Summary

The Quest of Erebor as it might have been.
Billa Baggins is not your average burglar- or, perhaps, a burglar at all. That remains to be seen. Thorin resents this little female's habit of gaining a foothold wherever she lands. Even in his heart.
A retelling/reinvention of A Hobbit's Tale, beginning with Thorin's arrival at Bag End. Through the Reclaiming of Erebor, and beyond!

WARNING: Ridiculous length, extreme drama, and non-canon moments galore.

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.
Wolf Eyes

Billa Baggins watched, trying not to look too distressed as her grandmother’s dishes were thrown hither and yon, flying recklessly down the hallway like very heavy, very expensive pie tins. The dwarves finished their ridiculous song and she edged into the kitchen to see her dishes stacked neatly on the table. Her knees went weak with relief.

“You lot are lucky none of these broke,” she muttered, touching one of the dishes gently. A thunderous knock boomed through the house, and every eye turned toward the front door. Gandalf grasped his staff, and Billa could have sworn there was a smile in his old eyes.

“He’s here.”

The dwarves suddenly became very serious, and Billa shifted, taking a step toward the door and shooting a nervous glance at the wizard.

“Who’s here?”

The two of them moved toward the door and Gandalf opened it with a grand air.

Billa stared at the newcomer. If the others had been outlandish, this one was perfectly wild. He was wearing braids and beads in his shaggy dark hair, and his eyes were the color she imagined a wolf’s eyes might be, at night in the firelight. The fur around his collar only added to the ‘wild beast’ impression she was getting from him.

"Miss Baggins, may I present the leader of our Company, Thorin Oakenshield." There was a certain note of grandeur (and was that pride?) in Gandalf’s voice as he spoke. Billa wasn't sure what to think at all, so she tugged her housecoat a little more tightly around her body.

"I thought you said this place would be easy to find," growled the dwarf, eyes narrowed as he glanced up at the wizard. "I got lost. Twice. If it weren't for the symbol on the door, I wouldn't have found it at all."

"Symbol? What symbol? There's no symbol on that door. I just painted it last week!" Billa lurched forward, catching the door before Thorin could push it shut. "There had better not be a... oh, bebother and confusticate this whole stupid thing! Gandalf!" She gave the wizard an appalled look. Scratching on her lovely green door like that. Terribly unfriendly. Not at all polite.

"So... this is the hobbit." A deep voice very near at hand drew her attention back to the leader. Thorn, was it? Or something like it. Billa was startled when she had to tip her head up quite a bit to look into his face. She had known, from very recent and overwhelming experience, that dwarves were taller than hobbits by a good measure. This, however... this was quite another matter. She felt like she was looking up at one of the Big Folk. He loomed over her, his broad shoulders and sharp eyes making her feel rather small and vulnerable. “She looks more like a dormouse than a burglar.”

"Yes, I'm a hobbit. Billa Baggins, at your service. Now, kindly wipe your shoes, though I doubt it'll do any good." She frowned at him. "Your Company have already ruined my carpets. It'll take me a week of scrubbing to get them clean again."

He conveniently ignored her demands concerning his boots, staring her up and down evaluatively. “Tell me, Miss Baggins, have you done any fighting?” He smirked lightly for the other dwarves’ benefit.
Oh, you’ll see some fighting alright. “I assure you, Master Dwarf,” she replied somewhat waspishly, “that I only ever fight when absolutely necessary.” This gathering was getting to be maddening. Gandalf laughed deep in his throat.

“And I think I can safely assume it hasn’t been necessary for you yet.” Thorin glanced at Gandalf. If appearances were anything to go by, the wizard was going to have a good deal of explaining to do. Miss Baggins was short and slight, quite literally dwarfed by the dwarves. The halfling (or “hobbit,” as the locals evidently called themselves) was hiding inside an outlandish coat that seemed to be made of brightly colored cloth squares all sewn together. She had light brown, curly hair and dark eyes set in a child-like face. No, she was not at all what Thorin had expected.

The dwarf swept his fur-lined cloak back over his shoulders. The hobbit was still squeaking indignantly about her carpets when Thorin caught her gaze. He held it a moment, looking for weakness, looking to see if she’d quail at the intensity of his eyes. She endured longer than most, and he nodded, mildly impressed.

“You see?” said Gandalf. “Plenty of spirit, and she’s light on her feet. Quick-fingered and clever, in the way of her folk.” The wizard’s praise fell on deaf ears as Billa looked around at the dwarves now crowding into her entryway, watching their young leader with silent respect.

Thorin greeted the others with a nod, reserving a rare smile for Fili and Kili, his nephews, as the dwarves of his company crowded in. The dark-haired dwarf pressed through the others and hung his cloak on a hook in the hallway, then turned to Gandalf. “Everyone has already eaten, I expect?”

Bombur looked tremendously guilty.

“Yes, but I saved some stew for you,” Balin called. “Heating over the fire as we speak.”

A collective sigh of relief filled the room, though Bombur still looked guilty.

At the table, Thorin related the news of his meeting in Ered Luin between spoonfuls of stew. It was a good stew, he thought in passing. If nothing else, Miss Baggins seemed to be a decent cook.

“So they won’t come,” said Dwalin, disappointedly. “We’re on our own, then.”

Thorin made a dismissive sound. “I expected it from the first. They’ll not come unless I am in possession of the Arkenstone, which would demonstrate that my purpose is divinely mandated. If we can find the King’s Jewel, they will join us. And if they join us, we will have a chance against Smaug.”

“That’s why you need a burglar,” said Gandalf, puffing determinedly at his pipe. “Someone who can sneak into Smaug’s lair and find the jewel without being seen.”

Thorin cocked an eye at the halfling, who was standing awkwardly in the corner off to his left, observing the conversation. “So you’ve chosen her to be this burglar?” He snorted lightly. “Miss Baggins, do you even know what a dragon is?” He honestly couldn’t imagine that she had actually agreed to this; had Gandalf told her anything?

Something about the way this dwarf simply dismissed whatever skills she might or might not have had rubbed the halfling the wrong way. She bristled, but listened in silence. They were a strange bunch, to be sure. When their attention returned to her, Billa had to close her mouth quickly to avoid looking the village idiot. Dragon? She opened her mouth and closed it again several times, hoping the words would come to her, but that failed, leaving her making a mockery of a dying fish instead of intelligent conversation.
“You know, big, scaly, bat-wings... breathes fire?” one of the dwarves offered helpfully, smirking at the flabbergasted hobbit.

“I know what a dragon is,” she snapped impatiently. Taking a moment to regain her composure, she took a deep breath. “With the greatest possible respect... have you all lost your minds?” Billa turned a disbelieving look on Gandalf, whose eyebrows were raised as though he were somehow innocent.

“Gandalf, do you sincerely expect me to go on some obscure quest with thirteen men, ruin my good prospects as they are, travel who-knows-how-far and steal from a dragon’s hoard? You have clearly lost what little sense you had!” She paused. “No offense meant, of course. I’m sure it’s a very noble quest, and I’m happy to offer what services I can. I believe I have some cakes in the pantry you haven’t raided yet, and there are plenty of beds here. You are all free to spend the night and I’ll send you on your way in the morning with a good breakfast under your belts. But that’s as far as my hospitality goes, thank you very much. I’m a respectable hobbit, and have no need for journeys, quests, or dragons.” She finished with an air of finality, nodding firmly as though that quite closed the topic.

“Billa Baggins,” said Gandalf in a tone that allowed no form of argument, “you will not be leaving your guests in a time of need.”

“Leaving—?” Billa frowned. “I’m not leaving anyone. Look, this isn’t my problem. Obviously, they need to find a real burglar, because I’m not.”

“These dwarves fight for their homeland and you say that you can do nothing.” Gandalf stood up, moving closer to the hobbit and towering over her as only one of the Big Folk could. “I happen to know there is more in you than even you know. Where is the hobbit I knew as a child, who begged her mother for tales of grand adventures and ran away from home at every opportunity? Miss Baggins, these are your guests and they need your help, whether they know it or not.”

There was a pause, and Billa gestured, as though trying to find words that simply wouldn’t come. At last, she sighed, looking defeated.

“Hear me, Wizard. I will get back at you for this. Someday, somehow, I will have my good and just reward, and you will regret this.”

With a huff, she turned to Thorin and offered a slight bow. “As your hostess, I offer you my services as they are—whether as cook or... burglar. If you would kindly give me the details of your quest, I shall take those into consideration.” Her words were formal, but there was a resigned sort of excitement in her brown eyes.

Balin stood up with a smile. “Excellent! Here’s your contract.”

Billa took the paper with a curious look that quickly turned to alarm as she unfolded it and saw its length and numerous clauses. She mumbled as she read, frowning at the paper. Words like “funeral,” “lacerations,” and “incineration” were louder than the others.

“Oh, yeah,” offered Bofur with a grin. “Dragonfire’ll melt the flesh off your bones right enough.” Billa stared at him for a moment, then shook her head. “Think furnace... with wings.” She tried to regain some form of composure, but ultimately had to sit down, looking very green.

Thorin turned to the old wizard, shaking his shaggy head. “Gandalf, I will be plain in saying I do not see the wisdom of this. But since you are so determined to have your way, I’ll give it to you. However, understand now: I cannot be held responsible for her fate.”
Gandalf nodded slowly. “Agreed.”

Thorin absently tapped his spoon against his mostly empty wooden bowl. “That said, I reserve the right to designate someone else to the task of seeking the Arkenstone. If her reaction at the mere mention of a dragon’s wrath has this effect on her, how will she react in the presence of a real one?”

Gandalf cleared his throat. “That remains to be seen. I expect you will be very surprised. Hobbits seem docile and homely, but are fierce as a dragon in a pinch.”

“For all our sakes, I hope you’re right,” said Thorin, heaving a sigh.

He was imagining all sorts of awkward and inconvenient scenarios. The hobbit fainting at the sight of an owl. The hobbit wailing and begging to go home halfway through the journey. The hobbit screaming in terror at the first sign of danger, complicating and muddling their quest.

Perhaps these were far-fetched. The most realistic and potentially deadly inconvenience, he thought, would be if the other members of the company neglected their duties through a need to dote on her, protect her, or cater to her every whim. Even he could admit she was, well, rather attractive. As far as halflings go, that is, he amended to himself.
The Journey Begins
Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

The morning was productive. Billa woke up early and (in her own words) “scrounged together” a massive breakfast. Then, as the dwarves ate, she put her house in order, locking doors and putting things away. When they were finished eating, she sent them on their way to get the ponies, promising to follow as soon as she could. The hobbit then proceeded to lose track of time as she washed the dishes and scrubbed the floors, wiped away mud and grime, and put her kitchen back in order. Though she lamented the fact that there was hardly a scrap of food to be found in her precious hobbit-hole, she knew it mattered very little.

It was as she was stuffing her mother’s old traveling clothes into a bag that Gandalf appeared at her window.

“What are you still doing here?” he demanded, frowning at her.

Billa glanced at him, surprised to see the wizard standing in her garden. "Packing. What are you doing?"

“Coming to tell you that you’re late.”

“Late?” Billa felt somewhere between exasperated and ashamed. Her mother would have given her a dreadful scolding if she were here.

“Yes, late.”

“But I haven’t finished—”

“No. You need to go. Now.”

“But Gandalf!”

“If you keep them waiting much longer, they’ll leave without you!”

So Billa found herself with a pack slung haphazardly over one shoulder, still in the dress she only wore for cleaning-days, running as fast as her furry feet would carry her toward the edge of town. Part of her resented being dragged out of her home with no respect for the proper way of things, but that part was drowned out by the growing sense of importance and excitement that glowed like a hot coal in her chest.

She was out of breath and flushed, quite winded by her run when she trotted up to the dwarves and their restless ponies.

"Miss Boggins!" Fili grinned at her broadly and offered her the reins to a small, docile-looking creature with ragged ears and a back that drooped with age. "Glad you could join us. We were afraid
you'd forgotten about us." Billa pushed her disheveled hair out of her eyes and looked at the pony with apprehension on her face.

"We're riding?" she asked nervously. Fili laughed.

"Of course. You didn't think we were going to walk to the Lonely Mountain, did you?"

Billa shifted. "Well, I had thought," she started, but the young dwarf tossed the reins to her and laughed again.

"Keep thinking, Miss Boggins. We ride!" The others had already started to move away, and poor Billa had to scramble up into the sway-backed pony's saddle by herself, which was not at all a pleasant venture. Luckily for her, the animal seemed to know what was expected of it and followed the others at a trot. She thought the pony was surprisingly spritely for its apparent age, but didn't want to draw attention to the fact that every time it took a step, she felt like she was about to fall out of the saddle. In fact, she did so a number of times before she found the proper rhythm, and even then, it was terribly uncomfortable.

When dusk fell, the company had covered some fifteen miles. They set up camp at the base of a rocky cliffside, a place Dwalin assured them was defensible. The ponies were picketed in the grass nearby, and Nori and Ori saw to their care, though Thorin, as always, groomed his own beast. Gloin started a fire with his tinder box and some kindling he’d brought, using some of the dry brush nearby for fuel. Bombur set about preparing the evening meal.

"Would you mind helping me here, Miss Baggins?" the ample dwarf asked courteously. "I'm trying to make a stew, and, well, after sampling a bit of yours from yesterday, I think I could learn a few things."

Thorin, sitting nearby, scoffed to himself. Sampling? An interesting way to refer to the consumption of four bowls of stew. At any rate, he thought Miss Baggins would, for the time-being, make a decent cook’s assistant in the company. Whether she ever became anything else was not something he felt confident enough yet to predict.

So far, she hadn’t come to him wailing to go home. She hadn’t begun grousing about missing her tea-time. She hadn’t even complained about the pony, which, for a first-time rider who spent a good portion of the journey thus far falling out of the saddle, was promising. Then again, they also hadn’t yet left the Shire.

Billa, who was tenderly rubbing various parts of her bruised anatomy, glanced at Bombur with a relieved smile. At last, something she could help with. Taking the opportunity to be useful, she assisted Bombur with the cooking, offering helpful insights about cooking over an open fire and various spices that worked well with wild vegetables that grew under the trees nearby. When the dwarf asked her how she’d learned to cook outdoors, the hobbit looked rather embarrassed and admitted that she’d done quite a bit of nighttime roaming in this area as a youngster.

"Mother could always tell if I hadn’t eaten, so I took to feeding myself with what I could find. It always tasted better cooked, so..." She trailed off with a shrug.

Balin glanced at her with interest. "Are you any good at hunting?" he asked curiously.

Billa blanched and made a face. "No. I tried, but I prefer my food to be dead before I see it. It’s one thing to skin a rabbit, another thing entirely to kill it."

Fili snickered. "Poor little burglar doesn’t like to get her hands dirty," he joked, nudging his brother.
“So if we end up fighting goblins, which one of us gets to protect her?”

“Goblins?” Billa frowned at him and tried not to show how much the thought bothered her. Goblins were another thing she didn’t want to face. Goblins and dragons—what next? She wasn’t sure she wanted to know, or even think about it.

Thorin shook his head lightly, adjusting one of the leather straps on his bracers. It wasn’t as if he was surprised she wasn’t fighting material, but if the very thought of killing at need bothered her… she was probably not going to do well in his Company.

Suddenly, there was a howl, and though it was distant, its mournful sound pierced through the night. Thorin stiffened. He’d dealt with wolves before, but he didn’t particularly welcome the thought of reckoning with them again. He drew his coat more tightly around him, remembering the great grey wolf he’d killed and skinned for its trim.

“Goblins and orcs,” Kili was saying, feigning a sober, frightened face. Teasing the burglar was turning out to be far too much fun. “I’d say we’ll both have to be on the watch at all times, brother. They strike in the wee small hours of the night, quick and quiet. You’re dead before you’ve even had a chance to wake, blood everywhere. Isn’t that right, Fili?”

Billa was starting to turn green again. She listened to the howling and shivered slightly. It had been many months since she’d heard that particular sound, although, if memory served, it was the wrong time of year. And that wolf sounded too… dark. Too deep. It was a deeper sound. She wasn’t sure, so Billa wasn’t about to say anything about it, but the thought was there nonetheless.

Fili nodded gravely, eyes sparkling with silent laughter. “I’ve seen it before. Nasty things. They come out of nowhere, no warning at all.” He watched the hobbit, trying not to smirk. “Tell me, Miss Baggins, how fast can you run?” There was a slight pause as everyone waited for her to react.

Billa shuddered and took a deep, shaky breath. “I think it might be wise,” she said softly, hoping they couldn’t hear the way her voice quavered, “for me to learn something about fighting. I may not like it, but I imagine that if there will be goblins and orcs,” she shot Fili and Kili a glance that said plainly she hoped there were no such encounters in their future, “it will be… necessary.” Her gaze slid over to Thorin, and she felt her stomach turn over when she saw that he was frowning at her. Quickly averting her gaze, an action that made Fili chuckle, the halfling stood up, her bare, furry feet silent on the dirt. She murmured to Bombur that she would return shortly, and then Billa moved off to take shelter near the ponies, away from the dwarves. Not the wisest thing, she thought, if there were to be an attack, but this deep in the Shire, she sincerely doubted any such thing was in their immediate future.

Kili forced back a grin. “Fili’s right, Billa. You’d be much better off running than trying to fight. Of course, if we’re dead, neither will do you much good. Then again, I don’t know. I guess you could always try reasoning with them.” He laughed, nudging Fili.

Thorin stood stiffly, stalking over to his nephews. “Enough. Both of you. A night raid by orcs is not a joke. It’s not funny.” He glowered at them.

Kili lowered his eyes, ashamed. “I’m sorry, Uncle. We… we didn’t mean anything by it.”

“No. You didn’t,” Thorin growled, turning away. “You know nothing of the world.”

He moved to the edge of the circle of firelight, staring out across the night-shrouded fields. His nephews had, after all, lost their own father to an orc attack when they were young boys. Did the
thought not sober them at all? They were not taking the perils of this venture seriously, and it bothered him to no end. He’d promised their mother he would defend them to the death, and he meant to do so. That included protecting them from their own folly and naïveté.

Bofur, who had been polishing his axe, set it down and stood up, hat in hand. He walked over to Billa. “My apologies for their behavior, Miss Baggins,” he said delicately, worrying with his hat. “They’re just boys, after all. They didn’t mean any harm.”

Billa glanced up at him and smiled shakily. “I know. I just...” She hesitated, as though unsure of how much to share. “I made this my quest too, when I joined you. I don’t want to be useless. But I know I am.” With a huff, she shook her head and smiled self-consciously up at the dwarf.

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t go worrying you about this. I’ll be fine. Thank you for caring.” The halfling took another deep breath and pushed herself to her feet. With a nod to Bofur and a grateful smile, she touched his arm and moved back toward the fire. Now that she’d had a chance to calm down, she looked much less likely to faint or get sick, though the distant howling continued to make her shiver.
They’d been journeying together for two weeks, maybe more. Billa was losing track of the time as she settled into the rhythm of traveling with the dwarves. Gandalf and Thorin drove them hard, but having never traveled farther than the River, Billa wasn’t aware that this was any different from a normal trip. She adjusted as well as she could and kept mostly to herself, though she and Bombur thoroughly enjoyed conversations about food when neither of them were otherwise occupied. She found his appreciation for her cooking to be flattering, and took every opportunity to swap recipes with him. Really, she thought, if it weren’t for Bombur, she might not have survived this first leg of the trip at all. The fat dwarf was a cheerful soul, and kept her grounded when she longed for the comforts of her own kitchen.

It was on a particularly chilly night, after Gandalf had left the Company rather suddenly following an argument with Thorin, that she found herself taking Fili and Kili their supper (they had pony-watching duty that night). She noticed almost instantly that they weren’t their usual cheerful selves. Both dwarves stood very quietly, staring intently at the ponies. Billa frowned.

“What are you doing?”

“We’re watching the ponies,” said Fili with a frown. “Only, there’s a slight problem.”

Kili glanced at Billa. “We had sixteen ponies. Now there’s... fourteen.”

Thorin was going to be absolutely furious. He would want to know just how the two brothers had failed to notice two of the ponies vanishing. Then Kili would have to admit that Fili and he had been quite occupied trying to knock an apple off an old fence-post with stones from increasingly further and further distances. He might even have to mention the quarrel that ensued afterward when Fili insisted he had cheated. And possibly he’d have to bring up the wrestling match that was supposed to settle the matter, but only ended up dragging on and on amidst gales of laughter (and, apparently, sometime during all this, two ponies vaporizing).

Kili was quite certain that when his uncle found out, he would very soon be short two nephews. The only solution that came to Kili’s mind was that they needed to find the absent ponies before Thorin found out.

“So, Miss Baggins,” he said, smiling nervously, “as our designated burglar, we were thinking maybe... you could look into the mystery of the missing ponies.”

Billa glanced from one brother to the other, eyes wide with surprise. “Me? You’re... but...” She hesitated.
Fili pointed into the distance. "Look, there’s a light that way. Maybe they wandered off." He smiled at Billa. "I’m sure a quiet little thing like you could sneak right over there and never be noticed."

"Wait. You want me to find your missing ponies, because you think flattery really works that well and because you don’t want Thorin to get mad at you."

Kili feigned shock. "What? No. No. That thought never occurred to us." He leaned down to her eye level, whispering conspiratorially. "What we’re really trying to do is give you an opportunity to prove yourself to Thorin. He thinks you can’t do anything besides cook. So being the kind, selfless souls that we are," he nudged Fili, "we’re offering you a chance to shine. In more of a burglar capacity."

He nodded, straightening again. "So off you go, Billa. Oh, and if you get into any trouble, hoot once like a barn owl, and twice like a brown owl." He grinned at his brother. "Come on, Billa. You’ll be great."

Billa actually laughed at that. "Hoot? No. I’m not an owl, I’m a hobbit, and I have altogether more sense than that. Look, you two, either you can come with me, or you can go tell Thorin right now, while I watch the ponies for you."

"Fine job," muttered Fili, gazing out at the animals again. "Now there’re two more missing."

Billa turned to stare at the ponies. Sure enough, there were only twelve. "And you’re sure they’re not wandering off?" She glanced hopefully at Kili, disliking the idea that someone was stealing them. Horse thieves. Never would have had to deal with this in the Shire.

Kili’s gaze shifted back to the quietly grazing ponies, and he quickly counted them. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe Fili, but it seemed unthinkable that the beasts could have been taken quite literally under their noses. He blinked twice, forgetting for a moment his bid to let their burglar “shine.” He slipped stealthily between the bushes and tufts of tall grass, hoping he’d spot something fishy that would give them more of a lead.

About a stone’s throw away, he noticed a young aspen tree had been broken in half about midway up its slender trunk. Its sparsely-leaved top jutted down at an angle, clinging by a few thin strips of bark. He moved toward it, squinting. "What do you make of that?" he whispered in wonder, turning back to Fili and Billa. "What could have broken it off so high up?"

Fili and Billa exchanged a nervous glance.

"Something big," said Billa unhappily.

"Something careless." Fili frowned at the sapling. "How did we not hear that?"

"Maybe it happened while you two were scuffling around in the dirt." Billa smirked slightly, though her eyes held a good deal more fear than she’d like to have admitted. Fili started guiltily.

"What? We weren’t—" He paused when Billa nodded to his shoulder, and Fili felt the rough fabric. There were bits of leaf and twig stuck to him. "Oh."

The hobbit pushed their bowls of stew into their hands, her expression slightly grim. "Alright. I’ll go scout ahead—scout, mind you—and see what it is that’s taking our ponies. If I scream, you two had better be ready to help me. With luck, I’ll be back in a jiffy and no one will be any the wiser."

Especially whatever’s stealing our animals. She didn’t like the idea of coming face to face with something big enough to pick up a pony and carry it off.
“Right!” said Kili, surprised that the stew was still warm. “Are you sure you don’t want to try the owl thing?”

He watched her move away on her nearly noiseless furry feet, then turned to Fili. “You sure she’ll be alright?” he whispered. “I didn’t realize.... do you think we should follow her?”

Fili didn’t answer immediately, too busy shoveling the delicious stew into his mouth. It must have been Billa’s turn to cook tonight. He swallowed, looked pensively after the unseen hobbit, then sighed.

“Yes, I suppose we should.” The blond paused for a moment, thinking. "She might not know any better, I guess. Wander right into the middle of a horse-thief camp. Might need rescuing."

Billa crept noiselessly through the bushes until she was just outside the ring of firelight. What she saw made her heart turn cold. Massive creatures, grotesque parodies of the Big Folk from Bree, squatting around the fire, grunting at one another. One of them was just setting the last of four ponies into a crude pen. She recognized Minty and Misty, a matched pair that Nori and Ori usually rode.

The halfling was so repulsed by these things that it took her several long moments to realize that they were actually speaking words in a tongue she understood.

“Mutton yesterday,” grunted one in a malcontent sort of tone, “mutton today. And blimey if it don’t look like mutton again tomorrow.”

“These ain’t sheeps,” growled the one checking the pen. “These is fresh nags.”

“Shut up the both o’ ya,” snarled the third, who was stirring a massive pot, “and finish yer mutton.”

Kili hissed back at his brother through the bushes, terror and excitement in his dark eyes. “Fili, trolls! Three of ‘em. You’d better go get Thorin. I’ll wait here and... keep an eye on them, I guess.” All concern for the trouble they would be in when their uncle found out about the missing ponies was forgotten in an instant. Besides, surely Thorin would understand his nephews couldn’t have done much to prevent trolls from making off with their ponies.

Fili flashed his brother a grin. “Save some for me,” he mouthed, grabbing Kili’s empty bowl and making off back the way they’d come, stealthily as he could. Luckily for him, trolls aren’t especially observant.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks for your comments and support. :) I dearly hope you're enjoying our little foray into the world of BagginShield.
Kili watched, half-horrified, as Billa stepped into the clearing from the side opposite, just out of the reach of the firelight. What was she thinking? Surely she knew better than to... or did she? This could not end well.

The knots on the pen looked simple enough. Billa crept closer to it, keeping an eye on the trolls as they shifted and grunted. Their conversation was supremely unintelligent, she thought, and it must have taken all their concentration to think of so many words to string together, because none of them noticed the tiny hobbit moving at the edge of the firelight. The posts nearest the trees were tied with thick, grimy rope, but the segments closer to the middle of the clearing looked like they were unstable, wobbling when the ponies bumped into them.

Misty tossed her head and snorted when she saw Billa, and the hobbit tried to shush her with silent gestures. Glancing fearfully at the trolls, she was relieved to see that none of them had heard the pony. Taking a steadying breath, she edged out toward the knot that looked loosest and started to work at it, stealing nervous looks at the trolls as they argued over how their food tasted.

Fili stumbled into their own camp and nearly fell over Bofur, who was rebraiding his beard.

“Uncle Thorin! Uncle Thorin! Trolls!” Immediately, the Company was on high alert, and Fili hurried on. “Trolls took some of our ponies, so we followed them, they’re over the rise just that way, and Billa’s—”

“Billa?” Balin lifted his head, looking startled.

Bombur frowned. ”You mean to say you let that poor little ‘obbit walk right into a troll camp?” The fat dwarf had grown immensely fond of Miss Baggins, and the notion of losing her to a troll’s appetite was rather unsettling.

Thorin leveled a scathing look on Fili. “I thought you knew better than that.” He shook his head, forging a quick plan of action with Dwalin and preparing the group before leading the clanking, but relatively stealthy party in the direction Fili had indicated. The dark-haired dwarf was still fuming to himself as he negotiated the rough, brushy terrain, both deeply disappointed and angry with his nephews. He would have a serious talk with them when this was over. Hopefully the halfling would not pay for their foolishness.

Kili, meanwhile, was having a silent heart attack. He was gesturing frantically from the bushes at the sneaking hobbit, trying to get her attention, but thus far, she didn’t seem to have noticed him.

“Come on, Billa,” he muttered under his breath. “Don’t be stupid. They’re just ponies.” Sweat was beginning to drip down his face as he internally debated just how good his odds of killing three trolls
on his own might be. Or at least grabbing Billa and getting away intact. Even he didn’t have the hubris to assume he’d fare well in either scenario.

Freeing the ponies wasn’t going well. The knot, though comparatively loose, was too big to be undone by one so small. Billa briefly contemplated stealing a knife that was stuck through the band of one troll’s loincloth, but decided she’d rather not touch it if the circumstance could be avoided. She spotted Kili’s frantic waving and had an idea. Noiselessly, she snuck back into the trees— or she tried to.

"Oi!" One of the trolls had spotted her and made a wild grab for her legs. Billa froze, but the stillness lasted for only a fraction of a second. Another troll yelled and she bolted. The first troll actually crashed into the trees after her, and the hobbit tore through the undergrowth as fast as her little legs could carry her.

Unfortunately, she was neither particularly fast nor was she very familiar with these particular woods. The troll, being larger and longer-legged, kept up, but his first several attempts to catch her resulted in handfuls of dirt or tree rather than hobbit. He did catch her, though, and squeezed her hard enough that her eyes watered and her lungs hurt.

"Lookit wot I got!" squealed the troll. (That was a disturbing concept in itself. Trolls should never squeal.)

"Wot is it?"

"I dunno. Wot are you?"

"Someone that needs to breathe," she wheezed, tears streaming down her face.

"Oh, sorry."

"Don' talk ta yer food, ijit." The biggest of the three, the one that had been cooking (if it could be called that) hit his friend over the head with the ladle. "Are they's any more o' you sneakin' around where ya shouldn't?" The troll leered down at her and Billa shook her head violently.

"No. No sneaking. No more of me." Her mind was spinning in a hundred different directions and she didn't dare look to the trees to find Kili. She only prayed that he was running back to tell the others. Half of her wanted badly to be rescued. The other half hoped the dwarves stayed away. She didn’t know what she would do if any of them got hurt because of her.

Fili followed his uncle with his head down. He knew he was in trouble, but wasn't sure what to do about it, or why Thorin was so angry. He'd only done what made the most sense. Bombur was mad at him, too, carrying his ax with a deep frown on his fat face. It wasn't until they caught up with Kili that the blond dwarf realized how mistaken he might have been. He could hear voices, deep troll voices, and a higher, breathless female voice.

Billa!

Oops.

He could hear them grunting at each other.

"Should we cook it?"

"'Ardly more 'n a mouthful."
"Let's eat it raw!"

"Ya think we're barbarians? Maybe it'd make a nice pie."

"I'd really rather not, if it's all the same to you. Hobbits aren't very good in pies."

"Drop her!" Kili leapt out of the bushes, brandishing his sword convincingly, showing his teeth. His voice was forceful and insistent, in the manner of one overcompensating for the terror gripping him inside.

"You wot?" said the troll, who was currently dangling Billa upside down by one of her ankles. (Fortunately, after a while on the road, the hobbit had fashioned her skirt into a pair of makeshift trousers, and thus avoided a somewhat embarrassing display.)

“I said, ‘drop her’!” Kili repeated emphatically, more slowly this time.

The troll complied, in a way. That is to say, he flung the halfling on Kili, who broke her fall, but was knocked backwards to the ground in the process. Fortunately, he was saved from his poor choice of words by the rest of the Company, who charged into the clearing, led by Thorin.

The massive trolls, momentarily startled, were quite literally overwhelmed by the dwarves’ assault, and could do little besides reel about clumsily, trying ineffectually to single out and crush this or that dwarf as this or that dwarf ran around slicing them about the knees.

Kili helped the hobbit up quickly, stepping in front of her. “Back into the bushes, Billa,” he hissed over his shoulder. “We can handle this.”

Billa hesitated for a fraction of a second. She was unarmed, untrained, and smaller than they were. She scrambled into the bushes and lay in hiding, watching the fight with her heart in her throat. She saw one of the trolls swing a club wildly at the back of Balin’s white head, and couldn’t help herself. She sprang out of hiding with a scream and wrapped herself around the troll’s massive, grimy wrist. The troll, startled by this unexpected attack (which didn’t seem to hurt it at all) defaulted on his swing and reared back instead, swinging Billa around and trying to shake her off. The hobbit closed her eyes, hanging on for dear life.

The troll pried her off and held her by her arms. Through some stroke of genius, one of his buddies grabbed her legs and pulled until she screamed in pain. Silence fell over the clearing almost immediately.

“Drop your weapons!” roared the troll holding her feet.

Thorin froze mid-swing, as did the rest of the Company. The trolls stepped back, holding the halfling up, threatening to rip her apart.

A momentary debate raged within Thorin. Part of him said, “Serves her right.” If he surrendered, they could all be killed. Another part reminded him it was his nephews’ fault that she was in danger. In the end, it was an impulsive, desperate decision that saw him angrily letting his blade slip from his grasp. He didn’t fully understand why; he knew only that he couldn’t watch the defenseless little creature be torn limb from limb. Moreover, lurking at the back of his mind was a faint hope that Gandalf might yet return and get them out of this mess.

With a succession of thuds and metallic clanks, the rest of the Company’s weaponry clattered to the ground.

A moment later, Thorin found himself being picked up and shoved into a large, burlap sack, which
was subsequently cinched tightly closed and dropped into a pile of other wriggling, grunting, dwarf-filled sacks. This was the most humiliating thing that had ever happened to him, he decided. If he survived this, no one would hear of it. No one.

“These ain’t ‘obbits,” announced one of the trolls suddenly, as though he had just had a revelation. “These is dwarves!”

“Of course they’s dwarves,” said the one with the ladle, hitting his companion over the head again. “Don’t be stupid.”

Billa was shoved into a sack like the others, but being so much smaller, she disappeared into it entirely. With shaking hands, she picked at a hole in the burlap. It took a couple of minutes, but the trolls were arguing again, this time over how to cook the dwarves. Roast them. Boil them. Eat them raw (which in this case, seemed to mean “alive”). Sit on them and squash them into jelly.

Billa felt like she was going to be sick as she squirmed out of the sack that held her. She was amazed when she made it out into the trees without being seen, but stopped there. The others were still trapped. What to do, what to do.

“This’s takin’ too long!” grumbled one of the trolls, and picked up the largest sack, which had to hold Bombur.

Billa panicked. “Don’t eat him!” she squeaked, her words nearly lost in the growling of the troll’s stomach.

“Eh?” He looked at one of his companions with a puzzled expression. “Wot’d you say?”

Billa’s brain was working overtime and buzzed through a hundred different ideas before landing on one, inspired by the puzzled look on the troll’s face.

“What if it ‘as worms?” she grunted, in her best imitation of a troll’s voice, which wasn’t very good, but it seemed to work well enough. The troll made a disgusted face and dropped Bombur on top of the pile of dwarves, who groaned under his weight.

“We has ta cook ‘em, then,” snarled the smallest, who looked rather put out by the idea. “I still says we oughta sit on ‘em. We ain’t ‘ad good jelly in ages.”

“No, no, my... no, no,” said Kili offendedly before finally taking the meaning of the kick. “Ohhhhh.... No, no, my... no, no, my... no, no,” Kili insisted, more politely this time.

Thorin sighed imploringly and shook his head. Then he kicked his nephew through the burlap. Hard.

“Hey! We don’t have worms!” Kili whinnied indignantly from inside his sack, apparently having just realized the trolls’ unintended insult.

The trolls turned at this. “Shut yer cake hole!” grunted one, taking a warning step toward the group of sacks.

“Well, we don’t,” Kili insisted, more politely this time.

Thorin sighed imploringly and shook his head. Then he kicked his nephew through the burlap. Hard.

“Ow,” said Kili offendedly before finally taking the meaning of the kick. “Ohhhhh.... No, no, my
mistake! We don’t have worms. We have... PARASITES!”

The others joined in, all arguing about who had bigger, more impressive parasites.

“I have nits!” Gloin added.

The trolls looked at the sacks, visibly disgusted. “Ugh,” said the one with the ladle. “We’ll ’ave to cook ‘em twice as long now.”

There followed a rowdy argument about how they would cook the dwarves, which culminated in a brawl between the two larger trolls. They very nearly rolled onto the dwarves and solved their own problem. After much scuffling, the two agreed that they would roast half of them now, and make soup out of the other half later. They were just choosing which ones to roast, when Billa, who was hiding in the trees at the opposite end of the clearing, made another attempt at distracting them.

"I was 'opin'," she grunted, "we'd make a pie out of 'em." This, to her delight, nearly started another fight. Not so much to her delight, one of them seemed to realize that if he hadn't said it, and his friend hadn't said it, and the third troll was busy picking his nose, then someone else must have spoken.

"Oi! 'Ooh said that?"
Dawn take you all, and be stone to you!" A voice thundered from above. The trolls, quite surprised by this, looked up to see who had spoken, and just then, the sun crested the hill, flooding the dell with light. The trolls hissed and tried to shield their eyes. One turned to point accusingly at the dwarves, but each of the three were turned to stone.

Billa edged into the clearing and looked at the trolls cautiously before picking her way nimbly past them to help the dwarves out of their sacks. As she pulled Kili to his feet, she gave him an apologetic smile. As easy as it would have been to lay the blame on him and his brother, she knew that if she'd just done as she'd said she would, they wouldn't have gotten into this mess.

With Gandalf's help, soon all the dwarves were free, though several had fresh bruises from being tossed around.

Thorin accosted Gandalf, aware that the old wizard had saved them and nonetheless quite determined to chastise him for waiting so long to do so. “And that’s what happens when you run off. I told you to keep an eye on the burglar. She got herself snatched up by those trolls and nearly killed. Almost earned the rest of the Company a nasty fate, too.”

Gandalf looked altogether too pleased with himself, and Thorin deeply disliked it.

“I returned precisely when I was needed, Thorin. And your burglar may have gotten you all into trouble, but she also saved your lives. Wasn’t that Billa impersonating the trolls from the bushes?”

Thorin looked surprised. “That was the halfling? I… I thought that was you.” He snorted dismissively, turning his back. “The resemblance was so wretched, it’s a wonder they were fooled at all.”

“These trolls must have come down from the Ettenmoors,” said the wizard, rapping his twisted staff on the one still clutching its ladle. “And since they couldn’t have moved in daylight-”

“They must have a cave nearby,” Thorin interposed. “Come on,” he urged the others, who were still, apparently, recovering from the trauma they’d incurred at the prospect of being killed and eaten in decidedly unpleasant ways. “Spread out. Look for their lair.”

It was Ori that found the cave, though he looked far less than eager to enter the dark hole. "What if there's more of 'em in there?" he asked in a quavering voice. Dwalin snorted derisively.

"Did you see the way they were fighting? If there were any more, they're probably long dead. Come on."

The younger dwarves seemed very impressed by the hoard the trolls had collected, the older distinctly unimpressed, and the wizard watched pensively. Billa lurked near the entrance, the
combination of smells and bones on the floor making her feel sick to her stomach. She didn't catch a lot of what went on, but when Thorin and Gandalf came out, they were carrying long, dusty-looking swords. She was surprised when the Wizard pushed a small, sheathed blade into her hands and smiled at her. Fili saw her new weapon and laughed.

"You're the worst fighter I've ever seen. And that's saying something." The blond dwarf grinned. "At least with that, you'll have a sharp thing to swing at them."

"Right, 'cause that's intelligent," chuckled Gloin, rolling his eyes. "Give the one who can't tell up from down in a fight something that she can poke her eye out with."

Thorin silenced Gloin with a look. "It's time she had a means of defending herself." He wasn't entirely certain it would help, but it couldn't hurt. He'd instruct one of his nephews to give her a lesson or two when next they made camp.

He turned away, strapping the scabbard of the elven blade he'd found in the cave across his back. It was a heavy thing, much longer than the longswords he was used to bearing, but the wizard seemed to believe it was a blade of great renown, and would prove a boon in a fight.

Several of the other dwarves had packed some of the loose gold in the cave into chests and were busily burying them with the spades they'd brought. Only Mahal knew if they'd ever return for them, but at least they'd be kept safe until then. Thorin had to shake his head a little at the foolishness of it all. If they succeeded in this quest, even five chests full of gold - enough to serve the average person several lifetimes - would be nothing compared with the wealth they'd have in Erebor. If they failed... they'd be in a place where precious metals had no worth.

He watched as the others began to gather up what spoil they intended to carry along, mostly some tools and a few curiosities. They were ready to move on. Well, most of them were. Kili was poking Fili in the ribs with a silver fork he'd found, giggling like it was the funniest thing he'd ever done. Thorin exchanged a glance with Dwalin, who seemed equally mystified by Kili's childishness.

The dark-haired dwarf shrugged. "Alright, let's mo-" He was cut off by a loud, echoing howl. It was deeper and heavier than a wolf's keening, but just as chilling. And close. Very close. "Wargs!"

Thorin bellowed, drawing his new blade with his right hand. With his other, he grabbed the collar of Billa's jacket and pulled her behind him, facing the tree-studded hillside from whence the howl had risen.

Billa let out a strangled sort of squeak. She found herself with her back against Thorin's, his hulking presence a comfort in spite of the sound of heavy pawsteps pounding toward them. Just how big were these things? They sounded like they were as big as bears!

The dwarves seemed to be in some sort of organized chaos. She recognized some of it from the fight with the trolls. Well, with how well it had worked against those creatures, she could only imagine-then the first warg came into view. "Size of a bear" seemed a fit descriptor, and when it saw them, it stopped. It was only then that she saw the orc sitting on its back. She'd never seen anything so ugly. Even the trolls had been prettier.

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As the nasty creature lifted a twisted horn to its lips, an arrow seemed to sprout from its neck. With a gurgling cry, it slid off the warg's back, and the wolf-thing, now free of its restraint, lunged forward with a bloodthirsty howl. The fight was a blur. There were four of them, and wargs, apparently, didn't die easily. At one point, she was trapped against an enormous furry corpse by Dwalin, who was trying to protect Thorin, who was trying to protect Kili, who was trying to protect Thorin, who was being protected by Fili- it was hard to follow.
She cowered against the still-warm carcass, holding her sword in front of her as though that would deter any more of the beasts from coming at her. Like so many untrained fighters, however, she believed herself to be safe from a rear attack. She felt the hot breath before the teeth fastened on her shoulder. Billa screamed as she was hauled into the air for the second time in so many hours, then tossed like a rag doll.

She collided with Gloin, who nearly beheaded her. As they both sprawled, the warg that had thrown her pounced on the pair of them, landing heavily on top of Billa's legs. Something cracked and try as she might, she couldn't scream again. The wind had left her lungs and breathing in seemed as impossible as flying. Gloin reached past her, grabbed his ax and swung it powerfully into the warg's skull. It squealed and reared away, already dying.
Chapter 6

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Thorin finished off the last warg by practically sheathing his blade in its chest. After it had plunged landward, writhing in its death throes, he levered himself against it and withdrew the sword. Only then did he turn and realize what had happened. His mouth fell open slightly in unchecked horror, the garnet blade dropping from his hand.

"Was no one watching her?!" he demanded through ragged breath, rushing over to the fallen halfling. "No one?" Oin knelt at her side, looking somewhat stricken, reaching for his kit. The others gathered around, murmuring. Several looked distinctly guilty, most noticeably Fili, Kili, and Bombur.

"What happened, Miss Baggins?" Oin asked, evidently trying to determine if she was in shock. He glanced at her leg, shaking his head gravely.

Thorin, mastering his alarm and frustration, turned his mind to the safety of the Company. "These were scouts," he said. "They've come in advance of an orc pack. You'll have to work fast, Oin. We can't linger here."

Billa found her lungs again and sucked in a ragged gasp as Oin gently felt her leg, determining how bad the break was. For a moment or two, she just panted, her color fading from terror-white to sickly grey as pain started to register properly in her stunned brain. Gloin shuffled to the side, muttering something about keeping an eye out for flying hobbit-lasses next time.

"A wolf," she ground out between clenched teeth, "the size of a BEAR just broke my leg." Billa sounded almost incredulous, if such could be believed. Resisting the urge to touch the leg that hurt, she folded her arms over her stomach, and gasped again. Her shoulder was very hot and... wet.... "It bit me." This time the incredulity couldn't be missed. Fili laughed halfheartedly.

"Aye, that's what they do, isn't it?" He rubbed the hilts of his swords, unable to completely swallow the guilt that was gnawing at him. If it weren't for him and Kili, then they would have been safe at camp, rather than getting the poor lass taken by trolls and eaten by wargs. Glancing at his brother, he nudged him and nodded back toward camp.

"We'll need our things, won't we? Might even be able to scavenge a couple ponies, if we're lucky."

They weren't lucky. The ponies had scattered. Wise beasts, but dreadfully inconvenient. By the time they and the others that had been sent with them returned, Oin had Billa's leg set and splinted, and it looked as though the halfling had been overcome with pain. At least, if she was conscious, it was only barely.

"I can carry her," Fili offered hopefully. He wanted to make up for not defending her when he
should have.

Thorin nodded. "You and Kili will take turns. We've a ways to go before we'll be safe to rest again."
He leveled a stern gaze on Fili, and his voice was a low, admonishing growl.

"Carry her gently. She's my burglar, not a bag of supplies." He hoped Billa hadn't heard. Certainly not the "my" part, anyway. That wasn't what he'd meant to say at all, implying he had some sort of claim on her. He turned away. "We move! Fast as we can, no falling behind."

Gandalf led the way out of the trees onto a tawny plain studded with occasional pines, and the distant mountains rose into view, blue as sapphires. "Hurry!"

Kili nudged his brother's shoulder as they ran, the halfling bumping up and down on the blonde dwarf's back. "You alright?"

"I'm fine," Fili puffed, his legs hardly more than a constant burning feeling that propelled him along over the ground. Thank Mahal it was mostly flat. The blonde flashed his brother a tight smile. "Next copse, we can switch off and I'll watch your back." It wasn't the extra weight that made running hard. It was the fact that he had to run in longer strides as he tried not to jostle the hobbit's broken leg. And since she was unconscious, she couldn't help him at all, and he was constantly adjusting his grip on the blanket Oin had settled her in, like an impromptu hammock.

Before they'd reached the next copse, though, there was another howl. Then two, then three. A chorus of warg-voices were raised behind them, much closer than any of them were comfortable with. "Forget switching, Brother," Fili growled. "You just make sure none of them get close enough to get to her."

Kili produced an odd, hesitant noise, turning back to catch sight of the beasts bearing down on them. "We'll never make it," he whispered between gasps for breath. He may have been carrying his brother's pack as well as his own, but Billa was heavier than both packs put together. An odd thought, considering she was so tiny.

Thorin was on Gandalf's heels, but when he noticed the proximity of the pack, he slowed his pace and fell to the back of the Company. There were three riderless wargs approaching at a fast lope, baying at intervals as the scent of the dwarves grew stronger in their nostrils. They were only a few minutes behind and gaining rapidly. The rest of the pack was further behind, faint black blotches against the distant tree-line.

The plain was dotted with odd rock formations now, here and there with no rhyme or reason, and the Company rounded them as necessary, Gandalf shouting "Hurry!" again and again.

Thorin paused and nodded at Kili. "Your bow," he panted. Kili stopped, leaning over, heaving. When he'd had a few seconds to catch his breath, he unsheathed his bow, nocked an arrow, aimed... the foremost warg yelped, tumbling end over end to rest in a shuddering heap in the yellow grass. The others came on more quickly, rapidly closing the gap. Kili fired another arrow and missed. His hands were shaking now, and he could barely hold them steady enough to aim well. The rest of the Company had passed one of the rock formations and were currently out of sight. Thorin drew his elven blade, poised with its dragon-tooth haft at his right ear. Kili fired again, more successful this time, but not a clean kill like the first arrow had been.

The wargs were upon them. Thorin dispatched the one that selected him, dodging out of its path and then lopping off its head as it passed. When he'd looked toward Kili again, his warg was mortally wounded, snarling in its final throes. Thorin nodded, and the two turned to catch up with the rest of the group. Just as they'd rejoined them, more howls rent the air, and Gandalf sent his gaze
imploringly skyward. "They're close. Hurry!"

Fili was gasping desperately for breath, doubled over and supporting Billa with his shoulders as they sheltered behind the rocks for a moment. "Kili," he wheezed, "you'll have to take her for a bit. I can't keep up."

"No time," growled Dwalin, and pushed them on as the wizard led the way. Fili was struggling, but Dwalin, an ax in either hand, was staying with them now. He'd sworn to protect Thorin and his kin, even if his kin were stupid.

"Quick!" called Gandalf, pointing toward a rocky outcropping a half-mile ahead. "We can still make it."

No one replied, but they were all thinking that the chances of them actually making it to the outcropping were slim to none. It was defensible, though, and they were all well-armed.

The wargs were upon them before long. While Dwalin, Kili, and Gloin held the rear, the others sprinted the last few lengths to the outcropping, where Gandalf was calling for them to go down, down, down inside. The opening was small, but one at a time, they slid through into the sandy cave within.

A warg lunged for Gloin's leg and missed, caught Kili's ankle on its way past and knocked him flat just before getting the majority of its neck severed by Dwalin.

"On your feet!" he bellowed, giving Kili a shove. "Go! NOW!"

Miraculously, the Company had made it intact into the cleft in the rock. The snarling of the wargs and the guttural speech of the orcs intensified as the pack regrouped and approached the entrance, but their advance was interrupted. A loud, clear horn call, followed by the muted thundering of horses' hooves and the whizzing of arrows. There was a passage leading between the rocks, narrow, but seeming to continue for a considerable distance.

"This way," urged Gandalf, motioning with his staff. Thorin nodded at the questioning glances from the rest of the Company, and satisfied, they all turned and followed the wizard, leaving the sounds of deadly scuffling behind. Thorin brought up the rear, directly behind Fili. The young dwarf was gasping, trembling. He looked as though he'd collapse if he went on much further.

"Here, Fili," Thorin said, patting the blond's shoulder. "I'll take her from here." As much as he'd theretofore avoided physical contact with the halfling- on principal, perhaps- he saw he had little choice now.

Fili's arms were shaking as he handed Billa over with a grateful look. The halfling seemed to be partially conscious, because as Thorin took her, she made soft whimpering sounds, sounds of a female in pain. Gandalf led them along the narrow path, no longer urging them to hurry, but keeping up a brisk pace. Fili kept by his brother, now noticing that Kili was limping. Taking his bag back, he apologized silently for not being at his side to defend him, the way he always had been.

The cleft suddenly opened into a narrow valley, which terminated into a much larger one, filled with flourishing trees and a distinctly Elvish-looking structure situated at the head of the beautiful, cascading waterfall.

"Welcome to Rivendell," said Gandalf, in a satisfied tone.
Thorin stepped out onto the viewpoint behind the others, and there was a look very close to cold, shocked fury in his eyes as he caught sight of the valley below with its distinctly elven architecture. Stone edifices, gazebos, bridges, courtyards, and pathways hovered over the river, framed by the dozen or so waterfalls glistening white down the surrounding cliff faces. Billa was still limp in the dwarf's arms, her head leaning into his shoulder, mouth open slightly.

Thorin rounded on the smug-looking wizard. "You! You've planned this from the beginning. Taking refuge with our enemy!"

"Lord Elrond is not your enemy, Thorin." Gandalf's faintly triumphant smile didn't fade, but his tone was grave. "This is a House of Healing, open to all who are pure of heart and need assistance; which, I believe, includes you."

"You ask me to trust them?" Thorin gestured sharply at the valley below with a hand, mindful of not jarring the unconscious halfling. "Them? The very people who promised us friendship, then betrayed my father and grandfather? Do you take me for a fool, Wizard?"

"No, Thorin, I take you for an intelligent leader of your people. Intelligent enough to know that with an injured burglar, you won't be getting very far." Gandalf nodded to Billa, who seemed to be trying to open her eyes. "Your archer is injured as well. It would behoove you to take what rest and assistance Lord Elrond can offer. Indeed, he knows more of map-making and runes than I do. Perhaps he can unlock the secrets of your father's map."

A compelling argument, to be sure. Billa shifted slightly in Thorin’s arms, and he glanced down at her. Garnet was seeping through her bandages now, and as skilled as Oin was, Thorin couldn't bring himself to trust that the old healer could save her leg. He looked back up at the wizard again. There was a war waging within between a lifetime of bitterness and nigh-desperation. Finally with a heavy sigh, he nodded. "Very well. We'll do this your way, Gandalf. And be it upon your pointed hat what consequences befall us!"

Gandalf nodded, seeming satisfied with this acquiescence. He led the Company down to the valley
floor and along one of the clear, winding paths. There was a slender elf in rich clothes waiting for them on the stairs, looking a touch uneasy as he sized up the party of dwarves that had straggled up to his perch.

"Please tell Lord Elrond that he has visitors," said Gandalf with a bow. The elf inclined his head gracefully to them, but frowned apologetically.

"My Lord Elrond is away at the moment." He glanced nervously at Thorin, and the dwarf realized he must have been unintentionally glowering at him. He made an effort to relax his face, readjusting his grip on the halfling.

"Not here?" Gandalf asked, looking puzzled. "Where is-"

He was answered mid-sentence by the same clear, mellow horn call they’d heard earlier, trailed by the sharp clip-clopping of hooves on the stone pathway over which the Company had just come.

The dwarves whirled around, instinctively forming an outward facing circle around Ori and Thorin. No less than fifteen equestrians in full, gleaming armor trotted into the courtyard, circling around the dwarves, starry banners flowing out behind them in the wind of their speed. At their head rode a dark-haired elf with a keen, dark gaze, a scimitar at his side and a long, double-pronged spear in his left hand.

"Gandalf!" he exulted, smiling warmly. The dwarves relaxed a little, recognizing they were in no danger. The elf - who could have been none other than Lord Elrond himself - dismounted gracefully, embracing the wizard. "What a pleasant surprise." He glanced curiously at the edgy dwarves, arching an eyebrow. "Are they with you, or are you with them?"

Gandalf chuckled, his smile easier now that his old friend was here. "A little of both, I'm afraid. This is Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror, and his Company, who are in need of your assistance. Thorin, may I introduce Elrond, Lord of Imladris, your host. And a more gracious host you will not find anywhere else in Middle-Earth."

Thorin dipped his head slightly to the dark-haired elf, somewhat at a loss. "I'm... honored," he said finally, stepping out from among the others.

Billa stirred again, and this time she managed to open her eyes slightly. She made a soft, pained sound, not unlike a whimper, and passed out once more. The weight of her own leg seemed to strain the break against the splint, and as her blood soaked the bandage, it started to trickle over her exposed ankle and into her curly foot-hair.

Elrond noticed the wounded halfling in the dwarf's arms, and his brow creased with puzzlement and concern. He turned a questioning glance on the wizard.

"We were caught unawares by an orc pack," explained Gandalf, his eyes darkening with worry as he took the time to observe the extent of the halfling's injuries. Her shoulder was damp with blood and her leg seemed to be bent at an awkward angle, in spite of the helpful splint it was bound to. "Two were injured. This one is a halfling, one of the Shirefolk." He gave Elrond a look that said he would explain further once the need wasn't quite so urgent.

Elrond nodded, wasting no more time.

"Hurry, bring her up the steps." He turned, indicating that Thorin should follow. "I have a room set aside for healing; I'll tend her immediately."

Thorin glanced at Gandalf a moment, his eyes echoing his final words before they'd come down into
the valley. He would trust the wizard on this, though it might mean their ruin.

Kili limped up the steps after the others, forcing back a grimace as he put a bit too much weight on his wounded ankle. These steps were higher than the ones the dwarves were used to, not dramatically so, but enough to annoy.

A few minutes later, Billa and Kili had been settled into beds at opposite ends of a circular, many-windowed room. Kili watched as the elf lord knelt at the halfling's side; he seemed to be chanting in his own tongue while he worked, cleaning the wound, resetting it, enclosing dried herbs between layers of the binding. He'd given Billa a tea of sorts before beginning that had relaxed her almost to the point of sleep, it seemed, and even now, there was no trace of pain or distress on her pale features.

Thorin watched silently, standing at the end of the bed. He would not leave her until he was certain this elf meant her no harm. It seemed a silly thought, even to his embittered mind, that the kindly Elrond would make such a pretense of concern, go to such efforts to gain Thorin's confidence, only to kill Billa once he'd lowered his guard, but still... he couldn't bring himself to leave her side just yet.

When Billa regained consciousness, nearly two full days had passed. Her sleep had done her no harm, and her shoulder was mending well, her leg straightened and healing under layers of clean, protective bandaging. Blinking bemusedly at unfamiliar surroundings, the hobbit tried to make sense of what her brain was telling her. She remembered being in immense pain, and had a vague impression of being carried. Then... soft voices, and the smell of good things to eat. Now, it seemed she was rather alone in a large, airy room that she didn't recognize at all. As she tried to sit up, a familiar voice called out gladly.

"Miss Boggins!" Fili's grinning face came into view not long afterward, and she wondered if he would ever tire of calling her out of her name. Secretly, she suspected he did it just to annoy her.

"What... Fili, where are we?" She tried to prop herself up on her elbows, but her shoulder protested with a sharp stab of pain, and she eased herself back onto the pillows with a wince.

"The House of Elrond, I gather, in Rivendell. Uncle's not happy about it, though."

"What are you doing in here? You're not hurt, are you?" This was obviously some sort of infirmary. She could see other beds, at least.

"No, but Kili's got a bum ankle, and I decided to grace him with my presence like the loving and devoted brother I- " Fili whipped around and grabbed a pillow that had just hit the back of his head, still grinning. Billa could now see the dark-haired archer in a bed across from her, though not well, considering she couldn't sit up properly at the moment.

Kili shot up in bed, grinning. "Ankle or not, brother mine, I'll make you behave." They'd been in the infirmary for too long, and while Kili was under no prohibition from leaving, Thorin had insisted he stay, if only to keep the burglar company.

"So Billa, have you met any elves before, or is this your first time?"

Fili helped her sit up and arranged her pillows so she could lean against them and see Kili better. The blond was grinning, happy to see their burglar alert and coherent again. No harm done. Well, no permanent harm.

"Um, well, I used to see elves passing through the Shire. Some of them would stop and speak with me if I was near enough, but most just sort of... glided through." Billa shrugged, looking mildly
bemused. "They seemed so solemn, it was hard to tell if they wanted to speak at all."

Kili nodded. "That's elves for you. I'd never met any before now. Not bad folk, actually. Not like Uncle's had us believing all this time." He thought a minute. "Oh. Their food leaves something to be desired, though. Too much green. Far too much."

While he was still speaking, he noticed a little dark shape peering around the frame of one of the open windows, just barely visible beyond the diaphanous curtain.

"Hello?" Kili said, hesitantly.

The boy leaned around the curtain, holding the wafting fabric with one hand as he looked at the people in the infirmary with large grey eyes. He seemed to be an elf-child, with fine, sharp features that indicated a recent growth-spurt. A mop of dark hair fell in gentle waves around his shoulders as he watched the strangers, excitement growing in his expression.

"You're dwarves," he said finally, as though announcing an amazing discovery.

Billa looked at the child and resisted the urge to correct him. Let him think her a dwarf if he liked. He'd discover his error sooner or later. "Who are you?"

"I'm Estel. Who're you?"

"Billa Baggins."

"That's a funny name."

"So's 'Estel.' "

"Is not!"

Kili scooted forward a little to the edge of his bed, taking pains not to aggravate his bandaged ankle. "Oh, please," he said, chuckling, "both your names are funny." The grey-eyed child turned to regard him, and he smiled. "I'm Kili, and this is my brother, Fili." Lifting a hand to the side of his mouth, he leaned forward confidentially. "Be wary of him," he whispered. "He's a mischief maker, that one."

Estel eyed Kili and Fili, clearly considering this. "You're not twins, are you?" he asked suspiciously, as though this were something one ought to be afraid of.

Kili shook his head forcefully. "What would make you think that? We don't look alike at all. Although," he glanced at his brother knowingly, "Uncle does manage to get our names mixed up often enough; one would think we did."

Estel relaxed notably, looking relieved. He stepped into the infirmary, releasing the suffocating curtain at last. "My brothers are twins," he explained. "The Twins. They're always getting me in trouble." Bounding across the space between them, he jumped onto Kili's bed, jostling him cheerfully. "What's it like to be a dwarf?"

Kili laughed. "I wouldn't know. I've never been anything different. Could you describe what it's like to be an elf?" He studied the young face curiously, wondering if all elflings were as inquisitive as this one.

After a moment of thought, the boy shook his head, dark locks swinging around his face. "No. Maybe it's nicer to be an elf than to be a dwarf. We don't live in holes underground."
Billa looked slightly affronted. "What's wrong with living in a hole?"

"To be completely fair, Estel, we," Kili gestured between himself and Fili, "don't live in a hole. We live in great halls of stone beneath the earth. Billa here lives in a hole, though, so you can ask her about it." He grinned at the halfling; if it weren't so easy to get a rise out of her, teasing wouldn't have been nearly as fun.

Billa scowled at him. "It's not a 'hole,' it's a smial, thank you very much." She sounded more annoyed than actually angry. She and Kili had had this discussion many times already. "And very well-kept, until you lot tramped in with your mud and your silly quest." Estel was immediately distracted, excitement gleaming in his bright eyes.

"A quest? Like a real-live quest, like the ones in the stories?" He bounced a little on the bed, smiling hopefully.

Kili looked puzzled. "What other kinds of quests are there? Do elves go out on play quests? Pretend they have kingdoms to reclaim, dragons to slay?" He wondered what kind of stories Estel had been reading. Certainly not about dwarves, if his knowledge of them was anything to go by.

Estel gave Kili a "don't you know anything?" look and crossed his arms. "I'm too young to go on quests," he explained, as though the dwarf were a bit slow. "Ada says that I'll be questing almost constantly once I'm grown, but he says I'll be doing lots of things once I'm grown." The boy looked somewhat troubled, as though the idea of all those things he was supposed to be doing as an adult was intimidating.

Billa watched the boy, softening as he did little boy things and made little boy faces. It seemed that no matter what race they were born into, little boys were little boys. It was comforting to know that some realities didn't change when she left the Shire. How long ago had it been? She didn't know, and didn't care to remember.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry there was such a long gap between chapters. To be honest, I kind of forgot that the internet existed for a while. XP Forgive me! I am not worthy!
"How old are you, Estel?" Billa asked curiously. Did elf-children age like Men, or like Hobbits, or like Dwarves?

"Ten," he said proudly, no longer troubled by thoughts of the future. The future, it seemed, had wafted out the window with the breeze. "Ada says that I'm old enough to start training with a real sword now."

"Indeed?" said Elrond, stepping into the open doorway. "I seem to recall saying that your training with real weapons was to be delayed another six months because of that stunt you pulled last week." His hands emerged from his ample sleeves, and he leaned over Billa's bedside again. "Let's have a look at your leg, shall we?"

Kili's eyes brightened with curiosity. "So," he whispered in Estel's ear, "just what kind of stunt did you pull? A good one, I hope."

Estel looked rather grumpy. "I didn't do anything," he told Kili with a pout. "It was Elrohir. I keep telling him, but he won't listen."

Billa eyed the newcomer nervously. He seemed very... there was a word for it, but it wasn't coming to mind. Important. Dignified. Majestic. Whatever. He seemed to be in charge of something. He reminded her of Thorin, in some ways. "How long have I been here?" she asked softly, looking worried at the thought. Thorin. If they were delayed, then Thorin would be upset. And it would be her fault. They might even leave her behind. Then what?

"Two days, Miss Baggins," said Elrond, carefully feeling along the halfling's bound leg. It seemed to be responding well to his ministrations.

Billa winced, though not because of any physical pain. "And... how long will it be before I can walk again?" She didn't like the expression on his face. The same expression that Healer Mags had when she told Hamwise that he'd not be able to work in the garden until after his arm healed. Poor fellow had been down in the mouth for the whole two weeks of his recovery.

"No more than a week," said Elrond, "if you continue to rest as ordered and don't try to walk on it before then." He unwound several layers of the binding and refreshed the dried herbs from a special pouch he kept in a cupboard in the nearby wall. "Athelas," he said, holding up a faded green sprig. "We who practice medicine still have yet to find anything that works so well as the 'healing leaf.' "

"Athelas," Billa repeated quietly, taking the leaf between her fingers. Billa, like all hobbits, had a deep love of green and growing things. If there was more she could learn from Elrond about the herbs and things he used for healing, she would learn it- if he was willing to teach her.

The elf lord finished with what he was doing, urged Fili to ensure she was drinking often of the tea
in the bedside carafe he'd brought that morning, and turned to leave.

"Don't let my son pester you overly much," he said, nodding at Estel from the doorway. "He's unceasingly curious about the outside world, and would likely never tire of hearing stories of the lands beyond our borders." Smiling faintly, the elf lord departed.

Murmuring her thanks, Billa watched him go, still holding the leaf gently. The way it smelled, tasted, felt, and looked- she would make sure she remembered.

"So," said Kili, feeling at ease again now that Elrond had gone, "what did Elrohir do that he blamed you for? Because Fili and me... we're experts in this area. We might be able to help you get him back." He winked at his brother.

Estel seemed surprised that this dwarf was actually choosing to believe him. "Well... he and Elladan sort of... they took some berries and made a lot of dye, and drew some stuff on one of the walkways. Ada was really angry about it. Said it was a childish thing to do, and his sons knew better."

"Berries, eh?" Kili was intrigued. "Well, Fili and I will show them a thing or two." Anticipating protest, he held up a hand. "Don't worry; we'll take all the blame for it. We're not staying here long. How much trouble can we get into?" He leaned toward Fili, grinning roguishly. "What say we pay those fiendish twins a visit?"

Estel relaxed slightly, and even started to grin, bouncing gently on the bed. "Really? You'd do that?"

Fili poured Billa some tea and pressed it into her hands before returning to his brother's bed with a grin. "For plaguing our poor young friend? Indubitably." The blond winked at Estel. "We've been dying to try out a couple things that would have gotten us beheaded in Ered Luin anyway. And what our dear mother doesn't know can't get us killed."

Kili slid off the bed, supporting himself with a staff of twisted pine the elves had given him earlier. He glanced at Billa semi-apologetically. "Sorry you can't tag along to see the fun. Healer's orders and all. Besides," he grinned, "could be dangerous. We'll come back later and tell you all about it."

As the three went, laughing, out the door, they quite literally ran into Thorin. The dwarf wasn't very amused by their clumsiness, and as he scanned their sorry faces, he knew at once something was up.

"What's the meaning of this? Fili? Where are you off to in such a rush?"

Fili glanced into his uncle's face, looking distinctly guilty. "We were just going to explore the valley," he lied, shooting a look at his brother. "Since there are such nice paths, you know... and Estel here was going to show us around, weren't you?" He clapped the boy on the shoulder, and the elfling grinned brightly.

"Yes sir! And they were gonna tell me all about orcs and wargs and goblins!" He sounded a bit too excited about those.

"Is that so?" Thorin asked, raising his dark eyebrows. He'd known the brothers long enough to recognize when they were trying to hoodwink him. "Well, young Estel," he said, shifting his gaze to the nervous, grey-eyed boy, "take care the company you keep. These two are as dangerous as orcs. And twice as annoying."

He smiled faintly, brushing past them. Whatever they were up to, it was likely nothing that would be of any consequence to him.

Fili traded a glance with Kili, then looked down at Estel.
"As dangerous as orcs?" the boy asked, regarding them with a new sort of respect. Fili giggled, letting off a bit of tension as he stepped hastily away from the infirmary.

"Trust Uncle to insult us with a compliment. Come on." Keeping his pace at least somewhat moderated for Kili's sake, the blond hooked his thumbs around his leather belt. "So... what sort of revenge shall we make for our little friend, hm?"

"I was thinking something nasty, something really unpleasant," said Kili, making a great show of rubbing his hands together. "Tonight after an exhausting day of strutting around with their noses in the air, the twins'll trudge into their chambers, half-asleep, and tuck in. That's when it'll hit them. Earlier, we'll have dumped a bucket of honey at the foot of their beds, beneath the sheets. And then their feet will be all sticky and they'll jump out of bed screaming and we'll be there to witness it." He hesitated a moment. "I'm not entirely sure how we'll be there, but we will be. Fool-proof, eh, Fili?"

Fili chewed the end of one of his braids thoughtfully. "Honey might be a bit hard to get ahold of without folk noticing." A moment's silence passed between them, and then he grinned, glancing down at Estel. "How clean are the ponds around here?" At first, the boy looked confused, then a look of malicious glee crossed his face.

"Ooh! Elladan will hate this. Mud in their beds?"

"You're on the right track, kiddo. Why don't you fetch us a couple buckets, and we'll look for a good scummy puddle somewhere?" Fili watched Estel bounce away and grinned at his brother. "This'll be fun."

He returned with two buckets he'd filched from the garden shed and the trio headed to the pond, where they collected some of the cleanest mud the two brothers had ever seen. Ah, well. Mud was mud. Estel led them to a wizened-looking oak beneath the verandah of the Twins' chambers, assuring Fili and Kili that they wouldn't be in there, as they generally spent their days training or riding about the valley.

"Fili, you and Estel go up first," Kili whispered. "Then lower the rope down and I'll send the buckets up."

Fili scrambled up the gnarled trunk, eagerness lending him strength where he lacked skill. Estel didn't climb so much as he ran up the tree, pulling himself up hand over hand as though he were some sort of furless squirrel. Long before Fili reached the verandah, the boy was dancing impatiently on the wide stone rail.

"Come on," he called, bouncing on the spot.

Finally, Fili stood on the smooth stone, leaning against the rail as he braced himself against the weight of the buckets. It was the work of a moment to bring them up, though Fili had to admit that hauling Kili up the same way would be considerably harder.

"Lookout duty for you today, brother mine," he called with a grin.

"Hey!" Kili whisper-shouted. When he saw that his brother had no intention of bringing him up, he crossed his arms grumpily. Lookout duty wasn't nearly as interesting. Curses on his ankle. He leaned against the bole of the tree, scanning left and right. No one close enough to mark them as disguised as they were behind the thick foliage of the oak. He huffed to himself, imagining what terribly entertaining mischief he was missing out on inside.

Fili and Estel were snickering delightedly to each other as they scrambled back down the tree to join
"Estel had the idea to put an extra layer over the foot of the beds so the mud wouldn't soak through." The blond was near to bursting out in delighted giggles. "They won't know what's coming to 'em 'til it's too late!"

Entering the infirmary, Thorin nodded to the halfling sitting propped up against her pillows, approaching with hands clasped behind his back. He was still wearing his brigandine armor, despite their inarguably safe location, though he'd left his coat and fur mantle behind in the guest chambers. It was clear he'd washed, and his dark hair had been combed, the two four-stranded braids redone. "How do you find yourself, Miss Baggins?" The tone rested somewhere between familiar and business-like.

"Well, I generally start by opening my eyes. If that doesn't work, my hands are often very useful." Billa's dry tone was accompanied by a merry smile. Perhaps it was Fili and Kili rubbing off on her, but Thorin's formality struck her as amusing. Still holding that athelas leaf, she rubbed it between her thumb and forefinger as she suppressed the anxiety gnawing at her gut. Were they going to leave her behind? Did Thorin know how long it would be before she could travel. "You look well. Being clean suits you."

Thorin nodded again, his gaze now firmly fixed on one of the carven bedposts. "One week? Is that what the elf lord told you? After that, you'll be ready to depart?" He didn't mean to sound so impersonal, but he certainly hadn't come here to chat about his hygiene habits.

Billa cleared her throat, smile fading into nonexistence. "Yes... that's what he said." She hesitated a moment, inspecting the withered leaf in her hand. "I'm sorry to have delayed you." If she were the betting sort, she wouldn't have put her wager on Thorin waiting around in Rivendell for her to recover.

Thorin shrugged a little. "These things happen." It was his way of accepting the apology. He looked at her, finally, and his gaze was neither hard, nor gentle. It just... was. "I will be plain in saying I did not initially wish to stay here the week it will require for you to heal. Even now, I do so begrudgingly. But the wizard has insisted time and again that if I leave you behind, this venture will fail. I don't understand the confidence he places in you, but it's been said he's gifted with prescience, so I'll not dare go against him. Not on this point."

Billa thought about saying something about the confidence Gandalf put in her, but decided that there was nothing she could tell this bright-eyed dwarf that he hadn't already thought of. She met his blue gaze and, after a moment, nodded. "I'll do my best not to slow you any more than necessary." Thorin was a hard man, a distant and unfeeling leader, focused on his Quest and nothing more. There was a part of her that wanted to see him smile. That wanted to see him behave like a real person, instead of this stone-faced carving he put up in his place.

"When was the last time you laughed?" The question was asked on a whim. Billa wasn't really sure what made her say it out loud. Looking at Thorin as he was now, standing with boots planted in an infirmary, by a hobbit's sickbed, she felt sorry for him, and didn't know why.

Thorin tilted his head a little, caught off guard. What could she be getting at with that?

"I'm not overly prone to levity," he said, at last, "while my kingdom is yet unwon and a dragon defiles the halls of my ancestors. I will not indulge myself in mirth while the massacre of my people remains unavenged, Miss Baggins." His blue eyes were deep now, his gaze heavy, as if he could still see the destruction of Erebor vividly before him, playing out again and again. Laughter was not his
way; the weight of an entire people's sorrow was ever present on his mind and heart.

There was unconcealed pity in Billa's gaze now. "I'm sorry." Though, whether she was sorry for his lack of levity or for the deaths of his people was a little vague. She truly did feel very sorry for him. What must life be like under that kind of weight? What could it be like to live a life where smiles and laughter were no more permissible than using a crowbar for mending socks? She wished there was something she could do, but had the distinct impression that any attempt to lighten his mood would go very much unappreciated.

Thorin stepped a little closer to the edge of the bed, putting his hand on the bedpost. As simple words as they were, the genuine sentiment behind them stirred him a little. He sighed, looking away again.

“"I don’t need your pity, Miss Baggins, as well meant as I’m sure it is. I need only for you to prepare yourself for what is to come.” He lowered his gaze once more, thoughtfully. “I’ve been impressed by the way you’ve conducted yourself, barring that foolish incident with the trolls. I certainly never predicted you’d make it as far as you have.

“But in future, when we move into greater and greater danger, increasingly harried on all sides by those forces seeking to stop us, you will need to be stronger than ever. You’ll need to keep up with the rest of my Company, fit in, become one of us, for all intents and purposes. We will not be able to make any special allowances for you as this journey wears on, however much my nephews may try through it all to ease your way. I want to make that clear. This Company is a chain, only as strong as its weakest link. I need you to be strong, Miss Baggins.”

"Understood." There was nothing more to be said. Billa knew, deep in the secretest parts of her hobbitish insides, that Thorin wasn't warning her. He was putting his faith in her. This was no longer just his Quest- it was hers, too. And he knew it. It was gratifying to know that he acknowledged it.
Elrohir was exhausted, but satisfied. Nothing in the world felt better than breaking Ada’s old records. Though, to be fair, it had taken years to be able to hit anything consistently while unbalanced on a galloping horse. His arm was satisfyingly sore.

Bursting into the chambers he shared with his brother, he pulled off his arm guards and flashed Elladan a tired grin.

“Tomorrow. Whaddya say? It’s been too quiet in the Valley. About time we gave the Homely House a new mascot, don’t you think?”

Elladan lifted an eyebrow dubiously. To an outsider, he would’ve been indistinguishable from his brother, but those who knew them well could tell them apart through a few subtle differences in their faces, and a few less than subtle differences in their personalities. Elrohir was more reckless and impulsive, while Elladan seemed to provide, more often than not, a much-needed voice of reason. No exception tonight.

“I don’t know,” he said. “Hasn’t been that long since our last prank. Ada might get suspicious. I was thinking something a little less obvious, something like…” He trailed off, eyelids drooping. “I’ll sleep on it. Let you know what my brilliant mind concocts in the morning.”

With that, he jumped, fully dressed, into bed, but didn’t get under the covers yet.

“Snuff the lamps, would you?”

Elrohir rolled his eyes to the heavens.

“Paranoid,” he taunted, but in no way that would imply real insult. Meandering over to the lamp, he dimmed it, kicked off his shoes, and slid into bed, not caring that he’d have to shower in the morning.

Seconds later, he leapt out of bed again with a screech, floundering in his blankets before falling very ungracefully in a heap near the mirror.

“What in Arda-?!?”

Elladan’s startled cry rose almost simultaneously with his brother’s, and he recoiled as though he’d been bitten, only just managing to right himself on the edge of the bed without tumbling off. Something cold, wet, and clumpy was caking his feet, and he rubbed them vigorously across the carpet, moaning in disgust. "What is this?! Get the light, 'Ro, get the light!"

Elrohir made sounds of utter disgust as he stumbled across the gap between his bed and the lamp. Once the light was up, he could see that he'd left a trail of muddy footprints across the floor behind
him. His blankets were a muddy, crumpled mess, and he could see more of the cold, wet glop peeking out from between his sheets. The elf stared at his bed, too shocked to come up with words for this atrocity. Someone had *pranked them*?

For lack of anything better to do, Elladan snatched up his now muddy pillow and hurled it across the room. "Gahh!" After he'd had a moment to calm down again, he sank against the wall. "I'm going to kill Estel for this."

Fili leaned against his brother, weak-kneed with silent laughter. They were under the verandah, and had heard the entirety of their victims’ shocked squealing. Convulsing with gales of mirth he couldn't release, Fili nearly stuffed a fist in his mouth, tears gathering at the corners of his eyes. Kili wasn't as successful at stifling his laughter as his brother, and a loud snort that had been building for some time forced its way out. Fili clapped a hand over his mouth. Too late.

Elrohir straightened, pointed ears twitching as he turned toward the balcony doors. He knew the sound of triumphant laughter better than any living creature. He also knew his little brother's laugh.

"That's not Estel," he growled, and bounded through the double doors just in time to see a pair of figures, one of whom limped noticeably in the twilight, disappearing around the bend in the path below. "Ooh... I'm gonna get them for this," he vowed, slamming his fist into the railing and immediately regretting it because the stone was hard and his flesh wasn't. "No dwarf gets away with pranking *me*." Nursing his hand, he grumbled as he moved back inside. He'd deal with them tomorrow, when his arms weren't so sore.

Elrohir pointed to the rumpled bed with a silent, mischievous smile. The dwarf was injured, and, not caring to mingle with Thorin's company, Elrohir believed him to be staying in the infirmary, unaware of Kili's stubbornness.

They were crouching together under the sill and stifling laughter when an angry, female screech cut the air above their heads. "KILI!" Billa was wet, chilled, sticky, and furious. "Ooh, when I get my hands on you, I'll-"

"Miss Baggins!" Bofur sounded shocked. He'd been helping her into bed, and now felt quite badly for not checking it beforehand.

Elladan turned a shocked look on his brother, punching his shoulder. "That's not a dwarf, you idiot!" he hissed. "That was their halfling!" Now he was feeling distinctly guilty; as amused as he might have otherwise been by her reaction, it really didn't sit well with him, pranking injured, unsuspecting females.

"Let's get out of here!" As they turned to flee around the perimeter of the circular building, they practically bowled over two young dwarves, who must have heard Billa's cries and been running to her aid. Elladan was staring down at the crowns of their flaxen and brown heads as the four recovered from the near-collision. They were as tiny as elven children.

"Aha! It was you two, wasn't it?!" Elladan accused, stepping back, pointing down at them. "Clever for dwarves! Very clever, indeed."

Fili leapt back and nearly knocked his brother over in the process. Catching Kili before he could fall, the blond dwarf grinned guiltily up at Elladan. "Ah! The Twins. We've heard about you. Elrond's sons, right?" He was trying to look innocent, but Fili had never been a good liar, even when he was technically innocent.
"Miss Baggins!" Bofur's voice carried very well, and so did the worried note in it. Fili glanced up and nearly swallowed his tongue, not sure whether or not he should laugh. Billa was leaning out the window, her curly hair sticking out in unnatural ways, expression pinched with outrage.

"You two wait 'til I get my hands on you! You'll wish you'd never been born!"

Kili's eyes widened as he realized he and Fili had been set up. "Wait a minute! Billa... we didn't do-"

"Just what is going on here?"

Kili gulped, peering around the building to the front door. No mistaking that voice. Uncle Thorin. The guest chambers were only a short walk away, and certainly within hearing distance. Kili's face went slightly pallid. "Uncle, it wasn't us, it was..." He looked back. The Twins had vanished, like ghosts, like shadows, like... Elves.

Thorin came around the side of the structure, looking from the enraged Billa to the contrite brothers and back to Billa again. Kili couldn't really read his expression; it seemed some unfamiliar combination of bewilderment and... embarrassment. Maybe seeing Billa in this state was awkward for him? "We didn't do anything," Kili repeated, raising his palms in token of his own confusion. "We're as surprised as you."

Fili looked guilty in spite of being innocent. He usually did, when he was caught in the middle of something he thought he was going to get in trouble for. "I think she got caught in a cross-fire, Uncle. It wasn't our fault they didn't know which bed was Kili's."

Billa was trying to limp out the door now, Bofur restraining her with a look of mild panic on his homely face, as though he were sincerely afraid she was going to do Fili and Kili real harm.

"Lemme at 'em, I'll make 'em eat that ego. Stuff 'em 'til they both burst." For some reason, it seemed much more threatening to a hobbit to be fed to death than it was to be beheaded or eaten.

Thorin, seeing a potential delaying of the departure from Rivendell, grew suddenly very stern. "Just a minute, Miss Baggins. I thought you were under orders to stay off that leg until it was healed." He stepped into the doorway, barring her passage through it.

Kili hoped his Uncle could talk some sense into the little halfling. She looked set to kill them both, and by the looks of things, if she didn't succeed in doing so, Thorin would. Kili nudged Fili. "We're going to have to come up with something really clever to pay those dratted Twins back for this."

Billa glared up at Thorin. She had honey in her hair, and her entire left side seemed to be very wet. After a tense moment, she grunted.

"Fine." As though they'd just had a row, she turned her back on him. "Fine! Deal with them your way. Next time they're close enough, I'll strangle them both. Bofur, help me to the baths. Oh, quit blushing. You're not coming in with me." Her tone was light, but as she let Bofur pick her up, there was a moment when pain flashed across her features. She hid it quickly, and continued teasing Bofur rather than let on.

Fili met his brother's gaze and nodded vigorously. "If Uncle doesn't bury us both first." He watched the older dwarf watching Billa retreat and decided the chances of escape while Kili was still limping were slim to none.

Thorin turned to his nephews and took a few steps toward them that might as well have been the tramp of doom for the looks on the brothers' faces. "Why would you two do that? Isn't it inconvenient enough that we're to be here a full week without you adding to the total?!!" His eyes
smoldered beneath furrowed brow as he shook his head. "What's in your minds? You think this quest is just another game of yours?"

"Uncle, we didn't do anything!" Fili tried to wipe the guilty look off his face, but it didn't seem to be working very well. "It was those Elves, the Twins..." He looked around, as if they might suddenly materialize and take credit for their bad taste in pranks and targets.

Elrohir had no such intention. In fact, now that he'd had time to recover from the shock of pranking the wrong person, he was quite delighted with this turn of events. Not only had it been a rousing success, but they were getting the poor fools in trouble.

"This is priceless," he assured his brother with a grin, Thorin's words clear as day to his keen hearing.

Thorin was scoffing. "Blaming it on the elves. Is that truly what you're doing, Fili? You may as well have blamed Gandalf, if you thought I'd believe something so absurd. What do you take me for? Whatever else they may be, elves are not prone to joking." He turned his back on them. "Try something like that again, and I'll send you both straight home. You'll not jeopardize this quest for your own sport."

Elladan returned his brother's grin, shaking hands. Success was certainly sweeter than he'd anticipated; his initial sympathy for that ferocious halfling that had appeared at the window hadn't lasted long. "How about we go for some dorwinion, Brother? Toast our victory." Chuckling, the two headed off to the kitchen, giddy with triumph.
Estel eyed his brothers nervously as they approached, dressed identically as usual, down to their boots. Not that Estel had any trouble telling them apart, but it certainly baffled the dwarves when they saw what was apparently two of the same elf. Elrohir was walking in step with his brother as they made their way down the path, stopped in front of Fili and Kili, then bowed in unison.

"You are, by far, the most worthy adversaries we have yet encountered," Elrohir said with a haughty smile, then winked jovially down at them. "Not bad for dwarves." Fili, who had been regarding them just as warily as the grey-eyed boy beside him, relaxed when their smiles became less identical.

"Not too bad yourselves, considering you're Elves," he replied with a smirk. "Might want to work on your aim, though." He snickered. Looking back on it, pranking Billa's bed had been hilarious. Just, not so much the part where they'd nearly been sent home.

Gandalf nodded gravely to Elrond, standing side-by-side with his old friend as they watched the dwarves assemble with their assorted gear and weapons. Billa was the last to arrive, and the wizard spared her an appraising glance before turning back to his elven companion.

"Even if Thorin is too stiff-necked to say so, we are very grateful for your hospitality. I'll be seeing you again soon, I think." He was still deeply troubled about this so-called Necromancer the White Council had met to discuss, and it would behoove him to seek aid from Elrond and his kin, if the portents were to be heeded. Saruman might not think this a matter worth investigating, but Gandalf had a much deeper interest in the people of the land than was generally accepted among the Wizards.

Billa leaned heavily on a short ash staff Elrond had gifted to her that morning (along with strict instructions to keep using it until the moon was full in the sky again). She had insisted on carrying her own pack, but Ori, who was her escort today, seemed incredibly distressed.

"But your hair, Miss Baggins!" he fretted, his eyes large and dark in his innocent face. The hobbit sighed and ran a hand through her short locks. Until now, her hair had been a wild mess of brown curls, hanging to her elbows on the days she could wrestle a brush through them. Most days she didn’t bother, since it all came more or less undone when she washed anyway. Now, at her own request, her long brown hair had been cut to a more manageable length, a fact that bothered Ori to no end.

"It's fine, Ori. I'm not bleeding, it's not burned off, and it'll grow back. Now stop acting like it's the end of the world."

"I could have braided it for you if it bothered you that much."

"I don't wear braids."

"But-"
"Ori, just leave it. It's a haircut, not a disease."

Gandalf lifted his head to look down the path. Thorin was deep in conversation with Balin, and looked more restless than ever. After a moment, the wizard cleared his throat pointedly and addressed Elrond in a louder tone than necessary, his eyes on Thorin. "Your assistance with the map was invaluable, my friend. I'll not forget this service soon." His blue gaze remained on Thorin, and his meaning was clear enough.

Thorin resented Gandalf's manipulative tactics, but nonetheless thought some expression of gratitude would be fitting. He bowed slightly to the elf lord, and seeing his gesture, the other dwarves followed suit.

"My Company is grateful for the hospitality you have rendered us, Lord Elrond," he said, and left it at that.

Elrond bowed in return. "I was glad to offer it, Thorin Oakenshield. The blessing of my house goes with you; may it see you safely wherever fate wills."

With that, Thorin nodded, and turned to the arched causeway leading over the river. The Company followed, and after a brief hike up a series of switchbacks, set their face to the Misty Mountains. Once they were well on their way into the foothills, Kili fell back and joined Billa and Ori.

"So," he said, crestfallen, "why'd you cut your hair?"

Billa sighed and ran her free hand through the short curls again. They were barely long enough to cover the tips of her pointed ears. "I cut it because short hair is easier to take care of. I don't want to slow anyone down any more than I already am." Tilting her head to look up into his face as she limped beside him, the hobbit offered him a smile. "Why?"

Fili fell in on her other side as Ori slipped away, muttering something about being outnumbered. "Because long hair looks so pretty on you." He was grinning, but when she aimed a frown at him, he blushed. "Sorry."

"Isn't she a bit _old_ for you, Fili?" Kili jibed, patting his brother's head. "Besides, Uncle would be furious to know you've been flirting with _his_ burglar." He grinned, absently, playing with one the straps on his pack as they went.

"I'm only… fifty…" Billa started defensively, then trailed off as she remembered that she was solidly middle aged. An old maid. With a sigh, she looked away. Fili seemed mildly alarmed.

"See?" he said, his jaunty tone slightly forced. "She’s only fifty. A good decade younger than me. Plenty young." Her put an arm around her shoulders and grinned.

Billa shrugged him off, but she was smiling. "You two act like you’re in your tweens," she scolded fondly.

By dusk, they'd made it a good ten miles up into the pass, and Gloin started a fire in short order while Bombur prepared the evening meal and the others sat about moaning and nursing blisters. Thorin and Gandalf studied the map, discussing just how much progress they’d have to make each day in order to reach the Mountain by Durin’s Day, when the keyhole in the secret door would be revealed.

Kili collapsed on a semi-flat stone beside Billa, exhaling heavily, stretching his legs.
“So how are you holding up? Ready to head back to Rivendell yet?”

Billa was on the ground because she was too tired to bother looking for a real place to sit. Her leg ached like crazy and she wasn’t sure she had the energy even to eat, but she forced a smile for Kili.

“Back to Rivendell? Too far to walk today. Might as well keep going forward.” The hobbit chuckled and let her head rest on the ground.

“You alright, Billa?” Fili nudged his brother and handed him a canteen.

“I’m fine.” She flapped a hand at them, but didn’t bother sitting up, or even opening her eyes.

Kili leaned over the halfling. "Uncle's looking at you," he said in a singsong voice, grinning down at her.

It was true. Thorin had turned away from the map, evidently at some word from Gandalf, and was staring at Billa with what might have been mild concern.

"Good for him," Billa chuckled, wiggling her hairy toes and ignoring the heat in her cheeks. With an effort, she pushed herself upright, then, reluctantly, used her staff to heave herself to her feet. She didn't want Thorin to think she was useless. She wasn't going to give him an excuse to leave her behind. Leaning heavily on her stick, she limped over to the fire, ignoring Thorin's gaze and Fili's giggles.

"Can I help, Bombur?"

The fat dwarf glanced at her and smiled, his eyes almost disappearing amid cheerful crinkles. "Of course, Miss Baggins. You're always welcome. Come, sit, and tell me what it is you'd do with two pheasants and a hare."

Thorin turned back to the wizard. "How does she look?" His voice was little more than a low rumble. "I fear she may not fare well in the High Pass on that leg." It was a legitimate concern. A weak link could cost them all dearly, in time, and possibly more.

Gandalf looked at the halfling for a long moment before answering. "Your fears are not unfounded, but I imagine there is more to Miss Baggins than you presume. Should she fall behind or slow you down more than you can cope with, you will be justified in leaving her behind." The wizard seemed, somehow, to know certain details he was withholding from the dwarf as he turned his piercing gaze back to him. "I am not gifted with foresight, as Lord Elrond is, but I can tell you... without the hobbit, you will not succeed."

"So you've told me on numerous occasions," Thorin sighed, somewhat irritated. He folded the map and tucked it into his tunic. "And I'll respond as I always have... I hope you know what you're doing."

Billa was helping Bombur pluck a pheasant now, and she seemed to know far more about the process than the portly cook did. Her fingers moved quicker than sight, while his stubby, short ones fumbled with the delicate little feathers, pulling out a few here and there but mostly slipping off with nothing to show for it. Billa kept offering him pointers and he'd nod in appreciation, trying to model his efforts more closely upon hers.

Thorin nodded to himself. She seemed to have enough wits about her still to be of use, but he wasn't sure how she'd fare as time went on. He still didn't know quite what to make of her outlandish haircut. She looked... strange now without her long ringlets. Bare. He could see the tips of her ears now, the back of her neck. He felt awkward even thinking about it, and he turned away, pacing
toward his nephews. "Fili," he whispered, "I saw you speaking with Miss Baggins earlier. What did she say? How much grief is her injury giving her?"

Fili looked up from oiling his leather belt, startled to find his uncle leaning over him. After a moment's pause to consider the question, he answered in an undertone. "Tired, but not in pain. Dunno how many days she'll be able to keep up." He hesitated, studying his uncle with mild surprise. "I don't think she means to turn back, though. Are you worried, Uncle?" Aware of the weight of responsibility that rested on Thorin's shoulders, Fili shifted slightly, wishing he knew what to do to ease the burden. "We can keep an eye on her. Make sure she doesn't fall behind."

Thorin nodded, thoughtfully. "You've already been doing that. Don't coddle her too much. The rigors of the way will only increase; you'll be doing her a disservice when the time comes that you'll no longer be able to ease her trouble."

He turned away, hands clasped behind him. What was the use of bringing along someone who had to be protected, comforted, accommodated? She'd not last an instant on her own, with no way of defending herself. Then Thorin remembered. That little sword Gandalf had given her. An elf dagger, really. He turned back to Fili, nodding toward Billa. "When she's done with the meal, give her a lesson. You and Kili. Teach her the basics of defense, and at the least, where to strike for a killing blow. I'll not have anyone in this Company be completely helpless."

Fili glanced at the hobbit, then at his brother, and nodded. "Yes, sir." The idea of teaching anyone anything was a little intimidating, to be honest, but he would do his best, because Thorin had entrusted the task to him. His point about not being able to help her in the future was a sharp one, and Fili wished it weren't true.

Dinner was delicious, as usual, and Billa, though she ate fairly little, was still fiddling with her bowl when Fili and Kili approached. Her short curls were sticking up in places where she'd run her fingers through them, and though she smiled, there was little energy in the expression.

"Up you get, Billa," Fili urged with a grin, taking her bowl and pressing her dagger into her hands. "It's time for your first lesson."

"Lesson?" Billa looked down at the weapon, then up at the brothers. "You're joking, right? It's nearly dark!"

"Well, we had better get moving then, hadn't we?"

Kili had a stout, hardwood branch he'd borrowed from the kindling pile, and he tossed it to his brother.

"Too dangerous to spar with sharps, especially with a novice," he said. "Her 'letter opener' there hasn't been sharpened in a while, so you're probably safe."

He grinned at Fili, and the blonde took a stance a few feet away from the bewildered-looking halfling while Kili moved behind her. "Now, we're going to start with blocking. If you don't mind, I think the easiest way to do this would be to show you... like this." He reached down and took the wrist of her sword hand in his fingers, wrapping his other hand around her waist.

"Come at her, Fili," he said, and when the blonde complied, he moved Billa's sword to block the (rather restrained) blow before it landed. "Keep your eye on his weapon at all times. It should practically be a reflex. Your sword becomes a part of your hand; you won't need to look at it at all.
Make sense, Billa?"

Billa's arms, shoulders and back were nearly rigid with tension. A glance at her face told Fili she wasn't frightened, she was angry. In a way, that was good. Anger would make her reflexes quicker. On the other hand, it also made her more dangerous, because she had a real weapon, and he didn't.

A heartbeat passed, then two, and the halfling relaxed again, her anger draining away. "Yes, it makes sense." She rolled her shoulders and adjusted her stance to more closely match Kili's, fixing her gaze on Fili's branch.

Thorin watched from the other side of the fire; his nephews, his burglar, and the dull clattering of steel against wood. *His* burglar? There he was doing it again. Well, she was contractually bound to perform a service, he reminded himself. That gave him some claim on her. But this was the last thing he'd planned for upon leaving the Blue Mountains- allowing this tiny female who wasn't even a dwarf to influence his future, the future of his people.

As he watched her, the flames reflecting orange in his blue eyes, like fire burning on water, he felt a peculiar stirring, something he'd experienced before but couldn't place. She seemed so small, so helpless. Was it concern for her safety? Was that the feeling? Thorin wasn’t sure he knew, or even wanted to know.
The light returned timidly, and when the sun did finally finish what must have been an arduous climb to peer through the mist-shrouded mountain peaks, the Company was well on its way up the pass. There was a light sprinkling of snow now, and the air was chill and damp. Most of the dwarves wore their hoods up, and Thorin had donned his fur-lined cloak. As the day wore on, the weather made motions to warm up just enough for the snow to become icy rain, something Thorin knew would greatly hinder them if they were to make much progress throughout the daylight hours. The cliffside pass ahead was narrow, rough, and poorly maintained, if it had ever been maintained at all. Mud would only make it worse. If luck were with them, they'd find a cave before the worst of the weather unleashed itself upon them.

Luck wasn't with them.

The cliff on their left was a sheer wall of rock, slick and wet with the icy rain that fell on them in increasingly dense torrents. Fili and Kili, who had been hovering around their burglar earlier in the day, had learned that trying to help her too much ended with a grumpy hobbit and ringing ears, when she decided she'd had enough and rapped each of them over the head with her staff.

Now the brothers toiled along with her, one behind, one in front, and for the most part, ignored the halfling as they tramped and slipped over the wet rock. Their trail had dwindled down to a narrow stone shelf, jutting from the side of the mountain. On the right, the drop-off was was steep enough to be nearly vertical, and the bottom of the pass was too shrouded in mist to be seen.

Thunder boomed overhead and Billa jumped, her bare feet skidding toward the edge. Kili, who was behind her, let out a startled yell and grabbed one of her arms, yanking her back. She teetered for a fraction of a second, her staff spinning out over the void before she fell into Kili, trembling. A yell came from up ahead, and it sounded like Thorin, bellowing about finding shelter. Fili pulled them both to their feet and Dwalin, who had turned back at the sound of Kili's yell, hurried them along.

Another peal of thunder boomed directly above their heads, and Gandalf's voice cracked back along the line of dwarves.

"TAKE COVER!"

A shower of small boulders rained down on them, and as the Company pressed their bodies into the relative shelter of the mountain's face, Billa spotted a huge chunk of rock sailing through the air, back-lit by twin forks of lightning.

"Eru save us..." The oath was lost in the wind and rain. The seconds stretched into an eternity before the boulder collided with the mountain above them. More splintered rock and stone shards fell.

"The legends are true," exclaimed one of the dwarves- Billa couldn't be sure who. "They're giants!
Stone giants!" And now, as another fork of lightning split the air, Billa could see the huge, rough form of a man, made entirely of stone.

"We need to move, now!" Dwalin bellowed over the growls of the massive stone creatures. There were more of them moving into view, nearly indistinguishable from the mountains that were their home. Lightning and thunder and pelting rain seemed to have woken them from long slumber to hurl massive boulders at one another, no doubt their form of merriment. Fili hurried forward and Kili followed, giving Billa the occasional nudge from behind. It wasn't until the shelf that served as their path fractured under their feet that the dwarves paused.

"Kili!" Fili whirled, staring in horror as part of the mountain peeled away, taking his brother, their burglar, and the stalwart Dwalin with it. Dwalin was holding the two smaller forms against the rock wall, braced and snarling into the wind as the stone giant stepped forward into the pass.

Thorin turned, realizing all at once that part of his Company was missing. No time to wonder what had happened to them; a moment later, another giant approached out of the darkness and rain, moving toward them with what he imagined was violent intent. The stone trembled under their feet and it was with a feeling of mild panic that Thorin noticed the missing dwarves and halfling standing on what appeared to be the knee of a new giant, advancing to meet the attacker.

"Kili!" he yelled, but his voice was lost to the roaring of moving stone and the howling of the storm. The attacker was evidently bested, knocked off balance, its knees buckling, threatening to collide with the nearby cliffside. Thorin raced forward just in time to see the stone crack against the mountain ahead with a massive rapport that shook the path beneath his feet.

Horror gripped his heart as he realized what had happened. Dead. Kili, Dwalin, Billa. Dead. Staggering forward, face stricken, he rounded the corner.

Miraculously, Kili and Dwalin lay on the shelf, surrounded by shards of stone, stunned, but very much alive. A cry from Bombur quickly tempered Thorin's relief.

"Where's Billa?"

"Over here!" Bofur yelled as he threw himself down on his stomach, reaching over the edge. Fili and Kili rushed to help him, and the others crowded around. Billa was hanging by her hands, eyes wide in her terrified face as she scrabbled at the smooth, slick stone with her bare feet. There was no purchase for her, and as her hands slipped, there was a heart-stopping moment when she thought for sure that she was going to die. Bofur caught one of her hands and she dangled in the air like a worm on a hook.

"Grab my hand!" yelled Fili, straining to reach for her while his brother braced him from behind. Billa lifted her free hand, but the wind was buffeting her away from the safety of the cliffside. Bofur grunted in pain, both strong hands wrapped around her wrist.

She was slipping.

Thorin could envision her plunging down, down, down into the mist below. He hesitated only an instant, and then he was over the cliffside himself, latched on firmly with one hand in a crevice in the stone, the other gripping Billa's forearm. With one massive effort, he heaved her up, and Bofur and the others managed to pull her the rest of the way onto the slick shelf.

A moment later, Thorin's toe slipped from the wet groove in the cliff-face, and all his weight went to his right hand. He grunted, floundering at the rock for another handhold and coming up with nothing. It was an agonizing moment before Dwalin's firm grip came to his aid, hoisting him back to
safety. Thorin panted, shuddering a little at the realization he'd almost left the Company leaderless in a heedless bid to save... her.

The others were gasping, laughing, clapping each other on the back, relieved to have survived such a bizarre ordeal.

"Well, that was close," Bombur was saying, "I thought we'd lost the burglar."

Thorin turned, looking dazed, confused. "She's been lost ever since she left home. She should never have come." The anger in the statement didn't seem to be directed at Billa; if anything, it was meant for him. She'd almost been killed. He'd nearly been killed leaping to her rescue, something he had predicted would happen... only he hadn't thought he'd be the dwarf doing the rescuing.

Surely the others were wondering now why he'd risk himself to the jagged rocks below- why he wouldn't have ordered Dwalin or Nori or Gloin to do it- why he'd almost left the dwarves of Erebor leaderless... on account of a halfling.

He had no answer for that. He knew only the leadings of his heart; there had been no thinking involved.

Gandalf turned to him reproachfully. "Thorin Oakenshield! What happened just now was no fault of Billa's. Cast your anger on the stone giants, if you think it will do any good, but otherwise keep silent."

Thorin glowered at the wizard, turning away. He'd not let the old man dictate to him as if he were the leader of the Company. They needed to find shelter, and quickly. A cave would be ideal, if one could be found.

"Come on!" he ordered, mentally cursing the rain, the wind, the stone giants, the wizard... and that dratted burglar for whatever spell she'd cast over him.

Billa felt as though Thorin had smacked her. She had thought he was starting to see her as at least marginally useful. Fili, Kili, Bofur and Bombur all helped her to her feet, and the halfling limped after the straggling line of dwarves, concentrating fiercely on the rain and the cold, and the thuds and booms of enormous rocks hitting the mountainside as the stone giants resumed their game.
It was a relief indeed when they finally found a relatively dry, roomy cave, with a sandy floor and a narrow entrance that kept the wind out.

There would be no fire or warm laughter that night. The dwarves huddled together, miserable, wet, and cold while they shared provisions and cold, leftover stew from the night before. Billa settled herself against a wall and massaged her aching leg. It wasn't fully healed yet, though the bone had knit together.

Fili watched her, a worried expression on his face. Nudging Kili, he nodded to her and took his paltry dinner with him as he plopped himself down beside the little hobbit-lass. "Don't look so glum," he said, poking her with a smile. "Uncle Thorin gets grumpy sometimes. That's not your fault."

Kili sat cross-legged on the other side of Billa, holding his stew bowl in one hand, tousling the hobbit's curls with the other. "I like it, actually," he said. "Your hair. It's... different." Thorin's words had hurt him as well as Billa, and he wasn't sure why. He felt, somehow, as though he'd failed, too.

But talking about it wouldn't help; distracting Billa might. "Haven't met such... erm... active rocks in a while, have we, Fili?"

"I'll be happy if we never meet any that active ever again." Fili shook his head. "That was a little too much excitement for the mountains, if you ask me. They need their rest after all that. A couple hundred years' worth." Billa chuckled, shaking curls out of her face.

"If we were surprised, think about them. Can you imagine waking up and having little people walking all over you? If he hadn't been so distracted, I think he'd have been just as unsettled as we were."

Fili laughed, but wasn't sure he agreed. He could all too easily imagine being smashed like a beetle by a startled giant.

"Hadn't thought of that," said Kili, amused by this idea. He sighed, glancing ruefully down at the congealed, brown glop filling his bowl. "Well. Cold stew. Better than nothing, I guess. I wish Uncle weren't so paranoid. A fire would've been nice." He turned to make sure Thorin hadn't heard his grousing and was surprised to see the dwarf's blue eyes fixed on him. He gulped.
Thorin gestured that he should come, and motioned at Fili, too. The brothers complied, and their uncle took them aside, speaking in a low tone. "From here on out, I am placing Miss Baggins under your protection." Anticipating some question from Fili, as this had been precisely what he'd said the blonde shouldn't do the day before, he went on. "I cannot risk her... compromising this quest. Don't allow anything like what happened earlier to happen again. And tell her nothing of this. Understand?"

The brothers returned to their positions on either side of Billa, making sure they kept up a steady stream of jokes and stories that made her smile. By unspoken consent, the two of them knew that the sadness and pain they'd seen in the halfling's face at Thorin's callous comment on the path couldn't be allowed to surface for too long. Despite being exhausted, wet, and cold, Fili insisted on taking Billa through another round of training. It was slower going tonight, due to the necessity of using real weapons and the relatively cramped size of the cave, but Billa made good progress in spite of these limitations. Kili taught her a little trick he'd learned about disarming Fili (it didn't really work against the others, but Fili was, unfortunately, just predictable enough to be taken advantage of).

Eventually, the Company settled down to sleep for the night, in spite of the howling storm outside. They huddled in their blankets and pressed tightly against one another, and the cave was soon filled with a chorus of snores. Billa shifted and squirmed and rolled over, trying to find a position that didn't feel like she was lying on bare rock. Trying to find a position that didn't feel like she was 'the weak link.'

She's been lost ever since she left home. She should never have come.

Maybe he was right. She had thought she could add something to their Company, that she could be useful. That she could achieve something. But maybe Gandalf was wrong. Maybe Thorin was right. Restless and angry with herself for slowing them down, angry with herself for thinking that she could be something she wasn't, Billa gave up on sleeping. She was no burglar. She was no adventurer. She was a hobbit. An injured hobbit, at that. She would only endanger them. Thorin had nearly died, saving her today. She couldn't let that happen again. Careful not to wake Fili or Kili, she rolled up her blankets and shouldered her bag. It was time for her to face the facts. She belonged in the Shire.

Bofur, who was sitting nearest the cave entrance on watch duty, sat up sharply as he saw the halfling walking past, her bag packed, her face disconsolate. "Where ye goin', Billa?" he whispered in alarm, jumping up and quickly following her. "Ye can't just... leave. Not like this!" His eyes and voice were plaintive. He'd been very fond of the plucky little hobbit from the first, and he couldn't stand the thought that she'd sneak away without so much as an explanation, a farewell. "Why, Billa?"

Billa stopped, surprised. She didn't turn to face him. Couldn't. Not without making this ever so much harder for herself. "I can't stay with you, Bofur," she whispered, her words tight with pain. "Thorin's right- I'm not cut out for this. You all... you're used to this. Living on the road, fighting and traveling. I belong at home. In the Shire. I was a fool to come at all, and I'm only slowing you down." She glanced out into the storm, which seemed to have calmed down a little since they'd found their shelter. "You saw what nearly happened today. Thorin could have died trying to save my life. How could I live with myself if one of you... any of you... didn't make it, because of me?"

Bofur shook his head. "No, Miss. You haven't slowed us down at all. You've been..." He lowered his voice even more. "You've been the best thing that's happened to this Company. I really believe that." Billa shot him a confused glance, skepticism clear in her lowered eyebrows. How could she be, when she was always such an... inconvenience?

As faint as Bofur's voice was, his words were still quite distinct in Thorin's ears. The dwarf hadn't
gone to sleep at all. He'd heard Billa packing, seen her walking toward the door. He would have
gone after her himself if Bofur hadn't beaten him to it. Now he lay still, listening. Feeling conflicted.
He hadn't meant them, the words he'd said to her after he'd saved her. They'd issued from frustration
with himself, frustration at the power she unconsciously had over him, at the need he felt to protect
her. Frustration with the fact that this quest was endangering her life. There. Now he'd admitted it to
himself. He didn't want her to be hurt, or killed, or worse. She was a little, delicate thing, a thing he
felt compelled to protect. No, she didn't understand what he'd meant, the meaning behind the words.
Even he didn't fully understand.

Bofur lay a hand on Billa's shoulder. "Forget what Thorin said; he didn't mean it. I'm sure he didn't.
You're welcome among us." He smiled sheepishly. "Even if we don't all show it at times."

Billa hesitated, conflict in her face as she glanced back at the jumble of snoring dwarves. "I... want
you to be safe," she whispered, half to herself. "But... even if I left... you wouldn't be. I just...
wouldn't be here to see it." Her halting words accompanied fierce pangs of grief. She didn't want to
lose them. She didn't want to see them disappear into death. She didn't want to be alone again. The
halfling shifted her weight off her aching leg, unintentionally leaning into Bofur's strong hand. After
a long moment, she sighed, and it was the sound of one who'd come to the conclusion that her
decision had been made a long time ago, and she'd just refused to see it.

Thorin’s relief was mingled with something very close to guilt. She wanted to get away from him so
badly she’d risk the wrath of the stone giants again? Risk traveling the treacherous mountain path,
alone, in the dark and driving rain? Idle words seemed ever destined to be his bane. He’d thought
nothing of how his remarks would affect her; not then, anyway. He’d thought only of his own
weakness, a weakness he’d not even known existed within him until he had to make the choice of an
instant. “The weak link” he’d spoken of in Rivendell seemed, at the moment, to be himself.

"Gandalf keeps insisting that you need me. I suppose I ought to..." Billa lifted her head, ears
twitching slightly as she scanned the cave. "Do you hear something?" A grinding, rumbling sound
that wasn't part of the snoring symphony. She could feel it in her toes. Were the giants at it again?

Thorin felt the rumbling, too, and sat up quickly. "Everyone up! Get up! NOW!"

He was too late. Before most of the dwarves could do more than grunt and peel tired eyes open, the
entire floor fell out from beneath them, sending the startled Company - and all of their bedding and
gear - plummeting into the darkness below.

They rolled and slid and skidded and collided with each other, down two hundred feet of nearly
vertical stone channel. Finally, they were deposited as neatly as you please into what seemed a
hideous parody of a basket, woven of bones and sinews and oily ropes. Bombur came last, plopping
loudly on top of the pile of dwarves and the halfling, all of whom now lay, groaning, stunned,
bruised, and weak, but thankfully alive.

"Fili, where's Billa?" Thorin coughed faintly, grimacing, massaging what was most likely a sprained
shoulder.

"I can hear you just fine," groaned the halfling, looking pale-faced and holding her injured leg
gingerly. "I'm right here." She was near the top of the pile and was only half-under Bombur, who
was working very hard to pull himself upright. That process only put more strain on the dwarves
below, who were making various noises of discomfort and protest. Fili was squirming, valiantly
trying to get out from under Gloin and Dwalin, who were growling profanities at one another in
Khuzdul as they tried to right themselves.

A loud, cackling laugh split the darkness, and a smoky torch bobbed into view. Beneath it, the
malformed face of a goblin peered through the bones at them, grinning wickedly. "Lookit what we got 'ere. Trespassers."

More goblins poured into the chamber behind the first, filling the air with their foul voices and leering smiles. Most of them appeared to be armed, and as the bone-basket was suddenly opened, several of the dwarves felt the sharp, threatening prod of crooked, rusty blades.

"Come along, then," said the one with the torch, who seemed to be the leader. "Down, down we go." As the dwarves and halfling were herded along the smokey tunnel, tripped and slapped and poked as they went, the goblins started a chilling, chanting song in time to the flapping of their big, flat feet. They sang in garbled rhyme and descriptive, painful phrases about what would happen to the dwarves once they reached "Goblin-town."
Thorin must've hit his head at some point during the fall. His ears were ringing, and his vision didn't want to focus. It was nearly all he could do to stay upright as the goblins prodded him along across the swaying rope bridges and over rickety platforms. The vast cavern ceiling above them flickered orange as the grunting, cackling, squealing group went along, and every so often, when there was a lull in the gloating and triumphant banter, the dwarves heard the distant, echoing clanking and grinding and thudding of other goblins at work in the adjacent tunnels.

After several minutes of being shoved along, Thorin risked a furtive glance over his shoulder. He quickly counted twelve dwarves. But there were two notable persons absent. No Gandalf... and no Billa. The wizard must've slipped away in the commotion. Thorin could only hope that the halfling had gone with him, wherever he'd disappeared to.

The dwarves were shoved along until they reached a fairly sturdy wooden platform, whereupon there sat an enormous throne and an even more enormous goblin. The creature was grotesquely fat, and sported more sores, boils, and scars than any dwarf should ever have to see. As smaller goblins dumped the Company's assorted gear at their king's feet, the huge goblin graced them with a huge, unsightly smile.

"Well well well, who do we have the pleasure of entertaining today, my pretties?"

"Trespassers!" called one of the goblins, nearly frenzied with their enthusiasm for pain and bloodshed. "Dwarves come to invade our tunnels!"

Fili shot a look at his brother. This wasn't a game. This wasn't one of their stories, where they would miraculously find a way to kill all their foes and escape unscathed. This was real. And what was more... "Where's Billa?" he whispered, glancing around with a sudden feeling of dread. The goblins around them were all but rioting now, jumping up and down, waving their weapons and calling out answers to questions no one had asked.

"Cook them! Eat them!" screeched one.

"Kill them!" howled another. "Rip them, tear them, pound them, smash them!"

"QUIET." The goblin king leaned forward in his seat, and the entire platform swayed slightly. "Come forward Dwarf, and speak, if you dare."

Kili couldn't help but shiver a little as he listened to the goblins hiss and howl for the dwarves' blood, gazed upon the corpulent perversion that was the creatures' king. At his brother's question, his mind fell open a little. He'd lost sight of Billa when they'd first been hurried away from the trap, and had taken it for granted that she was with Fili. He slanted a look at Thorin, wondering if he'd noticed, then turned back to his brother. "I don't know," he said, his words almost lost in the chaotic glee of
the goblins. "Lost track of her when we fell. Might be with Gandalf?"

Thorin stepped forward, shrugging off Dwalin's protective hand on his shoulder. That evidently didn't deter the hulking, tattooed dwarf, who shoved Thorin aside and stepped in front of his leader.

"I speak for these dwarves!" he bellowed. "I lead this Company."

The Goblin King looked intrigued. "Oh? Really? What kind of 'Company' is this? Come to steal from us? Come to assassinate me, perhaps?"

Dwalin snorted. "Don't flatter yourself. You're not worth the effort. You or your pathetic 'kingdom.' Besides, you have nothing we'd want."

The goblin cackled, slapping his flabby thigh. "You flatter yourself, Dwarf, if you think I don't know who it is you're protecting. I'd recognize Thorin Thrainsen, King Under the Mountain, anywhere. Although it helps that he's wearing the signet ring of King Thror, I suppose." He grinned, revealing a crooked row of rotting, half-missing teeth.

Kili gulped. If they hadn't been doomed before, they were now.

Fili made a gesture that might have been a plea for mercy and swiped his tongue over very dry lips. The lower one seemed to be bleeding. The hobbit had to be with Gandalf. Where else could she be?

The Goblin King eyed Thorin with a hungry sort of glee in his mean little eyes. "So, Oakenshield," he said, clearly enjoying his power over them as he pushed Dwalin aside with one fat hand, "what brings you to my humble kingdom?"

"A horde of goblin-filth," growled Dwalin, taking his place beside his king once again and looking very much as though he were more than willing to kill the tremendous goblin with his bare hands.

"I would suggest you control your little bodyguard," advised the goblin king. "I'm tempted to make an example of him."

Thorin glowered at the repulsive creature and nodded at Dwalin, who growled out a protest, but withdrew. "You're right. I am Thorin. What of it?"

The goblin leered at him with obvious delight. "Well, what a pleasure to finally meet Your Highness face to face! I've heard tell of your doings in Ered Luin. All very interesting, I'm sure, though perhaps not very 'kingly,' wandering like an itinerant from town to town, laboring at the forges of Men." He sneered derisively, and Thorin lowered his eyes. "So my question is, what are you doing back in this part of the world again? Obviously, you must have some scheme in mind."

Thorin glared up at him once more. "You're well-informed for an overgrown abscess living in a mountain-hole."

The goblin king's malicious smile twisted into an angry scowl. Apparently, he wasn't flattered by the words "overgrown abscess" when in reference to his appearance. "I make it my business to stay well-informed." Gesturing at one of his lackeys and settling back in his throne, the smile returned to his flabby face. "Send a message to the orcs- tell them I've found their prey." As the goblin swung off with a gleeful cackle, the goblin king leered unpleasantly at the dwarves. "They'll pay handsomely for the privilege of killing you, I think."

Thorin looked faintly surprised. "Indeed? I didn't realize my head was at a premium among orc kind."
The Goblin King's goiter bounced as he nodded, smiling smugly. "Oh, you've no idea, Thrainson. There's one orc in particular who'll be thrilled to get his hand on you." He chuckled to himself, as if at an inside joke. "Maybe you've made his acquaintance. Huge, pale, rides a white warg?"

Thorin looked up at this, fear lurking behind the blue wells of his eyes. "Azog the Defiler is dead," he said darkly, but it was obvious his belief in the statement was crumbling even as he uttered it.

"Is he?" the goblin mocked, jabbing Thorin with his hideous, skull-crowned scepter. "I suppose that's why he's sent word to the four corners of the world advertising the bounty that's on you." He guffawed, delighted at Thorin's shock and dismay.

"Now let's see. We have a fitting fate for our poor excuse for a mountain king. How about these others?" He turned sickly yellow eyes on the rest of the dwarves, several of whom looked fit to faint. The goblin's flat feet slapped across the wooden platform as he inspected the group, and he cawed with glee when Ori began to tremble, latching onto Oin's arm for protection.

"Looks like you've brought some dwarflings along, Thorin. Such pathetic little things. Don't even have proper beards. Much like yourself, actually."

The goblin turned to his guards. "Bring 'em out, boys. The young ones. Let's have some fun!"

At first, Fili fought to defend the others. Then he realized that he was among the "dwarflings" being dragged forward. The blond struggled valiantly, converting his fear into anger for the sake of his brother. For his uncle. For Ori, who looked like he was about to wet himself, if he hadn't already. The goblins' filthy hands were latching onto his armor, threatening to tear it off, dragging at his belt, tearing at his cloak. With a roar, he tossed one of the smaller goblins clean over the edge, twisting so his back was against Kili's.

The goblin king started to laugh, as though the lives of his own subjects made no difference to him. "Keep him under control, my pretties," he scolded mockingly. The goblins piled on top of the blond and his brother, bashing at their heads with dried bones and sturdy clubs. The two were knocked near senseless before they were shoved forward, along with the trembling Ori and a rather insulted-looking Bofur.

Seeing his nephews beaten and dragged forward awoke unadulterated rage in Thorin, and the oath he'd sworn to his sister burned hot in his eyes as he fought his way toward the young dwarves. It took six goblins to restrain him, and a good clubbing to the head, besides. Now he was on his knees, two goblins on each arm, two with hands tangled in his dark hair, and two others with their long fingers on his shoulders, standing by. He was gasping for breath, trembling, a trickle of red streaming down his face from his head wound. "Swine!" he hissed at the Goblin King, spitting blood at its feet.

"Tut tut," said the goblin, grinning, "we mustn't call names, dear Thorin. I wonder, though, why these dwarves seem so... dear to you. Is it just because they're young? Hmm? I think not. Relatives, perhaps? Sons? Oh, but I forget, you have none. Nephews, then."

Thorin's face, as stoic as he strove to keep it, betrayed the confirmation the goblin sought.

"Oh, how enchanting! He's brought his pretty little nephews out for a jaunt in the Mountains!" The goblins around him snickered and prodded at the young dwarves and Bofur. "Well, let's show them a bit of fun, shall we? Start with the flaxen-haired one. He'll give good sport, I think."

Fili was separated from the others, groaning as he was dropped at the foot off the throne. The goblin king turned, his flat feet making nasty slapping sounds on the swaying platform, mounds of flesh
jiggling grotesquely. "Tog, why don't you have a go at him?" A large, muscular goblin armed with a heavy cutlass sidled forward, grinning excitedly in the torchlight. As Tog advanced on Fili, who was still recovering from the head-bashing he'd just received, the goblin king leaned down to Thorin's eye level, chuckling darkly.

"What are you going to do, King Under the Mountain?" he asked mockingly. "Think you can save him?" He gestured, and Thorin's hair was pulled cruelly, straining his neck as others pushed his shoulders forward, forcing him to watch Fili fight to the death.

The blond dwarf was doing his level best to stay out of Tog's reach, but the ring of howling goblins wouldn't let him get more than a blade's length away from his larger, slower opponent. Despite the cutlass's heavy, rusted appearance, it was very sharp, as Fili found out when he cut it a little too close and Tog opened a deep cut in his side. Blood spattered the wooden slats and Fili stumbled, but kept moving, face set and determined. It was only after he'd made a wild dive and came up with a sword in his hands that the goblin king seemed to realize that he'd made a mistake.

Thorin snarled, wrenching wildly at the hands restraining him. He'd freed himself from half of them when another brutal blow to the skull dropped him to the floor. He lay still a moment, and when he came to himself again, his head throbbed and his eyes were cloudy. They focused, and he saw that Fili had just slain Tog.

He had a sword. He had Deathless, Thorin's spare blade, which he must have managed to grab when he'd gone sprawling just as Thorin had been knocked out. The dark-haired dwarf grunted, struggling violently against the slimy appendages pressing him into the roughly planed wood.

Utilizing the distraction Fili had created, Kili jerked away from the two goblins restraining him and lunged through the ring of goblins toward his brother. The other dwarves - especially Dwalin - were roaring and struggling madly against their captors now, and the look on the Great Goblin's face said things were getting decidedly out of his control. The platform was practically overrun with goblins, every inch occupied with the disgusting, grimy creatures as they restrained the outraged dwarves.

Then a sly smile flickered at the corners of the Goblin King's ugly mouth, and he knelt beside Thorin, a jagged dagger in his warty hand, though where on his corpulent body he might have pulled it from was anyone's guess.

"Enough!" he bellowed, and his voice carried surprisingly well over the chaos. "I'll kill him! I'll slit his throat right where he lies!"

Fili froze, his eyes fixed on Thorin. He glanced at Kili, who was equally motionless, then at Dwalin, who was in danger of having his arms twisted off, and finally- Fili's gaze flicked up to the Goblin King, to the dagger that pressed against Thorin's neck.

"It's your choice," the fat goblin crooned, looking far too pleased with himself. "Azog will pay well for the head of Thrain's son, whether it's attached to his shoulders or not."

Fili slowly lowered the sword he held, shaking with anger. "You'll regret this," he growled, sounding surprisingly like his grandfather as his eyes blazed with barely suppressed rage.

"Oh, I don't think so," the goblin sneered, flicking the tip of the dagger in a surprisingly dexterous motion beneath Thorin's chin. A thin line of red snaked down the dwarf's throat. "Now drop your weapon, or he'll do more than bleed."

Fili dropped the sword. Kili backed toward his brother, looking fearfully at the encircling ring of leering goblin faces. A moment later, the two brothers were wrestled, irresistibly, to the floor.
The Goblin King's blade didn't leave Thorin's jugular, and it was all the dark-haired dwarf could do to remain still as his nephews were descended upon by the furious goblins with clubs and whips and fists.

Kili did what he could to protect his wounded brother, shielding his body with his own despite Fili's forceful protests.

"Why don't you just kill me, then?" Thorin growled through tightening throat, face stricken. "Kill me, and leave them be!"

"But that wouldn't be nearly as much fun, would it?" the goblin laughed a wheezing, crackly laugh. "With a will, lads! The Mountain King's not crying yet."

Kili winced as the goblins' claws carved bloody furrows in his arms and back, but stubbornly withheld verbal protest. Uncle was clearly upset enough as it was. Fili was still yelling at him to get off, but the young dwarf wouldn't listen, wouldn't let them hurt his older brother any more than they already had. There was nothing on or under the earth that could shake his resolve. Fili's cries only served to strengthen the conviction that what he was doing was the right course of action.

The goblins were in a frenzy, driven into a state of crazed bloodlust by the helplessness of their victims. The platform groaned under their combined weight, rocking slightly as their king egged them on. Thorin's neck ached as his head was pulled back even further, everything inside him screaming in protest, raging against the helplessness that consumed him. His nephews, his sistersons. He'd failed them.
It was in this moment of hopelessness that Gandalf returned, heralded by a flash of bright light that swept dwarves and goblins to the platform, knocked them momentarily senseless. The Great Goblin floundered at the edge a moment, and then, with a wail, plunged over, nearly taking Thorin with him.

"Take up arms!" the pointy-hatted silhouette of the wizard urged, Glamdring glowing palely in the dim light. "Fight!"

The dwarves struggled to their feet, scouring the platform for their weapons, while the goblins lay a while longer, still stunned. But Kili lay where he'd been thrown, gasping, curled up, eyes squeezed tightly shut.

Fili sat beside his brother, eyes watering as he recovered from his attempt to stand. His head was reeling and he felt like if he let go of his side, it would open up and spill his insides all over the platform. A ridiculous thought, of course, but it felt that way nonetheless. Fili had never seen another creature disemboweled, and the idea of it happening to him was ludicrous, as far as he was concerned. Still, having failed at standing, he turned his attention to his brother.

"Idiot," he growled, giving Kili's arm a halfhearted tug, trying to get him to sit up. "I told you not to..." When Kili rolled a little toward him, he saw the deep, bleeding gouges in his brother's back and arms. "Mahal's hammer... Don't you dare do this to me, Kili. Get up. Come on, get up. If I can get up, you can. Please, Kili."

Oin's hands were as steady as ever as he found them, though his face was twisted with worry. He pushed Fili out of the way and used his own jacket as an impromptu bandage, tying it around Kili's deepest injuries before pulling him upright and stuffing a bundle of dried herbs into the injured dwarf's mouth.

"Chew," he ordered, then turned to Fili. "Arm yourself, lad. We haven't time to lay about."

Billa slowly regained consciousness, feeling as though the world were spinning in lazy circles around the spot where she lay. She could feel blood in her hair, and her leg felt like someone had set her knee on fire, but the place where the break had been felt solid enough, so it couldn't be too bad.

At length, she heaved herself up and groaned softly. The silence bothered her more than the pain. There were no voices, no hands, no roughness in the world to tell her the dwarves were nearby. Just cold, smooth, damp stone. A chill crept into her, and Billa wasn't sure if it was the temperature, or the loneliness. Stumbling a little, but using the wall to keep herself upright, the hobbit followed the
tunnel cautiously, unable to see in the pitch dark. More than once she tripped and fell, scraping her knees and hands against the stone and finding more patches of dirt and damp slime than she had ever wanted to encounter.

On one of these unfortunate trips to the ground, she found more than just slick stone and slime. Something hard and round was buried in the dirt under her fingers. It felt like a made-thing, rather than a natural thing, and without a second thought, she picked it up, rubbing it clean even though she couldn't see it. It was a ring, about the right size for her slender fingers. The darkness prevented her from inspecting her find, but she had a feeling that it was very precious, somehow. Billa pocketed the ring, pushing herself to her feet. Something clattered against the stone, and she felt a tug at her belt—she remembered that she had her sword. As she drew the blade, she noticed with a certain amount of dread that it glowed pale blue in the darkness.

Gollum grunted, stoving the hapless goblin's head in with a few brutal strikes of a sharp stone. He'd found the little squeaker wandering down the tunnel toward his cave earlier, and grabbed him from behind wearing It. The Precious. His precious Ring. He'd thought he had killed it then, but it must have revived somehow in the interim whilst he'd been dragging it out to his rock, his home sweet island out in the middle of his cool, subterranean lake.

It was a spacious cavern, even by goblin standards, lit only by the luminescent green glow of huge, spotted mushrooms and a few purplish crystals growing from the rocky ceiling, reflecting an eerie glow on the flat, heavy-looking lake.

Then Gollum saw something. Down the main tunnel a ways, where he'd caught his meal earlier. A faint, bluish light. It bounced a little, growing weaker, than vanished altogether.

Mingled fear and curiosity awoke in him, and he turned from the dead goblin to his little black boat. It was more of a hollow log, really. He'd stolen it from the goblins long ago, smuggled it back down here so he could get out to his island with greater ease. It rode low in the water as he paddled silently to shore, his large, flat feet making no ripples as he went. He lay on the boat, listening, his breath whistling quietly past his sharpened teeth.

Finally, he saw it. Illuminated purplish-green and walking hesitantly toward him. A creature unlike anything he'd seen in... well, maybe he'd never seen anything like it before at all. It was small like him, but stouter, and had a mop of curly, light hair on its head and large, fluffy feet. Its clothes seemed odd - fine, colorful - nothing like what grimy, utilitarian rags the goblins wore, and it held a strange shiny knife out in front of it like a shield, trembling in the creature's pale, delicate hands.

Gollum's curiosity trampled his fear. "What issss it, my precious?" he hissed, leaping out of the boat on all fours. "What issss it?"

Billa heard the hissing and slapping of Gollum's huge, wet hands and feet against the rock. Without the light of her sword, she was blind- or she'd thought so. Her eyes slowly adjusted to the weird light. Mushrooms that glow. The halfling caught herself wondering what they tasted like, and if they would go well with that garlic the elves had used- it was a touch strong for her taste, but strong flavors weren't a bad thing.

"What issss it?"

Billa stiffened at the sound of a voice. "Who's there?" She all but shouted into the echoing cavern, terror thrilling through her, making it hard to focus.

No. This is what Kili warned me about. If I give in to the fear, I'll be useless. Billa sucked in a deeper breath and tried to calm herself down. Movement attracted her attention and she swung her attention
toward it. Her sword flashed in the semi-darkness, and so did something else. A pair of bulbous eyes, reflecting green-blue light, like a cat's.

Don't panic. Don't panic. You're armed. You have a sword, and you know how to use it. Mostly.

"Who are you?" she asked, taking a step back and angling her blade at Gollum's skinny chest.

Gollum hissed as the shiny metal jutted toward him. He hadn't seen anything like it before, so smooth, so clean, so shiny, so... dangerous. Everything here was rough, dirty, rugged. Familiar. Not this. This puzzled him, and while he was still curious, his wariness made a resurgence. He sat back on his haunches, his bony, knobly hands shooting up protectively to shield his emaciated chest.

"What isss it, Precious? It's not a goblinsees, no. Not an orcses. It must tells us, Precious. What issss it?!" His luminous eyes bulged out angrily, as if Billa were intentionally withholding information he desperately needed.

"I'm... I'm a hobbit." Billa was confused by this skinny, slimy creature that seemed far more interested in talking to itself than talking to her. It did, however, talk rather than stuff her in a cage, break her bones, or threaten to eat her. That was a nice change of pace. "My name is Billa Baggins, of the Shire." The dwarves were definitely rubbing off on her. "Of the Shire" hadn't been a part of her name before now. She took a breath and gripped the hilt of her sword more tightly. Letter opener indeed. She would show them that size didn't matter, when one was sharp enough. That was rather good, actually. Should put that in a song.

"Now, it's your turn. Who are you?"

"Bagginses?" Gollum croaked to himself. "What isss a Bagginses, Precious?" He frowned, his already wrinkled brow wrinkling even more. "And what isss a hobbitses?" His eyes brightened a little. "Is it... tasty? Is it good to eats, Precious? We hasn't tried hobbitses, has we? We wonders, yes, we wonders." He skittered around behind Billa, moving on all fours like some kind of pale frog, licking his pale lips and hissing through widely spaced fangs. Perhaps if he were quick enough, he'd confuse the creature and its shiny, gleaming sword would be of no use.

Somewhere, in the back of his mind, he knew there was something different about this creature, something even more different than what he'd already noticed. More different than its colorful clothes and fluffy head and feet. Something he had known about long ago, long ago and far away, back when he was something... someone else. At the moment, just what that might be escaped him, but nonetheless, his curiosity was renewed. He'd find out just what the creature was... then he'd eat it.

Back to being threatened with eating again. Billa pivoted, keeping an eye on the creature like Fili had taught her. Speed of the hand, speed of the mind. Focus on the opponent, not on your stance. Stance will do you no good if you don't see the attack coming.

"Quit talking in riddles," she snapped, working hard to suppress the fear that clawed at her chest. "I'm not interested in being your supper- or whatever time of day it is. I just want to get out of this horrid place." What good telling the creature would do, she had no idea, but silence was never her default when under pressure.

Gollum started at this. A particular keyword the creature had said awoke something within him akin to excitement. "Riddles?!" he crooned, leaping about like a dog at the prospect of going for a walk, and ignoring whatever else the hobbit might've said afterward.

It had been so many years, so many long years since he'd riddled with anyone that the mere mention sent a thrill of pure joy throughout his body. Long ago, as one of the River Folk, before the Precious
had come, he had daily played at riddles with all his friends and family. He'd always fancied himself as being quite good at it, and now the thought of showing off to this creature resulted in nothing short of elation. "Oh, we loves riddles. Does it wants to? Does it likes to play?" He cavorted about on the slimy rocks, cackling to himself, completely forgetting that he'd wanted to eat the creature not a moment before. Well, that part of him was still there, actually. It just wasn't the most dominant part right now.

"We has one! We has one!" He paused a moment, grinning, his pale blue eyes gleaming with delight. "What has roots as nobody sees... Up, up, up it goes, and yet... never grows?"

Billa was hard-pressed to keep up with the creature's train of thought. Eventually, as Gollum waited expectantly for the answer, she pieced together the fractured sentences. And with the revelation that this slimy frog-thing was intelligent enough to speak with her, rather than just itself, there came a glimmer of opportunity.

"You want to play? Well... alright. Alright, let's play at riddles. But if I win- if I win, you lead me out. Deal?" She paused, thinking about the riddle. It was an old one. Digging for the answer took some time, but she found it. "Hills. No- mountains. There's your answer. Do we have a deal? I win, you lead me out of the mountain?"

Gollum's eyes became suddenly clever again, his tone lowered to the same sinister croaking he'd used before. He turned away, as if speaking in confidence with himself. "And if it loses, then what? Well, if it loses, Precious, then we eats it!!" This latter sentence ended with a pleased cackle, and he turned again to Billa. "If the Bagginses loses, we eats it whole." He tilted his head with a pleased smile, as if this were quite a good arrangement and Billa should have no trouble at all agreeing to it.

Billa hesitated. "You might have some trouble with that," she commented, eyeing the creature's emaciated body, "but good luck. You win, I'll be lunch, I win, you lead me out." Lowering her sword, she puffed out her cheeks and thought carefully.

"Um, alright, here's one. 'Thirty white horses on a red hill. First they champ, then they stamp, then they stand still.'" She edged toward the tunnel she'd entered through and leaned against a large rock, keeping a close eye on the creature. Riddles or not, she didn't trust it.

Gollum listened intently, running the words of the riddle through his addled brain like one might sift dirt again and again through a sieve, hoping to catch a nugget. At last, he made a connection. "Teeth? Teeeeth!" He chortled triumphantly, seeing that he was right by the look on Billa's face. "But we only has... six!" He opened his mouth, flaunting them in all their hideous, grime-encrusted glory, then moved with a half-saunter to the other side of the hobbit. A sly smile crept onto his face. "Our turn. Alive without breath, cold as death, never thirsty, ever drinking, clad in mail, never clinking." His grin widened. The creature was sure to be stumped by this one.

The sight of the creature's teeth repulsed Billa, and she tried not to gag. Wouldn't do to offend her opponent.

Alive without breath... Unlike Gollum's first riddle, this was one she had never heard before. She frowned in concentration, shifting her weight from one furry foot to the other and pressing her back hard against the rock. Her knee ached and her head felt like there was a fire lit inside her skull.

"Give us the answer," taunted the frog-thing. When Gollum got too close, bulging eyes alight with excitement, she flinched and stumbled away from him, swinging her sword up so the pointy end was aimed at his chest again. With her eyes on him and her mind desperately running the words of the riddle through a list of water plants she was vaguely familiar with, she actually stepped into the icy water of the lake.
With a yelp, Billa jerked her foot out of the water again, her concentration completely broken. "Gimme a minute," she growled at the eager Gollum. "I need to think."

Gollum hissed at her, driven to great impatience by the taste of victory. "Is it crunchable? Is it juicy?" he asked, licking his lips again gleefully. "The Bagginses is stuck!"

"I'm thinking," Billa insisted, waving her sword at Gollum and taking another step back. Something writhed against her ankle in the icy water and the hobbit let out a squeal of disgust.

"It's just a fish," she assured herself. Gollum's outraged hiss brought her attention back to the riddle, and as she ran through it one more time, she started to grin. "Ha-ha! It's a fish. ' Alive without breath, as cold as death.' See? I told you I just needed a moment. Alright. My turn." The frog-creature was prowling around her now, muttering curses. She twisted to keep him in front of her, moving away from the water and trying to shake the damp out of her foot-hair.

"Um, well... uh- alright. 'A box without hinges, key, or lid, yet golden treasure inside is hid.'"

Gollum paused, distracted by the new riddle. This one was a puzzler. Box. Key. Lid. Golden treasure. Gold. Gold? The Precious was gold. He grinned smugly to himself. Even if he lost the game, the Precious would still guarantee he had his meal. He'd never had anything gold before the Precious came. The only gold thing he could remember was... the sun. No, that wasn't it. Wait. His face lit up again.

"Eggsses!" he exclaimed, dancing around Billa. "Wet, crunchy little eggsses! Yes, yes!" He hadn't had them in so long, he'd almost forgotten their taste. When he'd calmed down a little, he scampered up a stone and crouched on his bony haunches. "Our turn. This thing all things devours- birds, beasts, trees, flowers. Bites iron, gnaws steel, grinds hard bones down to meal." Billa actually sat down this time, her sword dangling between her knees as she gnawed on her lip. The silence was apparently too much for the impatient Gollum, who crept out of sight around dark rocks. His sing-song voice floated back to her, echoing creepily in the dim cavern.

"Is it tasty? Is it scrumptious?"

"Gimme a minute." Billa recognized the triumphant tone, and worked to suppress a thrill of fear. "I need to think."

"The Baggginses is ssstuck!" cackled Gollum, peering down at her from his unseen perch as she brought her sword up again.

"I'm not stuck!"

"It doesn't know the answers, Precious. It doesn't know."

"You haven't given me enough time." Billa snapped, fear getting the better of her as she searched desperately for the creature in the dark. "Give me more time!"

Gollum, mistaking Billa's words for the answer he'd sought, shook his fist furiously and howled up at the cavernous ceiling. "Very clever! Very clever, Baggginses!" He scrambled down from the rock, an unhappy frown etched into the deep lines of his pale face. "Last question, last chance." His voice was little better than a snarl now, so outraged was he that this tricksy creature had gotten his best riddle, the one that had always stumped his family and friends back home. "Ask us, Baggginses. It must asks us a last question!" When Billa paused, hemming and hawing a bit longer than Gollum's thinning patience could handle, he tensed, practically braying at her: "Ask us!"

Billa flinched away, patting down the front of her vest as though she had an extra riddle in her
pocket. When her fingers encountered the right-hand pocket, rather than finding it empty, she realized there was something small between the layers of cloth. Distracted and frightened by the creature's furious screeching, she blurted out the first question that came to mind-

"What have I got in my pocket?"

Chapter End Notes

If you'll believe it, Loki and I have over 50 chapters already written on Fiercer than Fire! *mind blown* I'm trying to post at intervals of every other day or so, but if I miss a day, please please poke me- leave a comment or something to remind me. I am regrettably human, and forget even fun things like this.
The moment the words were out, Billa felt foolish. That wasn't a riddle at all. But before she could amend herself and ask a proper riddle, Gollum was hissing angrily at her. "Not a fair question," he snarled.

Billa felt a stab of stubborn pride and, before she could think better of it, she snapped right back at him, flicking her sword toward his throat. "You asked for a question and you got one. What have I got in my pocket? Go on, guess."

Gollum leaned forward, his dark, stringy hair buffeted in the subterranean breeze coming off the lake. His teeth were bared now, and outrage leapt from his luminous eyes. "It's tricksy! The Bagginses is tricksy! It must gives us three guesses! Three! Gollum, gollum." When Billa agreed, Gollum racked his brain for the things a "hobbitses" might keep in its pockets. He came up short. Even back when he'd had pockets, he didn't often use them. Well, not until the Precious came. That's when he used them, stealing from his family, his friends, taking their things for the sheer fun of it and stashing them away in his pocketes. But what might this creature have in its pockets? Maybe it was a trick! The Bagginses was, after all, tricksy. "Handses!" Gollum blurted out on a whim.

"Nope! Guess again!" Billa wiggled her fingers impudently at him, grinning triumphantly. "Two chances left."

"Knife!" Gollum guessed, then practically kicked himself. It'd have to be a small knife to fit in that pocket. When she again announced he was wrong, Gollum scrunched down into a ball, fists clenched, eyes squeezed shut. He had to get this. He had to win the game. What could it possibly have in its pockets?! Not the nasty, grimy things he kept on his little island, surely. This creature was too clean, too fine to have any of those sorts of trinkets and trophies. "String!" he cried, then realized the Bagginses may have had more than one trick answer in mind, and added, "or nothing."

"That was two guesses," scolded Billa cheerfully, very relieved to know that this particular encounter wasn't going to end with her being eaten. "And they're both wrong. I win! Now you have to lead me out of the mountain, like you promised." Gollum shrieked and hissed, seeming to lose what little sanity he'd had as he threw himself recklessly at the hobbit. Billa reacted swiftly, though not as well as she would have liked. With a yelp, she leapt backward and smacked the side of Gollum's boney head with the flat of her blade.

"You promised!" she reminded him shakily, trying to keep her emotions at a partial panic instead of letting them get out of control. "We made a deal. I won, so now you have to lead me out."

Gollum snarled, clutching the side of his head. The Bagginses was tricksy and sneaksy, and now she'd trapped him into a promise. He had to, she said. "Does we, Precious?" he whispered thoughtfully, still rubbing his head. There as no blood. "Does we have to?" He rocked back and
forth a moment, hissing to himself, as if still trying to process the fact that he'd lost the game.

Then he remembered. He hadn't lost. The Bagginses had tricked him. The Bagginses hadn't won fairly. He smiled crookedly, reaching into the little pouch at his side, tied to the remnants of the ancient, nearly unrecognizable rags bound about his waist.

His smile faded. Where was it? Where had it gone? He had just used it, earlier. Not even an hour ago! He began to wail and scrabble about in the silty soil. "Where isss it?! Where isss it?!" he shrieked, flying into a panic. He thrashed about, searching wildly for the Precious.

His eyes landed on Billa, and he froze. "What has it got in its nasty little pocketses, Precious? What?" His expression turned to one of unadulterated hatred and rage. "It stole it... it STOLE it from usssss!" Now in a heedless frenzy, Gollum leapt toward the now fleeing hobbit, his fangs bared, his eyes like live coals bouncing down the dim tunnel after the thief who had dared to steal the Precious. His Precious.

Billa pelted back down the passage, ignoring the pain shooting up her leg, ignoring the war drums pounding in her head, ignoring the way her heart blocked her throat and made it hard to breathe. Before, she'd been too scared of getting lost down here to leave the filthy little frog creature behind, to try to find her own way out. Right now, getting lost seemed preferable to being torn apart by the crazed thing. He was pursuing her now, screeching about a 'precious' and how she'd stolen it from him. She hadn't the faintest clue what he was talking about, and the halfling didn't want to stick around to find out. That look of hatred, that pure, livid rage on his face- it was unlike anything she'd seen before.

Rocks scraped along her arms and shins in the darkness. Her sword clanged against the wall, throwing up sparks that cast fleeting light over her feet. Her feet, which were blessedly protected from the harsh stone by thick, curly hair and callouses that ran as deep as mountain-roots. Yet even her hardy little toes were protesting the abuse as she fled through the darkness, heedless of direction or aim, wanting only to get away from the wretched, howling creature that wanted her lifeblood to spill in its nasty, cold lake. One thought bugged her, though. One inane, nonsensical thought.

What have I got in my pocket? As Billa thrust herself through a narrow gap and stumbled into a larger chamber, she paused to breathe and let her hand drop to her pocket. The shape was round and smooth. Circular. She pulled it out. It was a ring, just about the right size for her index finger. She remembered then, falling and picking it up, finding it in the tunnel, in the dirt and grime.

The hobbit heard a nasty shriek and turned in time to see the bulbous, glowing eyes of Gollum as he shot past the opening. Not wanting to drop the ring, she slipped it on and backed up, searching for the wall, pressing herself against the rough stone.

"Thief! Bagginses! Thief!" His desperate cries echoed after him, ringing off the stony walls and then fading into silence. He'd lost the Bagginses. The clever, tricksy Bagginses had gotten away with his Precious. "It must knows the way out," he moaned to himself.

Billa's heart returned to its normal place in her chest and continued its frantic pounding. He'd missed her. But she couldn't afford to lose him completely. There was still the threat of being left alone in the dark, starving to death in these cursed tunnels. As silently as she could manage, with hardly more sound than a wisp of smoke on the breeze, she followed Gollum.

The miserable creature made it all the way to the end of the tunnel, where he could see, around a final corner, the door out of the Mountain. It was guarded. Six goblins stood between that chamber and the outside world. Bagginses would have to get past them to escape, and past him to get to them. He crouched a long while in the center of the passage, long, bony arms outstretched, pressed against
the sides of the tunnel.

Billa eased herself along the wall, closer to Gollum. He wasn't moving. In fact, he didn't seem to detect her at all, even when she nearly dropped her sword and had to lurch forward to catch it, stop it making noise. It took several minutes, each an age long at least, but Billa eventually understood. Gollum couldn't see her. Either he was blind, or she was invisible. The former being obviously untrue, and the latter being unbelievable, she decided not to settle on a theory just yet.

When the Bagginses didn't appear after some twenty agonizing minutes, Gollum collapsed in a heap on the floor, pounding his fists in the dust, sobbing as loudly as he dared. So that was it. The Precious was lost forever.

He was on the floor, and Billa had several feet to get up some speed. She took a deep breath and made a flying leap over the creature's head. His long fingers snapped closed on thin air, just behind her hairy ankles. Gollum's outraged shrieks were getting the goblins very agitated. He couldn’t enter the guard room, though, couldn’t pursue Billa as she slipped through his grasp. Even in his horrified rage, he had sense enough left to understand his deadly peril, and as several of the goblin guards rushed into the passage, he turned away, bounding back down the tunnel, his screams of hatred and despair echoing after him. Should he live another thousand years, he’d never forget this. He would never forget the name of the one who took his Precious.

The goblins shambled around, searching for the source of the noise, and tiny Billa, unseen by all, engaged in the most terrifying game of Blind Man's Buff that she could have possibly imagined. One of the goblins actually tripped over her, and while he yelled at his companions, the halfling made it to the door. It was open just a crack, a thick, heavy, stone thing that looked as though it would have taken Dwalin and Gloin together to open it. She could smell fresh air.

"Oi, what'sat over by the door?"

"I see a shadow!"

"There's somethin' outside!"

Billa shoved herself frantically through the gap, pushing and squeezing. The buttons pinged violently off her vest as she forced herself through the crack, and not a moment too soon. Out the hobbit popped, into the open air and sunlight. She tumbled down the slope, dizzy with elation and lack of oxygen. She was alive.
Thorin had to shield his eyes against the dazzling sunlight when he and the Company came at last under the sky again, several of them wounded, most of them carrying looks of haunted relief. Kili staggered along beside Fili, supporting himself against his brother's shoulder. His eyes were shut again, his face drawn with pain where it was visible beneath the trailing strands of his sweat-damp hair. Gandalf urged them on down the rocky, forested hillside, and Thorin privately thought the wizard had bellowed at them to hurry so many times he was now deaf to any more such orders.

Finally, gasping for breath, the Company made it to a clearing amid the pines, where Gandalf called for a halt. "Gather yourselves together," he said, removing his pointed hat to smooth his now wild grey hair. "We can't linger here long; they'll be after us, sure as death."

Thorin stalked over to his nephews. Adrenaline had lent him additional stamina and ignorance to the pain of his injuries, but it was waning now, taking with it his remaining reserves of strength. "Fili, where's Billa? What happened to her?" There was something of a mournful look in Thorin's blue eyes, as though he feared the worst but was still clinging to some tiny hope the burglar would spring out from behind his nephews and begin scolding him for worrying about her.

Fili felt his legs trying to give out and sank to the cold earth. He couldn't stop the tears that gathered in his eyes. After several painful heartbeats, he shook his head. "I don't know." The admission felt like a lead weight on his tongue. "I haven't seen her since the cave."

"She was in the cage with us," said Bofur, looking vaguely panicked. "She must have been in the tunnels with us."

"I thought she was with you."

"I haven't seen her."

The dwarves were starting to bicker, though most of them were merely trying not to think about the price they'd just paid. Their burglar. Gone. Fili looked plaintively at Gandalf, holding his side and trying to breathe normally.

"We thought she might have followed you, wherever you vanished to."

The Wizard shook his head, looking equal parts grieved and confused.


Thorin lowered his head, bitter regret stirring within. He couldn't help feeling as though he'd just lost something terribly valuable, terribly dear. Wasted something that should never have been risked in the first place. *I should have watched her myself.*
"I warned you, Gandalf," he growled in the Wizard's direction. "I warned you nothing good would come of this. Now she's gone, and no conjuring you can do will bring her back."

He remembered his words to Gandalf on the night he'd met Billa. He'd let the wizard know quite distinctly that he'd not be held responsible for whatever might happen to the halfling. Didn't matter now. The dwarf felt very responsible.

Gandalf shook his head again and turned away. It seemed he was having trouble believing the plucky halfling lass was actually gone. So much for his foresight.

Kili was sitting next to his brother now, feeling rather raw. He swept his hair out of his eyes, and the gesture irritated the wounds on his arms. He winced, glancing at Oin, who was tending his brother. He could wait. Whatever he'd faced in the goblin tunnels, he knew he'd gladly suffer it again if Billa were still alive.... if he didn't have to see Uncle standing there, his hands clasped behind his back, looking vacantly off into the distance as though he'd lost the will to go on.

"So... what do we do now?" Bofur looked expectantly at Gandalf, who didn't answer immediately. Balin provided the answer all of them already knew, and none of them wanted to say.

"We go on without her. One burglar more or less can't stop us." The grandfatherly dwarf looked as grieved as the rest of them. Fili gasped as pain lanced through his chest like fire, and the tears that had wet his eyes now wet his cheeks as well. He cursed himself and every higher power he could think of in Khuzdul, his undertone carrying well to his brother and the healer, but not much further. Oin pulled his tunic back down over the bandages and Fili bowed his head.

"I should have been watching." Fili wished he could take it all back, relive the battle with Tog, take his brother's punishment, save Billa. He'd failed.

"Watching what?" A female voice startled another curse from Fili, who nearly gave himself whiplash looking for the source of the voice. Billa stumbled out of the trees, limping badly and scraped raw in several places, but blessedly, miraculously alive. "What's the matter with you lot? You look like you've seen a-

"BILLA!" Bombur nearly bowled her over as he caught her in a tight hug. "You're alive!"

"What-? Of course I'm alive!" Billa squirmed, looking surprised, yet gratified by the fat dwarf's exuberance.

Kili was the next to get to her. As dirty, blood-encrusted, and sore as he was, he enveloped the startled halfling in a hug and picked her up, laughing in unrestrained relief. "Oh, Billa. You have no idea what you just about did to us. I practically shed a tear." He grinned, setting her back down. "Don't worry, though. Fili's more than compensated for my dry eyes."

Thorin took a few steps closer, looking more perplexed than relieved. There were still shades of the mournfulness he'd experienced a moment before, as though he wasn't quite ready to believe the halfling was back, safe and sound. "Miss Baggins," he said, and the rest of the Company grew momentarily quiet, "I am glad to see you alive, against all hope. May I ask, though, how you managed to escape the tunnels after being separated from us? It seems highly... improbable." His words hung in the air a moment, made it seem suddenly tense.

All eyes were now on Billa again.

Billa seemed almost as perplexed as Thorin was, though there was a shadow of reluctance about her large hazel eyes. "To be honest, I'm not entirely sure. It involved a lot of running, and encounters
with creatures I'd really rather not think about ever again." Her eyes grew wide with a look of almost comical disbelief. "I had no idea goblins were that big." Fili broke the silence with a weak laugh. Whatever might have followed was cut off by Gandalf, who looked just as grave as ever, though he spared a fond glance for the halfling.

"We must move as soon as possible. The goblins won't be letting their prize go as easily as we might hope."

Oin scowled and muttered about being rushed, but he worked more quickly on Kili. "Hold still, you rascal," he grunted, dealing the dark-haired youngster a sharp smack to the back of his head before returning to tying bindings about his ribs.

Thorin frowned a little, but decided to accept the burglar's explanation for now. Now that he thought about it, he felt rather foolish for overreacting, for being so distraught about nothing. Disliking the way his mind had been turned, he refocused it on leading his Company.

“Hurry with Kili. We need to move.”

Ori handed Kili a stick to bite down on while Oin worked. The old healer's hands moved quickly, efficiently, providing what comfort they could, but there were some cuts that would require suturing and there wasn't time for that now. This done, the group limped on down the hill, proceeding as quickly as they dared, trying not to lose their footing on the rough, gravel-like lava rocks. They'd not gone ten minutes before the familiar, frightening howls and barks of wargs fell hard on their ears. As if things weren't already bad enough. Had the dwarves been healthy and whole, Billa might have been hard-pressed to keep up with them. As it was, they limped and stumbled along together. The wargs grew ever nearer as Gandalf hurried them along—right to the edge of a steep cliff. The Wizard looked temporarily dismayed, an unsettling expression to see on the face of their all-knowing guide.

"To the trees!" Gandalf shouted. "Up into the trees! Climb!" It was Gloin, Dwalin, Thorin and Nori that held the rear once again as the others scrambled up the trees, helping one another as much as they could. Billa was actually picked up and tossed into the branches of a scraggly fir, a most undignified experience, but not one she cared to argue about.

The wargs and their riders burst into view before the Company was safely out of reach. Dwalin bellowed at Thorin to climb like the fool he was, before burying one of his twin axes in a warg's furry throat.

Thorin directed a distinctly stubborn look at Dwalin that said he wasn't going up until everyone else was safe. The tattooed dwarf grunted resignedly and heaved himself up into the nearest pine, just as Orcrist clove the head of another warg at his feet. Thorin quickly slid the gore-spattered blade into its scabbard and turned to a nearby tree. An arrow skipped off the ground near his toecaps, and another whizzed past his head. He'd just levered himself up onto the second branch when something like fire stabbed through his inner arm just above the bracer. He yelped and nearly lost his hold on the branch, but continued climbing, gritting his teeth against the pain. He knew he'd been hit, but other than the nuisance of it all, it wasn't lethal. He made it about midway up the tree, balanced himself astride a branch, and held the arrow so he could snap it off near the entry point.

Gandalf was looking at him, concerned, and Thorin nodded. He was alright, all things considered. The wargs had halted their advance, strangely enough. Whatever relief this may have engendered died as suddenly as it had been born when the reason for their behavior became apparent.

A figure was approaching through the shadow of the trees, something tall, broad, and eerily white in the gloaming. As it drew nigh, it separated out into two figures, a pale orc, riding a white warg.
Horror pervaded Thorin's features, for while he'd been prepared by the Goblin King for the notion that Azog the Defiler was alive, seeing it borne out in reality was quite another thing. "It cannot be," he whispered.

"The scent of fear lies heavy on you, Thorin son of Thrain," the Pale Orc hissed through a fanged grin. "I remember your grandfather was the same."

Thorin glowered. "I do not fear you, fiend. If there is cowardice upon this place, perhaps it lies in your craven heart." His voice was heavy with age-old hatred, with lust for vengeance. This creature had slain his grandfather, driven his father mad.

Fili was, to be honest, in too much pain to focus on much of anything. He did, however, catch on to the fact that the pale blur on the ground below them was an orc. Well, an orc on a warg. Whatever. Thorin was talking to it. Why he bothered was a little beyond the blond dwarf's ability to understand at the moment, but he trusted that his uncle was doing what was best for them.

It was then that the tree started to shudder under him. The wargs were throwing themselves at the trunk, leaping and snarling at the lower branches. He noticed with a thrill of terror that Billa seemed to be stuck, several branches below him, dangling precariously from a twisted fork in the trunk where she must have been perched before. Now she was jerking her hairy feet up and out of the reach of slavering jaws in a sort of horrific dance.

“Hold on!” Thorin roared over the sound of snapping limbs and splintering bark. “Gloin! Grab Billa!” He’d just noticed her precarious position. The ginger-haired dwarf tried, but he already had two wargs intent on catching hold of his foot, and was hard pressed to hold on himself against the shuddering of the tree as the other beasts rammed their massive bulks against its trunk.

Thorin cursed, working his way down to the branch below. He scraped the protruding arrow shaft against a limb as he went, and practically bit his tongue off keeping quiet. When he was within reach of the halfling, a branch above her, he snatched her up by the back of the collar and one of her legs, lifting her into the branch above him, nearly falling in the process.

Then the unthinkable happened. The entire tree began to tilt toward the cliff, a slow, trembling descent. The pine had been a young, thin one to begin with, and its moorings were shallow, hindered by rock and silty soil.

Thorin’s face paled, and the deep, pleased laughter of Azog carried over the noise of roots straining and cracking out of the ground. “Hold!” the dwarf urged, gripping a branch with one hand, his
burglar’s wrist with the other. They were heading straight for another pine right on the edge of the cliff. This one was larger, and seemed sturdier. At any rate, they had no choice. “On my mark, jump!”

Billa whispered an oath she must have picked up from the dwarves, because no one in the Shire ever used language like that. She’d never been particularly good at climbing to begin with, preferring to keep her feet on the ground when she could. When Thorin yelled to jump, she closed her eyes and trusted that he wouldn’t throw her to the wolves. The irony of that thought wouldn’t impress her until much, much later.

Gandalf, perched in the higher branches of a tree that wasn’t in danger of falling, had started to lob flaming pinecones down at the wargs. One particularly sappy pinecone, burning lividly blue, smacked an orc in the face, and he fell off his mount with a howl of pain.

"Is this how you plan to die, Dwarf?" taunted Azog, his deep voice carrying all too well over the barks and bays of the frenzied wargs. "Burning to death, cowering in a tree? I thought you were better than that. Apparently, I was wrong."

Thorin turned back to the orc, and it was immediately clear his taunts had had something of their desired effect. Gandalf’s flaming projectiles had kindled the dry brush around the pines, and even now blue and green fire glinted in Thorin’s gaze as it met Azog’s. The dwarf exchanged a glance with Gandalf that told him all he needed to know. They were trapped. Even now, the fire that was keeping the wargs at bay was licking up the trunks of the pines. They would burn. There was nothing to be done; not even the Wizard could save them this time. Unless…

Thorin turned again to Azog. “And yet, even so, it would deny you the satisfaction you crave.” He smirked. “You long to defeat me in clean battle, Defiler. To watch me burn with my Company is not enough, is it?”

Azog tilted his scarred face a little, intrigued by what his foe seemed to be proposing. “What do you mean, dwarf-scum?”

“Just this,” said Thorin. “Send your wargs away, and let my Company go where they will. In exchange, I will fight you as you desire, and your victory – if it is claimed – will be true. Refuse me, and I will gladly burn with the rest while you watch. You’ll have no satisfaction. The hand I took from you will be mine forever, as will this shield of oak with which I bested you that day.” Thorin released Billa’s wrist and pulled back the trim of his coat, revealing the Oakenshield in its leather frog at his side. Then, seeing the look of snarling rage on Azog’s face, he smiled contemptuously, drawing it out and raising it triumphantly to the sky. “To burn with my people would honor me. Will you give me that honor, Defiler?”

"No, Uncle!" Fili’s pained cry could only just be heard over the crackling of the fire, the baying of the wargs. He wasn’t the only one, either. A chorus of protests rose from the others. Only Balin and Dwalin remained silent. They knew Thorin too well to speak against this plan of his, a plan that could save their lives, or at least give them a fighting chance. The tree Thorin was in was beginning to lean dangerously toward the precipice, and while the dwarf king swayed deftly to keep his balance, Azog barked an order in his own guttural tongue. The wargs were pulled back, restrained by their handlers in spite of their bloodthirsty howls.

"Face me, dwarf-scum," the Pale Orc spat. "Face your death."

"Thorin, no!" Billa was clinging to the trunk as it swayed, sagging toward the edge.

“My people leave first.” Thorin’s voice was remarkably steady for a dwarf on the threshold of death,
clinging to the boughs of a lurching tree.

Azog nodded, impatient, revenge-mad. He cared nothing for the others. They wouldn’t make it far anyway. Right now, he’d comply with Oakenshield’s demands for the opportunity to end the dwarf himself, to separate his proud head from his body, to bask in the knowledge that he had personally ended the line of Durin.

Thorin gestured violently at the others. “Get down! Quickly. All of you.” The smoke was thick and choking now, and the pale orc difficult to make out through the haze.

Fili and Kili were still protesting vehemently that they would not leave their Uncle. Thorin rounded on them.

“Do as I say! Sister-sons or not, you will obey my orders. Get the others to safety, and do not look back.”

The dwarves were jumping down now, bounding through the flames, patting themselves out even as they ran. Dwalin directed a look at Thorin that meant he was doing this only very begrudgingly; he understood there was no other choice that wouldn’t be the immediate death of the weak and wounded, while accomplishing nothing. Then he, too, disappeared down through the acrid, blue-tinged cloud.

Gandalf was the last, besides Billa, to go. Thorin handed the struggling halfling into the Wizard’s arms across the gap between the trees. He ignored her jabs at his sanity, her pleas, whatever other words she spoke in a last-ditch effort to dissuade him.

“Valar protect you, Thorin Oakenshield,” came the Wizard’s grave voice. He sighed, nodding, undisguised admiration in his old eyes, before scrambling sprily down the tree and leaping through the smoke and flames, the long hem of his robe blazing at his heels. The hobbit writhed in his arms, screaming protests that were soon lost in the roar of the fire.

The Pale Orc was waiting impatiently for Thorin to join him on the ground, growling insults in an undertone while the wargs went all but insane with their desire to rend dwarf-flesh. When at last the dwarf-king dropped to the earth, Azog wasted little time. Kicking his white warg forward, he made a swing at Thorin’s head, roaring as he went.

"The gift of death," he snarled, as Thorin barely managed to deflect the blow that would have separated his head from his neck, "is all I’ve ever owed you and your filthy kin."

Thorin grunted, recovering from the narrow escape, his lungs still thick with smoke, his eyes burning. He lurched further from the flames, towards the clearer air, Orcrist reflecting the glinting yellow eyes of a warg as its fangs snapped near his ear, just missing as he shrank away in time, slicing the beast’s hindquarters as it passed. There was a howl of pain, and the warg staggered, shuffling sideways, trying to regain its balance while keeping weight off its wounded thigh.

Thorin fell back into the familiar rhythm of battle, throwing himself at the pale orc and just managing to evade the mace swing meant for his face. Orcrist described a blur through the ashy air, cleanly severing the white warg’s front paw. Another keen of pain rent the sky, soaring above the greedy crackling of the blaze beyond, and the white beast collapsed, whimpering and twisting and curling in on itself. Unfazed, Azog dismounted in one fluid motion, fangs bared as he leapt for Thorin.

The dwarf bounded back, turning aside at the last second, deflecting the orc’s mace off the Oakenshield and retaliating with a quick slash. Azog was more agile than his hulking form suggested, springing aside, quick as a huge cat.
The orc roared, lunging again, and Thorin, hindered as he was by exhaustion, pain, and the effects of the smoke, was only partially successful in evading the mace this time. The dwarf ducked back, quickly enough to save his face from being taken off, but not quickly enough to avoid a graze. The strike was stunning, and he staggered, a wash of blood slicking down his forehead, practically blinding him in one eye. The next mace hit caught him in the brigandine, which spared him instant death, but not the shock of the blow. He was thrown to the ground by the unyielding power in the giant orc’s swing, and Orcrist dropped from his fingers.

He lay a moment on the cold, stony earth, gasping, praying he’d at least given the others enough time to get away, a chance to live. Fili would make a worthy king, given the opportunity. Fili would complete the venture he’d failed, reclaim Erebor, restore honor to the House of Durin. A thousand thoughts and regrets and memories blazed through his mind as the Pale Orc loomed over him, backlit against the fiery trees beyond, his scarred face fixed in a fanged grin of triumph.

Azog basked in the glory of Thorin's pain and imminent defeat. He didn't need to gloat in words. There was enough said in the silence between them. Thorin reached for his sword, but the Pale Orc stepped lazily on his forearm, grinding his heel between the stout bones and threatening to break them with his hulking weight. A low laugh escaped Azog's lips as he lifted his mace for the death-blow, his eyes alight with manic glee.

There was no impact. No war-cry. No flash of blinding light. Thorin's eyes were closed, braced for the death that would crush him and end his part in this Quest. But all he heard was a low, pained grunt. Suddenly, the weight left his arm. The sound of stumbling footsteps could barely be made out over the roar of the fire, and as the dwarf king opened his eyes, he saw a small, curly-haired shape standing over him, holding a dagger rigidly in shaking hands, teeth bared in feral rage.

"TRY THAT AGAIN!" Billa screamed, and a dark trickle of blood stained the edge of her little blade. Azog drew his hand across his ribs, and it came away dark with the same blood. He roared, sanity lost. He swung his mace, but Billa was gone. Azog followed through with his swing, only for a new cut, deeper than the first, to open along his left thigh. The orc let out a roar of pain and half collapsed, hand covered in hot blood. The wargs couldn't be controlled any longer. They plunged forward, snarling and biting, but now more forms were bursting through the flames. Fili and Gloin, Dwalin and Nori, Balin and Oin and Dori. The Company leapt into the fray, though none of them seemed to notice Azog retreating into the smoke, clutching at his wounded leg.

The fight – if it could be referred to as such – lasted but a few moments. Without their leader to rally them, the warg riders fell into disarray, a few fleeing outright, most staying reluctantly behind, aware that if Azog learned of their retreat, he would kill them himself. In the end, their loyalty was for naught. The piercing shrieks of great eagles joined the battle cries of the furious dwarves, and the remaining wargs and their riders were seized up in mighty talons and hurled to violent death on the jagged rocks of the valley below. It seemed Gandalf was not entirely without resources after all.

Kili knelt at his Thorin’s side, stricken, trying not to look at the ghastly, bloody gash in his forehead, the pale, still face. “I shouldn’t have left,” he whispered. “I failed you, Uncle.”

Billa somehow managed to keep her sword, despite the way her hand shook and her fingers threatened to lose all strength. She could see Kili and Gandalf, now Fili also, clustered around Thorin. With the Eagles’ help, there was hardly anything left to fight. She stumbled over to them, her heart in her throat.

"Thorin," she croaked, voice hoarse from smoke and screaming.

"No time," Gandalf said gravely. He pushed the brothers back, looking upward. One of the great birds dropped from the sky, scooping up the unconscious dwarf in its massive talons. He looked like
such a fragile thing. Billa knew, even as the thought occurred to her, that it was ridiculous. And yet, the fear remained.

"Don't you dare," she whispered, watching the Eagle loft away with him. "Don't die, Thorin."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you thank you thank you for all your amazing comments and kudos! :D You people are wonderful, you really are. When I see your comments, I want to dance (most of the time, I restrain myself for the sake of the normal people in the room).
The flight with the Eagles was quite the most terrifying experience Billa had the power to remember. Dangling from Ori's legs as he was carried in the talons of one of the huge birds, Billa kept her eyes screwed tight shut and clung to her companion for dear life. It was bad enough that she'd been the one to lead the charge back into the midst of an orc pack. Now she'd been nearly left behind in all the fuss with these friends of Gandalf's. Eagles. What a strange set of friends. Not that she was complaining.

When they were set down on the peak of an enormous spur of rock, the dwarves took advantage of the isolation to lay about and recover. Well, most of them did. Fili and Kili were hovering over Thorin's still form, and Oin was trying to shoo them away. And Dwalin...

"What in the name of Arda did you think you were doing?" The tattooed dwarf loomed over her threateningly, an ax in one hand and the other reaching for the front of her buttonless vest. Billa batted his hand away with a scowl, too tired and hurting too much to back down.

"What do you think I was doing? Saving his sorry hide from being torn to pieces!"

"That wasn't your choice to make," roared the hulking warrior. Dwalin looked like he might very well cleave her head from her shoulders, but a flicker of surprise registered on his face as the little hobbit struggled to her feet and screamed right back at him.

"Maybe I wasn't spineless enough to roll over and watch him DIE!"

"Spineless?" choked Dwalin, fist clenching around the haft of his ax.

"Yes, spineless," Billa spat, surprising him again by gripping the pommel of her little knife, as though getting ready to draw and fight him. "Or has all that ink in your head started to affect your hearing?" As impressed as Dwalin might have otherwise been by the halfling's bravery, he was too livid to care. He was actually halfway through drawing his ax back to strike at her when two voices stopped him.

"Dwal!" That one was his brother. Balin would be frowning at him severely if that tone was anything to go by.

"Billa." That was Thorin. Oin was trying to persuade him to stay lying down while he tended the gash on his leader's forehead, but the stubborn dwarf was struggling to sit up anyway. Billa whirled to face him, knife in hand. The blade touched his chest, and suddenly the Company went very still and serious. As fond of their burglar as they were, if she threatened their king...
"And you," she hissed, forcing Thorin to lay down with the point of her sword digging into his leather armor. "You selfish, bone-headed son of a cave-troll. Going off to die for the sake of some stupid feud- your bloodlust nearly left us leaderless. Then what, Thorin? Where would we be? Flapping around like a headless chicken, that's where!"

Fili was looking highly insulted by now, both by the cave-troll comment, and now the leaderless remark. As though he were completely incapable.

"Billa," rumbled Gandalf, and the halfling turned to glare at the Wizard, who was peacefully smoking his pipe as though nothing were wrong. "Put your sword away. You're among friends." After a tense moment, she complied. The halfling's hands were shaking. By the time the blade was sheathed, so was the rest of her. She sank down to sit on the rock and looked at Thorin, her eyes conspicuously wet.

"You could've died."

Thorin shoved Oin’s hands away, pushing himself up, wincing as his bruised ribs gave him grief. The pain in his chest was intense, and was making breathing difficult.

“Miss Baggins,” he growled, his blue eyes flashing, “call me what names you will, but what I did was not foolish. It was necessary, and I am honored to have done it. What you did, however,” he cringed again, taking another painful breath, and coughing a little, “was lunacy! Pig-headed, idiotic, lunacy! You could’ve all been killed, rushing in like that after I’d ordered you all to get to safety.” He saw Billa was about to protest, and cut her off. “Why didn’t you follow my orders?”

This question seemed directed at the entire Company, and the emotion behind it was hard to pinpoint. Wasn’t he happy to be alive, to still be in a position to lead the quest? There seemed to be something else driving his anger and frustration, something not immediately obvious. Perhaps even to him.

"Because unlike some people," Billa snapped, much quicker to answer than the others, "I don't let my friends die, simply because they think it's the right thing to do." She dashed away a stray tear and took a shaky breath, looking away from him. "Call it what you like, but I don't regret saving your life, Your Highness." There was an odd combination of venom and grief in her tone. The others jumped in then, Fili and Kili the loudest and most insistent. There seemed to be a hundred and one justifications for their actions, and each dwarf was eager to prove he hadn't been disobeying or dishonoring, just... helping. Dwalin seemed torn, twisting his hands around his ax haft and scowling at the halfling. Balin sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Enough. That's ENOUGH." Startled silence fell over the Company, and all eyes turned on Balin. "What's done is done, and no amount of arguing or name-calling will change it. Tend to your hurts, lads. We have a long way to go yet, and not much time to get there."

Thorin lay down again, suppressing a groan of pain, letting Oin finish what he’d started. The arrow in his forearm had to remain as it was until they had access to clean, fresh water. Removing it now would only be like pulling a cork from a bottle, and the wound left behind would require cleansing before it could be bound, or risk deadly infection. It wasn’t pleasant by any stretch of the imagination, though, and the skin around it was inflamed and swelling. At least the point had passed through; the sharp iron tip was faintly visible pricking up through the top of his bracer.

Once Thorin’s head injury had been tended and he’d had a few minutes to rest, he rallied his remaining strength into getting up again. He was too proud to ask for help, but Dwalin was immediately at his side, and supported the dark-haired dwarf to his feet. Even the simple action of breathing was nearly unbearable, but only a faint tremble and a frown revealed how sore he was as
he joined the others at the overlook, where the Lonely Mountain rose up eminently in the distance, a hazy blue, veiled in mist.

Billa was standing there, and her face said she’d not dismissed any of the previous conversation, but was mulling it over, stewing. Thorin’s frown deepened. A life-debt – even if he disagreed with it – was nothing to dismiss. She had saved him. And as embarrassing as that was, he was honorable enough at least to recognize that some expression of gratitude was in order.

“Miss Baggins,” he said quietly, placing a hand lightly on her shoulder. “I’m afraid I… I’ve been unappreciative… of your service to me.” The words were sticking in his throat for some reason, and that puzzled him. “Thank you. For your act of courage.”

Billa stood quietly under his hand, her expression conflicted. In some ways, she was too proud to admit that what she’d done might not have been ‘honorable.’ In other ways, she was too embarrassed to tell him the truth. The truth the burned at the back of her throat, and made her avert her eyes. “Courage? Is that what that was?” She huffed softly, shaking her head. "I barely remember. I was... scared. Scared of taking action, scared of doing nothing. All I knew, all I really knew... was that I couldn't let you die. Suppose that makes me the selfish one, doesn't it?" The halfling turned her head slightly, studying his face as though trying to memorize it. There were still angry lines around her mouth and eyes, but it wasn't directed at him. More than anything, she just looked tired. Billa sighed, shifting her weight off her aching leg. By then it had become a constant, dull pain that flared into angry, sharp spikes whenever she moved or put weight on it. Oin would probably be upset when he found out, but right now, there were others that were bleeding that needed his attention more. She could wait.

"We are beyond the reach of the goblins for now," Gandalf said quietly, and Billa was surprised to see the Wizard standing nearby. "But we need a proper camp for the night. With luck, we can reach a safe place tomorrow evening, and recover there while we plan our next move."

Thorin nodded. “Let’s go.” He turned from the overlook, and the others, reluctantly tearing their gazes from the murky peak in the distance that was their ancestral home, followed. They proceeded down a number of switchbacks until they’d reached the valley floor below, and Thorin certainly wasn’t the only one practically collapsing with exhaustion and pain when at last the ground evened out, advancing into a moonlit grassland dotted with stands of pines and various deciduous trees.

He led the Company as swiftly as he could manage, gritting his teeth, forcing himself on, and before an hour had passed, they reached a swiftly flowing stream where they were able to fill their empty water casks (they had only two left, because they’d been tied at Nori and Oin’s belts, and hadn’t been lost with the other supplies in the goblin tunnels). Thorin half-sat half-fell into a patch of sweet-grass at the edge of the water, hatefully accepting that he was too weak to go on any longer without rest.

Oin moved quickly to his side, and though Thorin insisted he was alright, just tired, the old healer prevailed upon him and was allowed to treat his unenthusiastic patient. The arrow had to be removed, and it wasn’t going to be a pleasant procedure.

“Chew some of this,” Oin urged, handing Thorin a packet of herbs. Thorin glanced at him skeptically, but ultimately complied. The healer aided Thorin in unstrapping the bracer, but since the arrowhead was firmly lodged in its boiled leather underside, Oin had to carefully support the arm and remove the bracer – and the arrow shaft – simultaneously.

Thorin wasn’t altogether aware of what oaths and curses might have escaped him, nor would he have particularly cared if he had been aware. Once the wound was cleansed and an astringent
applied, Oin bound it tightly. Picking up the bracer, he frowned at the splintery, red-stained arrow shaft and its rusty point.

“That’s an infection waiting to happen. Pray Mahal I’m wrong.”

Thorin didn’t seem terribly concerned. He retrieved the bracer from Oin, levered the arrow out of it, and proceeded to buckle it back on.

The healer wasn’t finished. “I’ll need to check your ribs now.” He reached for Thorin’s coat, but the dwarf pushed his hands off.

“See to my nephews,” he said, nodding at the pained-looking Fili and Kili. “I can wait.”

The night was a long one. Oin's eyes were tired and the light was fading fast. It wasn't long before Ori and Billa were volunteering to help him, and the old healer reluctantly agreed. They worked busily, stitching gashes shut, cauterizing cuts, cleaning and bandaging and treating as Oin instructed them. Billa looked fit to pass out when they were finished, and Oin insisted on checking her leg- at which point he threw up his hands in defeat.

"How am I supposed to see my patients well again," he demanded heatedly, "if they refuse to admit when they're hurting?"

"Why are you grumbling at me?" Billa asked tiredly, indicating Thorin. "His ribs still need treating, and you already know how hurt my leg is."

Ori was trying to convince Thorin to let him look at his ribs. Their stoic leader, while obviously in pain, seemed rather unimpressed with the young dwarf's attempts at persuasion. Oin sighed.

"If I see you on your feet again before morning, I'll see you carried to the Lonely Mountain on a stretcher."

Chapter End Notes

I love making Dwalin and Billa fight. It's so much fun. :)

Special thanks to Trevie and Wandacarla for their amazing comments. I love you guys!
The morning came too soon, the ground was too hard, the air was too cold. Oin insisted they all make at least a cursory effort at being clean, and so it was that the Company set out later than usual, stiff, in pain, cold and wet. The day didn't get any better. Kili was having a hard time keeping up, and it seemed Thorin would need to be hit over the head with something heavy and blunt before he willingly took a rest for his own sake.

The halfling, with her shorter legs and pronounced limp, had to be carried at intervals so she could stay with the group. She grumbled, but allowed Nori to carry her, perched on his back like a monkey. It was mid afternoon when they heard the first of the deep howls. Wargs. The Pale Orc, though incapacitated, didn't seem to be giving up on catching them. The foothills were cursedly rough going, but full of narrow valleys and thick stands of hardy pine trees. Excellent places to hide, and also excellent places to get cornered and killed.

Thorin led them into a sheltered dell, and Billa scrambled up the steep, rocky hillside. As the smallest and quietest, she was the obvious choice to scout ahead, even if her pace wasn't as quick as Thorin might have liked. When she returned, she was flushed with a combination of fear and breathlessness.

"Bad news," she started, and was almost immediately interrupted.

"They saw you?" Gloin had his ax in hand, peering suspiciously up the hillside.

"What? No. I-"

"See? What did I tell you?" Gandalf chuckled as relieved sighs swept through the Company. "Quiet as a mouse."

"Would you listen to me?" Billa was bouncing impatiently on the spot, which made her leg hurt something terrible. "There's something else out there." The dwarves fell quiet.

"What kind of something?" Gandalf's tone was hushed. "Was it an animal? Perhaps, in the shape of a great bear?"

"Yes, and it -" Billa blinked. "Wait, how did you know that?"

“Never mind how I know,” said Gandalf, flapping a hand dismissively, turning to Thorin. “There’s a house not far from here where we might take refuge, and have some time to rest and recover before moving on. I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Whose house?” said Thorin, warily. With the Wizard, nothing was as it seemed. The place might very well belong to a friendly troll or a family of affable talking badgers, for all he knew.

The sound of their pursuers grew ever louder as the wargs drew nearer.
“No time for that,” said Gandalf, turning. “We must move with all speed.”

“Are they friend or foe?”

“No time for that either! Hurry!”

Running. Why was it always running? The injured among them pressed themselves as hard as they could, helping each other along over the rough, rocky terrain. When they broke clear of the trees, it became apparent that the wargs were keeping their distance, though there was no obvious reason why. Their howls resounded in the shallow valley, echoing off the surrounding hills like the tolling of a pack of death bells. But as they ran, hurried on by the Wizard, a new sound came to them. The crashing of giant paws, the growling of an enormous beast.

"There!" Gandalf gestured with his staff. Across the meadow ahead, there was another copse of hardy trees, and in their midst, a long, low house, half hidden by a thick hedge. "Hurry!"

Billa had fallen to the back of the group. Try as she might, she couldn't seem to make her legs move any faster. The pain in her knee had started as short, sharp needles, and had now taken on delusions of becoming one with the sky, shooting lightning bolts down to her ankle and up to her hip. When she fell, it was Dwalin that noticed. With a low curse, he turned back and scooped her up, tossing her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. It was from this lovely, jarring position, her head and shoulders hanging across Dwalin's broad back, that she saw what it was they were running from.

It had been a glimpse, earlier. A fleeting look at an enormous silhouette on a neighboring hillside. Now she saw it all too well. The bear was huge, at least the size of one of the Eagles, possibly larger. A mass of wild black fur and flexing, surging muscle, wicked, curved claws and long, jagged white teeth. It crashed through the trees and into the open, no more than a half mile behind them.

"Eru save us," the halfling gasped. A trickle of cold dread had turned into a torrent of fear. Was this what they had come all this way for? Was this how they were going to die? The bear was pounding through the grass behind them, snarling deep in his thick, furry throat. Then, suddenly, there was a hedge in the way.

Dwalin tore through the garden and into the house, the last one in before the others heaved the door shut with barely a second to spare. The bear hit the door and it shuddered, but held.

"What in the name of the Seven Sleepers was that?" Bofur's exclamation was taken up by the others, and they turned to Gandalf for the answer. The Wizard pursed his lips and pulled his long pipe from an inside pocket of his robe.

"That," he said carefully, filling his pipe and lighting it without any apparent need of matches, "was our host."

Thorin looked at the Wizard as though he'd grown a third eye. “That beast? That was our host? Are you mad, Gandalf?”

“No more than usual,” said the Wizard, smirking behind his grey beard, puffing a ring of smoke. “His name is Beorn, an old acquaintance of mine. A kindly soul, though fonder of animals than other creatures. He’s a skin changer.”

If any of the dwarves weren’t looking at Gandalf before, they were now. Oin frowned at his battered ear trumpet, and Ori looked as though the very thought of a creature that could change its skin might make him faint dead away.

“What do you mean?” Thorin asked, presently. “Skin-changer? Does the beast wear another skin
beneath its fur?"

Gandalf snorted a little, pacing away across the straw floor. "You'll find out soon enough, if you can't figure it out on your own."

Thorin raised his dark eyebrows, shook his head. A pox on the dratted Wizard and his riddles.

This house was unnervingly large. Thorin felt like a dwarfling standing beside the table, the flat top of which was even with his eyes. There was a tankard sitting on the honey-colored boards big enough to sate three dwarves at least, and a plate the size of a small, round shield.

Even the animals that were lodging within were giant. There were two massive, horned oxen with brass rings in their noses standing, chewing their cud near the door, and Thorin noticed a bee the size of a small bird alighting on Billa’s curly head. He opened his mouth to warn her, but it buzzed off quickly enough and disappeared out one of the high, narrow windows.

Dwalin had set Billa down, grunting an acknowledgement of her weak thanks as he moved away, rolling his shoulders. The halfling stayed where he’d put her, oblivious to the bees and oxen and things. She closed her eyes and concentrated on breathing. Her leg was on fire, and her head felt like something large and hungry were emptying it through her ears.

Kili was in no better shape. He’d collapsed on the straw and was laying on his stomach, looking as though he might be sick. Blood was starting to soak through his tunic, and Fili was trying to work the garment off his brother, though he was favoring his injured side. Dori’s sprained shoulder was inflamed again, while Bifur was having trouble with his knee, which had been temporarily dislocated the previous day. All in all, they were a sorry lot as they straggled into the house and found places to sit or lay down on the hay-strewn floor.

Thorin approached his nephews, looking distinctly concerned. He watched as Fili revealed the extent of the dark-haired dwarf’s injuries, and swallowed heavily, remembering how helpless he’d felt when they were inflicted.

While most of the wounds were superficial, the way Kili was reacting hinted at deeper hurt, and possibly infection. Now that the fire in his blood was cooling again, the young dwarf would begin to experience the full extent of the pain and exhaustion he’d been fending off ‘til now. Thorin knelt down and felt Kili’s forehead. The skin was warm, though not quite feverish. Sweat was drizzling down his face, and he was trembling, looking at his uncle with dark, pain-filled eyes. Thorin caught Oin's attention and beckoned to him.

The old healer, who had been more harried these past few days than in any span of time he could remember, puffed over, running a hand through his light grey beard.

"I think he may be ill," said Thorin. “Can you do anything for him?"

“Perhaps, but I can’t just snap my fingers and make him better.” Oin was clearly becoming a bit exasperated. “Give me a few minutes with him, and I’ll see what I can do.”

Thorin turned to Fili. “And you… you’re alright?"

Fili met his uncle's gaze and forced a smile. "I'll be alright," he said, though his assurances were hollowed out by worry for his brother. Worry and guilt. If he’d been able to take his own punishment, then Kili wouldn't be in such pain. "What about you? Your head, your arm...?" Fili made a slightly helpless gesture, wishing there was more he could do.

Thorin grunted dismissively. "Don't concern yourself with me, Fili. Your concern is for your brother,
and," he leaned in a little, lowering his voice confidentially, "for her." There was no ambiguity on
the identity of this unnamed female, but all the same, Thorin didn't care to attract her attention if it
happened the halfling had particularly keen hearing. Then, seeing that Fili wasn't wholly satisfied
with his response, he smiled faintly and patted his nephew’s shoulder. "I'll be fine."

Oin was, evidently, drugging Kili with some kind of herbal opiate, though it would be a while before
the effects were seen. Meantime, it was clear the young dwarf was miserable and trying desperately
not to show it, especially in front of his uncle.

Thorin nodded at Fili, standing again. "Look after your brother. He'll need to be well enough to press
on within a day or so." The dark-haired dwarf felt something like a heavy weight descending on him.
Weariness and pain, and the cares of the road ahead. He needed sleep. They all did.

Fili looked up at his uncle, then down at his brother, and finally, over at the halfling. His concerned
frown deepened when he saw how pained the female looked. Still... if she could sit quietly while the
others moaned and complained, then she could probably wait longer than they could. Fili hated
himself for that thought, but knew, in that moment, this was part of what it meant to be a leader. To
make decisions like that.

"Yes, Uncle," he said quietly, bowing his head to his king. Right now wasn't the time to argue. The
blond settled in the hay beside his brother and took his hand gently, stroking the sweaty palm with
the pad of his thumb. He couldn't bear to look at Kili's injuries, but he could provide comfort in small
ways. His attention drifted around the house, watching the others as they found places to sit or lay
down. Thorin remained standing, and Fili noted that his uncle was watching the halfling. Billa
seemed content to sit near the door where she'd been left, and it looked almost like she would fall
asleep there. Thorin's expression was ambiguous at best, his dark eyebrows lowered heavily over
brooding blue eyes.

Fili caught himself wondering if, perhaps, there was more to Thorin's concern for their burglar than
the simple explanations of not wishing her to slow them down. This wasn't the first, or even the
second time his uncle had asked him to watch out for Billa. Fili studied the older dwarf thoughtfully.

*What are you hiding from us, Uncle? Or do you not know yet?*
As the shadows lengthened upon the golden floor of the house, the dwarves took what rest they could, eating from what remained of their meager provisions, and drinking of the water in the rain barrel just outside the back door (keeping a close eye out for the return of the bear, of course). Even though Gandalf assured them they were in little danger here, none of them felt particularly safe. Dwarves like things that can be depended upon—stone and fire and familial bonds—not strangers and their ways. Certainly not skin-changing strangers who might be just as likely to eat their guests as help them.

When full dark had set in and most of the dwarves had settled into the straw to sleep, Thorin did not join them. He had had an hour or so of rest earlier, and now he found himself, frustratingly, wide awake. He sat against one of the carved pillars of the house, eyes set on the door, in case their host returned. Someone had to keep watch, and it might as well be him.

At length, he heard a strange rustling and turned. The burglar. She was awake, too. Staring at something in her hand as though it were a comfort to her. A talisman or charm, maybe, Thorin thought, watching her a moment longer.

Then her eyes turned away from her hand and fell on him. Rather than quickly shift his gaze and pretend he hadn’t been staring, he left it where it was. She seemed puzzled, curious. Maybe she wondered what was keeping him awake.

Billa held his gaze for a long moment before she found words that didn’t strike her as rude, impertinent, or just downright unintelligent. "Can’t sleep?" she murmured, slipping the ring into her pocket. She’d thought she was the only one that was still awake. Sitting with her back against the wall, her legs stretched out in front of her, the halfling had been contemplating things while she waited for sleep to find her. The color of the moon. What sound a sleeping bee might make. Where this little gold ring may have come from, that it may have ended up in the tunnels far below the Misty Mountains. And what gave it the power to render her invisible. Now that she had company, she saw no reason to keep thinking silly things.

Thorin shook his head, blue eyes glinting in the moonlight streaming in the high windows. "I’m
keeping watch," he said softly. "The beast may return." Making casual conversation didn't seem entirely in keeping with the way he'd regarded the halfling up 'til then, but his curiosity overruled him. "What, if I may ask, keeps you awake, Miss Baggins?"

Billa hesitated for a moment, frowning at him as though deciding how exactly to answer a particularly tricky question. At length, she sighed and smiled faintly. "If I wanted to sound casual about it, I might say 'I just can't sleep.' But honestly, between you and me..." she shrugged and gestured to her leg. "I hurt a bit too much to sleep right now." She tipped her head back to rest against the wall, looking out the high window opposite with a troubled expression. "The world isn't what I thought it would be."

"It never is," Thorin murmured. "Though I don't suppose I'd know what a halfling might have expected in a journey like this." He smirked. "I suppose that night my Company invaded your cozy *smial*, you weren't envisioning your future self trapped in the house of a massive, shape-shifting bear, waiting for it to return and decide whether or not it wants to eat you."

Billa chuckled. It was a low, warm sound. In spite of the pain and fear of the past weeks, she still had a cheerful smile when called upon. "No, I can't say that shape-shifting bears ever occurred to me until today." She glanced at Thorin and smiled. "I think I was probably imagining getting the flesh melted from my bones- that's what Bofur said, isn't it?"

"He wasn't wrong." Thorin had witnessed that particular fate befalling many of his people - loved ones along with all the rest - and it was no joking matter in his mind. "If you are with us when the time comes, you may, indeed, make the very brief acquaintance of the accursed worm and his fiery breath. That is the risk we are all taking, and to which all have agreed. But knowing the risks beforehand makes them no easier."

He sighed, wondering why it seemed suddenly so easy to confide in this halfling. Was it because he knew he could never appear lower in her eyes? He, who she herself had needed to rescue from death? "I think on it often, the futility of facing such a beast with no real plan. At best, we reclaim the Arkenstone and escape unharmed. At worst, we wake the beast and it incinerates us all. Can anyone press on and on toward such uncertainty?" He met her gaze again, intently. "Could you lead your people to almost certain death, Miss Baggins?"

There was no hesitation in her answer as she met his gaze somberly, her hazel eyes sad in a face that wasn't as round as it had been before. "No, Thorin... I couldn't. I couldn't offer my people hope or redemption. I'd never have the faith to face certain death on the off chance that my kin could escape." She watched him for a long moment, and her expression clouded with half-remembered confusion and pain. "I don't understand you and yours, Thorin Oakenshield. I don't know what keeps you going, what gives you such courage and strength. I don't know what well you draw your faith from." She paused, considering him. Then she sighed.

"Sometimes I wish you were different. That your smile came easier, that you laughed when the sun shone, that you loved food or music as I do. But if you did... I don't know if you would have what it takes to lead us." That seemed to confuse her a great deal, and as she finished her observations, the halfling fell into contemplative silence.

"And yet you'd have the faith to offer your services to me as burglar, knowing full well your ultimate task will be to enter the dragon's lair and seek out the Arkenstone?" Thorin had been mystified from the first. Why would anyone who had no interest in the Quest besides the lure of gold risk death against a slim chance of success? Why would the halfling have agreed to come along at all? "Does your pledge remain, Miss Baggins? Will you still walk willingly in the shadow of the dragon if I command it?"
Billa hesitated for a moment, and a strange expression crossed her face as she looked at him. "What a silly thing to ask," she said at last, shaking her head and smiling slightly. "After all the places I've gone for you already, you think a dragon's lair will be any different?" The halfling chuckled, seeming amused by the notion.

Thorin’s eyes deepened a little, but he didn’t speak his true thought. A dragon’s lair had no parallel with anything they’d faced before, nor anything they were likely to face again. As impressed as he was by her courage, she was still very naive.

"Though I would like to know," the halfling continued, thoughtfully, "what is this thing I’m supposed to be fetching for you? The Arkenstone. It sounds like a specific object."

The dwarf saw no reason not to be forthright with her. "It's a symbol. A symbol of my right to rule. The King's Jewel. Without it, the Seven Armies of the Dwarves will not respect my bid to rule, and this Quest will be for naught." Then, realizing she'd probably need some sort of description, he shook his head a little. The splendor of the Arkenstone could not be encapsulated in any words. "It's white, luminous, delicately cut, no bigger than your fist. You could never miss it, not even were it to be buried beneath a mountain of splendid gems. No doubt the worm will be guarding it; he'll know its great value."

"Wait." Billa sat up, her expression slightly incredulous. "So you want me to steal your right to the throne from a dragon?" When he nodded, the incredulity became surprise. Surprise and, perhaps, a bit of pride. "That's a lot of trust to put in one little hobbit." Billa scanned the sleeping forms in the hay for Gandalf, but the Wizard had apparently disappeared again. After a moment, she leaned back against the wall and sighed.

"I'd consider calling you crazy, but you know what they say about the pot and the kettle." She shook her head, smiling again. Nothing could keep her too serious for long. Unless she wanted to ring someone’s neck. "Thorin, we're all mad."

The dwarf was tempted toward mild offense, but resisted. He had to admit there was some truth to her words.

"Perhaps," he said, and left it at that. He'd spare her more words about his duty and the greater good. One thing, though, still perplexed him. "Miss Baggins, why are you doing this? Why would you risk your life... for the good of a people not your own?"

Billa's smile grew, and she laughed softly. "Can't tell you how many times I asked myself that, lying on the cold ground under the stars and feeling sorry for myself. It was a while before I came up with an answer other than 'because Gandalf made me.'"

She shook her curly head, her expression nearly fond as she looked at the dark-haired dwarf. "But living with you and the others, listening to your stories... I know it's the right thing to do. You're fighting to regain something I've never done without. Even when my family was dead and gone, I always had a home. But you..." A wondering note crept into her voice. "You've taken this quest for a home, for peace, and made it so much more. Maybe I didn't see it at first, but I do now- and I think you're worth whatever I have to offer. And frankly, if I die, then at least I'll die doing something worthwhile."

Thorin was surprised by her answer, though he wondered, still, how much of her courage was derived simply from not knowing precisely what terrors lay ahead. Either way, certainly a good deal more to this halfling than he'd thought; an egregious understatement, really. There was that stirring within he'd felt before. Fondness? Was he growing fond of Billa?
"I'm honored, then, Miss Baggins. I hope such a sacrifice... is not neces-

Just then, the back door flew open with a heavy bang and the groggy dwarves were staggering up at once, huddling together, scrabbling for weapons. Silhouetted against the moonlit back garden was a massive, hulking shape. A huge, tall man, hair spiking like a mane down his back, clad only in a pair of ragged linen trousers. Thorin stayed put, raising a hand in signal. It would be no good to show aggression- not until the skin-changer's intentions became clear. Still, his other hand rested warily on the haft of Orcrist.

Billa looked up at their host as he strode through the door. His heavy tread left her in no doubt that he was tired. The skin-changer seemed oblivious to the dwarves until he stood in their midst. Now Billa could see his face in the moonlight, a wild mane of black hair mingling with a full black beard that even the dwarves would respect. The halfling turned a healthy shade of pink when she noticed the vast expanse of hairy muscle that was the skin-changer’s chest and shoulders, and as the huge man looked around at the Company, a familiar voice came from the still-open door.

“So, as I was saying,” Gandalf said, with a satisfied air, “that was how I and my companions escaped from the orc pack and made it here, somewhat encouraged on our way by you, if you recall.”

“I recall smelling orc on my lands,” the skin-changer rumbled. Billa heaved herself to her feet and limped toward the fireplace to stir the coals and lay more wood on. Their host watched her warily. “Your idea of ‘a few dwarves’ seems to have put me at a disadvantage, Wizard.”

“Ah, yes. Well, I hardly think that thirteen is an unworthy number.” There was a laugh in Gandalf’s voice. “May I present Thorin Oakenshield, the leader of our Company. Thorin, this is Beorn, a good friend of mine.”

“I have heard much of the Oakenshield of late,” growled the huge man, leaning down to Thorin’s eye-level, which had him bent nearly double, as the top of the dwarf’s head only came to his waist. “There’s a price on your head, Dwarf.”

“So I’ve heard,” said Thorin, relieved, but not completely at ease. He was used to being dwarfed by other races, but this was another thing altogether. “I suppose I should consider it... flattering that my death is so greatly sought by orc-kind.”

Beorn smiled faintly, chuckling appreciatively as he straightened. “Brave little man.”

Kili, who hadn’t had the strength to get up when the others had, propped himself up a little, swaying, curious despite feeling nauseous and lightheaded. He felt very small in the skin-changer’s presence, even smaller than he usually felt. He nudged Fili’s ankle to say something, but when his brother turned, he decided he was feeling a bit too ill to speak and collapsed backward again with a grunt, weakly flapping a hand in a way that meant “never mind.”

Fili frowned, sitting down beside Kili and reaching for a damp cloth to sponge his forehead. He was worried about his little brother. “Hey, Kee, it’s alright. Oin, can you give him something for the pain?”

Beorn half-turned toward the fireplace when light flickered through the longhouse. The halfling was hefting his big, flame-blackened kettle over the coals. The skin-changer’s bushy eyebrows lifted in surprise and he glanced at Thorin, then at Gandalf, waiting for someone to provide the answer to his unspoken question.

“Billa Baggins,” said the Wizard, an amused twinkle in his blue eyes, “the stealth expert of our
Company, and an excellent hostess besides.”

Billa rested the kettle on the iron hook and sat down beside the fire, looking rather like she was in pain. Beorn frowned and moved toward the table.

Stealth expert? Thorin couldn’t help but be a little surprised by Gandalf’s description of Billa. Other than a quick wit, a keen hand, and silent feet, she certainly didn’t seem “expert” material, but then, she had managed to save him that night when he was lying flat on the ground, wounded, his sword out of reach, the Pale Orc towering over him. Perhaps it was because she was the last thing anyone would expect in a burglar that she was proving such an excellent one.

Thorin caught the halfling’s unintentional wince and glanced meaningfully at Oin. It was clear by the look the healer returned that he’d seen it, too, and was none too pleased with the fact that Billa was once again straining herself. With a sigh, he quickly finished with Kili and paced over to the halfling, quietly insisting she let him see to her leg once more.

Thorin turned away, troubled. They would need to be moving on before long, and neither Billa nor Kili were even remotely well enough to travel. Gandalf and Beorn were continuing their conversation near the table, and the skin-changer offered the Wizard a tankard of honey-wine, which he graciously accepted. Thorin leaned against the pillar near the table, arms crossed, listening. The bear had been keeping the orc pursuers at bay on the borders of his land, and had killed one that morning, rather spectacularly, by the way he spoke of it, which sent the rest fleeing in terror. For now. Beorn was all but certain they’d be back, or find a way around his lands to continue their pursuit of the Company.

“And what of the road ahead?” Thorin asked Gandalf during a lull. “How will we reach the Greenwood without being overtaken? We have no beasts of burden, no supplies, no food.”

Beorn looked at the dwarf king and then at Kili and Billa, who were the most notably injured of the group. His silent assessment was clear enough, and Gandalf gave the Great Bear a glance, tipping his head slightly to the side.

“If our gracious host has any suggestions, I would be happy to hear them. Beorn, you are far more familiar with the area than I.”

The huge man stroked his beard thoughtfully and studied the dwarf. “Your party is injured, and the Greenwood is not as it was.” His somber gaze landed on Thorin and stayed there. “The darkness grows, and orcs are not the only ones that threaten my borders.” Levering himself away from the table, he stepped toward Thorin, and a subtle change in his expression made his face seem hard. Almost unforgiving.

“I don’t like dwarves. They’re greedy, taking without regard for the world around them and the folk that watch them.” The name ‘Thor’ hovered in the air, though no one bothered to say it out loud. “You think the lives of those who are smaller and weaker are worth less.” He reached out with one massive hand, past Thorin’s shoulder, and plucked a mouse from the hay. The beat of silence that passed between them was pregnant with the potential threat of the skin-changer’s attitude. The moment passed, and Beorn met the dwarf’s gaze again. “I hate orcs more. You can count on my assistance in your venture, Oakenshield.”

Thorin nodded slightly, surprised by the unlooked-for offer, letting the inadvertent insults that preceded it slide. “My Company and I are grateful to you. I hope, in years to come, your opinion of my people may improve, for it is not the love of gold that drives me, but a desire for justice, and a renewed hope for fallen dwarf-kind.”
Beorn was right. Thror had ruled with surety, but he had not ruled well. It was his greed that had brought the dragon, his lust for wealth, and Thorin wanted no part in that sickness. He had seen its effects firsthand, perhaps as no one else—not even Thrain, his father—had. In some hidden alcove of his heart, he trembled as he remembered the look in his grandfather’s eyes when he’d pulled him down the secret passage during the attack on Erebor. That wild rage, almost animal, at being forcibly separated from the King’s Jewel as it plummeted ‘neath the swirling treasure hoard. A heat rose into his chest, a strengthened resolve. He would not become like Thror.

“Your purpose is not my business, son of Durin,” the big man rumbled, releasing the mouse into the hay near Gloin, who looked a little unsettled. “My business lies in the husbandry of my animals, and the tending of the land. I’m afraid your injured will take longer than you have to recover. You may have to leave them behind if you want to reach the border before your pursuers.”

Fili sat up a little straighter, pausing the sponging of his brother’s brow. “No! You can’t leave him behind, Uncle!”

Thorin turned a stern look on his nephew that said he didn’t approve of such outbursts. “I will do what is necessary for the safety of this Company and for the success of this Quest.”

Now that the subject had been broached, it rested more easily on his mind as a viable course of action. But… Billa. Without a burglar, what hope did they have of reclaiming the Arkenstone undetected? It was a difficult conundrum, indeed, one that would require counsel.

“Balin.” Thorin turned to the white-haired dwarf, who had set himself against the wall nearby, and was intently carving what appeared to be a flute. “What do you say? Do we dare split up the Company?” His voice was confidential, though it helped that Beorn’s rumbling speech was currently breaking up the silence as he addressed Gandalf concerning what supplies the Company might require.

Balin didn’t answer immediately. His knife slowed to a gentle, eloquent stroke, and he took time to breathe before lifting his head to look at his king. “Leaving Billa and Kili here may get us to the Mountain sooner, possibly even on time. However,” and the word seemed to weigh heavily on him as he spoke, his voice gauged to an undertone for Thorin’s ears only, “it would not be a boon, at this point, to upset the balance. Losing our burglar,” he nodded to the halfling, who was reluctantly allowing Oin to feel the extent of the damage to her knee, “and our, ahem, jester,” a smile hovered about his mouth as he nodded to Kili’s pain-still form, “would not a confident Company make.” He let the words sink in, seeming to inspect his beard for a beat or two before continuing.

“It may slow us down, Thorin, but I think keeping the Company unbroken will benefit us more than a secret entrance.” It was a hard choice, and as much as he might advise Thorin, it wasn’t his to make.

Thorin saw wisdom in his friend’s words. “Of course you’re right, Balin.” He paced a little closer to the older dwarf, crouching down on his haunches beside him, slanting an evaluative glance at the halfling across the room. “It’s just that… if anyone is to stay behind, this would be their last chance. Any further, and it will be too late to turn back. If either of them take a turn for the worse, or are injured further…” He didn’t finish the thought, but the ramifications of that potential misfortune were all too clear.

Balin made a soft, understanding noise into his beard. There were dangers, of course. More for those two than for the others, perhaps, and yet... “If it worries you,” he murmured, “give them the choice. I think you know what their answers will be.
Gandalf, apparently just noticing the lateness of the hour— he always was one for neglecting such comforts as sleep when he’d set his mind on other things— turned his attention back to the dwarves. “Now that you’ve met our host, you’ll be wanting to get some rest, I expect. And if any of you were considering denying yourself the luxury in order to keep watch,” the glance he aimed at Thorin was anything but subtle, “there’s no need. Beorn is quite the most dangerous creature prowling this area, and he’s graciously extending his protection.”

The others nodded, seeming more at ease, and Thorin, frowning, sighed and internally conceded the Wizard’s point. He realized he was very tired, and he’d be less fit to lead if he tried to do so in a state of fatigue. Thanking Balin for his sage advice, he found a corner of a huge wool blanket the dwarves were sharing, provided by Beorn, and nestled into the fresh, clean straw beneath it. It wasn’t that he particularly enjoyed sleeping in a huddle with the others, but he’d grown somewhat accustomed to it these past few weeks, and even though the cold was no longer a concern, he was finding it difficult to sleep without the warmth of another body beside him.

Despite his initial concerns, once he’d given himself permission to relax, sleep caught up to him remarkably quickly. As he faded from consciousness, he could still hear the low murmuring speech of the Wizard and the skin-changer droning on and on in the stillness.

It was a jarring motion to the crown of his head that ultimately roused him, and he tilted his face upward a little to see what had hit him, his vision blurred with sleep. Billa was nestled into Fili’s side, and her feet were but a scant few inches from his head. It seemed she’d been claimed by some nocturnal spasm that had sent her large, furry foot into his head.

Thorin realized he’d never been this close to Billa while she was sleeping. He rolled over a little, looking at her. Her eyes were closed, but not gently. She was frowning, and there was the faint sheen of sweat on her face. Was she in pain, or… dreaming?

Billa twitched again, a little less violently this time. Her face scrunched in pain as the muscles in her legs tightened of their own accord. Oin had given Thorin only the barest of sketchy answers when asked about the condition of her leg, conveying that it wasn’t the healing break that was the problem, but some damage to the knee that was still fresh. As her diminutive form jerked again, Fili grunted. He, accustomed to sharing a bed with his brother (despite their mother insisting they were too old “for this sort of thing”) gave the hobbit a sleepy shove and rolled over so he was closer to Kili before sighing back into sleep. Billa’s breathing sped up and became uneven as her body processed the fact that the warmth of her companion was now gone.

“No…” Her voice was faint, but in the near-silence of the longhouse, it was easy to hear. “Don’t go.”

Thorin was stirred, in spite of himself, by her unconscious plea. His brow furrowed a little as he sat up, glancing from Fili back to Billa. She needed someone beside her, the warmth and comfort of another. She, like him, must have grown used to communal sleeping, and felt strangely vulnerable lying apart from the others. Thorin pitied her, but he knew he himself couldn’t lie beside her. None of the others could either, save Fili and Kili. The two youngest dwarves were seen as little more than boys, and therefore somehow immune to the same rules of propriety as their elders. Thorin had to think about this for a moment. Why would it be inappropriate? Wasn’t she one of the Company, just like all the rest? Yes, but she was more. Firstly, she was female. Secondly, she was an attractive female. He’d known this from the first, but had spent most of the Quest up until now trying to ignore that fact. No, he couldn’t help her himself.

In the end, he nudged Fili and woke him, nodding at Billa meaningfully and making gestures to convey his wishes.
Fili blinked owlishly at his uncle and, at length, understood what he wanted. Rolling over, he hooked an arm around Billa’s waist and pulled her against his chest, squirming into the hay so his back was against Kili’s side and Billa was securely tucked under his arm, like a hobbit-shaped rag doll. With only the slightest uncomfortable grunt, he settled again and was quickly asleep once more.

Billa, now safely ensconced in the warmth and safety of her companion’s embrace, relaxed again. Thorin turned over, settling back into the straw beside Dwalin while the still and quiet descended once more... just in time for him to catch Billa’s voice as she mumbled one final word into her sleeve.

“Kili.”

He frowned a little. The way she’d said his nephew’s name; it niggled at him somehow. It annoyed him. It troubled him. As if Kili were the one protecting her and worrying for her safety. As if keeping her company and helping her along the way were Kili’s ideas. Why should she latch onto a naive pup like him, of all people?

When Thorin realized the turn his thoughts had taken, he shook his head, as if by doing so he could dislodge them from his mind. What ridiculousness he could come up with when he was exhausted. That was it, he decided. Restful dawn would put all to rights inside his addled brain.

Chapter End Notes

Jealous!Thorin is jealous. :D
Beorn stroked the black and white head of one of the ponies with a tenderness that was startling in one so large. With his hand on the beast’s neck, he turned his somber gaze on Thorin.

“They will take you as far as Mirkwood, but no further. They belong here.” The ponies were saddled and laden with supplies. Not so much they they would be slowed down, hardy animals that they were, but there was enough there to keep the Company well fed for at least a week. If rationed, they would be supplied for two weeks, maybe more. Though waiting for Kili’s fever to break had cost them two nights’ travel, the addition of ponies would shave time off their journey, and Beorn’s generous donation of supplies and a decent map of Mirkwood, as the Greenwood was now called, would certainly aid in reaching their destination on time.

Gandalf sat astride a beautiful palfrey, waiting for the rest of the Company to be ready to depart. “Your assistance will not be forgotten,” said the Wizard, bowing from the saddle. “May we meet again when the shadows are not so dark.”

“The darkest shadows,” said the skin-changer, “are found only in the greatest light.” The ghost of a smile crossed his face. “Fair winds follow you, my little friends.”

Thorin dipped his head gratefully to the skin-changer, urging his piebald pony between a break in the tall hedges and onward across the green plain. The ponies moved at a gentle lope, well used to galloping the soft terrain and possessing remarkable stamina, though not, perhaps, as used to being ridden.

Gandalf and Thorin rode side by side, though the others followed single file, and just as dusk was settling, they drew up before the dense tree-line of Mirkwood, riding along it for a few minutes until they reached a narrow, overgrown pathway heralded by an ornate stone arch. It looked of elven make, but it was now hung with ivy and other twisting vines so that it was hard to make out a few delicate lines of script across its lintel. Overall, the elven road of which Gandalf had spoke so confidently seemed very poorly maintained.
Looking up into the crowded branches overhead, Thorin was struck by how… dead they looked. Many of them were sparsely leaved, and the leaves that were present were a sickly red-orange, drooping, crinkly-edged. He turned to Gandalf questioningly.

“We go through there?” No one could help being affected by the pervasive, heavy feeling, the edge of foreboding, that seemed a very miasma in the air filtering out of the pathway.

"This wood feels... sick." Billa eyed the trees distrustfully, one hand on her pony's neck. The animal didn't seem to like this place either, and shifted restlessly under her. Bofur dismounted nearby and Billa's mount shied nervously, unseating her for the fifth time that day. The hobbit hit the ground in a heap, but sat up again to glare at the beast, just as she had ever other time she'd fallen off.

"Are you alright, Miss Baggins?" Bofur helped her to her feet, and she gave him a grateful smile as she dusted herself off.

"I'm fine, Bofur. Thanks."

"Isn't there some way around this place?" Fili asked nervously, watching the stone arch anxiously as he dismounted also, and moved to help his brother do likewise.

"Not without going 200 miles out of our way to the north, or twice that distance... south." Gandalf hesitated frowning at the overgrown entrance. There was something wrong here. Leaving his horse to graze nervously nearby, the Wizard approached the old causeway, reaching out to touch the stone. If he'd expected to see some blatant sign, the was disappointed. But there were other, more subtle messages for those who knew what to look for. Deep stains in the once-fair stone, ragged edges where the rock had crumbled away. This wasn't merely the ravages of time.

Gandalf turned back to the others, deeply troubled. "Go straight through," he instructed, taking his horse's reins and mounting quickly. "Don't eat or drink of anything you find within the trees. And for your own sakes, don't leave the path. You won't find it again if you do."

"Wait," Billa cried, holding one of the supply packs and looking suddenly distressed. "You're not leaving us, are you?"

"I will meet you again on the other side, at the overlook near Dale." The Wizard's gaze fell on Thorin. "Whatever you do, don't enter that mountain without me."

Thorin had dismounted, and leaving his pony for the others to unburden, he stalked over to Gandalf, dismayed, angry. Perhaps a little betrayed.

“What do you mean by doing this?” Thorin jabbed a finger at the Wizard’s face. “How can you leave us at a time like this, send us into such a place while you ride off in the opposite direction?” His voice was low but intense, full of justified indignation. “What could possibly be so important?”

The Wizard looked distinctly regretful, conflicted, as though his heart would rather have remained with the dwarves, but he had no choice but to leave. Recognizing that Gandalf wasn’t doing this out of caprice, Thorin backed off a little, shaking his head.

“You’re truly going, then.” He sighed, glancing back at Billa. “I recognize you are not part of the Company and never have been, but I’d hoped,” his voice was lower now, a concerned dagger edged with something like fear, “you would be able to help us through this forest, at least. There are those whom I must protect, and entering such a place without you while several of my Company are still recovering from grave injury… gives me pause."

The old man bowed his head slightly, the wide brim of his pointed hat hiding his eyes for a moment.
"If the need were not so urgent, I would not leave you in such a place." The Wizard paused and sighed. "I have faith, however, that you will lead your Company as well in my absence as you do otherwise. There is no dwarf who could do better." Gandalf’s gaze landed on Billa for a second, and he nodded to her. She looked almost as though she were about to say something, and one of her hands was in her pocket, fingerling something inside. One of her missing buttons, perhaps, from the size of it.

"Have faith, Billa Baggins."

"It's not faith I lack," she murmured, and looked away, letting her hand drop. Gandalf felt a stab of pity for her, and for just an instant, wondered if choosing her had really been the right decision. The Wizard shook his head. There was no time for doubt. Now was a time for action.

"I will meet you at Dale. May the Light of the Valar guide you, Thorin Oakenshield." And with that, he was gone, spurring his horse into a frantic gallop back the way they’d come. The ponies, already divested of their packs, followed him with a will, whinnying and snorting as they plunged away.

It was as the line of ponies disappeared over the hill that Billa saw, for the third time in her life, the enormous, shadowy silhouette of a great, shaggy black bear. He stood near a copse of trees, his muzzle turned in their direction, motionless.

"What strange friends," she murmured, feeling oddly safe under the gaze of their mysterious, but generous host.

Thorin exhaled heavily, turning back to the others. “Come on. We can’t be caught out here after full dark. We’ll make camp best we can once we’ve traveled a while within the cover of the trees.”

The dwarves exchanged hesitant glances, then finally shouldered their packs and trailed after Thorin. So they were going into that dark, smothering forest after all. Without the Wizard.

As they entered the gate, Thorin paused, turning back to look over the Company. “Listen well,” he said, glancing at Dwalin in a way that said he’d rely on him to enforce the orders he was about to give. “I don’t know just what sort of foul enchantment lies over this forest. We all feel it, plain as that, and I warrant it’s nothing to be trifled with. Everyone will stay together; no straying from the path, no touching anything, no losing focus, no speaking in anything above a whisper. Gandalf said the forest would seek to lead us astray, and I don’t intend to allow that to happen.” He turned to Gloin. “Get the torches; we can light them in here without fear of being seen.”

They were fine, sturdy torches, dipped in beeswax, and Beorn had provided enough for the whole Company, though Thorin said they’d only require three at a time. Even so, they sent a reassuring measure of the gloom skittering away to hide behind twisted trunks and gnarled branches. Less reassuring was the light dancing in the eyes of watchful beasts as the Company passed, and the distant snapping and rustling of bush and bracken. The forest was cold and damp and airless, more and more as the dwarves and their halfling pressed on, following a flagstone path nearly hidden by the encroaching undergrowth.

Finally, some two hours after entering the forest, Thorin called a halt. They’d reached something of a clearing, though it was only open at its heart, since the surrounding trees had spitefully linked branchy hands far above, denying the weary travelers even a tiny glimpse of the night sky.

“Make a fire, and be quick about it,” Thorin urged Gloin in an undertone, glancing apprehensively about. He turned to the others. “No one wanders off. Keep together, and don’t leave the firelight. Rest.”
The dwarves more or less collapsed in a jumbled mess to one side of the fire. It was Balin's turn to take first watch, and Thorin ordered hourly shifts, so none of them would lose too much sleep. Their stock of firewood dwindled quickly as the night wore on. When Billa woke Ori for his turn, there were only a few sticks left. The halfling, however, was too tired to care about what would happen after the fire went out. She inserted herself sleepily under Kili's arm, and was soon lost to the world. Ori shifted uncomfortably as the last of the wood burned merrily over the coals, and looked out at the trees. Eyes. Everywhere, there were eyes. Most of them seemed small and at least relatively harmless, but still... without the fire how would they keep track of all those eyes? Slingshot at the ready, Ori moved cautiously into the trees in search of more fuel for the fire.

It wasn't until after the fire had died that the dwarves started to stir, getting cold without the flames to warm them.

"Who's on watch?"

"Who let the fire die?"

"What's going on?"

They grumbled and shifted, each one waking the others, until-

"Where's Ori?"
Dori and Nori were panicking, fumbling around for the torches Gloin had set near the fire. When the clearing had been illumined once more, it became immediately clear that Ori was truly missing, and the others began to be alarmed as well.

Gloin shook his head. “Tender young lad. Much like my own son. Should never have come.”

“We have to find him!” said Nori, already striding to the edge of the clearing, a torch in one hand, his mace in the other. Dori was hard on his heels, his blade gleaming red in the firelight.

“No!” Thorin lunged forward to stop them. “Don’t!” But the two dwarves were frantic, and nothing their leader could say would prevent them from going after their missing little brother. Contrary to Thorin’s bidding, they disappeared into the trees.

“We can’t just let ‘em go!” Dwalin said. “I’ll go after ‘em, bring ‘em back.”

Thorin shook his head, realizing he had to act quickly to prevent chaos from descending. “We all go. We can’t divide the Company. Everyone up! Hurry. Single file. Dwalin, bring up the rear. Make sure no one else vanishes.”

Dwalin herded the others into a line, shoving torches into their hands before taking up the rear. In the gloom ahead, Dori and Nori could be heard, calling their little brother's name in panicked, frightened voices. The trees seemed to crowd them from all sides, looming over them threateningly. The eyes seemed to follow them, skittering through the branches overhead and rustling through the undergrowth on either side.

The darkness around them seemed to press against the light thrown off by their torches, trying to swamp them entirely. Always, Dori and Nori seemed just ahead, out of sight and calling frantically for their brother. It seemed to take ages and ages of walking through the dark woods. Nori was the one the yelled that he'd found Ori, waving his torch wildly over his head to get their attention.

When the rest of the Company reached the scene, Dori was kneeling beside the younger dwarf, very white in the face and trying to staunch the flow of blood from a nasty-looking gash along Ori’s ribs.

Ori’s russet hair was in disarray as he lay in the midst of a tangle of bramble vines, hardly seeming to breathe at all. As Dori pressed against the wound, his brother stirred, making an incoherent, pained
noise. He opened his eyes.

"What-?"

Oin stepped forward immediately, reaching for his kit. "Here, get him out of the brambles. Be careful. Don't agitate him too much." When Nori and Dori had relocated the poor, wounded dwarf onto a clump of soft, but slightly damp ferns, the healer knelt at his side, waving the others back. "Give him some air. He can't breathe what with you all hovering over him like that."

Thorin was puzzled by the strange look Balin gave him. A knowing glance, maybe, as of some long-kept secret about to be revealed. Not fifteen seconds later, Oin uttered a startled grunt, lurching away a little, as if embarrassed. He turned a bewildered glance on the rest of the Company, as though he was rather at a loss. Balin caught his gaze and nodded, the ghost of a smile playing at his lips in the flickering light.

Oin hesitated a moment longer, an uncertain expression on his face. Nori wouldn't tolerate that. As the injured dwarf moaned pathetically, he fixed the healer with a wild look.

"Help her!" he hissed. Oin shook his head slightly, cleared his throat and bent over Ori's prone form.

"Her?" Fili shot his brother a startled, sidelong glance. When he looked down at Billa, the halfling looked equally shocked. In fact, every face in the Company wore an expression of bewilderment - all except for Nori and Dori, who were hovering over their injured sister, and Balin, who had his arms folded passively over his chest.

Thorin turned to the white-haired dwarf, looking rather aghast. "You knew, Balin? All this time? Why didn't you-"

"Because it wasn't important, and you would have been unreasonable about it. Really, though, I'm surprised it's come as such a shock to you."

Thorin began to feel uncommonly foolish. He'd long suspected there was something... off about the young, scantily bearded dwarf, but had never quite made the obvious connection. He grunted unhappily.

"Very well. What's done is done, and she'll just have to carry on as she has been. This doesn't change anything." He knew very well that it did change things. He just wasn't going to give it license to.

When Oin had patched Ori up again and her head had cleared enough to walk, supported by her brothers, Thorin made an about face.

"Back to the camp. We'll salvage what rest we can before dawn. No one else is to leave the clearing. For any reason. Do I make myself clear?"

Ori gave Thorin a sheepish look. Her legs seemed to work just fine, but the wound had been along her side and across her ribs, which made breathing rather painful. She stumbled after the others with her brothers' help, and the rest of the Company spent a good deal of time shooting her curious looks, as though checking to see how she'd changed, now that she was female.

Fili turned forward again, shaking his head. Ori didn't look any different, really, but... she was... different. "Did you know?" he asked, looking at his brother. "About... you know... all this?" He gestured vaguely back toward the new female. Or, the female that hadn't been- it was confusing.

Kili sneaked a furtive glance at Ori, then turned back, smirking a little. "I had a hunch. He- er, she
wasn’t exactly all that… well, manly.” The blond shook his head slightly, slowly slightly so they could walk with Ori and her brothers.

"Why, Ori? Why’d you hide your... um... yeah. That." Fili knew that what he’d said didn’t really make much sense, but trusted that she’d know what he meant. Nori bristled slightly, just as much out of a desire to protect as out of a vague sense of guilt.

"Why’s it any of your business? She's got a right to 'er privacy, don’t she?"

Dori nodded firmly in agreement. “It was no one else’s concern. It was enough that we knew, and old Balin. She didn’t have anyone to look after her back home, and we weren’t about to leave her behind. Not for every glittering thing in the treasure hoard of Erebor.”

Fili frowned slightly and glanced at his brother, who seemed just as baffled as he was. "But I mean... we could have helped." There was a moment of silence that felt very much like a storm was brewing in Nori, just waiting to be unleashed. Ori was the one that spoke, one hand squeezing her brother’s shoulder to keep him calm.

"It was my own choice. I didn't want anyone to know.” There was a pained look on her nearly-hairless face, and Fili actually felt a touch guilty for asking at all. It was just something about the way she looked at him with those big brown eyes... had her eyes always been like that? They were so dark and... and vulnerable. Fili looked away quickly. There were other things to be worried about right now.

"There's nothing wrong with that, I guess. Just... just don't..."

"It's our job to keep our sister safe," growled Nori. "You keep with your own duties, princeling." Dori shot him a warning glance.

"Keep up," called Thorin from the front of the group. "The clearing should be just ahead."

There was a problem, though. The clearing where they’d made camp didn’t seem to exist anymore. No matter how far they walked in that direction, it just didn’t seem to be in their path.

"This isn't possible," Thorin muttered, rubbing his bleary eyes, sighing tiredly. "How could we have lost a whole clearing?"

"Must've gotten... off track," Balin mumbled, swaying, eyes heavy.

The others, to a dwarf (and a hobbit), looked as though they’d willingly collapse where they stood and sleep through the night. Must have been the thick forest air, Thorin thought in passing. It was like a stifling, suffocating cloud of forgetfulness.

At any rate, they didn't seem likely to find the clearing tonight, and their torches were already burning down to their grips.

He exhaled harshly, almost too tired to be frustrated. "We stop for the night," he said, turning. "We'll resume the search in the morning. I'll... take the first watch."

As the others settled against each other with looks of relief, Thorin sat against a nearby tree, determined to stay awake.

Billa pushed Fili down beside Kili, who'd already collapsed into a pile of fallen leaves, and made her way over to sit beside Thorin. She was just as exhausted as the rest of them, but she nudged him in the ribs and leaned against his shoulder.
"We better watch in pairs, if we wanna stay awake." She was smiling, though her eyes drooped heavily.

Thorin intended to deny her, but instead found himself nodding. He hid a yawn behind his hand, knowing that if he let himself relax for an instant, the battle against sleep would be over.

"Very well." Even in his supremely drowsy state, the strangeness of her proximity to him registered. Certainly, he'd touched her before. He'd held her, carried her. Always during crises, though. This was the first time she'd come near him of her own accord, leaned against him as though she weren't intimidated by him at all. He wasn't sure just how to feel about it. He wondered if he would be more uneasy were he not so tired.

"Keep awake as best you can, but I will not fault you if you're unable to. The heaviness... in the air. It's affecting us all."

"It's not... normal." Billa shook her head and rubbed her face tiredly, looking out at the deep shadows around them. "This wood... it's... I don't know. It doesn't feel alive. It doesn't smell like green things and earth. It's not right." The halfling ran a hand through her hair. That was becoming a habit, and her curls stuck out in odd places as a result. With a sigh, she shifted slightly so her back was more against his shoulder than the tree. He was warm and solid, she noticed. Not like Fili, who tipped over when she leaned on him, or Kili, who never stopped wiggling. More like Dwalin, but less hard. Definitely sturdier than Bombur. She liked how he felt. Realizing her mind was wandering, she voiced her thoughts, determined to stay awake.

"You feel nice. Sturdy. And you don't tip over." Because that made so much sense.

Thorin frowned a little. "What does that mean?" he murmured. His eyelids felt heavy as lead now, and it was taking every bit of his will to keep them open, to keep his mind from slipping away into blissful forgetfulness. "Some sort of... halfling joke?"

"Fili... tips over." Billa mumbled, chuckled as she shook her head again, struggling to stay awake. "Just... flops. Like a pancake... I'm hungry."

"Can't do much about that right now," Thorin muttered by way of a reply, though it was a personal gripe, too. He was rather famished himself, having forgone an evening meal, and was trying to forget about it. That seemed to be his preferred method of dealing with things beyond his control. "Might be some hard biscuits in Bombur's pockets if you've courage enough about you to wake him and ask." A silly suggestion through and through, but if she were truly that desperate, at least she had one option.

"Who says I'd have to wake him?" Billa responded with a helpless, exhausted laugh. She nudged Thorin as her shoulders shook. It really wasn't that funny. Under normal circumstances, it may not have been funny at all. But presently, Billa found the suggestion of going through Bombur's pockets while he slept to be absolutely hilarious. "Oh, that's awful. I'm awful. Why'd I say that?"

Thorin honestly couldn't imagine, even in his practically comatose state, that this was a question she expected him to answer, so he just glanced at her strangely and kept quiet.

Perhaps she was a silly, childish creature after all. But she was also warm.

This became all the more apparent as the night dragged on another hour or so into the chill of early dawn, and sitting immobile with his back to a tree didn't help the cooling of his blood. But one side of him, at least, was warm.
He turned again to look at the halfling, and her chin was against her chest, her eyes shut. He nudged her a little.

"Miss Baggins?"

Billa's head jerked up. "I'm awake!" she announced, a little louder than she needed to. "I'm awake. I just... shut my eyes for a minute. Eyelids are very interesting to look at." Nonsense. Complete nonsense. She shook her head and rubbed her face and ran her fingers through her hair. But as soon as her hands returned to her lap, she felt her eyes closing again. It was as though there were simply no power above or beneath the earth that could keep her awake.

"Thorin?" She turned her head to look at him, but his eyes had that hooded, glazed look she'd seen before, when he was being too datted noble about everything. "You sleep... I'll just... I'll wake you in a minute." Billa forced her eyes open again, realizing they'd closed. She propped herself up a little straighter and stared out into the foggy greyish shadows. Not a full minute later, she was slumped against her companion and snoring gently, her head hanging near his elbow.

Thorin sighed a little. It was well past the time he should've called for someone to replace him, but... he felt strangely reluctant to move. He was warm, reasonably comfortable. And she was asleep against him. Didn't feel so improper if they were both sitting up, which was a strange thought, he decided, after the fact.

In the end, he didn't call for a relief. He stayed where he was, awake another hour, listening to her gentle, feminine snoring and the sounds of the dark, watchful woodland all around.

It was Fili who woke him, well past first light, and Thorin snorted, sitting up, feeling alternately angry and embarrassed.

"I wasn't... I didn't..." he explained, half-coherently, before he realized he didn't have to explain anything to Fili. Billa was still leaning against him, only just roused by his words, and he shifted his half-open eyes from Fili to her and back to Fili. This was really quite awkward.
To Find the Sun

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

It isn't the most pleasant thing in the world to wake up cold and stiff, with a crick in one's neck and rubbing shoulders with Thorin Oakenshield while still wiping drool from one's chin. Billa blinked at Thorin, and then at Fili, turning slowly pink.

"Um... I... guess we dozed off, huh?" She was surprised by how evenly the words came out, in spite of the sinking feeling in her gut when she looked at Thorin. He didn't look the least bit amused. Or understanding. He just seemed... disappointed.

Thorin glared at the cold ground, abruptly pushing himself to his feet, straightening his brigandine, and smoothing the fur on his coat. He was fairly certain if he didn't make an issue of what had happened, it wouldn't become one. He didn't look at the burglar, but he could see her in his peripheral vision looking up at him a moment before turning away. No one could fault him for what had happened, if "happened" was even an apt way of describing it. As he strode over to Balin, he had to shake his head a little. Nothing had happened except him falling asleep against an attractive female when he was supposed to be on guard duty. The Company's bleary-eyed stares were uncomfortably hot at his back now, and he tried to ignore them.

"Balin," he said in an undertone, pulling the older dwarf aside, "I think we may have lost the trail for good. The only way we'll be able to judge the direction now is by the sun, but we can't see it. What are our options?"

Balin glanced at Thorin, then at the others. He seemed awake enough, but there was worry in his tired old eyes as he pulled his hip flask out of his belt and took a long swig. Offering it to Thorin, the white-haired dwarf looked up at the trees.

"If the sun is our only hope," he said reasonably, "then someone ought to climb up and find it."

Thorin glanced at his nephews, then turned back to Balin. "But who can make such a climb? Fili and Kili are injured, and so's Ori now."

Balin studied him for a moment before tucking his flask back into his belt. He had a feeling that the obvious answer wasn't the one his king wanted to hear. So, rather than give it, he nodded to the rest of their groggy, guilty-looking Company. "Perhaps the question isn't 'who is capable' so much as 'who is willing.' If you asked, I'm sure someone would volunteer."

Thorin did, ultimately solicit a volunteer, and the Company was fairly silent, other than Fili and Kili, who were quite willing and assured their uncle they were just fine. "Is there anyone else who would be willing to try?"

Billa glanced around. She really, really didn't want to do this, but... she had to do something to make up for her mistake last night. Standing up, she tried not to favor her injured leg too much. "I'll do it,
Thorin.

Fili looked up, his expression deeply concerned and slightly jealous. "But Billa, you're still hurt."

The halfling straightened, a look of determination on her face. "I'm not in danger of opening my wounds and bleeding to death, unlike some people."

Thorin turned, surprised that she, of all the Company, would volunteer. Despite her efforts to hide it, her limp was still quite pronounced, and sending her up a tree would be foolish, at best. She could reinjure herself, and then they'd be in worse shape than they already were, having to carry her around as they had after she'd first been hurt. On the other hand, she did have keen eyes, and would be able to see further than any others in the group apart from Fili and Kili. The rest of the dwarves were practically in an uproar now, ashamed and determined not to be outdone by a female... a halfling female, at that. Thorin silenced them. A solution had presented itself to him, and while he didn't much like it, it was for the good of the Company.

"Very well, Miss Baggins. As your eyes are the sharpest, I'll not stop you. But I myself will see you safely to the top. We can't afford an incident."

Dwalin snorted indignantly. "Why should you have to go up with her- risk your neck? I'll go, muddled brain or not."

Thorin shook his head firmly. "No. I know the lay of the land best. I go."

There was a look of relief on Billa's face, mixed with intense gratitude as she glanced at him. She didn't bother protesting. While the others grumbled unhappily, she turned her hazel eyes upward and scrutinized the trees around them.

"This one, I think," said Balin, indicating a sturdy maple that stood a couple lengths into the shade, away from the clearing. The halfling nodded and breathed deeply as she approached. Locking eyes with Thorin for a moment, she smiled tensely.

"This should be interesting," she whispered, right before accepting his assistance in reaching the first branch. Billa waited only a moment for Thorin to follow her before she started to pull herself up to the branches above. She looked decidedly uncomfortable and out of place in the tree, but climbed with strong, determined movements, moving steadily up along the trunk. Climbing up was relatively easy. It was climbing back down that would be the problem.

Thorin stayed a foot below the halfling as she continued, slowly, to scale the tree. He didn't realize just how exhausted he was until his limbs began to tremble, and he grunted frustratedly when the strength he required did not come readily, and his grip wasn't as firm as he would've preferred. By the looks of Billa, she wasn't finding the climb particularly easy either. He watched her closely, making certain she didn't seem likely to fall, and hoping he'd be able to catch her in time if she did. He tried not to notice the smooth curve of her thighs and… Thorin averted his eyes. He wasn’t supposed to notice things like that. Besides, distracting thoughts like these were not helpful.

"Try that branch there," he said, breathing heavily, pointing when she pulled up short, unsure where next to go. They'd made it nearly halfway up now, and the others down below looked small and indistinct as they stood, staring upward in marked concern.

Billa took his advice without question, grasping the branch firmly and hauling herself up with shaking arms. She paused then and rested against the trunk a moment, working hard not to pant. Panting would make her dizzy, and that wouldn't help. Peering upward, the halfling frowned.
"Branches are getting thinner. You'll have to stop soon." She glanced down at him, and immediately wished she hadn't. It was a long way to the forest floor. Closing her eyes, she swallowed hard against the uncomfortable tightness in her stomach.

"I... I'll need your help getting back down. You won't be able to help me if you're too tired."

Billa grit her teeth and opened her eyes to stare upward. "Confusticate these heights," she grumbled. Her anxiety made Thorin very nervous. She was quaking such that he thought she might shake herself right out of the tree. For the good of the Company or no, this was beginning to seem like a grave mistake.

"Steady, Miss Baggins," he said, evenly, though his eyes betrayed his concern. "You're going to be just fine. If you fall, I will catch you. You have my word."

"I know," she said with a breathless chuckle, flashing him a smile without actually looking at him. "I know you will. I just... I don't like heights. Hobbits live underground, not in trees." Her voice was steadier now, though she was still trembling. "I'll be back. Don't get up too high. You'll be no use to anyone if you fall." Licking her lips nervously, she twisted and levered herself upward, reaching for the next branch. Scared or not, she was determined not to let them down.

Thorin shook his head. "You don't know the surrounding lands, and I'll need to see them for myself in order to know where we are." He followed her up through the spindly topmost boughs, and as they peered through the red-leaved branches, it was like breaking through a barrier. The air felt thin, clear, fresh after the stifling closeness beneath the canopy, and they both breathed deeply, feeling as though they'd been in some kind of half-sleep before, and were now fully awake. They disturbed a number of dark-winged butterflies, which fluttered up gently from the reddish-bronze leaves. One alighted on Billa's shoulder.

Thorin's attention was immediately drawn to the lone, mist-shrouded peak visible beyond the distant border of the trees. They were getting close. So very close. They needed only to continue in a north-easterly direction for a score or so of miles and they'd be through the woods and home free.

Billa took a deep breath, a knot loosening in her chest. It was more apparent than ever that the forest was ill, the air sick and heavy. "Hey." She'd just noticed the mountain in the distance and braced herself against the branch under them, leaning out a bit to get a better view. "Hey, that's it, isn't it? That's the Lonely Mountain!" An incredulous smile spread across her face. "I can't believe it. We're practically almost there."

Thorin nodded, and he couldn't help but be affected by her exuberance. "So it would seem. But distances can be deceiving from a great height. We have a ways to go yet. Come." As reluctant as he was to leave the fresh air and blue sky, the others would be waiting, and he'd seen what he'd climbed to see. He ducked back down beneath the canopy of red leaves, and the same heaviness he'd felt before once more descended upon his mind, a drowsy sort of fog that made it hard to think. It was so sudden, the change was almost jarring. He shook his head, trying to clear it a little, but the fog didn't lift. He'd just have to get used to it again.

As he began to make his way carefully back down through the swaying branches, he glanced behind him periodically to make certain the halfling was able to keep up and didn't seem in danger of falling. They'd made it roughly halfway down when she slipped. It happened so quickly Thorin had no time to prepare. The cracking of bark, a startled cry, and she was dangling by her hands, gasping, terror-struck.
Billa hung, feet flailing in the open air. The sudden drop had turned her stomach inside-out, and hanging was doing nothing to put her insides to rights. There wasn’t a single coherent thought in her head. The halfling could only remember the feeling of rough stone, icy rain, the force of the wind as it pushed her away from her friends, threatening to drop her into the terrible misty nothingness below. Now it was even worse- worse, because there was no one above her to pull her to safety. No one to save her.

Thorin whirled, practically leaping up a tier of branches to get at her, grabbing her about the waist, yanking her against his body and pinning her between himself and the trunk. For a moment, all was the mad beating of hearts and the harsh, frightened breathing of one small hobbit-lass. He could feel her heat, the way she trembled. Then his mind returned and he realized he’d reacted almost purely on instinct. Overcome with relief, and more than slightly embarrassed, he set her down on the branch beside him, holding her arm to steady her. "Watch your step next time," he growled breathlessly, "lest you leave this Company without a burglar."

Billa was trembling violently as she leaned against the tree trunk, her breathing erratic and her eyes tightly closed. She swallowed hard and tried to control the weak shaking in her knees. "Gimme... gimme a minute. I'll be... I'll-I'll be fine. J-just gimme a m-minute."

Thorin braced himself against the branch above, nodding. He glanced toward the ground and was somewhat amused to see his nephews standing on either side of a blanket, holding it taut between them. "Just in case..." Kili called up at him.

Thorin scoffed. A lot of good that would do them if the halfling actually fell on their makeshift jumping sheet. Still, he could understand that it alleviated some of their feelings of powerlessness as they watched the two precariously picking their way down.

At length, Thorin and Billa were safely on the ground again, and the halfling looked much relieved as she collapsed into the ferns, resting her shaky limbs and nearly sobbing for breath. She was instantly surrounded and coddled by an equally relieved Fili and Kili.

Thorin turned to Dwalin and Balin. "Northeast from here will be," he pointed, "that direction. We'll try to continue as straight as we can, but I may need to go up again at some point and make sure we are maintaining course."

"I'll go up next time," Dwalin said in a way that wasn't quite an offer.

"Perhaps that would be best," said Thorin, and sighed.

Fili pulled the little halfling into a semi-upright position and wrapped the blanket around her while Kili brushed the hair out of her face. "We didn't know," Fili said apologetically. "If we'd known you hated heights so much, we would have-"

"It's alright, Fili," mumbled Billa still shaking as she laid down on the soft, solid earth and pulled the blanket over her head. She wouldn't have long to rest, she knew.

Surely enough, Thorin was yelling at the others to round up their gear and get a move on. The hobbit reluctantly left the shelter of the blanket and shouldered her bag to follow them. She was really starting to dislike this forest.
The Company pressed on for an arduous six hours, barring the occasional break for water and what remained of their dwindling and largely missing provisions. On their first such break, it became apparent that Thorin had been right—Bombur did have biscuits in his pockets. Gloin also had some dried meat which he reluctantly shared with the rest. There wasn’t nearly enough to fill their bellies.

“Barely more than a mouthful,” grumbled Billa, frowning at the pathetic handful of food she’d been given. No more nor less than the others.

“You can have mine, if you like.” The voice had never struck Billa as feminine before, but as she looked around at Ori, she decided that his—er, *her* voice—was a little more mature than she’d thought. The young dwarf was holding out her biscuit to the hobbit. Billa noticed that her bit of dried meat was already gone.

“You need it more,” protested the halfling, eyeing the hardtack hungrily. Back at home in the Shire, she never would have dreamed (nightmared?) of eating such a thing.

“Nonsense. Just take it.”

“Hey.” That voice was masculine. “Both of you need to eat. You can’t go giving away your ration willy-nilly.” Fili was frowning at them, holding one of their two remaining water casks. Thank goodness Balin and Nori had the sense to hold on to theirs. Again. Without asking permission, he pushed his portion into Billa’s hands and gave Ori a stern look. It was unusual, Billa thought, to see him looking so serious. “Eat up, both of you.”

Nori had a particularly dangerous gleam in his eye as he took his water back from the blond, indulging in a brief drink before offering it to his sister. The females exchanged a glance. Neither of them were sure what to make of this new protective streak in the males of the Company, but they silently agreed that they were all ridiculous. It was only then, when things seemed to be settling down, that Kili sprang out of the bushes with a large toad in his hands.
``Here comes GANDALF!'' The young dwarf brandished the toad energetically. ``Give Gandalf a kiss!''

Billa squeaked. Ori hid her eyes. Thorin glowered at his nephew. Kili grinned cheekily, pushing the poor animal into their burglar’s face.

``Wartier than I remember,'' Billa muttered, shoving the toad away. ``Don’t think his namesake would approve.''

``That’s enough,'' Thorin growled. ``Everyone on your feet. It’s time to go.'' He was all but certain they were back on track now, elven road be damned.

He was wrong. Dead wrong. One hour more, then two, and the already dim forest around them had darkened into twilight. A few minutes after catching the first strains of its sleepy song, they drew up on the banks of a languidly-flowing, broad stream, its water grey and murky, eddying sluggishly around a few moss-covered stones.

"Don't get near it," Thorin warned, his tone faintly alarmed. "There's something wrong. It feels off. May be poisoned or bewitched by some foul craft of the elves."

He turned to his nephews. "You still have that toad you caught earlier?"

Fili looked surprised, but dug a hand into Kili's bag, pulling out the wretched animal. This was much to his brother's consternation, as Kili had grown rather fond of Gandalf the Toad. The creature was still damp and croaked unhappily as it squirmed in his hand.

The blond eyed the stream for a moment, then glanced at his uncle. "Everything in this place feels wrong. How can you tell if this is any more wrong?"

Thorin took the wriggling animal from Fili and stepped a little closer to the water's edge. "We'll send the toad in first, see how it affects him." He set it down near the bank, but rather than escape into the water as quickly as it could, like any ordinary toad would have, it veered aside in what seemed almost fright and began hopping back toward the trees. Gloin caught it, handing it back to Thorin.

"Well, if that's not suspect, call me a goblin," he said, shaking his ginger tresses wonderingly. Thorin leaned a little closer and plopped the heavy toad into the water, recoiling from the splash that followed. The toad's head bobbed up, and it croaked frantically, flailing its webbed legs, before going limp and being carried downstream.

"I think we have our answer," said Thorin gravely. "We have to find some other way to cross." Kili sighed, sorry for poor Gandalf.

Billa was sitting with her back against Bombur's shoulder, watching the stream and chewing her lip. It was quite a wide stream, and in the dim light under the trees, it was hard to see the opposite bank. This wasn't helped by the tendrils of silvery mist rising off the water.

"Kili," she said suddenly, frowning. "Can you see something on the other side? A shape in the water?"

Fili heard the question and squinted at the opposite bank while his brother did the same. There did seem to be something on the other side, but it was too dark to really make out what it was. A predator, maybe? Or a dead body?

Kili leaned forward, straining his eyes. "Looks almost like a... boat. An old boat, low in the water. I wonder-"
Thorin cut him off. "Bofur, do you still have your grappling hooks?"

"Aye, in my pack. I'll get 'em." While the hatted dwarf was thus occupied, Thorin retrieved a length of rope, which he then secured to the ring of the hook and handed to Fili.

"See if you can snare it. Mind your aim. And try not to get too much of the water on yourself."

Fili frowned and took a deep breath, staring at the vague shape. A boat. He'd just have to drop it in. Swinging the hook in a wide circle, he angled his body before releasing. The weighted rope soared through the air in a long arc, then splashed into the stream a good two lengths short of the boat. With a grunt, Fili started to pull the rope back in, determined to try again.

While Fili worked, Thorin spoke in hushed tones to Dwalin and Balin.

"We've strayed from the course," he said, frustrated with himself, and with the accursed forest's closely packed stands that turned them aside again and again and made it almost impossible to judge direction.

"We could parallel the stream," Balin suggested. "Follow it down. We'd get out eventually."

Dwalin shook his head. "We need to get away from this water; I don't like it one bit, and the sooner it's behind us, the better."

Balin looked at the stream and sighed, shaking his head. "I don't like it either, Brother. But if it can lead us out, it could be more boon than threat."

Kili watched his brother, arms crossed, wondering whether the stream's broad expanse was even wider than it seemed. "Do you want me to give it a go?"

Fili gave him half a smile. "Let me have one more shot, then you can try." He didn't want to point out that Kili still had nasty scratches all over the backs of his arms, scabbed over and healing. Knowing his little brother, he'd just get upset and stubborn about it. Unfortunately, his second try was no more successful than the first, and splashed noisily into the water to the left of his target.

Kili accepted the rope and its hefty metal weight from his brother, then stepped a bit closer to the water's edge than Fili had dared. He swung the hook around several times to gain momentum, then, employing all his strength, hurled it up and over the dark watery expanse. There was a decisive thunk and the line didn't slacken or come loose when Kili pulled on it. He drew the rope semi-taut, grinning, terribly pleased with himself. In a moment, the dark shape of the boat began to grow larger, and the lazy current didn't impede its progress toward their side of the stream at all. The others had gathered around now and were watching, their eyes glinting faintly in the dim light. At last, the boat's features came into view. It was little more than a small row boat, and looked as though it wouldn't seat more than two or three at a time. While it was clearly old and rickety, it seemed seaworthy enough.

"Now try to catch the line into some of the branches on the opposite side," Thorin ordered. "There's no paddle, so that's how we'll have to maneuver."

When the grappling hook had been successfully caught in the tangles of branches on the far bank - a feat that took about three tries from Fili and four from Kili- Thorin turned to the others. "I'll go first. It may be some kind of trick meant to ensnare those attempting to cross. I won't risk anyone but myself until I'm certain it's safe."

Dwalin started to protest, but faltered when Thorin shot him a look he knew well. No arguments would be accepted.
The Company watched rather nervously as Thorin climbed into the rickety craft. The dwarf pulled himself along the rope, the boat making gentle waves on the slow-moving, dark water. When he disembarked on the other side, he called to Fili and Kili to pull the boat back to their side. The brothers hauled the vessel swiftly back, and Thorin gave his instructions, voice carrying across the smooth water with ease.

"The boat's big enough for two- organize yourselves into pairs so that the injured ones have an able-bodied partner."

The journey over the water was tedious, but not frightening, at least. Billa, crossing with Bombur, eyed the water anxiously and held on to the mossy sides of the boat rather tightly. When they reached the other side, she scrambled up off the bank onto the dried earth above the stream.

Fili and Kili were the last to cross at their own insistence. Fili pulled them across, but looked as though his side was bothering him when they reached the far bank. Thorin was waiting for them. With a strong, steady hand, he helped Fili out first, making sure his nephew was safely out of danger before turning to Kili.

As he grasped Kili's forearm and braced him for the jump to shore, the fleet rhythm of hooves emerged from the trees. A magnificent stag with fine, branching antlers came charging out of the gloom, knocking several of the dwarves off their feet as he dashed straight through the group. Thorin released his nephew as the hart bore down on them, getting out of the way before he could be trampled. The animal ran right up to the water, gathered itself, and made a fantastic leap, clear across the stream.

Thorin cursed his luck. He might have killed the beast and fed his Company comfortably for a few days. This moment of distraction was enough. Kili had been braced against the edge of the boat, and when Thorin let go of him, he teetered dangerously. The deer's extraordinary jump had carried it right over the dwarf's head, and Kili ducked instinctively as the stag flew over him, but his sudden motion rocked the boat precariously sideways, sending the young dwarf flailing toward the water. Thorin lurched forward, gripping his nephew's arm in a last ditch attempt to steady him. Kili was able to right himself in time, but Thorin lost his footing in the thick mud on the bank and plunged headlong into the stream.

The water wasn't deep this close to the bank, but the damage had been done. Several cries of alarm met Thorin's ears when he surfaced again, and, panicking, he fought his way out of the heavy water and threw himself back up on shore. Too late. His senses were turning fuzzy, fading into oblivion. So this was it, then? He'd die in this accursed wood, long before he'd had the chance to test himself against dragon-fire. Of all the ridiculous ways to go.

"Dwalin... go on. Keep on," he murmured, his thoughts jumbling. His eyes closed, and he frowned a little. "Fili, don't- don't let her..." He trailed off, and did not speak again.

Chapter End Notes

Also- please forgive me for completely forgetting to update. Wow. I'm terrible about this. I suppose being a full-time, live-in caregiver would do that... still, it's hardly an excuse, is it?
"Thorin!" A chorus of worried voices broke the silence, not the least of which were Fili and Kili. Both young dwarves had guilt and fear stamped across their faces. Oin pushed them aside and knelt beside his king, brow furrowed with concern.

Billa was seated on the hillock above them and saw the whole confusing jumble play out by the water. Her heart was in her mouth as she stood, as though in a dream. It tasted like raw fish, her heart, and it was trying to block her throat. Oin's voice reached her as she started to move down the hill, struggling to process that Thorin wasn't moving.

"He's asleep!" The Healer's words was full of incredulous relief. "He's not dead. Just asleep."

The Company started breathing again as Billa reached them. Asleep. Not dead. A ball of tension loosened in her chest and she sighed. Fili was beside her when she stopped. Kili on her other side.

"Bifur, Bofur, make a stretcher." Dwalin was growling out instructions. "We'll find a good place to camp and wait for him to wake up." With remarkable efficiency, the dwarves fashioned a sturdy travois and carefully hefted the sleeping dwarf's limp, muscular form onto it.

"Drape a blanket over him," Oin said, soberly. "Keep him warm." Kili unrolled his own and did as instructed, tucking the corners beneath Thorin's body. He studied his uncle's face. The expression was flat, but seemed peaceful enough. He didn't seem to be in pain, which was somewhat reassuring. The Company moved out swiftly, deathly silent, feeling strangely lost and tense without the strength and presence of Thorin.

Dwalin insisted upon drawing the travois himself, and when at last they'd reached a small clearing, they halted and Gloin built a fire. They arranged the sleeping dwarf on a bed of blankets beside it so he'd be able to dry, and then settled in to wait.

Billa sat quietly beside Thorin, looking down into a face she hardly recognized. Without the harsh lines of anxiety and grim determination, he looked practically handsome. Movement to her left heralded Fili's arrival, and the halfling turned to look at him as he sat down.

"We shoulda been there to stop it," he murmured, shaking his head.

"He'll wake up soon enough," Billa said confidently, smiling at the blond dwarf. As Kili sat down, Billa turned a kind smile on him as well. "Everything will be fine. On the bright side, this is probably the best sleep he's gotten in weeks."

"How do you know he'll wake?" Kili voiced the question that was on many in the Company's minds.
The young dwarf felt tremendously guilty. This was entirely his fault, and there was no getting around that fact. "What if it's some kind of eternal enchanted sleep?"

Dwalin had an answer ready. "Then we go on. Those were his own orders, lad, and whether he wakes or not, we'll follow them."

Billa glanced at Dwalin, then at Kili. Her expression firmed into one of confident belief. "He's Thorin. You really think he'd just sleep for the rest of his life?" The halfling chuckled, all confidence and warmth. "He'll probably be up and yelling at us by morning." For now, at least, it was easy to ignore her own fears.

Fili looked comforted, but not entirely convinced as he glanced at his brother. "I guess so."

Kili was less convinced. For all the confidence in Billa's words, there was the distinct cast of doubt in her face. The disturbing fact that hung over all while they sat about whispering, exchanging uncertain glances, was that if Thorin were no longer able to lead them, Fili would inherit his duties. Even though Dwalin was currently assuming them.

One other thing gnawed at Kili's mind. The last thing Uncle had said. To Fili. Something about her. "Don't let her..." or words to that effect. What could he have possibly meant? Which "her" did he mean? Ori or Billa? Perhaps he was delirious. He patted Thorin's head, sighing sadly. "Come on, Uncle. We can't go on without you."

The sun rose over the forest, blazing bright and hot in a cloudless sky. Beneath the canopy, however, there was almost nothing to show for it, though it seemed unseasonably warm, even in the eternal twilight of Mirkwood. Thorin still wasn't awake, and no amount of shaking or slapping could fix that. Fili had a mournful, determined look about him as he stood up, his eyes on his uncle.

"We'll bring him with us," he decided, nodding slightly. "Take turns. Dwalin, you can take the first hour. The rest of you," he turned and found them looking at him expectantly, "pack up. We're moving out. Bofur, can you climb up and check our heading?"

Bofur looked rather dubiously up at the surrounding trees. Climbing wasn't one of his strong points, but he wasn't about to argue. With some travail, he managed to scale a sturdy ash, where, after recovering from being temporarily blinded by the sun's light, he determined its location. When he climbed down and reported his findings, it was rapidly determined they'd been going due north rather than northeast. They'd gone deeper into the forest rather than toward its edge. Kili looked uncharacteristically grave. This was most disheartening news. He turned to Fili, speaking in an undertone.

"So... we alter course? How long do you think it'll take us to get through? We'll," he lowered his voice to a whisper, suddenly aware of his obligation not to further damage the Company's already flagging morale, "starve if we don't get out of here soon."

Fili made a face, clearly uncomfortable with this idea. His brother was right, of course, and he remembered the Wizard's warning- 'don't eat anything you find inside the forest.' But if it was that or die, he would go against Gandalf's advice.

"I know, Kee, I know. If Uncle's guess was right- and I'm inclined to believe him," the blond glanced at their unconscious leader and shook his head slightly, "then we have another forty miles to go before we reach the forest's edge. There are animals in here. We'll have to hunt, and conserve as much water as possible." Fili paused and gave his brother a concerned, measuring look. The weight of leadership was heavy on his shoulders. "How true is your aim, Brother?"
Kili shrugged, frowning a little. “True enough,” he said, then added, sheepishly, “most of the time.” He’d fancied himself a first-rate archer until that run-in with the wargs in the Lone Lands. Apparently target practice didn’t wreak as much havoc on his nerves as actually having a charging beast’s fangs a stone’s throw from the point of his arrow. “What do you have in mind? We haven’t seen more than a squirrel these past few days. They’re quick, and they disappear the instant you spot ‘em. Other than that stag, but there’s been nothing like him since.”

"I could hit a squirrel," said a confident voice at Fili's elbow. The blond jumped, before realizing it was just Ori. The female was holding her slingshot and smiling encouragingly. "Used to do it all the time back at home. Well, they were actually sandrats, not squirrels, but it's the same basic idea, right?" Fili wasn't sure what to think about that. It was one thing to ask his brother to hunt, another entirely to put Ori on the same task. After a moment's tense hesitation, he sighed.

"Alright. You two, keep your eyes open for prey. We need to augment our supplies as much as possible. If you can get ‘em on the move, all the better." Lifting his head and his voice, he turned his attention to the others. "Bofur, you take point. Dwalin, in the middle. Gloin, you've got rear guard. Let's move."

Their boots ate up the distance between them and the forest's edge, if indeed, this forest had an edge. The dwarves paused infrequently, and spoke even less, though they often switched off who was pulling the unconscious Thorin along the nonexistent path. That night was no different than the one before, though Billa was less sure of herself when she assured the others that Thorin would eventually wake. With the morning light came the first of Bombur's attempts to cheer them up. His idea of cheering them, however, came in the form of long lists of foods he'd like to eat, and how they were prepared.

"You have to cook them until you have a nice bed of juices," he explained to no one in particular, smiling dreamily. "Then you can add the potatoes and onions- but you have to move it off to the side so it doesn't cook too fast. Otherwise the meat gets crispy too soon and-"

"Stuff it, Bombur!" Bofur was generally quite amiable with the others, but had few qualms about being direct with his portly cousin when he was getting carried away about food. As he often did. “You can keep your cooking fantasies to yourself, thank-you very much.”

Bombur looked somewhat hurt, but complied. Billa shot Bofur a displeased look.

"He's only trying to help, Bof. Let him be." Turning an encouraging, slightly dreamy smile on Bombur, she waved a hand lightly at him. "Go on, Bombur. You were just getting to the good part." Bombur smiled brightly, but his cousin groaned.

"Please, no more food-talk," he growled. "I'm hungry enough as it is."

Fili pushed between them, scowling. "Enough squabbling. Billa, if you and Bombur want to talk cooking, you two can take rear guard. Bofur, I know it's hard, but at least try to keep your mouth shut. We're all hungry, and not talking about food isn't going to help either way." Tempers were short and hot, but Fili was doing his best. "Next clearing we find, we'll take a break. We could all use a rest."

"And a good meal," muttered Billa, rebelliously.

The night seemed darker than ever. Billa watched the trees around them, wishing she didn't have to sit watch all alone. She remembered the night she and Thorin had sat up together, though it felt like it were months ago, now. The silence had seemed less threatening then, and the soft growlings and
rustlings that broke it had been, somehow, less hungry.

"Maybe it was because I was less hungry," she murmured, glancing down at the unconscious dwarf beside her. Thorin looked the same as he had when he'd first fallen asleep. Well, drier, perhaps. Not that it made much difference. The halfling sighed and peered around at the shadowy, jumbled forms of the Company, sleeping in small piles around them.

"It's hard," she heard herself say, though she hadn't meant to speak aloud, "getting on without you. I mean, Fili's doing a marvelous job of leading us. He learned that from you, no doubt. But really... it's..." Billa cleared her throat, and sighed again. How could she say it? The need to confide in someone was strong- might as well talk to the one that wouldn't suffer because of her own stupid fears.

"It's scary. There's no other word for it, Thorin. It's downright frightening." She paused a moment, listening to the distant croaking of frogs. "We'll survive, I know we will. But... but I wonder if you'll be with us when we see the sunlight on the other side. The idea that we might have to leave you behind- I don't know if I could do that." Something growled, and the bushes rustled. With a grunt, the hobbit pushed herself onto her knees and poked the fire, adding a small piece of wood before settling beside Thorin again. He was a comforting presence, even still and silent. She wondered if he could hear her. A healer had told her once that speaking to those that were lost in their own minds, caught in the hold of fever or trauma, could help them find their way back to the world of the living. She hoped he'd been right.

"Today wasn't so bad, though. Ori got a squirrel, and Kili killed it- and I caught something, too." Her chest swelled with pride, even as her stomach twinged uneasily. "I don't really... I mean, I didn't know I could do that kind of thing, you know? A fluffy little bunny rabbit. It was just sitting there, innocent as can be. And I... well..." Billa trailed off, frowning. "I was just so hungry. All I could think of was rabbit stew, or casserole, or brazed coney... you know. With all the right herbs, and a pinch of salt, some potatoes and carrots and onion. Next thing I knew, it was dead. I broke its neck, I think."

Billa was feeling a bit queasy, so she looked down at Thorin's face to steady herself. He didn't look angry or impressed. Just neutral. And asleep. The halfling reached out and gently brushed her fingers over his brow, down along his cheek and into his short beard. It was longer now than when they'd started their journey. How long ago had that been? Bag End seemed such a long, long way from here.

"I'd like to think you would have been proud, Thorin. I'm learning how to defend myself, and hunt, and all sorts of things. Soon, I'll hardly be a hobbit at all. Imagine what my father would say if he could see me now." She took a deep breath and let it out slowly, her hand still cupped around his cheek. "Don't sleep too long. We need you. At least... I do." After a moment of fighting temptation, she leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. There was no flash of light, or angel's song. He didn't magically wake up. But Billa felt a little better. Perhaps things weren't as dark as they seemed.

Chapter End Notes

BagginShield fluff. You're welcome.
The morning was cold and damp, as had been the morning before, and the morning before that. No one was willing to get up, but Fili roused them anyway, and sent his brother up a tree to check their heading. They found, to their dismay, they'd been traveling away from the edge again, though which direction was a little fuzzy, as none of them seemed to recall which side of the clearing they'd entered from. The previous night's dinner hadn't been enough to fill their bellies twice, so when they set out again, they were just as hungry as they had been the day before.

"No food," muttered Bombur.

"No water," added Gloin.

"And we keep getting lost." Nori grunted as the travois caught on a large root and jolted to a halt. He let out a string of curses that earned him an impressed look from Bofur, and a scowl from Billa. There was the sudden sound of heavy skittering legs through the surrounding bracken, and the dwarves scrambled for their weapons.

"Circle up!" Dwalin bellowed, his dual axes poised. "Keep together, lads!" They were hardly ready at all when spiders burst out of the underbrush. Three of them, with long, hairy legs and fat, black bodies. The dwarves held fast around Thorin and Ori, defending them with blade and body. The spiders clicked and skittered and keened and lunged, snapping with razor-sharp mandibles. One screamed as Fili buried a knife in the midst of its glistening eyes. Bifur let out a grunt of surprise as a spider caught hold of his leg and started to drag him away.

And now more spiders descended from the branches above, clicking and gurgling their delight over fresh prey. Dwalin lodged his axes in the face of the spider dragging Bifur, seizing the dwarf by his belt and hauling him back into the circle. This was slightly before a massive black shape dropped on them, catching Dwalin in the back of the neck with a sharp, glistening stinger. The sturdy dwarf stood a moment, frowning, before his eyes rolled back in his head and he crumpled. With Dwalin incapacitated, the others were hard-pressed to defend themselves against the onslaught that followed, wherein two or three spiders would strategically target a single dwarf, sting him, and then hold off the others whilst one dragged the dwarf away.

After Dwalin, there went Bofur, Oin, and Gloin. Bombur was assailed fiercely, since his plumpness greatly tempted the hungry arachnids, but he managed to fend off each attack. In the end, he, Fili and
Kili stood, surrounded by twenty enormous, scurrying, many-legged shapes. Ori and the sleeping Thorin had been taken, and Billa hadn't been seen since the start of the fight. Many a spider lost life and limb before the three were at last overwhelmed and dragged away.

Too small. Not skilled enough. Not fast enough. Billa stayed silent, hidden, rubbing the ring on her finger and cursing her own cowardice. She had her sword in hand, but what good did it do her if she was too scared to use it? There were just so many of them, and she'd never liked spiders. Was everything in the outside world unnaturally large?

It was painful to watch her friends be taken up into the branches, wrapped up in sticky silk like sick, white fruit. Some of them squirmed and kicked, but after the first sting, none of them really fought anymore. The halfling swallowed tears of frustration as Kili, the last to fall, was stung from behind.

"Fili!" he called weakly, just before being overrun with spiders. Billa's hands balled into fists as she looked away. She couldn't watch Kili being eaten.

Where's that courage now? Where's that Took blood when I need it? I should have helped them.

"This one's plump and juicy," hissed one of the spiders, almost directly over her head. Billa didn't want to hear it, but her legs refused to move.

"Pity about Hessan," hissed a second spider.


"How long must we wait?" asked the second, seeming to have forgotten all about Hessan. "I'm hungry."

"Shevul will not thank us for starting without her. If you don't want to be part of the meal, we wait."

"She better not take too long. I hate dead food."

Billa felt a jolt. They were waiting. The dwarves were still alive.

With careful steps, she moved deeper into the trees, keeping an eye on the white bundles dangling overhead. She found a decent-sized rock, and with a mighty effort that nearly wrenched her shoulder, Billa chucked the stone as far as she possibly could. It hit a tree some yards distant, making a dull thunk that carried easily across the space between them.

"What was that?"

"There's another?!"

The spiders scurried off excitedly, followed closely by their fellows. Taking a deep breath, the halfling sheathed her sword and started to climb, her heart threatening to seize in her chest with every pull that took her farther from the forest floor. The ground was very far away when she finally reached the branch from which hung two of the dwarf-bundles. Sticky white web hung everywhere, and she wondered how in the world she'd missed it before. Clutching the branch tightly as she crawled out along it, determined not to look down, Billa drew her sword and cut down the first of the silky cocoons.

Kili roused at the teeth-jarring impact with the leaf-strewn forest floor. As groggy, sore, and disoriented as he was, smothering inside stifling bands of silk, he had enough wits about him to
struggle against his bonds. They'd been loosened in the fall, and he managed to free his arms and so extricate himself- mostly- from the cocoon. He began hearing other heavy thuds around him, followed by the groans and confused voices of the others as they regained consciousness, and turned to the nearest bundle, ripping at the stretchy strands where the face would be. Bofur. The poor dwarf gasped for breath, squinting as though his vision wouldn't focus. Kili helped him the rest of the way out, and turned to another bundle.

A few of the others had managed to escape and were likewise assisting their fellows, glancing anxiously about all the while for the return of the spiders. They were muddled and clumsy in their efforts to free the others, but panic lent them a certain amount of useful speed. They understood they had no time to waste; wasting time could very well mean their lives.

As Kili tore at the strands about the face of the next bundle, he was momentarily startled to find a pair of very familiar, piercing blue eyes staring back at him.

"Uncle?"

"Yes," came Thorin’s muffled voice. “Now don’t just sit there.”

Kili returned, with a will, to ripping at the stringy spider silk, a smile of tremendous relief spreading across his face. Thorin seemed very much awake... and very much himself. A minute later, he was free. While he was still somewhat shaky and dazed, and looked more than a little disheveled, his hair wild and tangled with leaves and strands of silk, he was strong enough to resume command.

“You’re all unarmed?” he asked, frowning. He had Orcrist firmly in hand, as it had been in its scabbard at his side when he was taken.

"They’re coming back!” Billa’s voice rang out from the branches above them, but the halfling was nowhere to be seen. "Arm yourselves, quickly!”

Fili searched the ground for his swords in a certain amount of panic, and found one of them half-buried in leaves. The others picked up whatever they could find to hand, sticks and rocks, mostly, though a few were fortunate enough to find a weapon they’d dropped earlier nestled amongst the trees or hidden in the bushes and ferns.

The fight was a hard one, as confused and venom-sick as they were, but the flashing brilliance of Orcrist seemed to make a great difference; the spiders didn’t know quite what to make of it, or the fierce-eyed dwarf who wielded it with such unstoppable fury. After Thorin slew their Matron, an old, fat, thick-skinned spider at least twice as big as the others, the spiders retreated, leaving the ground littered with severed limbs and the crumpled, curled-legged bodies of the dead.

"We'll be back," hissed one of the fleeing arachnids, shooting a malevolent, eight-eyed glare at Thorin. "We will have our meal yet.”

Overwhelmed with relief and disorienting exhaustion, several of the dwarves sat down on the hard ground. Of the two water canteens that remained, one was cracked. Many of their number were injured, and they were missing one burglar.

"Where's Billa?” Fili looked about, his heart pounding again. "Has anyone seen her?"

"Up here." Billa's voice sounded weak. When he looked up, the blond dwarf found their burglar clinging to a tree branch, hanging upside-down and looking rather ill, spattered with black spider-gore. Her sword was, he saw, sticking out of a spider that lay on the ground below her.

Thorin looked up at Billa, blinking in surprise. What was she doing up there? His head still hadn't
completely cleared, but he’d been injected with a relatively small amount of venom, which, he supposed, had served to counteract the water’s effects. All in all, he wasn’t nearly as bad off as the others were.

"Can you climb down?" he called. There weren’t many convenient branches leading down from the one to which she clung, and he was prepared to go up after her if necessary. How she’d gotten there in the first place was confounding him.

Billa swallowed hard, eyes still closed. "Maybe. My arms feel like jelly." She tensed all over, and it looked for a moment like she would try to move along the branch, but neither her arms nor her legs moved. Fili moved forward a few unsteady steps and glanced at his uncle.

"Let go, Billa. I’ll catch you."

It took several tries to convince her to just let go, and when at last the hobbit dropped into his arms, it looked like it was mostly because her arms had lost the strength to keep her up any longer. The sound that accompanied her fall was like a breathless scream, and when Fili caught her, it didn’t exactly go down without a hitch. Or maybe it did—since the burglar hit his arms and the dwarf fell, his legs giving out under the additional weight.

Sheathing Orcrist, Thorin quickly helped the two to their feet. The others were busily swiping bits of spider silk from their hair, beards, and clothing, looking weary and ragged. They wore edgy, frightened expressions, as though they expected the return of the spiders at any moment... or possibly something worse. In a place like this, there was no way of knowing just what might appear out of the darkness between the trees.

"Are you hurt?" Thorin asked, sweeping his gaze over the halfling briefly before meeting eyes with Fili.

Fili shook his head slightly, seeming more unsettled than hurt. He was just as disoriented as the others, and as he managed to regain some form of physical stability, he quickly checked over his shoulder to see if the spiders were coming back.

"Other than a bad headache and being more tired than I’ve a right to be, I’m fine. What about you, Billa?" Fili glanced at the halfling, who met his gaze shakily. She was unsteady on her feet, but offered him a fleeting smile.

"I’m alright, I think. I didn’t get bitten, unlike the rest of you."

The blond touched the back of neck and shuddered when his hand encountered a nasty, swollen spiderbite the size of one of his knuckles, and weeping some sort of sticky liquid.

"We got off track... heading more north than northeast..." Fili glanced around for Bofur, wondering if the gregarious miner had managed to keep tabs on his sense of direction in all the chaos. He doubted it, but it was worth asking.

As expected, Bofur hadn’t the faintest idea which way they’d come, or which way they needed to be going. It seemed they’d have to send someone else climbing to find the sun before proceeding too much further.

While a very feeble-looking Oin tended the bites on the dwarves best he could, Fili and Dwalin filled Thorin in on what had transpired during the time he’d missed in his enchanted sleep.

"And what happened after that? Who... set us loose?" If Thorin hadn’t known better, he might’ve thought it another of Gandalf's surprising, last minute interventions.
Fili hesitated, confused. "You mean it wasn't you?" He glanced at Dwalin, who shrugged. After a long moment of thought, Fili tilted his head to look up at the branches above them, then around at the halfling, who was just then stumbling back into the clearing. She was wiping her mouth with a shaky hand, and had obviously just emptied her stomach into the bushes. He felt a twinge of guilt.

"Billa? Who cut us down?"

She frowned at him, and for a moment, he thought she might not know either.

"I did. What did you think I was doing up there?"

Thorin shook his head in wonder. "You never cease to amaze, Miss Baggins. 'Fierce as a dragon in a pinch,' the Wizard said, and I didn't believe him.” He smiled faintly. “Perhaps Balin will eat his words now about your 'letter opener' of a sword."

Chapter End Notes

And another chapter. Because I felt like it. How's that for an update reason, eh? :D
"Oin?" Thorin caught the healer's eye and nodding tellingly at the poor halfling.

Oin was too relieved at seeing Thorin awake to be put out much by the fact that his services seemed to be required by everyone present- all at once. He quickly finished cleaning the bite on Ori, who was trembling and pale, but seemed to be holding up alright, and then moved over to Billa. Noting vomit stains on her knees, he nodded to himself and dug in his battered kit a moment.

"Mint," he said, and handed her a brittle, dried sprig. "Chew it quietly and think happy thoughts."

Billa took the mint and did as instructed, thinking to herself that "happy thoughts" were a rare breed in this lifeless place. Shooting a glance at Thorin, she managed a smile.

"It needs a name. Proper swords have names."

Thorin nodded, wiping Orcrist clean on a nearby fern. "Perhaps a name will come to you. For now, we need to move." He frowned a little, glancing upward. "As soon as we have a heading. Dwalin! Send someone up. Whoever's fit."

Dwalin grunted assent, then realized, to his annoyance, that he was currently the only one fit. Besides Thorin, that is, but he wasn't about to let his leader risk himself again. Muttering under his breath, he found a suitable tree and worked his way up its sturdy, but sparsely branched trunk. Some fifteen minutes later, the bedraggled Company was on its way again, more slowly and less surely, but back on course... for the moment, at least.

The heavy air grew even heavier the further they ventured, such that it almost choked their lungs, made them dizzy. As they reeled along, it became apparent no matter how well they navigated, their chances of finding their way out were slim to none. They were going in circles, hungry and exhausted and on the verge of collapse. Fili could have sworn that he heard flute-song somewhere far, far away. He wanted to stop and listen, but Dwalin, who was behind him, got grumpy whenever he did.

"Keep movin', laddie," growled the hulking dwarf, giving him a shove.

Bofur was gabbling about tobacco pouches, Billa was snapping at him- something about circles. Gloin kept twitching and swinging his ax around.

Fili frowned at the warrior. "What's the matter with you?" Anything to get his mind off of that music. It was driving him mad. That and the ache of hunger in his belly.
"The trees! They're passin' wind!" The ginger dwarf swung around, bristling angrily as he stared at the plants around them. "They offer us insult!"

Dwalin thumped Gloin over the head. "Shut up," he said, and turned back to scanning the twining branches of the canopy above. He'd seen movement in his peripheral vision earlier, and it was unnerving him. Something dark, quick, elusive, shifty. Like a shadow. He'd have to keep a sharp eye out; giant spiders weren't the only things to worry about in here, he warranted.

Bombur was gushing about food. Some feast in his waking fancies, perhaps, where he had all the delicacies in the world at his fingertips and had only to snap up what he wished. Bifur and Bofur, who were closest to him, tried to ignore him. They were famished enough without listening to his talk of all the food they didn't have. At any rate, they didn't have to ignore him long. Soon, they were consumed in their own reveries, walking along dazedly, eyes glazed.

The others' voices faded behind Thorin, and he turned. His heart nearly strangled within him. He was alone. They were gone. All of them. He'd just heard them, hadn't he? Not a moment before. They'd been snatched away somehow, all in an instant. Fili. Kili. Billa. He frowned. Was that the order of things, then? He'd mourn the loss of a halfling before Balin? Before Dwalin? He turned about, searching the shadows for any signs of his fellows. It was cursedly dark here now, dark enough that he couldn’t see but a few feet in front of him, as if dusk had descended all in a moment and he somehow hadn’t noticed until now. This puzzled him to no end.

Just then, carrying eerily through the trees, he caught... voices. They were calling for him. Perhaps he'd been wrong. Maybe he'd been the one snatched away from the others.

"Over here!"

Female voice. Billa?

"Thorin! Where are you?"

A voice that evoked the thought of a kiss. A kiss? Thorin felt his heart beat faster. Ridiculous. Of course not. And besides- it was unimportant. The main thing was to find them again.

As Thorin dashed recklessly through the forest, trying to find his missing Company, the others were beginning to notice his absence. At least, Kili was. His fussing brought the fact that their leader was gone to Fili's attention, who tried to tell the others- but no one seemed capable of listening, even if they'd wanted to (which, apparently, they didn't). Even Balin seemed lost to the depths of his own mind.

"You were so... so perfect, Kisha. Why did you have to go?"

Fili tried to rouse the old one, shaking him. Kili tugged on Balin's elbow, his voice escalating from nervousness to mild fear.

"Balin, Thorin's gone missing. Please, you need to help us find him." Kili's pleading tone made no impression on the old one.

"Don't interrupt, there's a good lad," said the white-haired dwarf vaguely, pushing him away. "Can't you see I'm talking to Kisha?"

"We can't give up, Kili." Fili was disheartened, but not quite ready to throw in the towel. Billa! If anyone could be sensible in a situation like this, it would be the halfling.
Fili stepped back, trying to brush unseen, nasty ropes of drool from his shoulders with a shudder. He could have sworn it was falling on him from the branches above (the trees clearly wanted to eat them all, and were softening them up, he just knew it). The Company grumbled as he fought his way back through them, but they didn't stop him.

"Billa! Thorin's missing-"

"Don't trod on the sausages!" Billa gave him a shove, scowling. "I'm trying to enjoy myself here, can't you see that? I've had little enough food without you walking all over Bombur's marvelous feast." Bombur was giving him a nasty look, too, and fluffed a pile of leaves huffily, as though it were a lovely salad of some sort. Both of them had actually come to a stop and were sitting on the forest floor while the others staggered slowly away from them.

"If you're done stompin' on the cakes, would you like to join us, or are you just going to ruin it all for those of us that care to eat?"

Kili became really concerned when Bombur and Billa actually began shoveling handfuls of leaves, pine needles, and dirt into their mouths, chewing contentedly. He exchanged a horrified look with Fili, then turned back to the others.

"Stop it, you two. Would you look at yourselves?"

"Get off the cake!" Billa shouted, jabbing at Kili's knees with a stick she'd found (she may have believed it was a fork or knife). Kili snatched the "fork" away and flicked it off into the bushes. He reached down, gripped the halfling firmly below the shoulders, and shook her. "Snap out of it, Billa! You're eating leaves!"

Billa looked thoroughly affronted. "You're insulting Bombur's cooking now, eh? Wait 'til Gandalf hears about this. He'll turn you both into toads!" She tried to push Kili away, but only partially succeeded before Fili smacked her soundly. The crack of his hand connecting with her cheek resounded through the trees, and the Company actually straggled to a halt, looking about for the source of the noise. Billa, completely dumbfounded, stared at the blond in shock as her cheek took on a painful, rosy color.

"Listen to yourself, Billa. Look at your 'feast,'" he snarled. "You're eating chaff and loam, not cakes and sausages." The halfling looked down at her hands, and all at once, started to spit and cough. There was nasty grit all over her teeth and tongue, and a very unhappy feeling in her stomach as it struggled to digest leaves, twigs and dirt.

Kili offered her a handkerchief, which she gratefully accepted and used to wipe her mouth. The others, though, were only momentarily distracted from their private reveries, and continued chattering on to themselves, or staring dazedly off into the distance. No one was moving now, and Ori and Dori had settled to the ground beneath an aspen and were having some kind of invisible tea party. Kili shook his head, feeling helpless and out of his depth.

"No no no, this cannot be happening. Everyone's gone mad but us!"

"Mad is right," agreed his brother, staring suspiciously upward. "Let's get moving before these things decide they've waited long enough. I'm practically swimming in drool."

Kili's mouth fell open a little. Not you, too!

Billa looked from Fili to Kili and frowned, seeming deeply concerned. Bombur was now complaining loudly about his feast being ruined because they were walking all over it. The hobbit
turned to look at her friend, a thread of panic working its way through her expression.

"This forest is driving us all mad," she murmured, glancing at Kili again. "We need to keep moving. Where's Thorin?"

Kili shook his head helplessly. "Gone. We don't know where he is."

"Gone?" Billa couldn't hide the fear that shot through her like a wild flame. Without Thorin, what were they to do?

"Gone," confirmed Fili, still eyeing the trees distrustfully. "Come on, the three of us together can probably get them all moving again. We might get out of this yet. If the trees don't eat us first."

Far away through the malevolent trees, Thorin had finally come to a gasping halt, clutching at a stitch in his side. No matter how fast he ran, the voices that called to him were always just a little ahead, just out of sight, never close enough.

"Thorin, why did you stop?" A soft, feminine murmur reached his ears.

"Billa?"

"We need you, Thorin. I need you. Don't give up."

"Billa!" A fresh wave of strength surged through him, and the dark-haired dwarf leapt forward. He could see her- just through the trees up ahead. His burglar was beckoning to him, looking relieved, happy to see him.

But the form that solidified in the misty half-light of the forest wasn't a hobbit. A narrow, sharp-featured face with large, almond-shaped eyes frowned at him, and the sharp point of an elven arrow pricked his shoulder.

"Don't move, Dwarf."

Chapter End Notes

The cliffhangers. They just... they ride the plot bunnies into my brain and sit there looking all smug. How could I not use them?!
Halls of the Elvenking
Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the ladies Loki and Juno.

Thorin froze, feeling somewhat... betrayed. It didn't make any sense. What kind of sorcery was this? They'd read his mind, perhaps, lured him in using his friends' voices, faces. Billa. They'd used her likeness against him. And he hated them for it. Hated them more than any words of his could tell. His eyes, though, spoke what his words could not, and the elf glowered down at him, raising the tip of the arrow so it hovered a few inches away from Thorin's forehead.

"Who are you?" The elf's voice was mellifluous, and spoke in faintly accented Westron. "What business does your kind have here in the Woodland Realm, Dwarf?"

Thorin's lip curled with rage, but he resisted the mad impulse to swat the arrow aside and strangle the elf.

"It's no concern of yours who I am, or what I'm about," he snarled. "What right have you to detain me?"

"You're trespassing, Dwarf, in the ancestral lands of the Silvan Elves." The fair-haired elf smirked lightly, nodding toward the trees behind Thorin. Four other elves emerged on silent feet, dark-haired and grim-faced, arrows at the ready. He issued an order in Elvish, and two of them relaxed their bows, stepping forward. The blond turned back to Thorin. "You will be taken before the King for questioning. If you've any sense about you at all, you'll answer him more freely than you have me."

Thorin scowled, but didn't resist as Orcrist was taken, his wrists were bound before him, and he was led away along invisible paths through the darkening trees. He might have drawn the blade when he had the chance, had he the presence of mind, but was forced to admit it wouldn't have done him much good anyway.

It seemed a short walk that took them to a different area altogether. The trees were spaced further apart, and the air was cleaner. There were no spiderwebs here, and the path became more or less visible as they crossed a bridge, which seemed to be made of an enormously thick root. The root was, in turn, connected to a gargantuan tree, the limbs and trunk of which were twined about a curved stone structure of elven make. The gates were open, but guarded by several armed, dark-haired elves. Their eyes gleamed strangely as they watched him pass, their expressions enigmatic at best.

Up stairs and along passageways, all smooth and curved, like the outside of the structure had been, whether wood or stone. The throne room was cavernous, one might say presumptuously so. And there, seated on an elaborate throne, decorated with huge branching antlers and lifelike carved vines, was Thranduil, King of the Woodland Realm. He turned his austere face toward the procession, platinum hair falling over his shoulders in silky waves.

"Thorin Oakenshield," he greeted with only the faintest note of surprise in his voice, rising fluidly
from his throne. "You look terrible. Bring our guest wine and bread." His dark gaze flicked to one of the guards who'd escorted the dwarf inside, and the elf bowed, retreating. The silence lasted a beat or two longer than might have been polite before Thranduil glanced at his son.

"We found him wandering in the forest, my lord," murmured the fair-haired elven prince, bowing slightly. "He was calling for a companion, I think, and carrying this." The elf produced Orcrist and presented it to his father. Thranduil's expression darkened as he took the blade, murmuring something in Elvish. Drawing the sword partly and inspecting the gleaming metal, the elvenking pursed his lips.

"How came you by this, Dwarf? I was unaware that your kind had any respect for blades not of their own making."

Thorin felt dazed. Here, in the elven king's halls, the air was clear, and now the dwarf could see how ridiculous everything that had transpired in the forest in the previous few days had been. They'd behaved a bunch of lunatics, walking in circles, no doubt, and barely aware of their purpose at all. They'd been fools to think they could make it through the Woodland Realm without the Wizard.

"A gift. He said he'd be insulted if I passed up such a blade."

"Indeed!" said Thranduil, flicking his gaze amusedly between the ornately cast hilt and the dwarf. "Do you know aught of this sword, and whose hand may have borne it before yours?"

"An elf of Gondolin. Or so I was informed by the Lord of Rivendell," said Thorin, shaking his head at the elf who was currently offering him food and drink. As famished as he was, he would not accept refreshment until he was sure of the fate the rest of the Company faced. "What have you done with them? My people?"

Thranduil glanced up, his keen blue gaze locking with Thorin's. "Ah, so you did have companions, then. I didn't think you, of all people, would venture here alone. I'd always fancied you a more sensible sort than your grandfather. Poor soul, thinking he could retake Moria on a whim."

Thorin glowered at the elf, bristling at his supercilious tone. "No one could have been prepared for what we faced at the gates of Moria. What choice did we have? You certainly wouldn't have aided us."

"Of course I wouldn't have," Thranduil frowned slightly, returning Orcrist to his son. "You think I'd risk the lives of my kin for Thror's pride? Perhaps I was wrong. Maybe you are as dull as he was."

Thorin stiffened. "You know nothing of my people's suffering, Elf. Did you or did you not promise my grandfather friendship? Why, then, would you deny us in our greatest need? Are you completely without honor?"

Thranduil recoiled slightly, a flicker of unease and shame crossing his face, before he concealed it with the frustration and bitterness that had built over the ages. "Do not speak to me of suffering, Dwarf. You cannot know what I have seen."

He had raised his army. He, Thranduil, Elvenking, had led his kith and kin to the aid of the dwarves. He had headed the army that was to rout the dragon and save Thror from his own madness. He'd had every intention of helping his ally. Even within sight of the great bronzed gates of Erebor, he'd not doubted for a second that the might of the Woodland Realm would prevail.

Then he'd seen what Thorin could not forget. What none of them would forget. Dragonfire. Dale in ruins. Hundreds, thousands, fleeing for their lives. The young prince, begging for aid. Thranduil had
nearly urged his steed forward. A vision made him hesitate, however. He had Seen...

Himself, leading his army behind, rallying the dwarves and their waning courage, storming the front gates. Smaug emerging from the depths of the Mountain, still young and soft, but a grown firedrake nonetheless. Dwarf-blood turning the ground to scarlet mud. His kin, dying where they stood, burned in their own armor. The few warriors of Dale that had survived, rushing to their aid and perishing also. Smaug, scales gleaming like fire in the light of his own inferno, killing and ravaging, hunting down those that fled, then returning to kill those trapped inside the mountain. Not a single survivor. No more Thranduil, Elvenking. No Thorin, son of Thrain. No Thror, King Under the Mountain. And none to mourn them.

Yes. He, Thranduil, had turned his back on them that day, denied them aid when they needed it, and had not given them aid on any day since. Not sanctuary. Not supplies. Though, in his defense, they had not asked for it. A friendship had been lost, but at least they had been alive to hate him for it. Perhaps if he'd known of Thror's intent to march on Moria, things would be different now.

Thranduil came to himself and shook his head, straightening. "No. Do not speak to me of dragonfire. You think you know suffering. You know nothing."

There was a beat of gravid silence, then Thorin shook his head slowly. "We were driven from our ancestral land. Our home, time out of mind. To live in exile is the greatest shame a dwarf can know, Thranduil Oathbreaker. Whatever you may have suffered, it cannot compare. Now let me on my way. As you may have divined, I've set my mind upon Erebor, seeking the vengeance I've been long denied. Live or die, I hope never to cross paths with you and your ilk again."

Thranduil's expression was stony as he looked down at the dwarf prince. "You were caught trespassing and carrying that which you had no right to. Further, you've led more of your kin into my realm and set them loose to cause havoc. By all rights, I should imprison you until you die in your own time." The elf's face took on a haughty cast as he folded his hands elegantly and smiled in a rather condescending manner. "But I am generous. I'll offer you a chance to leave, with your Company and my aid. You imagine yourself on some noble quest- I see a more... prosaic cause. There are items in Thror's hoard that even I covet. Gems that glow with the starlight my kin love so. As one king to another, surely we can reach an understanding of sorts."

Thranduil's mounting condescension had the effect of squelching whatever iota of reasonableness Thorin might have had. "An understanding?" the dwarf scoffed. "Truly? I thought it had been well established you and I would never understand one another." He stepped a little closer, his short stature not in the least diminishing his intimidating presence as he stared darkly up into the elf's face. "What if I did promise the jewels you seek in exchange for my release, and then withheld them once my kingdom was reclaimed, my power restored? King or not, you make a fool's bargain."

Thranduil stiffened, outrage smoldering in his eyes as his lips parted in a barely less than obvious snarl. Was this dwarf so blinded by his own thirst for vengeance, by his anger and grief, that he couldn't recognized an offer of trust when he saw it? Ever were the dwarves of Erebor stiff-necked and proud, but the line of Durin had always taken it as a challenge to be stiffer and prouder than the rest. Thranduil clenched his jaw against the insults that raged inside him.

"Take him to the dungeons," he snapped, then took a breath to calm himself. "Let him cool his heels for as long as necessary. Be it even a hundred years, Thrainson, I can wait. A century is but a blink in the life of an elf." The elvenking glanced sharply at the guards and turned away, letting them drag Thorin off.

"Legolas- take a party and seek his companions. I won't have trespassers in our lands."
The younger elf bowed, murmuring obeisance as he turned to leave.

Thorin was ushered into a small, cramped cell that hadn’t been used in a millennium or so if the squealing of the door hinges was anything to go by. The elven guards slid a metal plate bearing a slice of bread and a wedge of cheese through the convenient slot beneath the door, reached through the bars to set a cup of water beside it, and disappeared.

Thorin didn’t touch what was offered. Neither did he follow his first impulse to hurl it back through the door at the elves as they departed. At a loss for anything better to do, he removed his heavy coat and settled onto a stone bench at the back of the cell to wait.

It was perhaps an hour later that the first of his companions was brought in. Balin, Dwalin, and Bofur, looking dazed and frazzled, and apparently just realizing all the things they’d been fancying beneath the dark, choking shadows of the trees had been lies. Balin was escorted into the cell adjacent Thorin’s, and as soon as the elves moved off again, Thorin made his way back to the door.

“Balin, where are the others? How were you separated?”

Balin groaned as he sat down and reached for the food he’d been given. “Same way you got separated from us--our minds were miles and years away, and our feet were trying to catch up.” The white-haired dwarf shook his head. “Are you hurt, Thorin?”

“Only my pride,” said Thorin, tightening his grip on the bars, “but I suppose that’s a small hurt, and I won’t lament it overmuch if the others are all brought in safely. When did you last see my nephews?”

Balin hesitated. “I... don’t remember. Things are still a tad fuzzy, lad.”

“They stopped to help Bombur- he was havin’ a ‘feast,’ remember?” Bofur’s voice echoed slightly from a cell further down the winding walkway. “I don’t remember seein’ ’em’ after that. Guess we lost ’em in the fire.”


“Aye, what do ye mean, lad?” Balin sounded less alarmed than confused. “There was no fire.”

“What?” Bofur’s frown was clear in his tone. “But... it was everywhere. Dragonfire.”

“There was no fire. You were seein’ things, lad.” Balin sounded vaguely irritated through his mouthful of bread.

Thorin sighed through his nose, much relieved. “Visions. Nothing more.” He hated the way his mind kept returning to the shock and betrayal of his own hallucinations, as if she’d actually been there. As absurd as it seemed, the memory couldn’t help but elicit real anger, and he despised that. She wouldn’t... she’d never... not Billa. Not his burglar.

Another half-hour passed, and then the thudding of weary boot-steps heralded the next installment of dwarven prisoners. Bifur, Bombur, Nori, Ori, and Dori, who had evidently stuck together throughout whatever tricks the forest had played on them. Still no Fili and Kili, though. Or Billa.

Nori was arguing with Dori. “If you didn’t have to be so dim! Taking tea in the woods, clinking invisible cups, of all things.”

“I tell you, we could see them,” Dori insisted. “Couldn’t we, Ori? They were there- all of it was there- a table, a lace tablecloth, a teapot, sugar cubes, everything. Isn’t that right?” He had a wistful
look on his face now, as though he wished he were back at his invisible tea party. Even if it hadn’t been real, it was better than… well, this.

Ori didn’t seem very eager to get involved, and as the dwarves were steered (rather politely) into adjoining cells, she nodded slightly, looking sheepish.

"Is that what you were doin’?" Bofur sounded incredulous. As Ori disappeared into the cell that already held her middle brother, her face was turning vividly red, listening to Bofur dissolving into gales of laughter.

Oin was escorted in next, grumbling loudly about Gloin and underpants. One of the elves steered him into a cell and handed the dwarf a new ear trumpet with a faintly amused smile.

"What are ye sniggering at, ye moon-face leaf-muncher?" The elves didn't seem the least bit bothered. They closed the door behind him and gave him the same ration the others had already received.

"No sign of Fili and Kili?" asked Thorin, but his query was answered a bare instant later when the young dwarves in question appeared, looking shamefaced and tired, but not particularly delirious. They were being escorted by the blond elf who had captured Thorin and an unfamiliar red-haired she-elf in a flowing green tunic and leather bodice. Thorin wished he hadn’t noticed Kili making eyes at her, but it was all too obvious.

The young dwarves were locked into adjoining cells, and the elves walked away, speaking in hushed tones, glancing over their shoulders. When they’d gone, Thorin leaned against his cell door again.

"You're alright?"

"We're fine," Kili answered. "Just a little confused."

"You can say that again," Fili commented under his breath, slanting a peeved look toward his brother's cell.

"Is everyone here, then?" Kili said, by way of changing the subject.

"No," said Balin. "Miss Baggins hasn't turned up. When was the last time you lads saw her?"

Fili, distracted from glaring in the general direction of his brother, pressed his face against the bars, alarm building. "What? You mean she wasn't with you lot? Last I saw her, she was with Bombur."

"Gloin's missin', too," pointed out Oin, in a gloomy sort of tone.

"Maybe they're together." Ori's hopeful suggestion was squashed not twenty minutes later as Gloin was frog-marched down the walkway, yelling curses and insults in which the elves' mothers featured prominently. This time, the elves seemed far less amused, and much less tolerant than they had been with Oin. The red-haired she-elf was with them, issuing quiet orders in Elvish. She paused outside of Thorin's cell and looked in at him. There was a faintly mournful look in her almond eyes as she shook her head slightly and turned away. She passed Kili's cell, glancing at him only briefly and not stopping.

As silence fell, Gloin started to yell again. "Don't ye just stand there, lads! We need to get OUT of this accursed hole!"

"No one escapes the dungeons of the Elvenking without his good will. And seeing as we've all been disarmed, I doubt any attempt would take us farther than our own doors." Balin's tone was filled with
exhaustion, but not defeat. "We'll simply have to wait for our chance. If he offers us a deal, we may yet leave this place on our own feet."

"There will be no deal," said Thorin, firmly. "The ElvenKing's terms are... unacceptable."

There was a collective sigh of disappointment from the other cells. Their leader, it seemed, had met an elf who was his match in stubbornness.

"So who was the last one to see Billa?" Kili asked at length, feeling deeply responsible for her absence. If only he and Fili hadn't run off looking for Thorin. That had been a fruitless endeavor, but at the time, it seemed the only thing to be done.

The others hesitated, no doubt trying to recall which parts of their recent memories were real and which weren't.

"She… fell." Bombar's voice was hesitant and strained as he fought to remember. Kili could imagine the frown of frustration on the fat dwarf's face. "Into a bush, I think. Tripped over something. Then the cakes- er, the elves, I mean. Then the elves came."

There was a brief silence, as though each of the dwarves was processing the implications of that series of events. At length, Balin spoke. "Our burglar has shown great resourcefulness before this." He chuckled faintly, though it sounded slightly forced. "I don't presume to guess what she'll do next."
Tauriel sighed quietly as the dwarves lapsed into silence. She was well out of sight, but her hearing was keen. "They speak of another," she murmured to her fair-haired companion, frustrated. "I'll take a party and search the forest again."

Legolas looked troubled and a touch uncertain. "The spiders are growing bolder, Tauriel. Why not let me go instead?" The blond tried to be delicate; he knew his red-haired captain would never agree to something she saw as a shirking of her duties. "I... worry. You could question the dwarves while I'm gone- casually, of course- and see if they'll reveal anything else about their missing companion."

Tauriel's eyes narrowed slightly. "It is my duty to protect you, my friend," she told him, with the air of one scolding a youngling. "Putting yourself in danger won't help anyone, least of all you."

Legolas opened his mouth to protest, then realized he had no argument. Well, none that he could verbalize, anyway. None that she'd respect.

"Very well," he said, finally. "I'll stay and question the dwarves, then." She turned to leave, and he grabbed her forearm to stop her, catching her eye. "Be careful. You know as well as I do these woods aren't what they used to be."

"I know. That's why I'm going, and you're not." Tauriel smiled faintly, looking determined. When she'd gone, the elf prince sighed and rounded the corner to the main walk of the prison. At the first cell he reached, he halted, glancing sidelong at the dwarf within. A youngster, by the looks of him, with doleful eyes, ruddy hair, and a wispy beard.

"You're a tender thing for a quest like this," the blond commented, stepping a little closer to the door.

Ori looked up at the elf, blinking tiredly as she tried to focus. "I'm near eighty. That's old enough." She glanced at Nori, who'd passed out on the bench. They were all exhausted. Turning her attention back to Legolas, she frowned slightly. "Why the interest? Didn't think you lot would care."

"Just curious," Legolas offered, shrugging. "You're not like most of the dwarves I've seen. Well... neither are they." He nodded toward Fili and Kili's cells. "I suppose I haven't met many young dwarves." He clasped his hands behind him, pausing thoughtfully. "Are your parents on the quest, too, or did they send you off alone?"

Ori's expression was flat as she answered. "My parents are dead." She paused a beat, then jerked her thumb over her shoulder at Nori's sleeping form. "If you're curious, you can ask my brother, though. My other brother's in the cell next to us." She nodded to her left. As though on cue, Dori appeared at his door, frowning, his braids in disarray.

"Is this gentleman bothering you, Ori?"
Gentleman? Legolas nearly chuckled. Strange way to be referred to. He raised his hands dismissively, stepping back a little. "I wasn't bothering him. Just making conversation."

He moved over to Dori's cell. "So how are you finding your lodgings, Dwarf? Better than the forest, I hope." He shook his head slowly. "Fourteen dwarves, wandering the tangled paths of 'Mirkwood,' as outsiders call it now. You were fortunate to make it as far as you did without losing too many of your fellows." Dori would no doubt "correct" him, but it wasn't so much what he said as how he said it that interested the elf.

Dori frowned at him. "Yes, I suppose we were lucky to have gotten through." The tense silence told the grey-haired dwarf that the rest of the Company was listening intently. "But perhaps you don't count the same way we do- there are only thirteen here."

The dwarf seemed a little defensive, but not overwhelmingly so. Legolas feigned a gaffe. "Oh. You're right. My mistake."

He shuffled forward casually, moving along until he'd reached Thorin’s cell. The dwarf was sitting against the stone bench, his head lowered so his dark hair half covered his face. When the elf’s shadow fell over him, his eyes jerked up, glinting pale blue in the dim light. "What do you want, Elf?"

Legolas leaned toward the bars. "From you? Nothing." He lowered his voice to a confidential undertone. "Between you and me, Thorin Oakenshield, I know of your missing dwarf. You’re not all here, are you?"

Thorin leaned forward a little, hands sliding down over his drawn up knees. "Good catch. Now that you mention it, I am missing some people. I think I had at least a dozen more dwarves out there I managed to misplaced along the way. Why don’t you go find them and leave off pestering us?" He wasn’t entirely sure what kind of tactic this was. At any rate, exaggerating, rather than denying a missing member altogether, seemed a more advantageous approach.

Legolas twitched away from the bars, unsettled by the thought of that many dwarves in his father's realm. But no. He shook his fair head. It was a trick, to throw him off. The elf took a deep breath. "The longer you hold your silence, the longer this 'Billa' is out there with the spiders. Either you can tell me what you know, or you can wait for us to bring in his body."

Legolas saw Thorin pale in the shadowed corner of his cell, and felt a twinge of guilt. He looked almost scared. "What of it?" Thorin asked finally, schooling his face back into its ordinary, unaffected scowl. "If we’re missing another dwarf- or a hundred other dwarves- what does my admitting it accomplish? I don’t know where they are any more than you do. Keep looking, if you think it will do any good."

"I had hoped you would care whether or not your companions lived." Straightening, he turned away from Thorin. Perhaps dwarves were all as stubborn and aggressive as his father had told him. The others he passed seemed to be mostly asleep. The young ones near the end were awake, though, and Legolas paused at the door where the dark-haired one was peering out at him. He'd seen this one watching Tauriel, and didn't appreciate it. But personal prejudice had no place here.

"I trust you are comfortable?" he asked politely, his tone only slightly stiff. Kili hid a yawn behind his hand. He was trying to ignore the uncomfortable feeling in the pit of his stomach, no doubt a result of eating too much too quickly after going so long without.
"Not bad, far as prisons go," he answered sleepily. "I'll probably get tired of it after a while, though."
Kili thought a moment, brows knit. "So, why are you so curious about how we're all doing? I don't
think any of us fancy this is some sort of inn. We're not paying customers."

Legolas scoffed. "Yes, I was considering opening a business. I wanted to know if the facilities were
up to snuff." Huffing laughter as he shook his fair head, the elf smiled faintly. "Is it so strange that I
want to ensure our guests are at least moderately comfortable?"

Kili shrugged. "I don't know. Just a bit odd, I guess. Not what I expected. Then again, neither is your
pretty captain." He grinned cheekily.

Legolas' smile vanished, and his stance shifted slightly, defensive tension pervading his lean body.
Kili was treading on dangerous ground. "I would be careful if I were you, Dwarf." The elf kept his
tone polite, but his fingers itched to draw his knives. "Don't speak of her as though she were some
common bar-maid."

"Oh, no, you mistake me," Kili said, his smile fading a little, "she's anything but. She's..." He trailed
off, looking equal parts dreamy and exhausted. "Well, she's something special. Not that she'd
give me the time of day."

Legolas' defensive stance persisted, and it dawned on Kili he might not be the only one with eyes for
the red-haired beauty. He looked down, nervously plucking at a fraying thread in his tunic. He'd let
his amorous leadings get the better of him, and now he was regretting it. The burning intensity of the
silence from the others told him they'd heard everything. When the elf left, he was going to catch it.
Legolas's stride was stiff as he departed. That... dwarf had the nerve to think of his Tauriel, as though
he actually had some shadow of a chance with her? Not that he did. The elf prince took a calming
breath as he descended the stairs. She was not his. She wasn't anyone's. Tauriel was too independent,
too free, to belong to anyone.

Fili let the silence sit for a minute, making sure the elf actually had time to be really gone. "Kee...
He wasn't terribly happy about any of this, but honestly, he was more confused than angry. "What
was that about?"

Kili's mind raced to concoct a believable explanation. "Just trying to... get a rise out of him. He's
smitten with her--obviously. I figured he'd leave us alone if... if I embarrassed him. Got him to admit
his weakness." He smirked. "Poor sap. Feeling probably isn't mutual. A beauty like her deserves,
well... a prince!"

"A prince? Like you, you mean?" Fili's tone darkened slightly. He hadn't bought a word of his
brother's story. Pressing his face against the bars of his cell door, he wished he could see Kili.

Kili sighed, settling against the wall nearest his brother. "No... not like me. I'm no prince. I'm... a
disgrace."

Thorin spoiled the young dwarf’s brief pity party. “What’s in your head, Kili? Why would you…?”

“I’m sorry, Uncle!” Kili blurted, feeling tremendously guilty. “I... I was just trying to change the
subject. He meant to trip me up, make me reveal more about... well, you know. I... was just using
his own weakness against him. Was that so wrong?”

Thorin leaned into the corner of the bars nearest Kili’s cell. “You should have held your peace. He’s
clever, that one. Thranduil’s son. The crown prince. As casual as his questioning seemed, there was
a method to it.” The dwarf frowned, resting his forehead against the door. “And another thing: if you
have any ‘feelings’ for this she-elf, end them now. You will not make a mockery of Durin’s line. Not any more than has already been made. Am I understood?"

“Yes, Uncle.” Kili huddled into a mortified ball. The reprimand itself was embarrassing enough; the fact that it was given within hearing of the entire Company… that was worse.

"Don't feel too bad about it,” murmured Fili, so the others wouldn't be able to listen in as easily. "This isn't the stupidest thing you've done. And besides, we caught it early, so it won't be too hard to fix."

It was very late that night when the captain of the guard made her rounds again. Tauriel was less than pleased. She'd failed to turn up even the slightest trace of a fourteenth member of the dwarves' Company. She was suspicious that they had made up this "Billa" character just to send them on a wild goose chase.

Most of the dwarves were quietly asleep in their cells, which was a relief. With quiet steps, she moved along the walkway, checking each of their doors to make sure they were firmly shut and locked. When she paused outside of Kili's cell to test his door, she saw his eyes gleaming out of the darkness, and hesitated, struck with confusion. This was the one that had watched her so eagerly when she captured the two of them- this one and the blond one.

The dark-haired dwarf was keenly aware of the fact that the others might overhear him if he spoke even a word to the she-elf. Fili wasn't a heavy sleeper, even when he was exhausted. Still, the young dwarf felt drawn, as if by some irresistible force, to speak to her. To say something. Anything.

Against his better judgment, he gave into temptation.

"Looking for something, milady?” he asked softly, leaning away from the wall toward the bars of his door. Even in the dim torchlight, she was a vision, her fair face framed by lustrous locks of red hair, her eyes like twin emeralds newly cut and polished. Tauriel glanced down the walkway cautiously. Fraternizing with "the enemy" wasn't exactly how she'd planned to spend her shift, but if she could get information...

"Nothing that exists in this realm,” she answered cryptically, her green eyes returning to Kili's shadowed face. He really wasn't as repulsive as she thought a creature that lived underground ought to be. A bit short, for sure, but not... entirely unelven, which surprised her. Kili shifted, scooting a little closer to the door.

"And in what realm will you find what you're looking for? It's not... in these woods?"

His heart pattered a little more forcefully in his chest, both with the thrill of her presence and the possibility of someone overhearing him.

The she-elf hesitated, looking at him with a distant, measuring expression for a long time, motionless, her pale fingers still curled around the tarnished metal bars. At length and took a step back and tilted her face upward, as though searching for the stars. Of course, this far under ground, it was a fool's errand. With a sigh,Tauriel turned her gaze on Kili again.

"I don't know.” A faint smile crossed her features. "As much as I enjoy any excuse to walk under the trees again, I don't much appreciate being sent after a member of your Company that has apparently evaporated into thin air.” Her keen eyes were on him, watching for the slightest reaction to this bit of news. Kili grinned, though she could see a faint edge of tension in his face.

"Well, it isn't like we didn't try to tell your fawning princeling. Could've saved yourselves some time
and trouble if he'd listened." Tauriel's green eyes narrowed. He'd crossed a line.

With a bow, deeper than one might have expected, she murmured, "if you'll excuse me, my prince," and departed, testing the doors of Fili's and Bofur's cells as she passed. When she'd gone and it was silent again, Kili caught the rustling of movement in the next cell.

"I didn't... I didn't mean to, Fili," he stammered in a half-whisper, leaning against the wall again. "She... it was a mistake. Please don't tell Thorin." The rustle of fabric against stone came to his ears as his brother shifted again.

"You're being stupid about this, Kee." Fili kept his voice very low, hoping not to wake the others. "But this time, at least, you actually got good information." They hadn't found Billa. The blond sighed deeply. He worried about his little brother and his amazing capacity for not thinking before he acted. He worried about himself, when he failed to think. Durin's Heir... he felt the weight of it more than he used to. It scared him. "Try to keep your mouth shut next time, Brother. You didn't give anything away this time, but 'a pretty face bewitches the mind,' and all that."

Thorin woke at pre-dawn. All but two of the lamps lighting the dim chamber had been snuffed, and the cell was very dark. He'd been dreaming. About Billa. Was this the first time? He couldn't decide. It seemed so familiar. She'd been telling him she missed him, asking him to "come back."

She looked worried. More worried than I'd seen her before.

"Come back, Thorin." Was she crying? I couldn't tell.

"But I'm not the one missing." Confused, that's what I was. She was the one that hadn't turned up yet. The elves hadn't found her. But... that was a good thing, wasn't it? It was like she could hear my thoughts. She smiled.

"Don't worry about me, Thorin. Fierce as a dragon, remember? Besides, I killed a rabbit all by myself. I'll be alright."

"A rabbit?" I shook my head in wonder. She looked so proud of herself. "You've killed giant spiders, Billa. A rabbit's nothing compared to that." I paused, realizing with an uncomfortable jolt that it was highly improper for me to be calling her by her given name. "Uh- Miss Baggins, I mean."

Her smile grew wider. I'd seen that smile before. She was trying not to laugh. "It's alright. I don't mind. Really. You're always so stiff and formal; you really should lighten up." Had she always had dimples? She was reaching for my hand. "I like it when you smile." Her little fingers slid over my palm to my wrist, pulled me closer to her. Before I had even the faintest idea what she was up to, she'd kissed me. Pulled me down and kissed me. I couldn't believe it, but it felt so... real.

He found himself clinging to the strange dream. As if it were more than that. As if it were comprised of memories, and not just a few snippets of conversations and his own private fancies. The kiss... it made his chest tighten, thinking of it.

Billa, wherever you are. Please come back to me.
A day passed without any sign of Billa. Then two. The dwarves grew more and more worried, though they worked hard not to let their captors see. Anxiety filled their waking hours, and more than one dwarf told his neighbor or cellmate of his worries in hushed tones. Billa was their chance to escape. If she was trapped, or injured... or worse....

It was very early in the morning of the third day of Thorin's imprisonment that a faint tapping sound echoed through his cell.

"Thorin?" a hoarse whisper came from the apparently empty walkway beyond his door. Thorin had been dozing fitfully against the stone bench of his cell, and as the familiar voice roused him, he thought for a moment he might have dreamed it. Then it came again, and he was at his door in a heartbeat.

"Billa?" he whispered, pressing against the bars to search his limited line of sight. There was no one there. Was he imagining things in here now?

"Oh, thank goodness." It was Billa's voice alright, though hoarse and unhealthy-sounding. "You won't be able to see me just now. I wanted to let you know that I'm here. Sorry it took me so long to get in. Those elves are a nightmare to get past without one of 'em hearin' me." Her words were becoming a little slurred. She was exhausted and very, very hungry.

Thorin reached through the bars, his heart thudding heavily. He still couldn't quite believe she was here. Was this real? How could she have made it past the Elves unnoticed?

"Billa, are you alright?" He didn't bother correcting himself this time. "Are you hurt?" A small, clammy hand slipped between his outstretched fingers. An invisible hand that gave his thumb a shaky squeeze.

"No more hurt than anyone else, I think," she whispered. "I need to find food before I do something stupid. I'll be back." With that promise and another squeeze of his thumb, the hand slipped away, and nearly silent footsteps retreated down the walkway, uneven with Billa's tell-tale limp.
Thorin was left to ponder just what sort of sorcery the dauntless halfling had at her command. She'd been invisible. How? It was impossible. Wasn't it? Balin appeared at his cell door a moment later, rubbing his eyes sleepily.

"What was that? Were you talking to someone just now?"

Thorin hesitated. Oh, yes, Balin. *I was just talking to an invisible halfling.* Could he have been imagining her? Ordinarily, he would have trusted his own senses. After what had happened in the forest a few days previous, though, he wasn't so sure.

"I... may have been," he said, cautiously. "But I don't know." He shook his head, frustrated and relieved and confused. He didn't know how to feel. "I never would've believed her capable of... vanishing like that. But it would explain some things."

Balin frowned, struggling to filter the implications of Thorin's words through a muddled, sleepy mind. "You mean... Billa?" The white-haired dwarf shook his head, trying to clear it. "You think she was here?" He wasn't sure Thorin was making any sense, but he trusted his king above a great many other things. The walkway was deserted, and as far as he could tell, there weren't any elves lurking on the steps below their cells, either. "What's going on, lad?"

Thorin knew he sounded like an idiot, but was too overwhelmed to care. "Billa. She was here. Her voice..." He trailed off. "She sounded... she didn't sound like herself at all. Said she was going to get food. But... she wasn't there. She was invisible. And yet, I felt... she touched me." Thorin sank to the floor. It was taking him some time to process this. Mostly, he feared he was going raving mad. "Is it possible, Balin? Could it have been her?"

Balin hesitated. Was the madness hereditary, then? "Is it possible? Well... I suppose so. But it's not very likely." The old dwarf paused uncertainly, wishing there were a more delicate way to put this and hoping the others were still asleep. The chances that they weren't listening were very low. "Are you... alright, Thorin?"

Thorin took a deep breath, wincing into his fist. "I don't know, Balin. I honestly don't know." He'd never felt so uncertain in his life. He'd begged Billa to return, and she had. Or had he dreamed it up like the last time he'd seen her? Wishful thinking. He didn't know what to believe anymore. One thing was certain: he had to get free of this place. Not knowing what was real and what wasn't was not doing his pragmatic mind any favors.

"Balin, am I being a fool for holding firm? Should I... seek a deal?" His voice was low enough that he hoped the others wouldn't hear. They needed leadership from him, decisiveness. Not self-doubt.

Balin didn't answer immediately. As was his wont, he considered the options before them very carefully before speaking in slow, measured tones. He wanted to steady Thorin, to bring him back to himself.

"If it were my choice to make," he said softly, "I would think on it another day or so before taking action. This may be a dream that will pass away in morning light, or it could be real. Either way, time will tell." He nodded slightly, though he knew Thorin couldn't see him. "If Billa was here, she will come back. I've no doubts about that."

Kili tapped lightly on the wall separating him from Fili. "Did you hear that?" he whispered, his tone surprisingly somber. "Is Uncle...?" He couldn't speak aloud the words he'd intended to. Calling into question the sanity of the Company's leader, their bastion of strength—the one Kili admired most in the world—was no easy matter. But as it stood, what else could they all make of it?
Fili wasn't sure he was willing to answer out loud, but at a lack of any away to gesticulate to his brother, he did. "Yeah. I heard." The blond was deeply concerned. The halfling's absence had been hard on all of them, especially Thorin. Maybe it was time to simply admit the possibility that she wasn't coming back. Time to be honest with themselves.

"It was probably just a dream," he assured Kili, determined not to believe, or even think that Thorin was possibly... unstable.

Bofur, on Fili's other side, was a little less optimistic. "Well, that's that, isn't it? At least we had a good run, eh, lads?"

Thorin caught Bofur's words and snapped toward the wall. "I'll not allow that kind of talk," he growled. "This venture goes on, whether I'm to lead it or not. Since it seems you've all caught the pith of my conversation just now, I'll say this. What I saw may or may not have been real. In this place, I cannot know anything for certain. The Elvenking commands great sorcery, and could doubtless make any of us see what he wishes. If Miss Baggins has not returned, I'm inclined to believe that is all this is. But... if this is madness..." He swallowed, recalling all too vividly his own father's madness, the raving and belligerence that ended in his disappearance. "If my senses can no longer be trusted, there is no point in my continuing to lead. That task will go to Dwalin, Balin and... Fili." The implications of this hung in the air a moment, and Thorin could only imagine the bewildered look on his nephew's face (and quite possibly most of the others').

Fili couldn't believe his ears. Horror and gratitude warred within him. When he spoke, it was with the strong tone his mother had taught him to use when he was trying to convince others that his words were true. "It won't be necessary, Uncle. I believe you."

"Then yer both mad!" snapped Bofur. "I'm not gonna follow-"

"Bofur!" Bombur's pained outcry silenced his brother quite effectively.

The day was quiet and sullen after that. Balin continued to speak to Thorin in hushed tones, though his king's responses were sparse at best. Each dwarf was occupied contemplating the changes that might take place in their Company, should Thorin have really gone mad. Most hoped he hadn't.

"Balin." Dwalin's rumbling growl interrupted his white-haired brother. "We need to make a plan."

Balin glanced at his door doubtfully. The elves would be listening. It was hardly past noontime- or he thought so. His internal clock wasn't as accurate as it had been. "Yes, Brother?"

"The burglar's a lost cause. We need to start planning an escape without her." The implications were clear and devastating. They couldn't count on Billa. They couldn't count on Thorin. It's up to us.

"Speak more softly, Brother," Balin urged, leaning against the wall nearest Thorin. "These Elves could hear a whisper in the wind a mile distant."

Thorin was sitting, his back to the cold stone bench again, head lowered to his drawn-up knees. He caught much of the conversation that ensued between the two dwarves beside him, or at least, Balin's side of it. The thought that Dwalin doubted him, that Dwalin had given up on him, was unbearable. He wanted to be angry--his heart was awash with the tight burning of rage--but he didn't know where to direct it except back at himself. After all, he was the one who'd compromised the venture. He was the one going mad, mad with his longing to see Billa again. His desire for her to be safe. His need for her to be beside him. Such misguided passion could wreak havoc on even the firmest of wills, the most focused of minds. Why? That was the question he returned to again and again. Why had he allowed her to gain such a hold over him?
Kili stared mournfully at the floor. He felt as though the ground beneath his feet had crumbled and he was plummeting into some dark abyss. If he'd taken anything or anyone for unshakably strong, for certain, for an anchor in the dark, stormy seas of the wide world, it was Thorin. His uncle was the closest thing he and Fili had had to a father since their own had fallen in the Battle of Azanulbizar, long, long ago. Gone mad? If Uncle's gone mad, then we're all doomed.

The darkness seemed to deepen as night set on, even in the dungeons of the Woodland Realm. The elves walked their rounds less often, and after the evening meal was delivered, there were sometimes hours between the patrols. It was into this gloomy silence that the whisper came again.

"Thorin!" The tapping of an invisible fingernail against the bars of his door. "Thorin, are you awake?"

Thorin wasn't asleep. Hadn't been able to do more than lapse into a feverish stupor where the same furious thoughts and emotions ran in a continuous loop around his brain. In all truth, he'd become something of a wreck, his nerves on edge, his heart a heavy iron weight in his chest. When he heard the tapping, the voice, he sighed into his hands, scoffing at himself. There he was, going off again. Mad as a loon. After the soft tapping came once more, he sat up a little.

"Thorin?" It was her voice. She sounded more herself now, less exhausted and threadbare. He wanted it to be her, more than anything. He'd never known until she was gone from his side just how much he missed her, needed her beside him. Needed to know she was safe, protected. A fine job he'd done of that.

At last, resigned to confirm what he'd so vehemently been denying, he pushed himself wearily to his feet and stepped to the door. As expected, there was no one there. The light was dim, but it was nonetheless very plain she wasn't there. The walkway on either side, far as he could see, was empty of anything, even the barest hint of a shadow.

"Billa?" he said faintly, feeling rather hollow and numb at the prospect of his own fears being confirmed beyond doubt.

"I'm here." The halfling's tone was relieved, her voice stronger now that she'd rested and eaten. "Sorry I didn't come sooner. This place is crawling with elves. You'd think they lived here or something." There was a smile in her words, despite the hushed whisper she was using.

"Billa?" Balin was at his door now, peering out at the apparently empty walkway. "What-?"

"Not now, Balin," said the invisible hobbit. "I'll explain later. Right now, it's best if I-"

"Baggins?"

"Oh, for goodness' sake!" Billa appeared as suddenly as if she'd just dropped the blanket she'd been hiding under. She was just finishing a gesture, her hands flying violently apart. There was a glint of gold between her fingers as she scowled at them. "Yes, I'm here. I'm alive. Yes, I was invisible. Personally, I think I can hang around a little longer if the elves can't see me, don't you?"

"What's that?" Balin was looking at her hand, a troubled frown on his face.

"It's the ring that makes me invisible." Billa's tone was exasperated now.

"But where-"

"No, Dwalin. I'll explain when you're not in a jail cell, but for now, be quiet."
Thorin looked as though a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Shaking his head in wonder, he reached through the bars, taking the halfling's little hand in his own as if to reassure himself that she was actually there before him. A now-familiar thrill ran through him, replacing much of the anxiety and tension that had coursed through his veins but moments before. She was very real. That didn't mean he wasn't as puzzled as the others as to her mysterious powers of invisibility, but for now, he was too heady with relief to be overly concerned. He felt a resurgence of the faith and trust he'd developed in her, the halfling who had ever been more than met the eye.

"You came back." His tone was hard to read. There was fierce emotion in it, to be sure, and gratitude. Amazement, perhaps. "You came back, Billa."

Billa rolled her eyes, smiling incredulously at him. "Of course I came back, Thorin! What, did you expect me to just lay down and die out there in the forest? Honestly, I can't leave you lot alone for ten minutes without-"

She stopped suddenly, her gaze flitting toward the stairs, ears twitching. She slipped the ring back on, giving Thorin's hand a squeeze before releasing him and pressing herself against the wall. Thorin was close enough—he could hear her slow her breathing, hoping not to be detected.

Less than a minute later, a pair of dark-haired elves came into sight. One of them frowned suspiciously at the dwarves as they passed, but neither seemed interested in asking questions. Their prisoners often talked amongst themselves, after all, and it wasn't unusual for them to stop talking when guards approached.

When the elves had gone, the silence stretched on for a few tense seconds. Kili's sleepy voice was the first to break it.

"What's going on?" He'd been roused by the faint whispering, which had grown rather intense before ceasing altogether, and was now rather confused. He'd thought--of course, he reckoned he might have imagined it--that he'd heard Billa's voice.

"I dunno," answered Fili, unnecessarily. "Think they found something?" He was further from their uncle's cell than his brother, and couldn't hear any of the whispering distinctly enough to identify them.

"Hush," whispered Bombur. "Think it's got something to do with Billa."

"With Billa?" asked Bofur, sitting up.

"Hush."

Billa let out a shaky sigh. "I'd really like this place if I weren't in danger of getting locked up or stepped on." She took a deep breath and giggled nervously, exhaling as slowly as she could manage.

"What about us?" asked Dwalin in a gruff hiss. "Can you get us out?"

"Well, I don't know yet, do I? Only been here a day. But really, what's the matter, Dwalin? Can't just punch the door until it gives in?" The invisible halfling snickered into her hand before shifting to stand in front of Thorin's cell again. She reached through the bars and gripped his arm firmly. "I'll do some poking around, see what I can find. Getting you out of here won't be easy, but I think we can manage. They're pretty convinced you'll never get out of these cells--only two places are actually guarded; here, and the throne room. We'll see what I can dig up, alright?"

Thorin nodded, still processing. He covered her hand with his own. It was very warm. Warm and soft. For an instant, he was mildly ashamed of how cold and calloused his fingers were.
"Be careful, Billa," he whispered earnestly. "Don't take any unnecessary risks if you can help it. If you're thrown in here with us, we'll be no better off than before." He might've said more to her had the others not been listening, but for the moment, he'd said enough. *Mahal guard you, my little burglar. Would that I could.*

Billa's voice held a smile when she answered. "Don't worry, Thorin. You'll see me again soon. Fierce as a dragon in a pinch- remember?" Her hand lingered on his arm for a moment longer, then she withdrew it with what sounded like a reluctant sigh. "I'll be back," she whispered, her footsteps all but silent as she moved away, toward the stairs. There was a minute or two of quiet after she was gone. Somehow, the silence didn't seem as oppressive as it had been.

"Billa's back," murmured Ori, grinning at her brother. Nori shook his head and tousled her hair fondly. Dwalin was silent, and Balin, not wanting to deflate their renewed morale, kept his thoughts to himself.

Billa's ring troubled him, and he didn't quite know what to think of it. Perhaps after the dungeons were behind them, he could speak with Thorin on the subject. Until then, he would set those thoughts aside. No use worrying about what couldn’t be changed.
Risky Business

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Chapter Notes

Okay, I need to throw myself at your feet ad beg forgiveness. It's been six days since my last update, and there is absolutely no excuse. None at all. Please, have mercy on me!

When morning dawned somewhere far, far from the depths of their cells, most of the dwarves were already awake.

There was a certain amount of cheer in their faces and voices now, though Thorin had given explicit instructions that no one was to speak of Billa or what had happened. Still, they were growing too restless now not to speak, so they talked of other things to pass the time. Balin told old stories of his youth in Erebor and the coming of the dragon. Bofur supplied a song or two, and many an amusing yarn he'd picked up during his travels. The younger dwarves discussed their hopes and fears for the days ahead, sharing a few choice memories from the journey thus far. It was difficult, though, to tell them while omitting all reference to a certain halfling. She'd become such an integral part of their group, they couldn't imagine themselves without her.

"So what's your story, Ori?" Kili asked at last, hoping she wouldn't take offense.

Ori laughed, appreciating the rhyme. "Dori n' Nori refused to leave me behind. Said I would light the mountains on fire or something while they weren't looking."

"Have you seen this dwarrow try to cook?" asked Dori in a pained tone. Ori laughingly told him off for insulting her edibles.

"Besides," added Nori, nudging his sister, "I seem to recall you begging to come with us."

"It wasn't begging, exactly," protested Ori, blushing. She didn't want the others to think she was entirely helpless.

"Well, you certainly hid your... femaleness very well," Bofur said, grinning. "But now that we all know, it's rather amazing, really, how we were fooled as long as we were. If you don't mind me sayin', you're a right pretty lass."

The was a sputtering sound from the direction of her cell, and Nori burst out laughing. "I think she fancies you, Bof. She's just turned about five shades of red."

"I do not!" Ori said, a little too loudly.
Bofur chuckled. "Aye, well, can the lass be blamed? Mother always said I was the handsome one."

Bifur muttered something in Khuzdul, and Bombur shrugged.

"Handsome or no, I've a pretty wife back home I love more'n any food you could tempt me with." The fat dwarf sounded enormously proud and pleased with himself.

"Aye," Bofur said again, nodding seriously. "Can see that. How many dwarrows ya have now, Brother? Was it nine or ten? Lost count a while back."

Bombur grinned hugely. "Eleven. And expectin' another."

Tauriel accompanied the elves that brought them lunch, pacing quietly along in their wake. She paused at each door to look in at the dwarven occupants. When she reached Thorin's cell, she paused for a long moment, a faint smile curving her lips. She looked almost satisfied. Knowing. Without a word, she moved on. Thorin frowned at her as she passed, disliking very much her satisfied manner. What could it mean? Nothing good, likely as not. Almost despite himself, he began to fret again in earnest, ruing the list of possibilities his mind concocted with such ease.

When Tauriel reached Kili's cell, the young dwarf was tossing a stone and pretending not to notice her. As the others began to eat, though, making some amount of noise chewing, scraping plates, and rustling about, Kili leaned toward his door, glancing nervously in the direction of Thorin's cell.

"Sorry about... last time, milady," he said softly, looking a little embarrassed. "I shouldn't have been so... well, rude." It was clear he'd had time to regret their former exchange. Tauriel gave him a startled glance, delicate eyebrows raised. After a beat or two, she pursed her lips and sighed.

"You're young," she murmured, inclining her head, "and... forgiven." She didn't think it necessary to lecture him about how much respect a prince deserves. If he didn't know already, her words would teach him little.

After another pause, she graced him with a faint smile. "You aren't what I expected." Her green eyes lit on his face, as though weighing him against some invisible standard.

Kili's heart practically skipped a beat when she smiled at him. He was relieved she hadn't taken his apology the wrong way, or been too proud to accept it. The others were still contentedly slurping their water, munching their bread, and chatting casually amongst themselves, so Kili felt somewhat safe to continue the conversation.

"You're nothing like what I've always thought elves would be. You can trust me on that." He glanced toward Thorin's cell again, and turned back to Tauriel. "You've been... very kind to us. Kinder than we've been to you. Barring the whole 'imprisonment' bit," he added, grinning. "May I... may I ask for your name?"

She wasn't sure whether or not to answer at first. After a moment, she nodded slowly. "Tauriel. And... you?" It occurred to her that other than Thorin, she didn't know any of their names.

There was something of a lull in the others' conversations, and Kili hesitated. His desire to obey his Uncle was warring with his need to speak with this elf, his need to keep her here.

"I'm Kili," he whispered so softly he was sure only an elven ear could have caught it, knowing well that if she replied in anything close to a normal volume, he'd be sunk. "Your name is beautiful. What's it mean? I don't... speak any Elvish," he admitted sheepishly, even though he was fairly certain she wouldn't be the least bit surprised.

Her stance was relaxing now, her lips curling into a more genuine smile, green eyes warming.
Tauriel chuckled faintly, a sound like water over smooth stones. "It means 'daughter of the forest,'" she told him softly, noting his nervousness. He clearly didn't want to be overheard. He was like a youngling, afraid of getting in trouble. In a way, he was. The elf hadn't thought he would be so easy to talk to. Just then, glancing along the walkway to check on the others, she spotted the blond in the adjacent cell, watching her distrustfully. Tauriel's smile disappeared. Distrust and dislike walked hand in hand--this was a fact well-known to her. She glanced at Kili, nodded slightly, and turned away.

Kili watched her go, his face reluctant, crestfallen. That was that. She'd gone, left him as lonely and empty as before. Well, almost. He had her name, and a name could fill the mind and heart with hope. He sighed, snatching up his cup and plate and moving quickly to the stone bench at the back of his cell. He was finished with caring what the others thought, he decided, and if they questioned him further, he'd explain he was just trying to win them an ally. Tauriel. He was repeating her name silently to himself now, grinning, his food and drink forgotten on his lap.

Legolas was waiting around the corner, and the look he favored the red-haired elleth with spoke disdainful, disapproving volumes. "Tauriel?" His dark brows knit, and he shook his head. "What were you doing?"

Tauriel pulled up, leaning away from Legolas. She'd not anticipated seeing him here. He was supposed to be... somewhere else. The redhead frowned.

"What do you mean?" Though she tried to keep her tone innocent, but knew she wasn't entirely successful. Really, who she talked to was none of his business. Immediately, Tauriel regretted the thought. She bowed her head slightly. "I was speaking with one of the dwarves, my prince."

Legolas crossed his arms, turning away from her. "Did you learn anything... of use?" His tone was unnervingly flat, but a faint edge of annoyance joined it at the very end.

"His name is Kili," she responded softly. "I think he would be willing to talk more freely now... he seemed to think I was nice. For an elf." The captain sighed and lifted her head. Legolas turned back, his blue eyes burned into her as he watched her, and she wondered, not for the first time, what his feelings were for her, and whether or not his father knew. She couldn't help feeling a tad guilty for making him so upset. She didn't like seeing the prince so stiff and angry. Angry princes were liable to do stupid things that put princely necks at risk.

"You seemed to be enjoying the exchange a little more than necessary," the blond replied sullenly. "You never smile like that for...." He trailed off. The word "me" hung in the space between them.

Tauriel's gaze lingered on him for a moment longer, then she turned her face away from him. "My apologies, my prince." She didn't know what else to say. This was a stupid thing to get upset about, but she couldn't tell him that. "I'm to check the lower dungeons. If you'll excuse me..." She bowed slightly and edged past him. The lower dungeons were all empty, of course, but it was part of the rounds the prison guards walked. It was part of the prison.

Legolas watched her go, his chest in a bind. For untold years she'd been his captain. He'd protected her. Stayed by her side. Shared the art of training, combat, duties. Watched her. Yes. Watched her. Wished he could do more than that. Oh, how he'd wished. How he'd toyed with the idea of, well, broaching the subject. Becoming more than prince and captain, prince and subject. Didn't she know? Hadn't it been obvious enough for her? A frown fixed firmly on his face, he rounded the corner to the dwarves' cells, stalking up to Kili's cell. The dwarf was sitting on his bench at the back, his eyes glimmering inquisitively in the gloom.
Legolas eyed the dwarf for a moment. Accusing him outright wouldn't do at all. Too easy.

"What, exactly," the elf asked in a dangerous tone, "do you expect to achieve with her?" Kili was a bit stunned, pulled from his pleasant reverie into a decidedly unpleasant reality. Ah. The prince had come. Perhaps she'd told him herself. Told him he'd been bothering her. The thought was somewhat jarring. He'd thought she'd been... receptive, at least. Well.

"I don't have any idea what you're talking about," Kili said, after he'd recovered somewhat. He took a casual sip of water. "What do you mean?"

Legolas leaned closer to the bars, keeping his hands neatly clasped behind him, as much for appearances as to stop himself trying to reach through the bars and strangle the dwarf.

"I would say you were playing dumb, but I doubt it's a game for you." His tone was viciously scathing, his cheeks slightly flushed, eyes blazing with jealous outrage. "Whatever you might think, you have no right, and no chance. If you know your own fortune, you'll not speak to her again." Kili put up his hands in surrender, fighting back a grin. If he didn't have a vested interest in this discussion, he would've found the elf's behavior... absurdly entertaining.

"Alright, Prince. Calm down a little before you hurt yourself. I honestly don't know what you're so upset about. If she didn't want to talk to me, she didn't have to. You'll notice that I'm the one in a cell. She could've walked away anytime she wanted to."

If there is one thing that can make jealous indignation and proud anger even worse than they already are, it's proving them absolutely pointless. Legolas knew Kili was right, and that made him even angrier. He was mad at Kili for being an interloper (and succeeding!), at himself for being stupid and helpless, and at Tauriel, for daring to choose a dwarf over a prince of her own kind. He straightened, and his expression was most unattractive.

"Don't test your luck, Dwarf. I have it in my power to make your stay significantly less pleasant."

Kili frowned at the elf, but nodded. "Duly noted, Prince." He sensed a wisecrack wouldn't go down very well at the moment, and left it at that. When Legolas had stalked away again, the chamber was completely silent for five tense seconds, other than the continuous rushing of the nearby waterways. Kili cringed in anticipation. When Thorin finally did speak, though, it wasn't with blustering anger. Just something like deep disappointment, which was far worse.

"Explain yourself, Kili."

The young dwarf moved slowly toward the bars of his door, head down. So much for not caring what the others thought. "Uncle," he said finally, "I know what I'm doing."

"Well, this would be a first. Would you mind sharing?"

"I'm befriending an elf. There. I said it. Winning us an ally. She's-"

"The Captain of the Guard," Thorin interposed sharply, "not some ordinary underling. Besides that, she's the darling of the crown prince. He asked a question I'd very much like you to answer: what do you hope to accomplish with her?"

Kili hesitated. "I don't know. But I have to... try, at least. I see an opportunity, and I'm working with it. None of the rest of you have any real plans!"

"Thorin." Balin's steady voice put a temporary halt to the storm brewing between uncle and nephew. "The boy has a point. I say we let him try. If he fails, we're none the worse. If he succeeds, all the
The wise dwarf paused a moment. "But," and the word hung like a precariously-balanced boulder, "he should be aware that this ought to be an attempt at friendship only. Any hope of romancing the she-elf is folly, and will end only in pain."

Kili swallowed heavily. That was his fear. But he wasn't "romancing" her so much as, well... he wasn't sure what to call it. All he knew was his heart beat a feverish pace in his chest when he thought of her, and she was the loveliest, wisest creature he'd ever met. He just needed to work on getting her to lighten up a bit.

Thorin tightened his grip on the cold metal bars. "But with their captain, Balin? She may be using him, trying to gain information. She's not the tender lady she looks; she has craft." He shook his head slowly. "Besides, why would she be interested? What does he have to offer her? He's a dwarf, and to the elves, we're nothing. Our lives are but ships passing in the night. They know this well. There is no reason she'd seek friendship with him for its own sake."

"Craft can be used against craft, my king," said Balin humbly. "While she tries to gain information about us, perhaps we can gain information about them." He wouldn't point out that there were folk of any of the three civilized races (four, counting hobbits) that, unlike Thorin, sought friendship for the pleasure and good company it offered.

"Is it possible," asked Ori hesitantly, from Thorin's other side, "that she really is as nice as she seems? I mean, she hasn't insulted us or anything that I've heard."

"Aye," said Dwalin in a mildly scathing tone, "she could be nice as ye please, lass. Or maybe she already has somethin' hangin' over our heads, just waiting for the right moment to drop."

Thorin turned away from the door. "Do as you please, Kili. Have a care, though, what you say. Lives and fortunes may depend on what words 'accidentally' escape your lips. Remember also the threats of the elven prince."

Kili nodded. "Yes, Uncle." Well, one obstacle had fallen, at least. But he knew better than to be relieved. Life had gotten, suddenly, much more complicated than he preferred. He could nearly feel Fili's gaze boring into the wall beside him. "I'm not going to get carried away," Kili promised in an undertone. "I'm just trying to befriend her, and see what happens."

Chapter End Notes

Because Ori's just so freakin' adorable.
Clandestine Visits

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

Another extra-long chapter, folks. Don't start reading unless you have time for about two chapters, mmkay? Count this as a sort of bonus apology for the lateness of the update.

The hours passed slowly for the dwarves. Though they tried to strike up the cheerful banter that had entertained them before, nothing could quite cover the tension between Thorin and Kili. Not that any of the rest of them were thrilled about Kili's choice of friends, but it was a little less immediate for them.

As the evening patrols moved past their cells, Tauriel returned, seeming somehow more upset than before. Her eyes were hard as the gems Kili fancied they resembled, and her hand strayed often to the knife at her side. As before, she checked each of the cells, but paused by Kili's door. The hardness in her eyes faded slightly, becoming more an expression of concern.

"I don't know how you've done it," she whispered, so softly that she almost couldn't be heard, "but there have been suspicious goings on. Doors left ajar, food missing from the pantry, items disturbed in the armory." Her gaze sharpened again, concern turning to mild frustration.

Kili looked a bit startled, moving quickly toward the door. "Tauriel." He couldn't quite disguise the adoration that filled his face, as if he hadn't noticed the accusatory nature of her words at all. Then it did register, and his features tensed a little. "Oh. Well, I didn't do it, I swear. Trust me, if I'd been raiding your pantries, you'd have probably caught me by now. Stealth isn't really my thing." He grinned. "Sure you don't have some really clever, really big rats?"

Tauriel's frown deepened. "Kili, it doesn't take an elf to know when there's an intruder in our midst. I won't ask you to tell me who it is--I doubt you'd tell me even if I did." She hesitated a beat, then touched the bars of his door, as though trying to steady herself. "When you see your burglar next, warn him. Thranduil is not kind to those he views as thieves." She held his gaze a moment longer, noting his surprise, then stepped back, turning to move down the walkway as though nothing had happened.

Kili sighed, watching the swish of her green linen dress as she moved back down the walkway. Why would she...? Was she trying to help them? Or lure them into trusting her? He remembered Thorin's words about her being more than she seemed. Crafty. He felt... intimidated by her presence now, and he hadn't really felt that way before. All the same, he couldn't bear to see her walk away. Tauriel, please. Don't go. He realized too late he'd spoken his plea out loud.
Tauriel froze. It had been many, many years since anyone had called her name so plaintively. She
was standing between the cells occupied by the fat dwarf on one hand, and a bald, hulking warrior
on the other. Both were looking at her as she turned her head, looking over her shoulder at Kili’s
door. A handful of seconds passed silently, and she knew that every dwarf in the Company was
listening and watching, intently as you please. Kili cleared his throat nervously, barely able to hold
the elf’s gaze.

"I’m... sorry," he said at last, reaching up to worry with one of his braids (he’d just redone them). "I...
I just... well... I was hoping you’d stay... a little longer." He’d never been so tongue-tied, and he felt
like an idiot. Even more so because the entire Company was listening to him fumble for words like
he’d suddenly been stricken dumb.

Tauriel turned completely, a most curious expression on her statuesque face. As though she’d not
quite believed him, but couldn’t decide whether it was a trap or a joke. Slowly, her gaze shifted to
Dwalin, who was closest.

"Is he in earnest?" she asked softly, lifting her eyebrows slightly. Dwalin scowled at her and didn’t
answer, but Bombur smiled uncertainly.

"Aye, ma’am, I think he is." The corpulent dwarf acknowledged her gaze, as she turned it on him,
with a slight shrug. Tauriel then looked at Kili, studying him for a long, silent moment before
speaking.

"Later," was all she said, before turning on her heel and striding away. She paused by Thorin’s cell
to give him an apologetic glance, but found that he refused to look at her. The elf sighed and moved
on. She should have known better than to hope friendliness in a few individuals meant a change of
heart in their iron-willed leader.

Kili sighed, uncertain how to take her response. The way she’d looked at him. There was something
to it. She’d seemed genuinely surprised. Not annoyed or haughtily amused, as she might well have
been, but open. Receptive. Maybe it was just the timing. Turning away from the door, he paced back
to his bench and sat against it, hugging his knees to his chest. Dwalin began muttering to himself,
and scattered, subdued conversation broke out in the other cells, but Kili ignored it.

Thorin leaned against the wall nearest Balin’s cell. "You heard what she said? The first part?" Balin
confirmed that he had, and Thorin continued. "What do you make of it? They haven’t... found her.
Have they?"

The white-haired dwarf stroked his beard. "It could have been a threat," he said very quietly, so the
others wouldn’t hear, "or it might have been a warning. She could be dropping hints to frighten us, or
she might genuinely be worried. The elf is hard to read."

Thorin grunted unhappily. He hated subtlety in all its forms, and the wiles of women had ever
escaped him. Well, there was Billa, but she was... different. She wasn’t about playing games and
fainting and coquettishly batting her eyelashes. She had spirit about her, a fire within, like to his own.
He crossed his arms and sank against the wall.

*Balin, tell me she’s alright.* He wouldn’t say it. What was the use of being told only what he wanted
to hear, true or not? One thing was certain. If Billa came back, Thorin would have words with her.
She was being too reckless, and if the elf captain was to be believed, it might be more than the
success of their venture that hung in the balance.

The evening meal came and went. The lanterns were extinguished for the night, the cell doors
checked once more. Night crept in and passed, second by agonizing second. No halfling whisper disturbing the quiet. Though Thorin watched his door intently, nothing happened. Eventually, even he succumbed to the siren song of exhausted sleep.

If he dreamed, he didn't remember it. He was woken in the morning by the rattle of the plate against flagstones as his meal, or what there was of it, was pushed through the slot under the door. The portions were notably smaller. Doubtless, the prince had heard tell of Tauriel's continued interactions with his nephew. And speak of the she-devil.

Tauriel stood outside his door, her expression deeply serious. "Pray Thranduil has mercy on her," she whispered cryptically.

Thorin sat up slowly, his limbs stiff and achy. Her words took a moment to register, but register they did. His face visibly paled, and there was cold horror in his eyes as he got up and paced to within a few feet of the door, hands clenched into fists.

"What... do you mean?" His voice was a low growl, hate-filled but weak, as if he hadn't the strength to speak any louder. He knew well what she meant, but was trying to determine whether or not she was bluffing. Trying to get a rise out of him. Trying to get him to reveal more of what he knew.

Tauriel studied him, her face impassive. "She's careless," the elf answered, not looking away.

"She? What can you possibly be talking about? Who is... she?" It was a lost cause, Thorin knew. He'd never been good at pretense. But the crushing tightness in his chest eased a little. Perhaps they hadn't actually caught Billa yet. The elf was being too ambiguous to tell for certain.

Tauriel inhaled deeply, then sighed, closing her eyes for a moment. She looked almost relieved. Almost. When the captain opened her eyes again, her gaze was as unreadable as before.

"Doesn't line up with what I know of you," she informed him suddenly. "A burglar... stealth isn't the usual course of action for dwarves. Of course, neither is it common for one of Durin's folk to willingly travel with those who aren't dwarves themselves." Tauriel's posture was straight, poised and tense, but not stiff. As though she were ready to deflect an attack.

Thorin glowered at the elf, crossing his arms. "So you've inferred this based on what you know of dwarves. How clever of you." But how had she figured out that Billa was female? Had she somehow overheard it? Or had she inferred that, too, from something else? He couldn't understand why she would come to him if they already had Billa. What was she hoping to achieve? Whatever the case, this didn't bode well at all. If they didn't already have Billa, they would have her soon.

Tauriel watched him, calculating how much more information they could trade. He'd confirmed her guesses so far, though she hadn't expected him to react so strongly. He was attached to the female, then. This 'Billa' was dear to him. Her chest tightened as she took in his stoic expression, fear-grey pallor, and tense, aggressive posture.

"I cannot give you something for nothing, Thorin Oakenshield." The warning was cryptic, but she couldn't afford to be obvious about any of this. Thranduil was too angry to care what these folk felt about this burglar, but she hated grief in all its forms. Death. Pain. Sickness. Helplessness. Thorin looked helpless now. She hated inflicting it on him.

"Be careful." She turned away, her auburn tresses tickling her ears as she strode away. The elf hadn't yet decided what to do about Kili.

The young dwarf followed her with a longing glance, but didn't try to speak with her this time. He
sensed something had gone very wrong, something that could jeopardize everything. Something that was far bigger than his secret affections for an elf captain.

Thorin gritted his teeth, desiring nothing more than to bash the door down and find his missing burglar. He was ill-suited to standing by idly when those he was tasked with protecting were in danger. But what could the elf want? Was she looking for some kind of... bargain?

"Balin," Thorin said quietly into the wall, trying to relax some of the tension in his jaw, "what was she getting at? 'Something for nothing'... Is she looking to make a deal?"

Balin shook his head slowly. "I... don't know." He had, of course, listened to the entire conversation as closely as he could, and most of what had transpired between his king and the guard captain had been unnerving. "If I didn't know better, I might say that she was trying to threaten her. But they can't have caught anyone. Otherwise, they would be more open about it. Elves love to gloat." Balin furrowed his brow, thinking hard.

From Thorin's other side came another suggestion. "Sounded like she was testing you, almost." Dori's cultured voice was subdued and thoughtful.

Thorin turned, frowning a little. "Explain. Testing? Why would she be testing me?"

"To find out if she can trust you... maybe?" Ori offered hesitantly. "She... didn't seem like she was threatening you. Not to me, at least. It sounded more like she was trying to... warn you."

Thorin shrugged. "Why would she warn me? What does she think I can do?"

Nori nudged his sister with a frown. "You wouldn't think someone was threatening you until they had an ax at your throat."

"No, honestly, if she'd wanted to threaten us, don't you think she'd be a bit more aggressive about it?" Ori wasn't willing to back down just yet.

"Perhaps she wanted us to... warn her." Balin sounded doubtful, but that was the ultimate conclusion of that train of thought, wasn't it? "It's the one thing she thinks we have that she doesn't--a way to contact the intruder."

"Well, she's thought wrong, then," said Thorin mournfully. "We don't." He paced to the back of his cell and collapsed on his bench, resting his face in his palms. If he had any power to conjure Billa Baggins, he certainly would have used it long before now.

"I think... she's trying to help us," said Kili hopefully. "I really do. If she thinks we've been talking to you-know-who, why doesn't she have guards posted here at all times, waiting to catch her? Why wouldn't she use that to her advantage?"

"Stuff it, Kili," growled Dwalin. He muttered something that was unclear, involving the words 'lady-friend' and 'perfect.'

"Dwal." Balin frowned reproachfully in the direction of his brother's cell. Dwalin went mercifully silent. He was coping with their captivity only a little better than Thorin was. The warrior was determined to be ready, so he’d developed a strict exercise regimen for himself. He'd never been much for talking anyway.

Fili rested his forehead against the cool metal of the bars and sighed. "I... think Kili's right. If she wanted to take advantage of the situation, she could. But she hasn't."
Thorin was fairly well lost to his own thoughts now. He'd led them all into this, gotten on the wrong side of the Elvenking. Perhaps it was too late now to retract his disparaging words; too late, even, to offer the king what he'd asked and more. It was said wounds to elven pride were not easily healed, and time did not dull the memory of the offense. With Thranduil, at least, the rumor seemed to hold very true. They had little choice now. If Billa had been discovered, or was on the verge of being so, trusting the elven captain was their only hope.

Gloin rapped on Oin's wall. The old healer was dozing, as he couldn't hear anything the others were saying, even with his new ear trumpet.

"Did ya hear that, Brother? The lad's sayin' we should trust the elf lass. Wha' do ya think o' that?"

Oin jerked awake with a snort. "Eh? Wha' was that, Brother?" Gloin repeated the question, louder (which he got scolded for- "shouldn't yell indoors, lad,"). Oin thought about it a moment, then shook his head. "Well, ya can't be a first-rate healer without bein' the trustworthy sort. Elves can't be all bad."

Billa pulled her ring off and sat down heavily, her back against Thorin's door. She hadn't anticipated having so much trouble finding somewhere to sleep. She'd gotten lucky the first day, apparently. Perhaps she would go back to the cellars after Thorin was properly updated. Tapping the door and shifting so her spine was between the bars, the hobbit sighed. This burglaring business was a lot harder than it sounded.

Thorin was up before he was fully awake, lurching across the length of his cell with one leg almost completely numb. He steadied himself against the bars. "Billa? Is that you?" His eyes searched the dim walkway outside in vain, but this didn't squelch his hopes. Of course she wouldn't be visible.

"Down here, O Observant One," she chuckled, reaching backward through the bars and pinching his leg. Naturally, he wouldn't expect her to be visible right off, but wearing this ring all the time was tiring, somehow. As though... Billa frowned. As though she were constantly carrying a great weight.

Thorin recoiled, startled. Then, recovering, he cleared his throat and stepped back to the door, lowering himself onto his haunches and gripping the bars again. "Billa, I..." He felt rather foolish. "I think I'm awake now."

Billa let out a soft snort of laughter. "That's good, 'cause I'm not." With a sigh, she rubbed her eyes tiredly. "This place is huge, Thorin. There have to be at least a thousand strong living here, with enough food and wine stocked to provide for a week-long feast. And their armory. Good gracious, I didn't even know what half of those things were."

This mention of her scouting exploits quickly tempered Thorin's relief. "You're not safe, Billa," he whispered, resting a hand on her shoulder. "The elf captain--Tauriel, I think was her name--she knows. She's warned us several times now that they're onto you. You've been careless, Billa." He shifted uncomfortably. "You don't know how I've... worried."

"You? Worried? Ha." Billa didn't sound like she really meant it, but she also didn't sound terribly upset. A violent shiver swept through her, and the halfling sighed, sounding almost like she was on the verge of tears. "The king has ordered the front gate closed and locked. It's guarded day and night, and as far as I can tell, it's the only way in or out of this place. Does this place have a... name...?"

In the midst of the snoring symphony, she thought she'd heard something. Billa sat up, a frightened look on her face as her pointed ears twitched.
Tauriel shook her head so that her hair, blessedly loose tonight, settled differently across her shoulders. She had a nasty headache trying to take root and had hoped that letting the weight of her hair down for a while might help. It didn't seem to be making much difference, however. The dungeons were filled with the echoes of a chorus of snoring. Some of it, she suspected, had to be faked. No one snored that loud. Still— it was no business of hers. Creeping closer to Kili's cell, she peered through the bars. He was probably asleep. It was worth checking, though.

Kili had been unusually restless tonight already, so Billa and Thorin's conversation, even though it hadn't been by any means loud, had roused him. Seeing a familiar face glowing in the spare lantern light outside his cell, he shot up off the pile of outer clothing he'd been using as bedding, moving softly to the door. Tauriel looked different, somehow, and he realized it was because she was wearing her hair loose. Not only that, but she wasn't in her typical guard attire. She wore only a flowing green dress that followed the curve of her body perfectly, accentuating her womanly figure. He'd never thought she could look any more beautiful—apparently, he'd been wrong. She was stunning. He stood a moment at the bars, his amazement plain on his face, before mastering himself.

"You're... you look lovely, milady," he whispered, smiling pleasantly. "To what do I owe this honor?"

"Blooms follow buds." She dismissed his comment with a wave of her hand, looking relieved to see him awake. "I... wanted to talk." Now that it came down to it, Tauriel was a bit embarrassed to admit that she had no bosom-companions among the guards. She wanted someone she could trust, someone she could just talk to. In all honesty, she had no idea whether or not this dwarf would ever be fully trustworthy, but, shame as it was, he was the closest thing she had to a friend at the moment. Other than Legolas—and they had never really been allowed to be as close as they would have liked. At least she didn't feel like she had to fend off Kili's amorous advances. He was a mere child, and his infatuation would fade. It was neither a threat, nor a burden.

"I suppose I'm disturbing your sleep. Perhaps I should go." She didn't move to stand, opting instead to watch him.

"Oh, no! Not at all." Kili's reply may have come across a little too enthusiastically. And perhaps a little too loudly. He heard incoherent mumbling from Fili's cell and cringed. "Sorry." Kili leaned a little closer to the bars. "All I get in here is sleep. Someone stopping by for a chat is a rare treat." He smiled charmingly. "So what's on your mind?" She wanted to talk. To him.

"Just... had a headache. Couldn't rest." Tauriel sighed and shifted, propping her chin on her hand. "There are many things that need done. Not the least of which is to capture your beloved burglar." The elf made a queer expression that might have been a form of distaste.

Kili nodded thoughtfully, somewhat pulled from his amorous revery. "Burglars take some catching, I guess," he said, fidgeting with the ragged hem of his tunic. "If that's what you mean to do, that is." He shrugged. "Or not. I know you don't just blindly follow orders. You have a head on your shoulders. Loyal as you are, you make your own choices." He met her gaze with surprising conviction.

"Look, Tauriel. This venture--this reclaiming of our homeland--it's all my uncle's ever dreamed of. It's all me and my brother have ever wanted. It's a good thing, something even you could get behind, I think." He looked down, shook his head. "Every day that goes by in here, though, is a day wasted, and our chances of getting into the Mountain are lessened. I know you're fiercely loyal, but your king's made a mistake. You may deny it, but I can see it in your face: you've thought about it."
For a moment, suspicion flavored her glance, but Kili's expression was so intensely convicted that she couldn't believe he was just trying to manipulate her. Tauriel sighed heavily and looked away from him. "I heard how the two kings spoke when first Thorin Oakenshield was brought within these walls." Her voice was very distant, and soft enough as to be almost drowned out by the snores of the Company. "They are both proud. Too proud. Proud and hurt and angry. Neither is willing to forgive, or see past his own anger." Sorrow filled her green eyes. There was nothing she could do about either of them.

"Uncle's always been that way," Kili said, unhappily, "and I don't see that changing--leastways not fully--until the dragon's dead and his kingdom is restored. He's too angry, too full of hate. Unwilling to forgive or forget. But... these past few weeks, he's changed. He hasn't been as bitter or angry. It's given me hope that, well, that he will be mended, eventually. Right now, though, he carries too heavy a burden." Kili chuckled quietly, fiddling with his hair beads again.

"Fili and I tried carrying it for a day or so. Didn't work out very well. Got ourselves ambushed by your eight-legged pets. We were lucky that...." He trailed off, looking troubled. He'd almost mentioned Billa. "We were lucky," he concluded simply.

An expression of absolute disgust crossed Tauriel's pale face. "Those... things!" she hissed savagely. "They've ruined our beautiful home. This was the Greenwood before they came. We've killed hundreds of them, but there are always more." The fire that had so suddenly filled her eyes died just as quickly, replaced by sadness. "He won't let me lead an expedition to exterminate the damnable things at their source. Neither of them will. And others suffer because of it. The Shadow in Dol Goldur grows by the day, and they do nothing."

As quickly as it blazed and was gone, Kili couldn't help but be affected by the passion in her face and voice. It was clear she felt great responsibility for the fate of the world at large, not just the land within the Woodland Realm's borders. That gave the young dwarf something of an idea. "We heard news of the Necromancer from Beorn. The, uh, skin-changer." She seemed somewhat puzzled, so he quickly explained and then went on.

"Anyway, I heard him and Gandalf talking one night when everyone else was asleep. (Gandalf's the Wizard who's been with us off and on along the way.) They mentioned that the Necromancer and Smaug could potentially join forces." Kili's tone was sober, and it sounded odd, indeed, coming from him. "If we don't defeat the dragon... it could mean the end of the world as we know it. Tauriel, if your king won't listen to reason, then you must stand up for your people. For both our peoples. I'm asking you to help us. Please."

His words were earnest, well-considered, and as he spoke them, he seemed somehow older. More mature. Tauriel was once again surprised by this young dwarf, this child who was not a child. The idea of the Necromancer of Dol Goldur and the dragon Smaug allying themselves was one that touched her heart with cold fear. The elf looked away.

"Mithrandir is not unknown to us," she murmured. "Neither is the Necromancer, may his life be blessedly short." After that, she lapsed into silence, thinking about these things. Kili might be bluffing. Lying, even. But... she didn't think he would. Of course, there was only one way to find out. Tauriel stood slowly, her gaze impossibly distant.

"Too long have we been trapped within our own realm." Turning to Kili, she grasped his hand through the bars. "Tell no one I came. I will return, Kili. When I can." There was new determination in her face. She would patrol the borders, and see for herself. She would test the dwarf's words. She would not let her world fall into Shadow.

Kili smiled, squeezing her hand. "It stays between us, Tauriel." A note of worry crept into his tone.
"Be careful. I know you can look after yourself, but all the same...." Her touch was so incredibly soft. He turned her hand over, kissed it gently. He hoped she wouldn't think the gesture forward. "Thank-you, Milady. Be safe."

A smile flitted across Tauriel's face, and she cupped his cheek briefly with cool, slender fingers before turning away. "Thank you, Kili. You're a better friend than I had hoped."

The words drifted softly over her shoulder, and then she was gone. When her nearly noiseless footsteps faded away into the perpetual snoring symphony from the cells (of which Bombur comprised, no doubt, the entire horn section), Thorin rose up from his makeshift bedding, moving softly back toward the door of his cell. Billa had vanished at the first hint of Tauriel's coming, and he didn't know where she may have gone after that. He sighed, kneeling against the bars, and was surprised to hear a gentle snore issue from the open space in front of him. Tentatively, he reached out. His hand brushed the rough corduroy of Billa's coat, and he realized with some amazement that she'd fallen asleep against his door. How far she'd come, this halfling he'd once fancied would die if parted from her own soft bed. He didn't want to wake her, but he didn't have much choice. She wasn't safe where she was; any patrolling guard might stumble over her, and she'd be hard pressed to get away before they had their hands on her.

"Billa," he whispered near where he judged her ear to be, gently jostling her shoulder. "Wake up."

Billa produced a series of soft, snuffling grunts as she returned to consciousness. "Thorin? I... spiders." She shuddered under his hand. "I'm awake." Her fingers were surprisingly cold when they found his hand. Slowly, she rose and shook herself, releasing him in the process.

"I should go." Disoriented, yes, but apparently still aware enough to know what she was about.

"Billa, wait." Thorin still felt odd speaking to what was apparently thin air. He didn't know where to look. "Remember what I told you. Don't do anything unusually reckless. You're invisible, but not invincible. Promise me you'll be more careful, for your own sake, at least." And mine.

There was a second or two of silence, then, "alright. I'll try." Really, Billa was a little unsettled by Thorin's worry, though not in a bad way. This wasn't at all the reaction she'd expected from him. Still... it was nice to know he cared.

The faint padding of tired, downy feet faded away, and Thorin turned from the door, pacing back to his bedding. Billa was their only hope now. He thought to himself, though, that he couldn't have placed his faith in a worthier creature. Kili seemed to have been cultivating another option, though, and from what Thorin had caught of his conversation with the elf captain, there may or may not have been an offer of help ventured.

Kili had been very free with her, but to Thorin's knowledge, had mentioned nothing of Billa. Even so, it was likely it wouldn't have mattered if he had: he knew nothing of note she hadn't already guessed about their burglars. He'd bristled a little when she had lumped Thranduil and himself together--too stubborn and proud for their own good--but the situation at hand seemed to lend credence to her observation. Thorin had appreciated that Kili seemed to have remembered his stated purpose in befriending the elf, rather than losing himself to his impulses, but all the same, the relationship concerned him. Kili would only be hurt.
Days passed quietly. Billa returned at odd intervals to update Thorin and slip stolen supplies through the bars. Not much, mind you. A packet of herbs here, a pen-knife there. Useful things that might see them through the days after their escape, but nothing that would help them get out. Lockpicks, apparently, would raise too much suspicion if they went missing just now. Tauriel didn't return for several days after her midnight visit to Kili. Legolas, however, lurked on their vicinity fairly often, his anxious blue gaze watching them for any sign that they knew what his captain was up to.

Late one night, however, there was a break to the usual routine. They must have been in the dungeon for two weeks or so by now, but it was hard to keep an accurate track of time when one could neither see the daylight, nor trust one's captors not to be truthful about the time of year, let alone the time of day.

Regardless of what the others might think, this was a marvelous idea. The best she'd had in ages. Giggling to herself, Billa snuck along the passage, glad the rushing water covered the sound of her somewhat uneven footfalls. It was funny, she thought, how one walked on one's toes when one was unbalanced.

"Thorin!" she whispered loudly, and found Kili instead, looking curiously out through her, since she was invisible. "Whoops. Wrong cell." Billa giggled again, biting her tongue to quiet herself. "I'm playing a joke," she told the baffled Kili with an invisible grin.

"Billa?" Kili whispered, looking like he couldn’t decide whether or not this was funny. It was no less unnerving to not see her when her voice was issuing right in front of him, but right now, it was her behavior that struck him as more peculiar. "A joke? But… Billa, what about the guards?" He glanced at the wall beside him, as if to gather his brother's opinion somehow through the stone barrier, then turned back to the empty, giggling space before him. "Are you alright? What's wrong?" Had she been drugged? She'd never been one to behave like this, least of all when guards could appear at any moment and she was supposed to be finding them a way out of the prison.

"A joke," she agreed, speaking slowly as though he were very thick and hadn't understood her. But even the sound of her words was enough to give away the huge grin on her face. "Better than creamed honey, you'll see. The guards can't. Can't see me." More giggles. Kili tried not to grin, despite his desire to join in her levity. As he leaned a little closer to the bars, he caught the distinct scent of wine. She was drunk! He had to remind himself this was serious--she might be caught. All the same, it was awfully funny.

"Uncle?" he whispered. "It's Billa. She's gotten into the elves' stash."

Thorin pressed himself into the corner of his cell, nearest Kili's he could get. "What? She's there? She's there with you?"
"SHE'S DRUNK!" Kili supplied, too loud. Several voices harshly shushed him. "Sorry."

"Am not!" Billa said in a hushed, insulted tone. Fili winced sympathetically, and thus didn't see the hobbit appear suddenly in front of his brother's cell, looking quite upset. "I am a Baggins of Bag End, and we do not-"

"Wist, Billa, wist. There are guards about, love," Bofur hissed, his expression deeply worried.

The halfling sobered a bit at the reminder, but grumbled and sighed as she meandered down the line of cells. Her wonderful joke. Ruined. Fully visible, she wandered into Thorin's limited field of view, looking disheveled and flushed, carrying what appeared to be an ornate belt-knife. It looked large, as she needed both hands to hold it, but it was really no longer than such a knife ought to be. She paused there and gave Thorin a very hurt look.

"I'm not," she protested, almost too loudly. "I only had a little. No one noticed." Thorin frowned. He'd warned her about being reckless, and here she was... capering about, heady with elven wine.

"Billa," he whispered seriously, looking faintly panicked, "what've you done? You need to sober up. You'll be caught!" He proffered her his water cup through the bars. "Drink this, quick. It'll help."

Billa frowned. "No." Despite the color in her cheeks and her apparently uncontrollable emotions, her gaze was bright with (somewhat misguided) intelligence. "You're always throwing your weight around, telling me what to do. Think you're the biggest plum in the pie."

Thorin leaned against the bars, looking rather taken aback. He cleared his throat and took a moment, trying not to be angry. She obviously wasn't herself.

"Miss Baggins, you're not being reasonable," he said distinctly, eyes hard. He'd reverted to his previous formality with great ease. Perhaps she'd grown too comfortable with him. He was, after all, the leader of the Company. Not just... well, not just whatever else they were to each other. "You're going to get yourself caught, and then we'll all be ruined. This is no time for you to voice such opinions."

"Don't like hearing it from me?" Billa asked fiercely.

Ori's voice, from the cell nearest the stairs, rang out. "Someone's coming!"

Billa frowned in the direction of Ori's cell. She threw the belt-knife over the edge and disappeared. "This isn't the end, Mountain King," her voice came, nearly sing-songy, from the open air. "I'll get my joke yet. And I'm not drunk."

The elves, when they appeared, looked suspicious, but not alarmed. Thorin quickly resumed his place on his bench, leaning back against the wall and shutting his eyes to give the appearance of dozing. The others did what they could to seem casual, some more successfully than others. Kili's fake snoring was painfully obvious, even from several cells away. The elves, though, didn't seem terribly bothered, and went about their routine as usual, checking doors, retrieving plates and cups, and moving off again. When they'd gone, Thorin opened his eyes and pursed his lips pensively. It was the look of someone who wanted very much to be angry, but knew better than to be, and resented that fact. Annoyance, maybe. She'd gone and gotten herself drunk, come to play a prank, insulted him, then ghosted away in the blink of an eye. Would the burglar's surprises never end?

"Well, that was... odd." Balin's words summed up well the collective impression of what had just happened.

The rest of the night was blessedly uneventful, though that didn't stop the dwarves from fretting.
When no halfling was added to their imprisoned number, they started to relax a bit. With luck, Billa would have learned her lesson about the wine of the Elvenking. Elven wine was much stronger than that made by Dwarves or Men.

It was on a day that many sounds of merriment and song echoed down from the halls above, not even three nights after Billa's "joke," that the halfling appeared before Bofur's cell with a ring of keys, gesturing for him to keep quiet. She was clearly in possession of all her senses this time, and her hands were as steady as ever. One at a time, she unlocked the doors, releasing the dwarves from their interminable imprisonment. When they were all free, she met Thorin's gaze seriously.

"Yes, I was drunk, yes, I was an idiot. I made a mistake and I hope never to do that again. Now please, follow me. And for goodness' sake, be quiet."

Thorin nodded, hardly able to believe this was actually happening. It felt strangely surreal to be passing beyond the iron door that had kept him in his tiny enclosure for so long. For a time, especially after Billa's experiment with the potency of elvish drinks, he had begun to fear the Company would never see the outside of their cells again. He didn't celebrate overly much, though. That would be a bit premature. They weren't free yet. In a hushed tone, he instructed the others to leave their armor and heavy outer garments behind. If the dwarves were to make any attempt at stealth, they would need to dispense with things that would jingle or clank or rustle too much as they walked. Dwalin wasn't at all pleased with the idea of leaving his armor behind, and scowled fiercely at Thorin for a long moment before obeying the order.

Kili, though, looked almost giddy with the excitement and thrill of the escape. He kept nudging Fili and grinning, as if to make up for all the days he and his brother had been kept apart, and more than once the others caught him desperately stifling laughter. The Company proceeded on tiptoe over the various causeways of the subterranean prison, trying to be quiet but often failing miserably and receiving reproving looks and frequent shushings from Billa and Thorin, who were at the head of the group.

The hobbit led them ever downward along deserted pathways and corridors, quickly and surely as if she'd lived in this place her whole life. At last, the Company came, breathing heavily and trying not to be loud about it, to the lower cellars, where barrels were stored and filled and sent down a sloping trapdoor into the river below for transport to the lands beyond. At the moment, though, the trapdoor was closed, and no one who wasn't familiar with the process would have noticed anything suspicious about the ordinary-looking wooden floor on the far side of the room.

"Hold on." Dwalin looked skeptical. He surveyed the room a moment, squinting in the dim lantern-light. "How are we supposed to get out from here? We're in their cellars!"

Billa shushed him frantically, pointing at the two elves, each snoring in harmony with the other over a low, sturdy table. A half-finished bottle of wine sat between them, and two other bottles on the floor beside them, both empty. Gesturing for the dwarves to gather around her, she explained in a hurried undertone.

"There's a river that flows under the Woodland Palace- you've all heard it from your cells. It runs right under this room, and those barrels over there," she pointed to a large stack of barrels, all on their sides and obviously empty, "are to be sent down the river to Laketown. The front gate isn't an option, so I had to find you a back door. Each of you needs to get into one of those barrels, and down the river we go before they can say 'Bob's your uncle.'" She was smiling, but there was anxious tension in her expression as she glanced at the elves again. Dwalin looked entirely unconvinced.

Thorin frowned a little, crossing his arms. This seemed an unlikely plan. "Climb in the barrels?" he
whispered. "It's not that I doubt you, but... will we be able to breathe?"

Billa made a face. "I'd prefer to hammer the lids on so you lot couldn't be seen, but that was something that occurred to me--I'd really rather have live dwarves at the end of this. Dead ones aren't much use for dragon-slaying." She flashed Thorin a smile. "You'll be riding low in the water, but as long as you don't throw yourselves around too much, you should stay afloat, even with the lids off."

Thorin hesitated a moment longer, glancing at the sturdy oak barrels, then back to Billa. He nodded slowly. "It seems we have little choice."

"You're mad!" Dwalin said, a little too loudly. The elves stirred, and one of them made a face and muttered something about "berries." Everyone froze, and a few seconds later, the dorwinion-saturated elves had settled again and seemed to be dreaming peacefully once more.

Thorin turned a hard look on Dwalin. "Do as she says. It's our only chance." His voice was stern, and meant he'd hear no more arguments. Dwalin grunted something under his breath and turned to the barrels with the others.

Billa made sure everyone was in their own barrel, stuffed packing straw around them to cushion the coming fall, whispering encouragement to each in turn. There was a growing clamor above them--it could only be assumed that the elves had found the empty cells.

"Here. Just in case." Billa pressed Sting, her little sword, hurriedly into Thorin's hands before sprinting toward the lever. It wasn't anything like Orcrist, but she had no doubt that if there was a need, then Thorin would wield it better than she could. The only battles it had seen were in the semi-dark forest, piercing spider-flesh. That was where it had earned its name--from the wails of a particularly gruesome spider. 'It stings! It stings! Demons and elf-magic!' The wood squeaked in protest as the mechanism unlocked, and the trap door swung open, dumping the barrels into the water. Billa threw herself after them, trying to grab onto a barrel before they met the river.

The jolt of his barrel as it hit the water was such that Kili was sure his brain had been unseated. He shook his head to clear the unpleasant dizzy sensation, pleased to find that, due to the weight distribution, the barrels settled on one end and filled with only a minimum of shockingly cold river water. The current was swift here in the channel that rushed beneath the cellars, and he, Fili, and Dwalin linked hands and positioned themselves in the gap to keep themselves and their fellows from being swept down river until all were assembled.

Thorin floated one of the empty barrels toward the floundering hobbit, who had plunged into the water last and looked rather winded. "Climb in," he urged, and Ori, who was closest to her, reached out and tilted the barrel toward her a little so she could scramble into it. This done, Thorin gave the word, and the clump of barrels began its progress downstream, everyone trying to keep a hand on the rim of a partner's barrel and so stay together.

Tauriel wasn't sure which was worse--Thranduil's reaction to her border report, or the fact that her charges were now missing. She made for the wine cellars, walking a thin line between outrage and relief. There was the guard who was supposed to be on duty, drunk out of his mind--and with no keys to speak of.

"You'll be lucky if you're still drunk when I get back," she hissed to the unconscious elf, before dashing up the stairs again. "They're in the river! Quick, before they reach the gate!"

Legolas met Tauriel in the corridor. "I just heard," he informed her quickly as they jogged along. "Don't worry; it's not your fault. Besides, they won't get past the gate." They proceeded quickly
outside through one of the guard entrances, paralleling the river as it wound along, roaring down rapids and falls. They heard the sharp blasting of the signal horn behind them—now the gate wardens further downstream were doubtless triggering the mechanism that would block the dwarves' escape. They'd put a stop to this nonsense once and for all.

"Legolas-" Tauriel cut herself off almost immediately. She wasn't sure he would understand. In fact, she was fairly certain he wouldn't. The dwarves needed to escape, needed to make it to the Mountain. They needed to deal with Smaug, since Thranduil had already made his decision concerning elven involvement with the Great Worm. But Legolas was looking at her expectantly now, and she had to say something.

"Ah... nevermind." She looked away, avoiding his gaze. Beorn had explained everything to her, though he hadn't been in a terribly good mood about it. Apparently, she'd disturbed his bees, or something along those lines.

"What?" Legolas persisted, loping along beside her as they negotiated the rough, overgrown path. "I've never known you to hold back what you're thinking." When Tauriel again insisted it had been nothing, he frowned a little, but let it go. He could ask her again later, when their prisoners had been restored safely to their cells and his father had been appeased. He had a vague hope it might concern... well. No time for such considerations. They reached an overlook a few lengths from the gate. The dwarves were moving swiftly with the current: the group of barrels—several of which had now been separated from the others in the chaos—were nearing the gate. Two armored sentries stood guard on the bridge that covered the only, and now blocked, opening, their spears lowered at the ready.

Bifur uttered a few choice words in Khuzdul that quite summed up the Company's shock and dismay. So close, and yet... so far. They hadn't counted on there being a further gate barring their escape. Thorin assessed the blockade ahead, a determined jut to his chin. They'd come too far to go back now. He wasn't giving up.

"Billa." He turned to the burglar, whose barrel he was adamantly holding up against his own. "We need to open that gate."

Dwalin, behind them, grunted. "Good luck with tha'. We've no weapons other than her little toy sword."

"That 'toy sword' saved your life, Brother," Balin interjected, paddling his barrel closer to the others. He sighed, shaking his snowy head. "Not looking promising, Thorin. Any ideas?"

Billa was thinking furiously. They needed... they needed... an idea sparked in her fertile brain and she started to heave herself up out of her barrel, bracing herself against the edges.

"Kili!" she yelled, glancing over Dwalin's head. "Fili! With me! Bifur, Bofur, you're the closest to the bank—start throwing whatever you can get your hands on!" The halfling made a brave leap toward the bank and caught a branch, her legs splashing into the water an instant before she started hauling herself upward. If the elven guards were at all surprised, they didn't show it. One swung his spear toward Billa, while the other kept his eyes on the barrels below.

Thorin watched with barely-suppressed horror as his burglar rushed, unarmed, up the bank and toward the elven guards. He gripped her sword tightly and wished he'd thought to give it back to her before she'd initiated her unbelievably stupid, tremendously bold plan.

Billa prayed her idea would work. It was reckless—just reckless enough that maybe it was catch them off-guard. She dodged the spear-tip and dove between his legs. The elf let out a startled yell in his
native tongue—and now the hobbit had both guards' eyes on her. Fili was scrambling up the bank, and Kili was just ahead of him, and neither of them had a clue what they were supposed to be doing until Billa yelled, "The lever!" There it was; a carved lever, like the one that had released the trap door, jutting out of the stone above the gate.

Legolas watched in disbelief as the dwarves affected their mad plan, most of their barrels now pushed by the current up against the gate, beneath the bridge. The two young ones, though, were on the bridge, and had already succeeded—with their smaller female that Tauriel realized was the long sought-after “Billa”—in incapacitating the two guards, flinging one into the river and knocking the other senseless with the butt of his own spear.

Thorin shoved two of the empty barrels back out from under the bridge. “Get in!” he called, his voice echoing from beneath the stone structure.

“Go on.” Kili waved a hand at his brother. “Help Billa. I’ll get the gate, and be right behind you.” He winked at Fili and headed for the lever at the top of the stairs.

Legolas looked fit to be tied, fumbling at his back for his bow sheath. Coming up empty, he realized that in his haste to overtake the dwarves, he’d forgotten to stop by the bowmaster to retrieve his weapon (it had needed a replacement string).

“He’s going to pull the lever!” There was panic in his eyes as he gestured toward the dark-haired dwarf, who was even now reaching for the lever. He could only imagine the look on his father’s face when they relayed the news of their failure, and he wasn’t about to see it played out in truth. “Quick! Don’t let them escape!”

Tauriel had her bow in hand already, arrow set to the string. She honestly didn't remember preparing to shoot, but it was such a habit now that it might have happened at any point during their pursuit of the escaping dwarves. She could be charged with high treason if she didn’t obey immediately, but the female hesitated a split second, feeling as though she were being crushed between a mountain and a boulder. As captain of the Woodland Guard, it was her duty to return these prisoners to the dungeon. As a Silvan elf, who chose untold years past to stay here in Middle Earth rather than sailing away to the West, she had a duty also to the land she loved, and these dwarves were the ones that were trying to save it. But Legolas's wild blue gaze was on her.

Mechanically, Tauriel raised her bow, took aim, and with a silent prayer, released the arrow. It flew straight and true, and buried itself to mid-shaft in Kili's thigh. Non-fatal shot, but more than enough pain to stun a trained warrior.

Billa had already jumped. Above her Kili's agonized scream made her twist in mid-air, desperate to help him and helpless to do so. Rather than landing squarely in the barrel, she hit the rim hard and splashed into the water. Fili landed awkwardly in his own barrel, bashing his arm against the side so tears of pain sprang to his eyes.

"KILI! NO, KILI!"

Kili couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. The shot had dropped him instantly, and even with as much adrenaline as was now surging through his stunned body, the pain was such that he couldn't even begin to move his leg without sending jolts of fire into his skull. He lay on the stone a moment, trembling, then forced himself onto his back, still not completely sure what had happened. He could see the lever above him now through shaky, blurred vision, and he realized he had to pull it. He had to. Simple as that. At the moment, it seemed an arduous mountain to climb. Gritting his teeth against the pain, he forced himself into a sitting position, supporting himself with one hand on the ground behind him and reaching upward with the other, his fingers outstretched, trembling.
Thorin had heard Kili's cry, and the distress in Fili's voice as he called his brother's name. He felt something like ice running through his blood. "Kili," he whispered, grief and horror already settling in his stomach like cold, heavy stones. In the back of his mind, there was the image of a little dwarrow, dark hair bouncing about his eager face, his brown eyes bright with delight as he chased his fair-haired brother around their harried, exhausted uncle's chair. Thorin swallowed, his fingers curled tightly around the rim of his barrel, his eyes and heart 50 years and countless miles away.

Tauriel was tearing through the long grass, her bow gripped tightly in one hand, her arrows forgotten in the quiver on her back. She had to reach Kili before he pulled the lever, before he lost too much blood, before he realized that the shaft sticking out of his leg had the green and white fletching of the Woodland Guard. The others, her fellows, were hard on her heels.

She knew Kili wasn't going to make it in time. The lever was too high, he was in too much pain. Tauriel didn't think about it. She stopped to draw another arrow, and the others, as they dashed past her, took a wider route to avoid her line of fire. The lever came down with a clunk. Tauriel's arrow thudded into the wood barely a hair's breadth from Kili's hand.

"KILI!" Fili had braced himself against the stone arch. As his brother rolled off the ledge and plunged toward the water below, Fili shoved himself away from the edge. Kili dropped into Fili's barrel, the arrow shaft snapping off close to his leg as the dwarf was wedged into the space Fili made for him, and the barrel went briefly underwater. A little behind the others, they were swept downstream and away from the elves, out of their reach. Tauriel stood on the bridge, watching them race toward the rapids.

Legolas pulled up beside the red-haired elf, shaking his head in dismay. They were too late. There would be no catching them, not now that they had the fiercest of the rapids driving them on. Soon they would be out of the Woodland Realm altogether, and no longer in the Elves' jurisdiction. He sighed, looking down at the flat stone beneath his feet and the pools and streaks of crimson trailing over the ledge. With a grunt borne more of frustration than exertion, he wrenched Tauriel's arrow out of the lever and slid it back into her quiver.

"Father will not be pleased." He slanted a glance at his companion that betrayed his fell mood, but did not speak his true thought. She could have killed him if she'd had a mind to. She missed on purpose.
Thorin had hold of Fili's barrel, and was trying to keep it upright as much as possible, but it was a lost cause once they hit the brunt of the rapids. The poor barrel, overloaded with two dwarves, tipped this way and that, going under frequently. Thorin's face bore a stricken look, and though he was still barking orders and directing the others around this or that obstacle as best he could, it was easy to see he was only just holding together. Kili was losing too much blood, and had gone alarmingly pale and listless.

"Fili, see if you can bind his leg," Thorin urged. It wouldn't be easy, but they had to try.

The ride through the rapids wasn't kind to any of them. At one point, Bombur's barrel was actually flung up onto the bank, and the fat dwarf was forced to pick it up and jump back into the torrent to avoid getting left behind. Thorin occasionally glimpsed Billa, clinging desperately to the edge of Dori's barrel, and prayed she wouldn't be crushed between oak and stone.

At length, the river calmed, and the dwarves were able to maneuver their barrels over to the bank and crawl out onto the mud. The rapids had flung them apart despite Thorin's best efforts. He'd been among the first to drag himself ashore, and now the dark-haired dwarf was standing on a rocky outcropping, waving the others over. Fili was retying a strip of cloth about his brother's leg, nearly as white as Kili was. Oin splashed up onto the bank with Dwalin, reeling from their reckless escape. He staggered up onto drier land, shaking water out of his ear trumpet.

Dori and Ori were paddling closer now, supporting a horribly limp, wet hobbit between the two of them. There was a patch of sticky red in Billa's wet curls, and as they dragged her out of the water, she moaned and protested weakly that she would be fine after a short nap. The old healer waddled over to Billa, practically swimming in his wet clothes, and quickly assessed that she was alright, as she'd claimed.

"Just a scratch," he said, relieved, clucking at her handlers to clean it before moving on to Kili. Fili had settled his brother on a flat rock near the shore, and the poor dwarf looked up at Oin with a trembling gaze, seeming more than a little liable to pass out.

"W- wha- what... h- ha- happened?" Kili stuttered, shuddering, obviously in shock. His brother shushed him with quiet assurances that things would be better soon.

"Too risky to remove the point here," the old one grunted, fishing in his now-damp pouch. "For now, we stop the bleeding and try to make you comfortable."

"We haven't the time," Thorin said, voice full of regret, glancing at his nephews and then at Oin. "We must reach the lake before dark. We're too exposed out here." The Company was a disorganized mess, but Thorin rounded them up again. Oin checked the bandage Fili had tied, and after adjusting it slightly, gave Kili some of the herbs Billa had salvaged for him.
"We need someplace safe," the healer told Thorin grimly. "And relatively clean. This boy needs attention as quickly as we can spare it."

"How far to Laketown?" asked Billa, wincing as she probed the scratches on her scalp gingerly. "Maybe we can seek shelter there."

"The Lake Men won't be pleased with us," said Balin warningly, wringing water out of his beard. "They do good business with the Woodland Realm. We'll be in a lovely kettle of fish if the elven envoys reach Laketown before we can share our half of the story."

"We've little choice," said Thorin, shaking his head at Balin. "We've no food or supplies, and no weapons. It'll be the Lake Men or nothing." He turned to Fili. "Can he walk, or will he need to be carried outright?"

At this point, Fili looked downright frightened. A fresh wound and a dunking in the river--what if Kili got sick? What if the Lake Men turned then back over to the elves? The blond looked from his brother's face to their uncle and shook his head slightly, still ashen. "Even if he can walk, I don't think he should. I can carry him-"

Dwalin let out a short bark of harsh laughter and approached. Shouldering Kili's shivering body so his arms hung to the left, and his legs on the right, he nodded slightly to Thorin. "Lead the way, lad."

Kili moaned softly, trying to withhold any more noticeable outcry as he was slung along like a sack of potatoes over the hulking dwarf's shoulders. Mahal forbid Uncle think he was weak. He thought, in passing, it was a funny thing to prioritize. His head was very fuzzy now, like there were pins and needles prickling at the edges of his thoughts. His face and hands felt cold, numb, and he was glad there wasn't much in his stomach. An arrow. But who had shot it? Neither of the guards they'd faced had had a bow, and they hadn't seen anyone else around. Then again, they hadn't looked. It didn't make any sense to him, no matter how he tried to filter what little he knew through his hazy mind.

Ori was looking on with concern, wringing out her knitted scarf and arm warmers. She wished there was something she could do to help. Her brothers had been coddling her from the start, and now that she was no longer one of the most vulnerable members of the Company, she felt compelled to return some of the care that had been given to her.

"You alright, Billa?" she asked, her brown eyes sympathetic. "I can get a rag to clean your scratches with, if you like."

"I think I'll be alright, Ori," Billa said with a watery smile. "If you wouldn't mind staying close, though... I'm not quite as steady on my feet as I-" The hobbit interrupted herself with a violent sneeze, and shook her head, scattering icy droplets from her damp curls.

Ori stayed at Billa's elbow, growing increasingly worried as the halfling continued to sneeze and began to look rather pale. "Begging your pardon, Billa, but I think you may've caught cold. Here." Her wool scarf had already dried somewhat, as the fabric was good at wicking off water, and she wrapped it around the hobbit's neck, smiling as they continued on.

"Caught cold," Billa muttered, her voice muffled by the scarf. "I hope not. Probably just... the light. Been underground too long."

The Company straggled along in Thorin's wake until they topped a steep rise. The lake came into view, and with it a barge, and a man with messy dark hair and a bow slung about his shoulders. The
bargeman eyed them nervously as they approached. A group of dwarves, wet and injured, obviously unarmed and carrying no supplies- they made an odd sight, to be sure.

"What can I do for you, friends?" he asked cautiously.

Thorin eyed the man with equal wariness, but considering their current state, he was more disposed toward courtesy than usual. "We seek passage to Laketown. Is your vessel available for hire?" They had little enough to offer. They hadn't brought much in the way of money to begin with, though each had some silver sewn into the hem of their tunics, in the way of seasoned travelers. They'd meant to save it for emergencies, but as Thorin watched his nephew suffer, he figured this was as good an emergency as any.

The bargeman hesitated a moment, still looking them over. His eyes rested briefly on Kili, who looked torn between passing out and being sick, Fili, who was nursing a nasty patch of bruised scratches on his arm, and Billa, who was sneezing again.

"The town doesn't take kindly to outsiders," he said uncertainly, though already half persuaded. "And I haven't a permit to carry passengers."

Dwalin began muttering something unsavory, and Thorin silenced him with a look. Couldn't really blame the dwarf, though. They were all cold, wet, and exhausted, and had little patience for haggling with a bargeman who seemed apt to refuse them anyway.

"Permit?" Thorin looked a bit perplexed. "Why would you need a... permit?" He glanced at Balin to let him know anytime he wanted to step in and help would be quite welcome. The older dwarf had a knack for getting others to see things his way. Balin's expression was grave as he moved forward and encouraged the man to answer Thorin's question. After a moment's hesitation, the bargeman did, explaining the Master of Laketown was using a man's business and what he was and wasn't allowed to carry in his boats or sell in the marketplace as a way to tax a city already starving to death.

"So what we need," summed Balin with a sly smile, "is a smuggler." The man eyed him a moment, then nodded. Balin smiled wider. "We'll pay double. We have great need to get into Laketown. We need supplies, weapons--and if we succeed, you will be a rich man."

"Who are you?" asked the bargeman suspiciously. "And why do you wish to visit a dying city?"

"We are but simple merchants of the Blue Mountains traveling to our cousins in the Iron Hills, lad. We met misfortune on our road, and require assistance."

After a great sigh, the bargeman waved them forward. "Payment in advance," he said quickly, "or no deal. I've need of your patronage, as it happens. My latest shipment hasn't come through as it ought."

"What is it ye ship, lad?"

"Empty barrels, from the Woodland Realm."

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Thranduil's body grew rigid, his hands gripping the sides of his throne. He leaned forward, eyes boring into his very penitent-looking son. "How could you have lost them? Thirteen dwarves escaped my walls beneath your incompetent noses, and I want to know how."

Legolas shifted nervously, feeling like an insect under observation. "Father, we only had word after it was too late. They'd breached the water gate by the time we saw them, and by then, there was no stopping them."
"They escaped by way of the river? Through the cellars, then. Clever. Perhaps they had help...." He went no further with this train of thought. At least, not out loud. "They'd slain the guards at the gate, then?"

Legolas shook his head. "Light injuries, but both alive."

"And did you even try to stop the dwarves when you'd sighted them?" Thranduil's tone was excoriating, and Legolas dropped his gaze. "Surely they were in range of your arrows!"

The prince stole a brief glance at Tauriel and nodded slightly. "We tried," he said carefully. "Hit one of the young ones--a crippling shot. But before we could make any use of it, he'd jumped and they all slipped through the gate."

Thranduil snorted. "'A crippling shot'? I take it the arrow was yours, Captain?" Thranduil smirked a little at the discomfort that flickered across Tauriel's face. "Don't look surprised. My son is an open book--he cannot deceive me. If he were ashamed for himself, he would stand tall and accept my reproof. Well, what have you to say? Why did you not take a killing shot when you had the chance, stop the whole escapade from going any further?"

Tauriel watched her king for a long moment, her expression stoic and her gaze steady. Unashamed. "I didn't feel lethal force was necessary, sire." Her eyes flicked over to Legolas, as though speaking to him also.

Thranduil frowned down at her. "What you felt had no bearing on your duty. You were to stop the dwarves. That was your task, and you failed in it."

Legolas took a step forward. "Father, I didn't tell her to kill him. I... I told her to stop him. He was trying to pull the lever to open the gate, and I'd left my bow behind. She dropped him before he could pull it, but... he forced himself up as we were running to take him and...."

"And he opened the gate," Thranduil finished in a patronizing tone. "Well, then I'd say lethal force was necessary, wouldn't you? If you'd killed him, Captain, the dwarves would not have escaped." With a sigh, the king stood and turned his back on them, hands clasped behind him. "Now they go to wake the beast from his slumber. Your little blunder may cost them dearly, as well as anyone who harbors them. They'd have been better off living out the rest of their days in my dungeon."

Tauriel swallowed. This was a part of her plan that she hadn't liked to think about. And yet... "I don't believe they go to wake the dragon, my king. Thorin is proud and stubborn, but he is no fool. They cannot hope to overpower Smaug with a force of fourteen." Thranduil's gaze sharpened, and the she-elf stiffened slightly, answering before he could ask. "The intruder we couldn't find... was a companion of the dwarves. One 'Billa' by name, sir. She helped them escape."

Thranduil's frown became a look of distinct surprise. "She? A female dwarf? I'd thought the dwarves guarded their women more carefully than gold. Why would they risk one in a venture like this?" He pondered to himself whether this 'Billa' might have had some kind of personal connection with the Company, a wife or sister that wouldn't be parted from him she loved.

"I... don't think she's a dwarf, sir." Tauriel shook her head slightly, glancing at Legolas again. He'd heard as much as she had of the dwarves' talk. "I don't know what she is--they referred to her only as their 'burglar.' Too small to be a dwarf. Hardly the size of a child, sir."

Thranduil turned at this. "Not a dwarf? Then... what? What else could she be?"
Legolas cleared his throat. "I'd thought... of course, it may be a foolish theory, but I'd thought she—or rather it, since I hadn't seen her until the incident at the gate—might be," he looked immensely uncomfortable, "a sorcerer of some kind. She walked among us for so long unseen—no dwarf could have done so. It was as if... she weren't visible at all. Wasn't that so, Tauriel?"

Tauriel nodded, looking distinctly unsettled by the thought. "There have been... incidents, since the dwarves' capture, that have suggested we had an intruder in our midst—an intruder that no one could locate. More than once, I thought I heard the passing of a light-footed creature... but saw nothing."
The captain shivered slightly. What if she'd been wrong? What if the dwarves were allied with the very dark powers she sought to thwart?

Thranduil's dark brows met, a troubled cloud passing over his face. "Why did you not speak to me of this when you'd first begun to suspect that something was amiss? I might have looked into it myself and seen something your own eyes passed by. You know my power. I may have drawn out this creature and discovered its purpose had you thought to inform me."

Thranduil took a step down toward Legolas, a dire look in his eyes. "You know not what you may have allowed to roam freely through our halls, my son. You are young yet, naive. Evil has ever sought to find a way into the places that have resisted it longest. Even the most impenetrable stronghold invariably has... a weakness." Legolas lowered his head in shame. He knew well to what weakness his father was referring.

"That was my failing, my lord, not his." Tauriel stepped forward, her expression fixed and determined. "I thought we would be able to find the creature and bring her to you. I never thought she would elude us for so long. At times... I even doubted the creature existed except in my own mind. Forgive me, my lord. I have failed." She bowed deeply, her hair falling forward over her shoulders.

"No," said Legolas, pulling her up again. "No. I take the responsibility, Father, for what's happened. I... wanted to prove myself capable, to catch the one that had eluded us. I didn't realize, until the very end, that this may have been... beyond my skill to manage."

Thranduil seemed mildly placated. "As I'd thought. Perhaps nothing will come of it. Should Thorin Oakenshield meet with success, we may yet have the opportunity to find the truth of the matter." He sighed, waving a hand dismissively. "I trust a lesson has been learned. Legolas, you may go. Captain, I will have a word." The prince bowed and took his leave, casting one final, reluctant glance over his shoulder at Tauriel. When he'd gone, the Elvenking moved another pace toward the red-haired elleth.

"My son has grown fond of you, Captain," he said in an undertone, his voice deep and resonant in the intimate space between them. "You have known him many hundreds of years as friend and prince, but I sense there is more to it than that now. Have you... encouraged this?"

Tauriel resisted the urge to laugh. Something more between Legolas and herself? Indeed her prince was fond, perhaps a touch too fond, but would Thranduil suffer his son to ever be anything more than friend to her, a Silvan elf? Still, the question begged thought. Yes, she, too had noticed the "something more" between them, and occasionally, she wondered at it. But when did she have time to entertain the fancies of a golden-haired prince?

"I... have encouraged nothing of the sort to my knowledge, my king," she replied at last. "I had not thought you would... allow your son to treat with an elf of such low bearing as myself." But she couldn't stop a slightly hopeful note from creeping into her words to betray her. The idea that Legolas might feel more than friendship for her was one that moved her deeply. What if... what if? And what if it was all naught?
Thranduil shook his head. "I would not allow it if love were a thing that could be commanded away. The race of Men, perhaps, experiences passing infatuation. Among Elves, such things develop slowly, and are not so easily... dismissed." Thranduil drew himself up, staring down at her with scrutiny. "I have spoken to him about this, and he informs me his choice has been made, and will not be turned from unless," he lowered his chin a little, "you will not have him." The king sniffed lightly, as though he were amused by the thought. "To have a prince so taken with you, a commoner... it is not the way of wisdom, and it cannot end well. But," he sighed in exaggerated resignation, "for my part, I will not forbid it. I lament the diluting of royal, high elven blood, but better the line endure in some fashion than not at all."

Tauriel realized she was gaping at the king and closed her mouth with an astounded click of teeth. Legolas... loved her? Had chosen her? Tauriel was in a daze, her mind spinning. "Thank you, my lord," she murmured numbly. When she looked at Thranduil, she could see distaste, but she could also see resignation. Had he accepted their union as inevitable?

Legolas will hate me for what I must do.

"My lord... I must... speak with the prince." Tauriel could hear her own shock as she scrambled to recover. This changed nothing. It changed nothing. And yet, it changed everything. Oh, how she hated pain and grief.

Thranduil nodded, turning away to settle gracefully on his throne again, the long train of his shimmering, silver robe swirling behind him. "Very well, Captain. But think well upon my words. I will neither forbid nor endorse your relationship--I will only permit it, if you deem that you are... worthy of my son's affections." There was the hint of a smirk in his expression now. He waved a hand, his long, pale fingers graceful as the wing of a swan. As she turned to leave, his voice came again, as of an afterthought... or a final warning.

"Do not toy with him, Tauriel. He deserves to know the truth, whatever it may be."

Tauriel paused, looking back at him. The resignation, the sadness... had it been an act? For now, as she looked at him, she could see that he knew very well--he knew better than anyone--that she would never be worthy. It was almost as though he'd been teasing her with the possibility of what she could have, if only things were a little different. She bowed slightly, and departed. As soon as the door was shut behind her, the captain broke into a jog. She needed to find Legolas. She had to tell him.

"So they left everything behind, then?" Legolas asked, glancing into the nearest cell. "Well, that would have aided in stealth, certainly. Did you find anything else? Anything suspicious?"

The chief guard thought a moment. "No," he said, presently. "I'll have them look again."

"Good." The blond prince turned away. "Let me know if anything..." He trailed off when Tauriel came rushing up the walkway, an odd look on her face. "What's wrong?" Legolas asked, frowning worriedly. "What did Father say?"

Tauriel stopped, her glance flicking over the guard, uncertainty clear in her face. "May I speak with you alone, my prince?"

Legolas indicated that they could, concern turning to something like alarm. Tauriel was clearly very upset. It wasn't at all like the stoic Guard Captain to let her emotions rule her like this. Once they were alone, the red-haired elleth turned quickly to face her friend.

"Legolas, I can't stay here and do nothing. I must go after them." Such emotion was rare, but this
was sharpened to such intensity, it fair radiated from her. It was as though, under the surface, Tauriel were almost frantic.

Legolas frowned. "To bring them back?" He shook his head. "It's a lost cause, Tauriel. Surely they'll have made it to Esgaroth by the time we could overtake them."

"Not to catch them." Tauriel shook her head, meeting his gaze out of necessity, and wishing she could look away. "To help them."

"Help them?" Legolas looked as though every ounce of blood in his body had frozen solid. When he moved again, there was horror in his eyes. He leaned closer to her, glancing behind him to see that no one was listening. "Help them?" he said a little more quietly, but just as incredulously. "Have you gone mad? Why would you want to help them? You've already helped them enough, Tauriel, letting the young one live long enough to open the gate! If the king hears you've even asked..." She could finish that sentence as well as he could.

"I'm not asking, Legolas." Tauriel felt as though her insides were twisting around in tight, serpentine knots. "If only to ensure they don't wake the beast... I must go. Please understand, I do not do this out of love for dwarves. I go... to fight the Darkness. I go... to strike, before it swallows us all." Her green eyes looked suspiciously wet, but she refused to look away. Showing weakness would do her no favors. "It has devoured our beautiful wood. We can no longer see the stars. We cower underground while the spiders of Dol Goldur defile our trees and the paths we have walked in peace since the time of the Last Alliance. I cannot live in a world of darkness, Legolas. I... I am not strong enough."

Legolas was bewildered, but his gaze wasn't without understanding. He sighed and looked away. "I, too, lament the evil that has tainted our ancestral lands, but I don't see how going after the dwarves—who, for all we know, may have allied with some evil force themselves—will accomplish anything of worth." He met her tearful eyes again, forcing a faint smile. "Tauriel, come. You're upset. You've never made good decisions in this frame of mind. Let's go somewhere private and talk this over. We'll find some middle ground. Going after the dwarves, though," he lowered his voice, "is not an option. Father will view it as a betrayal, pure and simple. He will not allow you to return, and I...." He tried to swallow the emotion beginning to creep in to his tone, "I wouldn't see you again, Tauriel. He would ensure we were separated for good. I can't lose you. Perhaps that makes me weak, but... I can't. Please."

Tauriel took his hand. It was the first time, in her memory, anyway, that she had ever initiated any sort of affectionate physical contact with him. "We will be separated, in the end. You will sail to the Undying Lands with your kin... and I will stay here, with mine." She paused and took a deep breath, blinking to rid herself of the tears she dared not shed. "Legolas, we will never truly be together as you wish it to be. But you will always be my truest friend... even when it seems I've forgotten what that means. I pray you'll forgive me someday." She released his hand and turned, her throat tight. She had to go now, or she would be too late. If Kili didn't sicken from infection, he would be weak from blood loss, and the Lake was full of ice at this time of year.

Legolas watched her go, face stricken, eyes cold. So there was a reason she'd seemed so oblivious to his affections all these long years. She didn't love him. Never had. Never would. He couldn't decide which hurt more: this knowledge, or the knowledge that his father, when he heard of her decision, would brand her the most heinous of traitors. Legolas would tell him, of course.

Not right away, though. If there was one thing he owed her for her centuries of faithful service—if not her centuries of friendship—it was a head start. The king would doubtless want her brought back to face judgment, and Legolas could no longer protect her. That would be up to those she now sought
so ardently to help—among them, the very dwarf she herself had shot not an hour before.
Thorin exchanged a meaningful look with Balin. They'd been riding in the poor man's livelihood, and most of those barrels--when they were retrieved--would probably be unfit for anything but burning. Ah, well.

"We'll pay you well, bargeman. Half up front, half when we have the rest of our supplies." Bard and Balin quickly reached an agreement on what would be fair, and the dwarves wearily retrieved the required amount from their seams (Gloin grumbling rather loudly to himself), and presented the coins to Bard before boarding the barge.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Dwalin rumbled in Thorin's ear. "Trustin' a Lake Man with the lion's share o' our money."

Thorin was standing in the bow. "Or we could wait here to be caught by the Elves--or worse. Do you think we're in any shape to defend ourselves?"

"All the same, I don't like the looks of 'im."

Ori helped Billa sit against the side, huddling beside her. "Don't worry. We'll be warm and dry soon, I think." She smiled reassuringly at the shivering halfling, but she was inwardly troubled.

The dwarves were not a happy lot, and referred to their companion almost exclusively as "bargeman" or "hey, you." Balin sat near the helm, speaking quietly with the man, whose name was Bard. He was uncomfortable with the situation, to be sure, but he glanced worriedly and often at Kili and Billa.

"Hardly more than children," he murmured, his brow creased with mingled anxiety and concern. "'Misfortune' hardly seems a fair descriptor."

"They're hardier than they look," said Balin in an undertone. "But sometimes I wonder if it was wise to bring them."

The air grew chill and damp as they moved further out into Long Lake. Soon, chunks of ice were floating by them, and it became clear that the weather had not been kindly to the men of Laketown. A sudden, icy breeze tore the clinging mist asunder. For a moment, the shape of a single, jagged
peak could be seen on the horizon, looming solemnly over the land.

Kili was shuddering like a leaf in an autumn gale, his eyes squeezed tightly shut as his brother held his hand and whispered encouragement. They’d be safe soon, Fili said. They would get to Laketown, then he could rest properly. The opiates had, at least, eased much of the pain, but the young dwarf was still in a bad way, his system struggling to overcome the strain of shock and blood loss.

Thorin looked on, tight-lipped, and the only thing that momentarily relaxed the concerned frown on his face was the sight of the Lonely Mountain, lurking darkly behind the mist like the great beast that dwelt beneath it. They were nearly there. Nearly home. The thought roused his sinking spirits. Home.

He paced across the deck, ducking under the pivoting spar, and caught sight of Billa huddling beside Ori. His frown returned. She wasn't well—that much was immediately clear. He moved quickly over to her, bending down to speak more privately, his hands clasped behind him.

"Nearly there, Billa."

"She's freezing, Thorin. I can't warm her up." Ori's doleful brown eyes were frightened. Thorin exhaled heavily, hesitating, glancing at the others. They were mostly occupied gazing at the Mountain, looks of wonder and reverence on their exhausted faces. Propriety be damned, Thorin decided, and sat on her other side, pressing her tiny, shivering body into his own. Dwarves were harder than hobbits, thicker-skinned, warmer. Warm enough to forestall hypothermia. That, at least, he had to offer. As often as he'd needed her in the past, right now, she needed him.

Billa was shivering violently, but having a dwarf on either side seemed to help. "I-I-I'm al-al-r-right, really. Jus-ju-just a li-li-li-li... a bit cold." The halfling clenched her teeth against the shivering and chattering, but that only brought about another fit of sneezing. There wasn't enough time between the sneezes for her to breathe properly, so by the time she'd finished, she was red-faced and gasping.

Something clattered on the deck, and a moment later, Bard nudged his bow out of the way and dropped his heavy longcoat over the three of them. "We've still a ways to go." The Lake man's voice was gruff, but his expression was strained and anxious as he glanced from Thorin, Ori, and Billa to Fili and Kili. "When we get closer, you should all move below. We won't get into the city at all if they think I'm breaking code."

Thorin nodded appreciatively, wrapping the coat more fully around Billa. "If it's all the same to you," he said, getting up, "we'll move down now. We're... ill-equipped for this weather." Without bothering to ask, as he was more than a little sure she wouldn't be reasonable about it, he scooped Billa up in his arms, still wrapped in the coat, and moved toward the trap door Bard kicked open for him.

"Fili, Dwalin, bring Kili," he ordered over his shoulder. "The rest of you, move below as you wish." The roof of the hold was low, even by dwarf standards, and Thorin found himself in danger of hitting his head as he moved to a small, flat bench overlain with a blanket, setting the shivering halfling down and resuming his place beside her. He ignored the searching glances of several of the others as they appeared at the bottom of the narrow steps. It was none of their concern how he chose to protect the Company's burglar. He tucked the coat around her again and drew her against his chest.

"Hold on, Billa. We'll be there soon."
The hold of the barge was little more than a crawl-space, really. If one didn't know better, one might think that the trap door was intentionally concealed beneath that pile of rope and canvas. The space was damp and, if possible, even colder than the deck above, though the air was stale and old, smelling of wet tar and soggy bread. The walls were slick with damp, green mold, and tiny icicles dotted the sturdy beams above their heads.

Billa made several incoherent grunting sounds as Thorin settled her against his chest. She was trying to speak, but by then her sinuses were so thoroughly clogged that even if she had managed to find the words, they'd have been near-incomprehensible. At length, wheezing quietly and attempting to wedge herself inside Thorin's coat while he was still wearing it, the halfling let her eyes close. Though she still shivered sporadically, she seemed to be in the process of falling asleep.

Fili wiped the perspiration from his brother's skin after he'd been settled on a bench. The move had not been easy for poor Kili--at least now he seemed to be unconscious. It wasn't a peaceful unconsciousness, but he wasn't moaning and twitching in pain anymore. Sitting back with an exhausted sigh, he shuddered and tried not to let the burning in his throat turn into real tears. Small. Soft. Warm. Someone sat beside him, and Fili shot a surprised look into large, anxious brown eyes. Ori. She was twisting her knitted arm-warmers around her wrists.

"They'll be alright," he offered with a brave smile, covering one of her hands with his. "We all will. You'll see." He had nothing at all to substantiate the claim, but it was infinitely better than just letting her sit and look frightened.

Ori nodded a little, tugging fretfully on one of her ribbon-wound braids. She'd braided ribbons into her hair for no other reason than there was nothing better to do in the Elvenking's dungeons. She couldn't help but wonder if anyone had noticed--or would notice. But something in Fili's voice and manner was reassuring, even if she sensed he doubted his own claims.

"I hope so," she said, smiling faintly. "I'd be sad if we lost either of them. They've always been so kind to me. Well, not to say you haven't," she corrected herself quickly, "because you've been wonderful. Just I... oh, I don't know." Her cheeks began to feel very warm, and she knew she was blushing. Again.

Fili politely averted his eyes, pretending not to notice her blush and trying very hard not to smile. It seemed somehow rude to be so cheered by her embarrassment. Giving her hand a gentle squeeze, he sighed, feeling a little less like the world was falling apart.

"It's frightening," he admitted, his words almost a whisper in his effort not to be overheard, "the idea that either of them might... not be with us anymore. Honestly, I think Uncle will forbid it." He chuckled weakly, and shook his head. "But... I guess... I get the feeling they've both lived through worse. They have no excuse. They have to... we're too close." The blond glanced at her, feeling anxiety clawing at his chest, and at the same time, a smile tugged at his lips. Perhaps his sense of humor was broken, but laughter was fighting to escape along with the desperate pleas to the Valar to save his brother.

Thorin leaned against the wall, feeling strangely... drowsy. It seemed the harrowing escape in the barrels coupled with the horror of believing--even for a minute--that his nephew was dead was an exhausting combination.

This felt very nice, he admitted to himself. Being with her. Being beside her. Not just because it had been something he'd longed for for some time--holding his burglar to himself, protecting her with his own arms--but also because, well, she didn't seem to mind. Quite the opposite, in fact. He wondered faintly if, after she was well again, she would be upset with him. Pretend it hadn't happened. Make as
little of it as he would ordinarily have made of it himself. In some small, but insistent corner of his heart, he very much hoped not.

Ori blushed even redder than she had before. It was a curse to have to display her emotions so obviously--like being an open book. But Fili's hand was very warm, and his grip firm. Calm. Reassuring. In spite of her embarrassment, which she knew would pass, she was comforted.

"Your uncle has led us well. I trust him. And," she fidgeted a little, the sides of her worn and scuffed leather boots scraping together out of habit, "I trust you." She sneaked a nervous glance at his bemused, blue-grey eyes. "You did a good job, I think, leading us in the forest when Thorin was asleep. Maybe someday I'll... write a poem about it. Not that my poetry's much good," she added quietly, looking down at their entwined hands. Fili barely had time for more than a self-conscious chuckle before something fist-shaped hit the back of his neck hard enough to make stars pop in front of his eyes. A moment later, he was on his back on the floor, though he hadn't the faintest idea how he'd gotten there, and Nori was kneeling on his chest.

"I warned you," he growled. "I warned you about touchin' my sister." Ori jumped up, startled, horror written all over her face.

"Nori! What are you doing?" She grabbed her brother's arm, trying with all her (very limited) might to pull him off of Fili. She didn't succeed. "He was only trying to help, Nori. He didn't do anything wrong!"

Thorin stiffened and sat up, opening his eyes sleepily. "What's the meaning of this? What happened?" Based on the current position of the row's participants, he could fairly well guess what had happened.

While Ori was trying to pull her brother off of Fili, Nori was digging his knee into Fili's ribs. The blond blinked, trying to clear his head while his lungs labored against a great weight. But he wasn't completely helpless. Now that Nori was distracted, Fili reached up, grabbed the older dwarf's shirt-front, and heaved him to the side. Nori growled a curse, but as Fili tried to roll to his feet, he bashed his own head against the side of the bench he'd just been sitting on, and sat down with a grunt of pain.

By now, Billa was awake, and slipping unsteadily off of Thorin. She landed on the floor with a bump and a yelp that turned into a storm of sneezes. The halfling's eyes and nose ran terribly as she sneezed and sneezed, trying desperately to breathe.

Ori shot a rather furious look at her brother, kneeling next to Fili. "Are you alright?" She inspected his head, her dainty fingers separating his golden mane to see if he'd split his scalp open. To her relief, there was little more than an angry, reddening bump. She patted it, because that was really all she could think to do, looking guilty.

"I'm sorry, Fili. I didn't... I mean, he wasn't...." It was her fault, what had happened. She'd known her brother might react this way.

"Shoulda seen it coming," Fili whispered with a self-deprecating shrug. His gaze landed on Nori, who was anchored to the bench with Gloin holding his arms and Bofur sitting on him, looking smug.

"Give 'er a kiss fer us, lad," urged the hatted dwarf with a mischievous grin. "We can 'old 'im." Fili could feel the heat rising in his face and prayed it wasn't visible. Shooting a side-long look at Ori, he shook his head.
"Ignore them," he muttered, as Gloin chuckled.

Ori shrank into a little ball on the floor, flushing with embarrassment at the thought. Not that she would've minded overly much if Fili had... well. It just... made her feel strange, all melty and warm inside. She withdrew her hands into her arm warmers and lowered her head to her knees, tucking into herself like some sort of dwarven turtle. If anyone asked, she'd say she was cold.

Thorin glowered at Nori, quickly retrieving Billa from the floor.

Balin pressed a handkerchief into her hand. "Here ya are, Lass."

"Are you hurt, Billa?" Before she could answer, there was a shout from the deck.

"Everyone below. Now! We're approaching the gate." Bard's hushed voice was just audible below deck, and one by one, the remaining dwarves dropped into the hold, and the trap door banged shut after them.

Billa buried her face in Balin's handkerchief and gasped for air as her sneezes subsided. Leaning limply against Thorin, the halfling closed her eyes. Her coloring went from flushed to pallid in the space a few heartbeats. She looked absolutely miserable.

"I hate b-b-be-bein' sick," she mumbled thickly, starting to shiver again.

Thorin swaddled Billa in Bard's coat once more. It was an old, worn thing, and smelled like sweat, wet leather and damp wool, but it was warm, and for the moment, that made it priceless.

"Hold on, Billa," Thorin rumbled in what he fancied was a soothing tone. "I'll have you inside by a fire in a moment." If all goes well.

There was some amount of discussion up on deck, Bard's voice and an unfamiliar, strongly accented male voice. The dwarves listened, barely daring to breathe, for a few tense minutes. Then heavy footsteps approached above them, accompanied by very distinct words.

"Sorry, Bard, but I hafta check the hold. Master's orders. No exceptions." The dwarves in the hold were still as statues, eyes fixed on the boards above, straining their ears. Bard laughed, but it was a harsh, humorless sound.

"Come now, Deno. What could I have down there? You know as well as I do the only cargo I ever haul in the hold is fish, and it's the wrong season for that. I've already lost today's shipment, don't let's delay any more. I want to be home by my own hearth before tonight's ice sets in."

Billa shuddered, eyes watering as she all but smothered herself with the handkerchief, trying not to sneeze.

"I know, I know," said Deno, sounding apologetic. "Don't worry. It won't take but a moment. There've been some... incidents these past few weeks what have put the Master on edge. They're watching me, he said. Might come down on me own family, ya know, if I let anything slide." The door creaked open, and yellow lantern-light started to creep into the dim crawl-space below. A shadow stretched across the wall as Bard leaned down and clasped Deno's hand, pressing a goodly sum of money into his palm, wrapped in a bit of canvas to stop the coins making noise.

"They've sick and injured," the bargeman murmured, barely loud enough for those closest to the trap door to hear. "I've promised them aid... without it, they may die."

Deno hesitated, leaning down to peer into the crawlspace. The dwarves saw his blunt-featured face staring at them, illumined harshly in the light of his lamp.
"Dwarves?!" The whisper was awash with astonishment. "But I... Dwarves, Bard? Here?" It sounded almost as though he considered them something sprung from legend, more fairy-story than fact. How brief was the memory of Men. Thorin stood up slowly, moving into the shifting golden arc of the lantern.

"We have returned," he said simply.

Deno looked even more baffled. "But you're... but the... oh my." He sighed, turning back to Bard. "The Master'd kill me if he knew I'd allowed a group of dwarves smuggled into Laketown. But I... well, what am I to do?"

"What's going on there?" said an oily voice, from the deck. "What have you found, Deno?"

"Oh. Alfrid." Deno sounded terribly conflicted. He glanced back at the expectant, pleading faces of the dwarves. A weighty beat of silence.

"Uh, it's nothin'," he said at last, turning away. "Empty. Just thought I saw a... er... a rat."

"A rat?" Alfrid's greasy skepticism made Fili shiver. He had an arm around Ori's shoulders now, shielding her from sight, his eyes fixed on the opening above them.

"You'll have to take care of that, Bard," sneered Alfrid. "There's a fine for bringing pests into the city. Some'ow, I don't think rats are the only pests on board." There was a threatening note to his voice now, and the dwarves held their breath.

Billa wheezed frantically behind Thorin, still sitting on the bench where he'd left her. Balin was supporting her as she lost the fight, letting loose a minor explosion of sneezing. She suppressed it violently, face scrunched and weeping, the very damp handkerchief clamped over her nose and mouth, so the noise she made was like a loud, strangled squeak. There was silence on deck for a long moment.

"What was that?" asked Alfrid, his voice low and malicious. Deno seemed a bit at a loss. He hemmed and hawed for a moment, searching for words, then produced a very fake sounding cough.

"That was... that was me, Alfrid. Sorry. It's the blasted cold. Comin' down with somethin', I shouldn't wonder."

Alfrid scoffed. "Whadda you take me for? A simpleton like the common folk? A fool like you, Deno? I wanna know what you're protectin'. Guards, search the 'old."

Thorin turned back to the others with a look of dismay. "We'll never get anywhere trying to fight them," he said quickly, as the clanking of armor and weapons approached the entrance to the crawlspace. "I'll get us out of this when we've had a chance to explain ourselves." Dwalin glowered unhappily but saw that Thorin was right. Fighting would be no use. The first guard dropped through the trap door, and let out a cry of alarm.

"Dwarves, sir!" he called. "A whole gaggle of 'em."

"Dwarves?" Alfrid sounded incredulous and, for once, completely surprised. "Bring 'em up!" As the Company was herded up on deck, tight groups forming around Ori, Kili, and Billa, the guards watched them. One, the younger of the two and the one who had jumped into the hold, seemed rather awed by them, while the older glared at them suspiciously. Alfrid had a nasty smile on his sallow face, and was poking Bard in the chest with one long finger.

"You're in 'ot water now, aren't you? The great bowman, smugglin' dwarves into Laketown. Wait 'til
the Master 'ears about this."

Bard ignored Alfrid, but looked at Balin with a sorrowful shrug. They were all in for it now. "Sorry, friends."

They were marched off the barge and across a series of decks and ramshackle bridges in the shadows of tall, slapdash houses, all separated by a broad, filthy channel. The townsfolk stared in wonder as the group passed, the children leaning out of windows to get a better look, or pointing, tugging insistently at their mothers' aprons or their fathers' sleeves.

Thorin held his head high, a very ill-looking Billa bundled up in his arms. As much as he disliked being a spectacle, he'd carry himself like the royalty he was. Alfrid was bringing up the rear, smirking at Bard and barking at the guards now and then to "'urry it up." When they reached a surprisingly grand courtyard before a large, well-maintained structure with heavy double doors, they drew to a halt. Alfrid slipped inside, and a moment later, returned with a slouching, orange-haired man in fine, pompous clothes. The Master.

"Well, what's all this?" he cried in a plummy voice, looking rather bewildered.

Dwalin stepped forward, sweeping a guard's spear aside contemptuously to reach the front of the group. "We are the Dwarves of Erebor," he said in a great voice, his expression hard. "We are led by Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain." There was an unmistakable note of pride in the warrior's rough voice.

Fili, stooped under the unconscious weight of his injured brother, glanced at his uncle and felt the same pride and admiration that the others did. Thorin was every inch a king, even burdened with a violently shivering hobbit-lass. Billa looked small and frail in his arms, and Fili felt a stab of worry for the poor thing. Had her time in the river really done so much harm? The Master looked startled, overwhelmed, as though it had never occurred to him that those silly legends about the Mountain King returning might actually be true.

"Really?" he said, glancing from Dwalin to Thorin and then to Alfrid beside him. "Caught sneaking in on a barge, you said? Hmmm. This doesn't portend well." A few curious townsfolk had begun to drift in behind the dwarves now, hoping to see something interesting.

"Thorin, is it?" The Master nodded to himself. "Then why, Thorin, must a king sneak about like a... spy? Hmm?"

"We are not spies," said Thorin wearily. "We met with ill fortune at the hands of Thranduil and were told your town wouldn't take kindly to those fallen afoul of the Elvenking. Empty-handed and low as we seem, we are in earnest. We seek to reclaim Erebor, and with your aid, I believe it can be done."

The Master looked very concerned at the mention of Thranduil. He'd grown wealthy trading with the Woodland Realm, and wasn't about to jeopardize his primary source of income. "Why should I? What would I stand to gain?"

Dwalin let out a harsh bark of laughter. "Is the memory of Men so short?" he asked scathingly. "If we reclaim Erebor, we shall have a dragon's hoard at our disposal. Wealth will flow through this land again. This was once a land of craftsmen and artisans, proud of their trades and rightly so. Have the men of Esgaroth forgotten?"

The townspeople murmured among themselves, and soon all eyes were on the Master. He shifted uncomfortably and glanced at Alfrid. Running a beefy hand over his thin, shockingly orange hair, the man frowned, trying to look thoughtful rather than uncertain. Thorin adjusted his grip on the
halfling. As light as she seemed in his arms, he couldn't hold her weight indefinitely. They needed a warm fire and blankets, soon. He'd assessed fairly well now what sort of man the Master was, so getting him to see things his way wouldn't be too difficult.

"All will share in the wealth of the Mountain," he said so the enthused crowd could hear. "For your service to us, you will be handsomely rewarded. Your city--which I see even now falls into ruin--will be rebuilt to rival Dale of old. You stand to gain much, Master of the Lake Men."

Ori saw that Fili was struggling to support Kili and moved to the dark-haired dwarf's other side. "I can take a little of his weight," she offered timidly, inserting herself under Kili's limp arm. He wasn't very heavy, tall as he was, but all the same, he was dead weight, still unconscious, his head hanging to one side.

Fili accepted Ori's help gratefully, and adjusted his brother's arm around his own shoulders and tightened his grip on Kili's waist. His arm was getting very sore, but he refused to loosen his grip even one jot, lest the injured dwarf slip from his grasp. At least his baby brother was still unconscious. Otherwise this would be unbearable for him.

"Thanks, Ori," he whispered. "Don't know what I'd do without you."

The Master licked his lips, envisioning wall-to-wall piles of coins and jewels filling his halls--no, filling the halls of the palace he'd build for himself. As speculative as this venture was, greed won out over his common sense. Besides, the townsfolk might very well riot at this point if he refused them.

"You make an excellent offer," he said, rubbing his hands together like a landed fly. "And I accept it. Welcome, King Under the Mountain. Welcome, and thrice welcome!" Cheers erupted from the assembled throng, and even Alfrid was grinning, momentarily distracted from the irksome fact that Bard would go unpunished.

Chapter End Notes

Throwing out some kudos to you crazies out there, you incredibly devoted (perhaps slightly obsessed) folk who have, in one way or another, read the entirety of FtF from beginning to present. In particular:

Tevie
fogisbeautiful
FarGreenCountrySwiftSunrise
Wandacarla
and
Heather

I'm absolutely positive that there are others I haven't named here, but I wanted to thank you anyway. Your comments light up my day, and I love reading them. Stay tuned for the next chapter! ^_^

- Juno
The dwarves were ushered inside and a healer sent for, bedclothes brought and fires laid. Soon the
guest wing was looking quite cozy, and the sounds and smells of hurried cooking came from the
kitchen at the other end of the hall. Oin accepted the human healer's help ungraciously as Fili and Ori
laid the injured dwarf on the table in the main room, where there was the most light. The point of that
arrow needed to come out, and come out now.

The door opened again and a tall, red-haired figure in flowing elvish clothes entered. Tauriel's face
went, if possible, paler than normal when she saw the exposed, inflamed wound.

"Let me help." It wasn't an offer. It wasn't a demand. It was a plea, and Oin was hard-put to deny her
when those green eyes were so full of remorse and something that looked like fear.

"Would that the lad were awake to see ya," he said, escorting her to Kili's bedside and dismissing the
human healer with an irritated gesture. "That'd liven him up in a hurry, I warrant."

In one of the largest suites of the guest chambers, Thorin enlisted Ori's help to get Billa into some
fresh, dry clothes (ducking out during the process, naturally). They'd belonged to a child, it seemed.
The jacket she wore was faded blue velvet with wool trim, and they'd had to roll up the sleeves to fit
her. Ori quickly fetched a mug of hot, spiced wine from the kitchens while Thorin silently wound
Billa in a thick blanket and helped her into an oversized chair by the fire.

"Here's the wine," said Ori shyly, pressing the steaming cup into the miserable hobbit's trembling
hands.

"That will do," said Thorin, nodding. "Now run and see about Kili, and report back to me." Ori
moved off, leaving Thorin and Billa alone beside the crackling warmth.

Billa's hands shook so she was in danger of spilling the mug's contents. She couldn't seem to stop
shivering to save her life. Raising the cup to her lips, she managed to take a sip without making too
much of a mess. Honestly, the halfling was so tired, so cold, and so very miserable that she felt liable
to burst into tears at any second. Of course, rather than crying, she started to sneeze instead, which
quite spoiled her efforts not to spill wine all over the blankets that covered her.

Thorin shook his head, feeling on the one hand uncomfortable being relegated to the role of a nurse-
maid, and on the other, pleased to be with her, to aid her in whatever capacity she needed. He
retrieved a towel and quickly dabbed up some of the warm liquid she'd dumped down herself.

"You need rest," he said firmly. "I'll help you to bed." Taking the mostly-spilled wine from Billa, he
set it on the mantelpiece and scooped the halfling up again, gently, drawing back the covers of the freshly made bed, removing the damp blanket, and resting her on the clean sheets. He pulled the comforter over her, tucking it in carefully. "I'll have Oin in to see you soon. Don't try to get up, or he'll work himself into a fine mood."

Billa watched him, her large hazel eyes bleary with exhaustion and what may have been a fever. Had she been a little less miserable, she might have told him that for hobbits, this was fairly normal. When they got sick, they got sick fast and hard, then recovered within a day or two. But her muddled brain refused to produce the thought that Thorin may not know this. So instead, she watched him, wishing he wouldn't go, wishing he would lie beside her again. He was very warm.

Tauriel worked quickly. With Oin's help, the point of the arrow was removed and the ugly wound cleansed. She didn't look at the old healer as he inspected the arrow, nor as he turned his gaze on her, but she knew that her guilt was written all over her face.

"The arrow came from my bow." She confirmed his silent accusation as she treated Kili's bleeding leg with herbs she'd brought with her. "If I hadn't... then he would have been killed." Fili gave her a horrified glance, but honestly wasn't sure whether to thank her or challenge her for injuring his brother. The blond was distracted by Ori's nervous approach, and stepped away from the table to meet her.

"The elf is helping us," he said quietly. "I don't presume to know why."

Ori glanced fearfully between Kili and the elf. Though Tauriel's voice had been quiet, she'd overheard. The elf had shot Kili. Why would she have done it? It... didn't make any sense. How had shooting him saved his life?

"Fili..." Ori whispered, hiding in her new, oversized jacket. "Is... is he going to be alright?" Oin was wafting a bowl of near-boiling mint water beneath Kili's nose in hopes of bringing him around. Kili stirred as the pungent scent entered his nostrils, clenching his hands and moaning fitfully, face drawn with pain. His eyelids fluttered.

Fili swallowed the lump in his throat, or at least, he tried to. With a somewhat painful effort, he tore his eyes away from his brother. "I hope so. Not a fatal shot, so... he should recover." It sounded rather like the blond dwarf was trying to convince himself.

Looking at Ori, he realizing for the first time that she didn't seem to be wet anymore. Then he looked down at himself, in his damp, chilled clothes and boots that squished unpleasantly with every step. But before he could follow through with the vague concept of drying off, he heard Kili's quiet moans. Turning hastily, Fili was back at his brother's side in a trice, peering worriedly into his face.

"Kee..."

Tauriel steadied herself, inhaling the warm, minty scent as she tied off the neat, white bandages around Kili's leg. She couldn't stop the faint smile that flickered across her face, though. He was coming around. Slowly. She smoothed the bandages fastidiously, then glanced at Fili.

"You'll want to get into some dry things. He needs rest, but he's out of danger for now."

Fili nodded slightly. He wasn't willing to question her just yet.

Kili settled into what Oin noted was a “natural sleep,” and Fili assisted the healer in changing his brother into some clean, dry clothes the Lake Men had provided (while Ori and Tauriel stepped out, briefly). Afterward, Ori retrieved a basin and washed, dried, and combed Kili’s sweat-soaked hair,
glad for something to do besides standing by, fretting. They had done all they could do for him now.

“Oh.” Ori bit her lip, looking contrite. “I forgot I was supposed to report back to Thorin.” She turned
to Fili, sheepishly. “Think he’ll be upset with me?”

Thorin clasped his hands behind him and paced over to the hearth. “I’ll stay with you until Oin gets
here, make sure you don’t run off.” He smiled faintly. It was unclear to him why his spirits were so
light now, considering all that had happened and all he knew lay before him. Perhaps it was because,
despite all other considerations, here in this place, the Company would have its first true respite since
Rivendell. It seemed so long ago now--ages ago. A hazy, pleasant memory. They’d made it this far,
against all hopes--nearly to the doorstep of the Mountain--and once they were rested, they’d have just
enough time to find the hidden door before Durin's Day was ended. All things being what they
were… they had been very, very fortunate. The lion’s share of that good fortune, he knew, was lying
in the bed behind him, swaddled in blankets.

After a few minutes of staring drowsily into the flames, Thorin was pulled from his reverie by the
distinctive chattering of teeth. He turned. She seemed to be asleep (perhaps what little she’d had of
the wine had helped with that), but she was shivering such that her entire body shook. Maybe the
bed was too far from the fire. Thorin paused, surprised by the impulse that leapt to the forefront of his
mind. He could think of one way to warm her in a hurry; it had certainly relaxed her in the
crawlspace of the barge. But the impression Oin might take when he arrived and found them in bed
together gave Thorin pause. However chaste it might be, and however necessary, there was always
going to be a certain stigma associated with male-female bed sharing.

She sneezed again, and it was followed with a violent, choking cough. That made up Thorin’s mind
fairly quickly. He closed the door and noted that it had no lock. This made the dwarf pause again,
but Billa's coughs seemed to be getting worse. He hardened his resolve, paced back to the bed and
reclined gently beside her, on top of the covers. It was a large bed, especially by Hobbit standards, so
he didn’t have to move her but a little to ensure he wouldn’t slip off the edge. Her skin was very
warm, he noted immediately, which worried him, but he felt that her shivering had lessened almost
immediately, so his body warmth must’ve had some positive effect. Or was it his presence itself?
Both? He couldn’t decide. All he knew was that the same sense of well-being washed over him as
he’d felt in the barge. She needed him, and he was content to be by her side.

Fili glanced at the door his uncle had disappeared through with the halfling earlier. With a sigh, he
gestured at it. "Come on, I go with you. Only fair, since I was the one distracting you." He shot a
glance at the door of his brother's room. Fili seemed more relaxed now that Kili wasn't in immediate
danger, but tension didn't fade as quickly as he wished it would. And... his gaze flicked to Tauriel,
who was sitting in the corner, waiting to speak with Thorin.

"Come on." He clearly thought it best to warn his uncle himself. Ushering Ori through the door, he
froze. His uncle was in bed with the hobbit. Not under the covers, but still....

Fili cleared his throat and glanced at Ori. "You wanted to be updated on Kili's condition?" he asked,
perhaps not as loud as he might have, given that the halfling was clearly asleep. Billa was nestled
under Thorin's arm, snoring squeakily and looking flushed, but at least she didn't seem to be as
uncomfortable as she had been earlier.

Thorin leapt up from the bed too quickly, nearly falling over sideways in the process.

"F- Fili," he stammered out groggily, rubbing the side of his face a little, his gaze flicking
embarrassedly from Fili back to Ori, who was hiding behind the blond. Both of them looked rather
embarrassed, too. Maybe a little scandalized, but he might have been reading that into their expressions.

"Yes," Thorin continued, coughing forcefully into his fist, a gesture meant to indicate he was more business-like now. Whether it succeeded or not was unclear. "Will he be alright? Did he wake?" He stole a furtive look back at Billa, and he thought for an instant her eyes had been open, but snapped shut the instant she saw him looking at her. Maybe that was his imagination, too. It seemed to be very active today.

Fili nodded slightly, avoiding looking directly at his uncle and inspecting Thorin's boots instead. "Oin woke him." For a moment, he shifted uncomfortably, aware of Ori's hands wrapped around his, since his hands were behind his back and so was she. He took a breath, remembering why he'd come in here. "Um... the elf captain is here. She treated his wound. And... she said that she was the one that shot him."

Thorin frowned, looking for all the world like he was trying to puzzle out some incomprehensible riddle. "She... shot him? She shot him? Then why would she...?" Had it been some kind of mistake and she'd regretted it afterward? Or was there some craftier, hidden motive?

He strode out of the room, glancing back at the sleeping halfling as if to remind himself she wasn't going to vanish, and shutting the door behind him. Tauriel was standing now, waiting patiently, her arms folded. Thorin felt several very conflicting compulsions, the most prominent of which was to demand she leave. But the reasons behind what she'd done intrigued him enough that he resolved, at least, to hear her out before he sent her away.

"What do you have to say?" he asked, staring darkly up at her. There was much less anger in his voice than he'd expected there to be.

Tauriel waited until he was standing still in front of her, then did something that, several days before, she may have thought entirely unwise. However, she took one step back, and lowered herself to one knee. She would have had to look up at him if she wanted to meet his gaze, but instead of doing so, she kept her head lowered respectfully. All other activity in that room absolutely ceased, each dwarf certainely just as startled as their king.

"My lord," Tauriel said in a soft, grave voice, "it was I that released the arrow that struck down thy nephew. Though it were less than what my prince asked of me, I regret it still, and have come to make amends. Had I not struck him, another might have taken my place and his heart then may have been the target, rather than his leg." These formal words, spoken in the elvish fashion, seemed very sincere. "I have spoken with the Great Bear, and heard of your anger against Smaug. I offer thou my aid, such as it is, in ridding the world of the foul dragon, and restoring the throne of Erebor to its right glory."

Even Dwalin's mouth hung partially open by the time Tauriel finished, his face torn between alarm and distrust. "Don't listen to a single pretty word off her silver tongue!" barked the warrior, before the others had quite recovered.

Thorin raised a hand to silence Dwalin. He could make his own judgment. His frown had eased to a look of puzzlement, as though he hadn't understood what she'd just said, or couldn't understand it. She was clever--he'd seen her craft from the start--and could doubtless use her wits and quick tongue to her advantage. But... why? Had Thranduil sent her in some misguided effort to claim the share of the treasure he'd been denied? Or to ensure they were captured and brought back? That her actions might be the result of precisely what she'd said was having trouble registering with him.

"But your king," Thorin questioned, "your prince... your people. If what you're saying is true, you've
betrayed them. Why?" Loyalty was of all dwarven values the most prized. Other considerations aside, betrayal of any kind brought the highest of shame. Did she truly care so much about what went on beyond her own borders that she'd bring such disgrace upon herself?

Tauriel actually winced at his words, feeling the weight of the betrayal heavy in her mind and heart. For a long moment, she was very still. When at last she spoke, her voice was not entirely steady. "I brought my findings before my king, my worry that greater forces than we had yet seen in this age might join, and cast a shadow upon our land. This dragon, and Necromancer... they frighten me. But Thranduil no longer cares to look outside his borders. I... cannot accept this." The red-haired elf paused, seeming more uncertain now. "I love this land too much to let it be overrun and tainted, as our forest has been. If the darkness can be driven out, it would be an honor to be among the few who fought to restore the light."

"Good lass," murmured Balin, looking very much as though he approved. Thorin took a step back from her, glancing at Balin. He valued the old dwarf's opinion highly, and it seemed he was of a mind to trust her. As... unlikely as it seemed, he had to admit, she didn't have the look of a liar.

Thorin shifted, feeling the weight of many eyes and fortunes on him, turning back to Tauriel. "I am satisfied with your explanation, she-elf. But however merciful your aim was, my nephew may not understand." He shook his head, looking somewhat overwhelmed. "Give me some time." With that, he turned away.

Balin followed him into his chambers, unsure what sort of decision Thorin might be trying to make, but purposing all the same to offer guidance. The white-haired dwarf made sure the door was firmly shut before turning to his king with a curious look in his bright old eyes. "What's on your mind, Thorin?" The exchange with Tauriel had been baffling, at best, but he saw nothing wrong with allowing the elf to make of herself what use could be made. He didn't doubt she was a capable warrior, and would be a great boon should the dragon awake. Balin shivered, and decided not to dwell on it.

Thorin turned, not terribly surprised Balin had followed. "She's an elf... swearing loyalty to me." He threw up his hands, pivoting back to the wall again. "What am I to do with that? I couldn't... allow her to come with us. As capable of a warrior as I'm sure she is, what if she... turns on us, when we're at our most vulnerable? I'd be a fool to allow her to join us, Balin. Would I not?"

Balin considered his king's words carefully. At length, he spoke in a slow, measured tone. "It would not be meet to deny her completely." He paused a moment, staring hard into his beard. "Yet I share your concern. Would it be possible," and here he raised his hoary head, fixing his gaze on Thorin's back, "to make use of her talents and keep our distance as well? Can we afford not to accept as much of her help as she offers?"

"You mean... leave her here, with Kili?" Thorin tilted his head in a way that suggested he hadn't really considered the long-term ramifications of his nephew's injury. There was no possible way the young dwarf would be well enough to travel before Durin's Day fell, let alone be of any use. Someone would have to stay behind and care for him, and to leave the Company's only healer would be decidedly unwise. He frowned unhappily, disliking the situation where it stood. Trusting an elf. *Needing* an elf. "Will he be safe with her, Balin? I know she could've killed him before--she had her chance--but... Balin, I can't lose him." *I never should have allowed them to come along in the first place. So very young. Too young.*

"We have time to judge the elf's mettle." Balin sighed quietly and stroked his beard. "We should stay here a day or two, give the lads some time to recover before we move on." He paused, frowning slightly. "You realize... we may need to leave the burglar behind. If this illness of hers is serious...."
The old dwarf didn't finish the sentence. He knew he didn't need to. Thorin's imagination was more than vivid enough without his help.

Thorin nodded. He had considered that, but hadn't quite decided just what sort of feelings it evoked within him. In a way, he'd be relieved if she were forced to remain. It hadn't sat well with him from the start, the idea of sending her in to burgle the Arkenstone from beneath the dragon's nose, but she'd been so insistent... he didn't think he'd be able to persuade her otherwise, had he half a mind to. Moreover, Gandalf's words about the venture's success resting on Billa's inclusion in it were firmly ensconced in the back of his mind--and now he very much believed them. To leave her behind would be risky, at best. "I am caring for her," Thorin said, hesitantly. "I hope to see her well enough to make our departure in a few days. If not, then so be it, but as far as I can help it, I'll not leave her behind."

A knowing smile crossed Balin's bearded face, but he made no further comment. With a slight bow, he acknowledged his king's decision. "Shall I send for supper?" The Company would enjoy the respite, even if Thorin was too preoccupied to share in it. Cocking his head slightly to listen, Balin nodded slightly. "Sounds like Oin found what he was looking for. Billa should have some soup in her before she sleeps. I'll go fetch it."

Chapter End Notes

If any of you are familiar with Google Docs, you'll know that once they reach a certain length, they start to load very slowly. This chapter is the last in the doc titled "Fiercer than Fire," which is 157 pages long. The next chapter will be coming from "Fiercer than Fire II," which is only a few pages shorter. :) Soon, we'll be creating a third. Because we're that awesome.
Taúriel rose to her feet after Thorin left, and let out a slow, tense sigh. Her betrayal was complete. She had offered fealty to another king. Though she knew this course of action to be a virtuous one, it made her feel no better about her own methods. Rather than stand in the central room where the dwarves could continue staring at her, she excused herself, moving into Kili's chambers to watch over him.

Fili frowned at the elf's retreating back, even more uncertain now than he had been before. "Can we really trust one that would abandon her own people?" He spoke quietly, more to himself than to anyone else.

Ori waited for Dwalin's tense discussion with Bombur to cool a little before venturing a very timid opinion. "Fili, I... I think she's going to do what's right, and leaving the Elvenking when he wouldn't listen was... right. I don't think she'll betray us. She wants us to succeed. If we don't, her people will suffer along with all the rest." It had been a brave thing to say, especially for her, in the midst of a currently very fractious Company. She smiled faintly, withdrawing into her jacket and arm warmers again.

Fili glanced at the female in surprise. Hardly more than her round, freckled nose and large brown eyes could be seen between her mop of ruddy hair and the collar of her oversized jacket. He wondered where her scarf was. Maybe still with the halfling.

"Maybe you're right," he admitted. "I just... hadn't thought..." Hadn't thought what? That elves could choose so drastic a course of action for the sake of what's right?

Nori cleared his throat pointedly and made a threatening gesture in their direction. Fili decided it was time to move on before he got attacked again.

"I should look into getting some dry clothes." It wasn't much of a farewell, but the blond stood and departed, seeming uncomfortable in his own skin.

Ori glanced at Nori in a way that meant "behave!" then turned and slipped into Kili's room. Taúriel was sitting unobtrusively in the corner, watching the gentle rise and fall of the sleeping dwarf's chest. She looked very pensive, alienated. Alone. Ori bit her lip, taking a tentative step toward the fierce-
eyed she-elf. "I'm sorry about," she glanced toward the door, "them. They've always been that way. Distrustful of anyone different. But I... I like you. You're not like the elves my brothers always talked about."

Tauriel didn't move, but her gaze flitted to Ori's face, appraising her with the swift eye of a protector. Then she relaxed slightly, and sighed. "I get the impression that dwarves don't have the best image of elves to begin with--not hard to improve on the concept of oath-breakers and liars." There was a slightly bitter tone to her voice, but her expression was more sad than resentful. "Thank you, though. I didn't expect to find any friends among your Company." Her gaze returned to Kili, delicate eyebrows lowering slightly.

Ori smiled faintly, but it faded into a look of concern when she saw the elf's glance shift back to Kili. The young dwarf was shifting a little, his face drawn. "Is his leg... will it heal? I mean, I don't doubt your skill with... medicine, I just... he looks so... ill."

Tauriel's green eyes darkened slightly with worry. "It's trying to get infected. That's why he's struggling so much. It should heal just fine. It will just take time." Time that we don't appear to have a lot of. She could only hope that her skills were enough to pull him through with all speed. Thorin seemed to her to be a dwarf with too much responsibility and too little time.

The door opened slightly, and Thorin peered inside. Finding Tauriel where he'd suspected, he entered and approached her, looking markedly more collected, his hands clasped behind him in a business-like fashion. "Since you've offered your service, Lady, I accept it. In the capacity I choose, that is." He didn't look into her face; his eyes were fixed on a point on the wall behind her. His tone was flat, maybe faintly perturbed. "You will stay behind and care for the wounded, if you aim to be of use to my Company."

Ori, shrinking shyly into the opposite corner, looked disappointed. She'd definitely been hoping Thorin would allow Tauriel to come with them. She would've felt safer--more comfortable--with the skill and quiet composure of the she-elf in their midst. Especially when it came to potentially facing a dragon.

Tauriel studied him, seeming unsatisfied. "As you say," she murmured, inclining her head toward him obediently. Her own words came back to her. Proud. Too proud and hurt to see past their own anger. She would stay, if she was needed here. If not, she would be ensuring Thorin's success in his endeavor, regardless whether he wanted her to or not.

"T-Tauriel?" Kili's weak, groggy voice carried into the midst of the dwarf and elf's awkward space, and both turned to look. "It's... it's not her," he murmured softly, as if to himself. His eyes were half open, and he winced a little as he turned his head toward the voices he'd heard. "Dreaming again." He turned his head away with a sigh and closed his eyes once more.

Thorin glanced at the elf, looking rather... embarrassed. "My nephew shames himself," he whispered intently, leaning in. "When he wakes, you'd do best to explain your intentions are entirely platonic."

Tauriel's eyes widened, her cheeks coloring ever so slightly as she looked from Thorin to Kili and back with an expression of embarrassed disbelief on her face. After a moment of confused silence, she nodded fervent agreement. "Yes, sir." She hadn't thought Kili's infatuation anything more than a passing fancy, the inclination of a young heart toward a kindly face. If, indeed, her face was kindly. "Severe" was a word more often applied to her.

"What'd... you say?" Kili murmured from the bed, his words barely coherent. Tauriel shook her head slightly. Standing, she moved over to Kili's bedside and gently wiped the sweat from his brow. Oin had wisely left some drinking water on the sill, and she filled a cup deftly.
"Drink this," she murmured, supporting his head and shoulders with a strong arm. "You need rest."

Thorin's eyes narrowed as he glanced from Tauriel to a piece of fuzz floating in the air and then back to Tauriel. Ah, well. It wasn't as if he hadn't warned the young dwarf. Balin had warned him, too. The foolish naivete of youth would prevail in Kili's mind only so long as it wasn't sobered by a few healthy doses of cold reality. It remained to be seen whether he'd check his fancies when she revealed she was the one who'd shot him. Nodding to himself with what might have been mild satisfaction, Thorin turned and paced from the room.

"Tauriel?" Kili took a small sip of water, opening his eyes a little. It was clear he was still somewhat feverish. "But..." He frowned, deeply confused. "This isn't... Where'm I?"

"We're in Laketown. Your companions brought you safely here." Tauriel couldn't help but smile faintly at his confusion.

"Laketown?" said Kili, rubbing his eyes, still frowning a little. "But I...." He moved his leg a little, and a fresh wave of pain shot up his thigh. He moaned lightly. "I was hit... my leg... shot." He reached down a little, lightly brushing the spot where the arrow had entered. The fresh trousers he'd been dressed in had been rolled up above the knee, and there was a thick bandage wound tightly around his leg, just above the knee joint.

Ori approached the bed, looking alarmed. "I'll go get Oin. I think he needs more herbs for the pain." Tauriel glanced at her and nodded slightly, passing a cool hand over Kili's leg and murmuring for him to be still.

When Ori had gone, Kili shook his head a little. "Shot... didn't see it coming."

Tauriel paused, letting the silence settled between them. "It was I," she said quietly, her tone very solemn. "The arrow that pierced your leg came from my bow. I wished to spare your life."

"Spare my life?" Kili repeated, words a little slurred. "You... shot me?" His head dropped back on the pillow and he shut his eyes, wincing. When he opened them again, they seemed a little dull, as though he weren't really seeing what was before him. "Shot me..." he murmured once more.

Tauriel's heart dropped. "Yes. I shot you." At least... he wouldn't "shame himself," as Thorin had put it. The she-elf lowered Kili gently back onto his pillows, trying not to feel too disappointed. "I'm sorry, Kili." Pulling the blanket around him and tucking the corners under, she straightened, glancing toward the door. Oin would be here soon to administer more of the pain-dampening herbs he used. She didn't like the smell of them, but had no more of her own herbs with which to treat the young dwarf.

Kili waved a hand weakly, a response that was ambiguous at best. He was clearly still too delirious to fully process her words. A moment later, the old healer had returned, and with the help of his usual concoction of herbs, the young dwarf lapsed back into healing sleep.

Tauriel watched healer and patient, sadness in her angular face. Though she knew he wouldn't remember any of this, it was still a bitter truth to acknowledge. She had hurt him, and in more sense than one. Even as a warrior, the elf loathed causing pain of any sort.

And yet, here I am, hurting my friends on either hand. With a sigh, she settled back into her corner to watch over him while he slept. Until Fili returned, at least, it was best for someone to keep an eye on the injured dwarf. Just in case.

Hours passed slowly for Fili. No matter how much he tried, sleep eluded him. He watched his
brother, watched the fire, paced in circles around the common room. The sky was fading from deepest black to slightly lighter grey when one of the doors opened. Fili turned mid-stride, and was surprised to see, not Thorin, as he'd expected, but Ori. The blond paused, frowning slightly.

"Are you alright? Can't sleep?"

Ori shook her head, surprised to see someone else up, too. "Been so long since I slept in a real bed," she said softly, "now it almost feels like something's... wrong, when I'm not lying on anything hard. Can't relax." She twisted one of her ruddy braids around her finger, looking pensive. "Might try sleeping on the floor tomorrow night, if Dori would let me." The way she said it hinted that the meticulous dwarf may have reacted rather strongly when she'd suggested it earlier.

Fili relaxed slightly, looking relieved. "I thought I was the only one," he admitted with a rueful smile. "I was hoping it was just the food, or maybe worrying about Kee... but the beds bother me. And so does the water, if I'm being honest. I swear I can feel it sometimes." He dusted off his sleeves nervously and offered her a smile. "Maybe I'll fetch some wine. Think that might help?"

Ori looked surprised. "I'd like that. Always helps me relax." She smiled, moving over to the hearth and seating herself on the little brick shelf before the quiet blaze. She produced a pair of dainty needles and a tightly wound ball of grey yarn from the pocket of her jacket and began unravelling a few lengths of the yarn. "Working on a shawl for Billa," she said softly, looking pleased. "My needles were taken by the Elves. Got a new pair from one of the washerwomen. Not as nice as my last ones--Nori made 'em for me."

She wasn't certain why she felt compelled to tell Fili all this. It surely wasn't because she thought he might be interested. But she was finding herself increasingly more at ease in his presence, free to talk about her own interests, small as they might be. "I like knitting. Soft things. Nice things. Reminds me of home." She glanced up to see Fili filling two clay cups of wine from a small oak cask on the corner of the table and smiled again. He had a gentle strength about him that made her feel at once comfortable and protected.

Fili had relaxed as she spoke. Now, returning to her and offering her the cup with slightly less wine in it, he smiled down at her. "I'm sure Billa will love it. You make really nice things." It was a compliment, and he really meant it. "I guess some folk think... a dwarf that doesn't work a forge can't be a good craftsman. You're living proof to the contrary. It's encouraging, really." He graced her with a fond glance, his blue-grey eyes twinkling. Her homely little interests were comfortingly tame in comparison to everything else that was happening. He appreciated her steadiness.

Ori smiled, putting aside her needles to accept the cup. She'd already finished an entire row, and the cheerful little loops of grey wool were taking shape. She took a small sip of the wine, then looked up at Fili, her eyebrows lifting with unexpected pleasure. "This is good." Another sip. "Very good. I know a fine wine when I taste it." Dori had no doubt bequeathed her some of his enviable expertise. "I didn't think the Lake Men had such... good stuff. I wonder where they got it." It had a delicate, complex, slightly tangy taste initially, but left a sweetness like honey afterward. And a lovely, warm sensation in the stomach, Ori was noticing now.

Fili was smiling, as though somehow her praise for the wine was communicated in part to himself, having brought it to her. He took a drink of his own, and was pleasantly surprised. "I'm not an expert," he said slowly, "but I'd guess the Master of the Lake Men is trying to endear himself to us." He chuckled, lowering himself to sit beside Ori, close enough that their shoulders touched. With a sigh, the blond looked thoughtfully down at the liquid in his cup. "Reminds me of the stuff we had in Rivendell. Feels like such a long time ago, now."

Ori nodded. "Been a long time since we weren't running for our lives, or in danger of being killed
and eaten at every turn. Rivendell seems like a beautiful dream now. Such lovely things there! I learned some of the elven runes from Lord Elrond's scribe, too. When my brothers weren't looking," she added softly. "I know they wouldn't approve."

Fili was very close now. She wondered why she'd only just noticed that. The firelight played off his winsome features, danced in his blue-grey eyes, glowed on his flaxen mane. Mane, Ori thought, hiding a smile of amusement. Now that she thought about it, he did rather resemble a great golden lion, noble and strong. Royal. (She'd seen a rather lifelike drawing once, in a book of exotic creatures from Far Harad and beyond.) It was clear Fili, of the younger heirs of Durin, had most definitely taken after his uncle. He would make a worthy king, someday.

"Fili, I know this may sound strange, but... I've thought over what Bofur said about me in the Elvenking's prison. A lot. Do I... do I really look... female?"

Fili took another long drink and turned his head to look her over more critically than he'd yet had time to. In the cheery, yellow light of the fire, she seemed ever so much warmer and softer than he'd ever thought. They had all had to take their belts in over the course of their travels, but Ori... well, maybe he couldn't see properly under that coat. The thought of what he might see under her coat made him aware of the heat in his cheeks. He refocused on what he could see--her face. Again he noticed her freckles, the round softness of her nose and eyes, the dark ribbons in her braids. After a moment, he cleared his throat slightly.

"I... I'm not much of a judge... Kili would probably be a better person to ask. But... if I were to answer truthfully... I do think you're rather... well... very... I think you're pretty. " Fili glanced into her face, smiling bashfully. The wine had settled like embers in his stomach, wonderfully relaxing. Probably just as well, he thought, because otherwise he might not have had the courage to answer her question at all. The drink must have been decently strong. He was grateful.

Ori's familiar blush made a reappearance, though in the firelight it gave her something of a healthy glow. She averted her eyes, taking a more respectable gulp of wine, her heart beating a lustier cadence in her chest. The searching way he'd looked at her made her feel very funny, and though his gaze hadn't lingered on her long, for the first time in her life she'd felt wanted. Desired. Attractive.

"You're very sweet," she whispered softly, her fingers trembling a little and setting the wine in her cup shuddering. "I've never felt that way. Pretty. I was raised to be more like my brothers than I would've liked. No mother, and all. When Dori and Nori let me come along, they dressed me to look male, cut my hair, and..." She blushed a little redder, "told me to act very brave and bold and loud, or the others would suspect. I... made something of a fool of myself at dinner that first night, I think." She met his gaze again, smiling softly. "I like to believe I've come a ways since then."

Fili chuckled, remembering. "Well, I think we all did. And poor Billa. I didn't think much of her, but I liked her food." He glanced at her again, feeling awkward and yet comfortable. It was a strange combination. "Ori, do you think..." Her gaze met his and it was as though his question, whatever it had been, had fallen down a very deep, very dark hole. He saw, really saw, that she wasn't just pretty. It was a similar feeling to getting hit over the head, or having his legs swept out from under him. There was a single lock of chestnut hair lying messily over her left eye, and her cheeks were pink, her eyes bright with pleasure. He'd never seen her so happy before. Was that the difference?

Ori noticed the shift, and it caught her off guard. He was looking at her very differently now, as if he'd had some sort of epiphany. As if he were just noticing something for the first time. "Do I think... what?" she ventured, suddenly self-conscious again as he stared at her. The space between them became charged with some peculiar magnetizing force, and she hardly dared to breathe, lest the spell be broken. The flames crackled placidly in the stillness that followed as she slowly--very slowly--
leaned a little closer to Fili.

Fili's mouth was partially open, but if his lungs were working, he couldn't tell. He was light-headed and felt suddenly very warm, though it wasn't unpleasant. The concept of kissing her crossed his mind in a rather vague, fuzzy way. That concept became more concrete as the space between them gradually narrowed. Her nose was about two inches from his, freckles and all, when Fili stopped, and a look of shame crossed his face.

"I shouldn't--I'm sorry. This is... very..." He withdrew, looked almost painfully apologetic. "I shouldn't even think things like that. Please... I'm not suitable company tonight." Fili stood up, gripping his empty cup so tightly his knuckles were white. He looked like he could have kicked himself for what he'd almost done. And Nori would have skinned him alive.

Ori opened her mouth to say something, then closed it again, looking equal parts surprised and rueful. He'd almost... he'd almost.... Almost. And she knew then that she would have wanted it. Enjoyed it. But that beautiful, shrinking space between them had vanished now, quickly as it had come. Though not as if it hadn't been. She'd remember it well, especially if nothing like it ever came again. "I'm sorry," she whispered, unable to meet his gaze now. "I... shouldn't have... the wine...." She set the cup down on the brick shelf beside her. "I'm sorry," she said again, reaching for her needles. It would help to busy her hands.

"The wine," Fili agreed, glancing at her. "It's not your fault, Ori. I just... I should have known better, I guess." With a sigh, he set his cup on the table and paced back toward the fire. Sitting down a little ways from her on the floor, rather than on a level with her, he folded his legs under his body.

"If I were more polite, I'd just go sleep and leave you to your knitting. I guess I'm just not nice enough."

"I--I don't mind," said Ori, mildly afraid, now, to look at him for more than an instant. "I like... being with you." She cast on another dozen stitches in the blink of an eye, her needles flashing in the golden light. "I feel... calmer around you. Like I'm safe. It doesn't make much sense, I know," she admitted, "but that's the way of it." He made her feel calmer in many respects, but he also made her nervous. It had been easier, believing she was unattractive, indistinguishable from any of the males in the Company. With that disproved now, she had more appearances to keep up, more expectations to fulfill. She wanted him to continue liking her, believing she was pretty, enjoying being around her. It was rather overwhelming, she thought, but no less worthwhile.

"Fili," she said at last, "about what happened a few minutes ago... I," her needles flashed furiously as they picked up anxious speed, "don't think that was impolite. I think it would have been rather... nice."

Fili was stunned. She really thought all that? He shivered, glanced at her, and caught Ori's gaze on him. They both looked away quickly, and he could see her face turning red again. But what to do? She'd just confessed that she wanted him to kiss her. Was that permission? A request? Did she really know what she was saying?

Fee, you're completely over-thinking this. The voice in his head sounded very much like Kili. If you like her, and she likes you, don't just sit there. Do something about it!

Yet Fili remained motionless, watching his own shadow jump nervously from side to side as the flames crackled softly at his back. He listened to the quiet click-click-click of her needles for a long moment before the words slowly started to form in his mind.

"I think... I think too much of you to do anything like that," he admitted at last. "You are... too
worthwhile. Too valuable. To--For me to give in now, would be a disservice. I don't want... no, I won't risk your honor... on a whim."

"My honor?" She sounded surprised. Her needles slowed, and she frowned a little. "This is about Nori, isn't it?" There was mournful realization in her tone. He was afraid of how Nori would react if they dared act on their feelings for one another. In a way, he was right. She'd nearly forgotten the incident on the barge, even though it had only been hours before. She didn't blame Fili for being hesitant. All the same, she wished it didn't have to be this way.

"No." Fili's voice was firm again. He stood and looked at her, touched her shoulder with a gentle hand. "This is about me, and about you, and to hell with your brother and his overreactions. If I thought it the right thing, then I'd fight Nori ten times over to have that... what almost happened. But I don't. It wouldn't be right. Not tonight. Not with the wine muddling things. You deserve better." He let that sink in a moment before he sighed, and gave her shoulder a squeeze. "Now... I think we should both sleep. It's nearly dawn."

"You're right," said Ori quietly, looking a little sad. Perhaps it was more than he'd said. "You go ahead. I won't be able to sleep. Not now. May try for a nap later." She shifted a little, finishing another row of the shawl. "Best if I just... stay up." Her needles were still now. She turned to look at him, smiling embarrassingly. "I'm sorry, Fili. I've been... silly. I hope you sleep well."

Fili looked somewhat crestfallen, but nodded. "I... yes. Good night." He awkwardly, almost reluctantly, let go of her shoulder and turned toward the room he was sharing with his brother. It was hard not to look back. He passed through the door into his brother's room and closed the door with a sigh. A pair of green eyes gazed at him from the corner, and Fili nearly leapt out of his skin before he realized it was Tauriel. How she'd gotten in without him noticing wasn't something he wanted to contemplate at the moment.

"What are you doing in here?" He knew his tone was irritable, but he had a right to be. The elf gazed unblinkingly at him, like a great cat. There was no answer. Fili rubbed his eyes tiredly, wishing the world would go back to being simple. But when he looked again, ready to demand an answer, there was no one there.

"Great. Now I'm seeing things." Fili grabbed a blanket and rolled himself into it, settling in the corner and missing his brother's comforting warmth. Or even Billa's. It felt lonely and cold without the others. And that made it all the harder to forget that moment when he might have been close to another, and had given it up to keep her safe from himself.
Dawn broke through the high windows, pale yellow and cold, accompanied by the distant murmur of the townsfolk going about their business and the faraway calls of fishermen hauling in their early morning catch. Thorin emerged, draped in a black wool blanket, to rebuild the fire. He halted in his tracks when he caught sight of poor Ori, leaning against the brick of the hearth, her hands still clutching her knitting needles. There was a dainty grey shawl draping across her lap, mostly finished, and the ball of yarn had fallen and rolled several feet across the floor.

Thorin stepped over her yarn to kneel on the brick shelf before the fireplace. Soon, he had another crackling blaze going, and he sighed, sitting a moment, watching the flames begin to lick over the wood. Then his eyes fell upon the little cup at Ori's side, still half-full of crimson liquid. Maybe she'd been... drunk. She didn't seem the type to drink alone, but what did he know? As he got up and turned away, he caught sight of the other cup on the table and frowned. Very odd.

He decided, then, that it would be best to check on Billa. He entered her room quietly and shut the door behind him. She looked quite rumpled and miserable, even in her sleep, and her pillow was soaked in sweat. Her hair—longer now than it had been—was a mess of tangles, and her face looked wan and had a slightly greenish hue. Thorin quickly stoked her fire and added more wood (he'd banked it well the night before to ensure it would last until morning) before heading for the wash basin on the table by her bed. He had no choice but to wake her—she looked feverish, and a quick brushing of his hand across her cheek confirmed that she was. He raised her head and turned her pillow, then lay a cool, wet rag over her forehead. She stirred, looking delirious and faintly panicked. He took her hand firmly. "Rest easy, Billa. You're safe."

Billa shuddered, gripping his hand tightly and beginning to shiver despite the heat radiating from her small body. "Thorin," she breathed, nearly choking on his name. Almost immediately, she started to cough. It was a deep, wet, nasty-sounding cough, the kind that abuses the muscles in your stomach and chest, and leaves you too exhausted to fight the next time your throat starts tickling.

Thorin winced a little at the painful-sounding cough, gently tucking the covers up beneath her chin. He released her hand and retrieved a kettle from a hook near the hearth, filling it from the pitcher beside the basin and hanging it over the fire. There was a little mug on the table Oin had left the night before, with a small cloth packet of herbs. Thorin didn't know what they were, but they had an acrid, pungent scent to them. He assumed that, when steeped in hot water, they would help her breathe better and soothe her throat. While the kettle was heating, Thorin scooted a chair up beside Billa's bed, leaning over her with concern. She didn't seem to be fully awake, but neither was she asleep. Her eyelids fluttered, and every so often, she'd try to speak, though it usually ended in violent, choking coughs.

"Shhhhh..." Thorin said, wringing out the cloth in the basin, folding it into a long strip and reapplying it to her forehead. "Don't try to speak." After the brew (Thorin wasn't entirely convinced it could be called "tea") was finished, and Billa managed to drink some with his help, she seemed to...
relax. Her breathing was still a bit ragged, but the steam and soothing heat were visibly easing the halfling's discomfort. A small, clammy hand emerged from under the covers and grasped one of Thorin's fingers. The grip was weak, but steady.

"Thorin." She spoke in a whisper, but it didn't end in a cough. Billa struggled to keep her eyes open. She didn't want to descend into dreams again. Not now. "Talk..." she mouthed. "Talk to me."

Thorin looked puzzled. "What about? You just want me to... talk?" It certainly wasn't a comfortable task, speaking for its own sake, but it was what she wanted. He cleared his throat. "I don't know what to say. Fine words, pleasant words. They don't come easily to me. I've not had the luxury of such... friendly banter." He helped her take another sip of tea, and went on. "It's a thing for peacetime, and I've known little but war and strife and... exile."

He sighed, shaking his head. "I don't know why I'm telling you this except that it's all that consumes me. I can't recall a time when grief and anger weren't roiling within my chest like dragonfire itself." He set the cup on the table and leaned over her, meeting her shaky gaze with his own steady, though slightly discomfited one. "You, Billa. You've given me hope. Strange as it seems, I set out on this venture with little thought it would succeed. Knowing we had naught but a fool's chance. Gandalf encouraged me to try, though. Rather insistently, I might add."

A reflective smile appeared briefly, then vanished. That had been an interesting meeting with the Wizard, that day in the Blue Mountains when he'd come to speak of the Quest of Erebor. “He agreed to accompany us on the condition that you came, as well. At the time, I saw it as nothing more than a bizarre personal favor that would end in disaster." He squeezed her hand lightly. "I could never have been more wrong, Billa, and if I could take back my disparaging words--every last one--I would." He smirked faintly, remembering. "With the exception, perhaps, of my reprimand when you came to the Elvenking's dungeons, raging drunk. Those words you deserved."

The flush on Billa's cheeks darkened considerably. "Agreed," she whispered. "I was a fool." The hobbit still sounded shaky, but her words were clearer now. "May I... tell you a secret?" It was only fair that she share some of the burden, since he was doing so much for her. When Thorin gave a cautious nod, she swallowed. "I'm scared."

"You'd have to be a fool not to be. Heading into a dragon's lair is no--"

"No. Not that." Billa shook her head, her grip on his finger tightening slightly. "The water. I'm... I'm afraid of water." She smiled a little. Funny how the water under the floorboards scared her more than the dragon under the Mountain.

Thorin tilted his head a little to one side. "The water? You're afraid of the water?" He hadn't even considered that. After such a mad escape in barrels down the river, which she had orchestrated? "Why?"

Billa shivered, closing her eyes. "'s a Hobbit thing. 'm afraid of drowning." She made a face and tried to keep her breathing steady. Reaching shakily for the tea, she looked up at him.

"What's there to be afraid of? Can't you swim?" Thorin nudged the cup to the edge of the table so she could reach it. The possibility that she couldn't swim awoke in him sudden alarm, though he dismissed it as quickly as it had come. What creature with any sense of self-preservation didn't know how to swim? It was easy. Natural. When she looked embarrassed, he saw he'd assumed wrong.

"You can't swim? Truly?" Her expression said she didn't much appreciate his condescending tone. "Then why did you lead us out by way of the river? What if you'd fallen in and there'd been no one near enough to save you, Billa?" He frowned. "And why didn't you tell me?" He wasn't trying to
scold her, but he'd have been lying if he'd claimed he wasn't upset.

"It was the only way," she mumbled into the cup, her hoarse voice echoing oddly between clay and liquid. "I had to get you out. If you had known, we would have lost our only chance." Despite her determination, her face burned with shame. Swimming wasn't a skill any self-respecting hobbit possessed. Sure, the Buckländers with their boats and big river... but they were all crazy. Most of them drowned in the end, anyway.

Thorin shook his head. "I wouldn't have stopped you," he said, wondering briefly if that reflected poorly upon him. "I wouldn't have. All the same, it would have been good to know. I've kept a sharper eye out for you, or at least made certain you had a partner who could catch you if you fell in." He sighed through his nose. "We were fortunate. If we'd lost you...." If I'd lost you.... He didn't finish the thought, but his tone hinted at deeper stirrings than his words could articulate, if he'd had a mind to speak of them at all.

Oin came bustling in at that moment, looking well-pleased by Billa's alertness, even if she wasn't nearly as bright-eyed and bushy-tailed as usual.

"Well, well," he said, setting his kit on the table beside Thorin, "looks like a good night's rest didn't do you any harm." Billa submitted to Oin's brief exam, listening to him comment on how quickly she seemed to be recovering. He checked her cup and, after telling her to drink it all, departed with a smile. Things were looking up.

The hobbit sighed, letting her eyes close. She could hear it--the water below them, slapping quietly against the thick wooden supports. "What kind of an idiot builds a whole town on the water?" she whispered, shivering.

"A people terrified of fire," Thorin mused soberly. "I can't blame the refugees from Dale for taking such a precaution, though I doubt, in the event of a dragon attack, hovering over a lake would avail them much." He rested a hand reassuringly on her shoulder, standing. "I'm sure you'll get used to it eventually." A smile materialized briefly on his face, and departed. "I have business with the Master of the Lake Men, but I will return. Oin will attend you, and I'll speak to Ori about keeping you company. I know it is a," he hesitated, glancing at the floor, "lonely thing, being ill, and confined to bed."

He stepped to the door, turning back to glance at her a last time. "Rest well. And Billa... don't even think about getting up. I'll not be pleased." Billa made small, grumpy, protesting sounds, but settled deeper into the bed to at least try to sleep again.

"Stay safe," came the hobbit's faint voice as he reached the door. "Come back soon."

Tauriel was waiting in the common room. When she saw Thorin, she strode toward him, looking grave. "A delegation from the Woodland Realm is here," she told him in an uncomfortable undertone. "They are in conference with the Lake Master."

Balin looked up, his wise old face filled with concern. If Thorin was to face more of the Elvenking's people, then he would want to be there to see that his temper was kept in check.

Anger and concern poured into Thorin's face. "From the Woodland Realm?" His tone was dark. "Well, it's plain enough what they're about. Come, Balin." He stalked rigidly from the room, looking very much as though he were marching to battle.

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The large meeting chamber was dark and drab, like most of Laketown, with ghastly taxidermied
creatures adorning the walls and lurking in the corners, gazing mournfully through sightless glass eyes. Thorin found it rather unnerving, though the four, armed Elves sitting at the far end of the table were far more discomfiting.

The Master stood when the dwarf king entered, dipping his head briefly. "Welcome, Thorin Oakenshield," he said, a little more grandly than necessary.

Thorin halted at the table. "I understand you've requested my presence." His voice was low and edged with anger, ringing in the tense silence. All four elves eyed him, and while not openly hostile, none of them were happy. It wasn't until Tauriel ghosted through the door behind Thorin that anything changed. Three of the elves stood, reaching for their weapons.

The elf who remained sitting was Legolas. Thorin recognized him at once—those dark, otherworldly blue eyes were hard to forget. Equally difficult to forget were the prince’s orders for his captain to shoot Kili. Duty or no, that did not sit well, and did absolutely nothing for Thorin’s efforts at civility. "What business do you have with me, Thranduil’s son?"

Legolas eyed the dwarf with intense dislike, but didn't stand. It was almost an insult, how he refused to give in to his temper so obviously. "I have no business with you, Dwarf. My business is with the traitor that stands with you--my former captain." His gaze landed on Tauriel, burning with bitter anger. "You are to return with us, willing or no, and stand trial for your crimes."

Tauriel tensed only slightly, and her expression remained stoically blank. "You know I cannot return, my prince," she replied calmly. "Or shall I say 'former,' also, since I am no longer part of the Woodland Guard?" Her voice caught a little, but she seemed otherwise at ease with the situation.

Legolas shrugged. "It doesn’t matter. You may no longer be captain, but you are still a citizen under Thranduil’s rule, and must be held accountable for your betrayal. And for the mockery you have made of the Guard.‘ There was something strange about the way he spoke, something… false. As though he were trying to be angrier than he really was. He glanced at the elves flanking him, then turned back to the red-haired elleth. "What is your answer? Will you come with us willingly?"

For a moment, she watched him, a strange expression on her face. She seemed almost remorseful. Almost... grieved. But if that were the case, she hid it well. Rather than answering Legolas directly, she turned away from him and lowered herself to one knee, giving her full attention to Thorin.

"What is thy will, my king?" she asked, loud enough for the elves to hear her. Her voice shook ever so slightly. One of the Guard drew his bow, stiff with outrage, growling what sounded like an insult in Elvish.

Movement caught Thorin’s eye. The prince. He’d stiffened, as though caught completely off guard, and now that Thorin looked at him, it was clear Legolas was in some amount of shock. The blond stood, slowly, his fingers gripping the sides of the long, narrow table. His face was pale with what might have been horror. Or rage. "You swore fealty to a dwarf?" Legolas spat the word as though it were some variety of disgusting insect.

Thorin might’ve been affronted by the elf’s tone if he weren’t already quite aware of how inconsequentially he and his kind were regarded by the prince. He glanced back at the kneeling elf beside him. “Say what you will.” This particular personal disagreement was not one in which he cared to involve himself if it could be avoided.

Tauriel bowed her head slightly, then stood, turning to face Legolas and stepping forward to stand apart from Thorin. This discussion was between herself and her closest friend. She glanced sharply at the Guard whose arrow was aimed directly at her heart, and she lifted her hands slightly to show that
"I came only to observe," she said carefully, still speaking in accented Westron, rather than Elvish. "If Prince Legolas wishes to speak with me--wishes me to explain myself--then I shall." When she had met the gaze of each elf in turn, she let her attention settle on Legolas.

"Do you hate your own kind so much, then, Tauriel?" The prince paced around the table, eyes hard, hands clenched at his sides. "I don’t understand what my father did to make you turn against him like this. Perhaps you can explain that." There was something of a pleading quality beneath the iciness and hostility.

"What your father did," she answered, softly this time, as though reluctant to speak against Thranduil, "was turn a blind eye to the enemies that gather around us like flies on a carcass. I have sworn to help Thorin and his kin be rid of the dragon Smaug, nothing more, nothing less. Would that I had not needed to turn my back on anyone to fight against such evil. I shall serve as I am needed in order to free the land from its shadow. Anything less..." Tauriel hesitated, and a flicker of pain crossed her face. At least, it looked like pain. "Anything less would not be my best effort, and would therefore be a shame to myself and my kin."

The red-haired elleth inhaled deeply, lifting her chin and meeting Legolas's gaze squarely. The anger and hurt in his face pained her deeply, and her mind harkened back to her own parting words. *You will always be my dearest friend, even when it seems I've forgotten what that means. I pray one day you'll forgive me.* If he ever forgave her at all, she would count herself among the most blessed of her kind.

"For five-hundred years, Tauriel, my father the king has protected you, given you his favor." Legolas looked as though he was treading a thin layer of anger and resentment over a lake of grief and resignation. The fury was--in the greatest part--feigned. Even Thorin, who considered himself no good judge of emotional nuance, could sense something of it. The prince was playing the part, and had no desire to bring Tauriel back with him at all. "You threw all that away, all in one moment, because he didn't share your views on the affairs outside our lands? Was that... wise?"

Tauriel stiffened, her green eyes growing hard. "Do you think so little of me?" she asked, her calm fraying a little at the edges. "Do you really believe that I would... give up all I've ever known, all I've ever loved, simply because... your father and I didn't agree?"

Loved. The word struck something of a chord within Legolas, if the look he turned on her now was any indication. "What have you loved?" The words issued in Elvish, and were accompanied by great hurt. "Nothing, apparently, that was enough to keep you there."

Tauriel was stunned by his words, and it registered openly in her face. She couldn't hide the hurt dealt by his... his complete lack of faith. "I have loved my home," she replied, also in Elvish, shaking her head slightly. "I have loved my people, my duty. And I have loved you. I came... I fight... because I love too much, Legolas."

This clearly caught the prince off guard, and he didn’t seem to have the slightest idea how to feel about it. His features were hard to read, conflicted. "Loved? In what way? I’d thought... what you said when you left..." He trailed off uncertainly, taking a cautious step closer, his eyes softening a little.

Tauriel shook her head, stepping back to keep the space between them. The pain was even more evident now, her hands clenched at her sides, her shoulders nearly trembling with tension. "We can't," she warned him, and her voice shook. "You know we can't. You are the prince, Thranduil's only son. I'm just... just a traitor. Please, don't do this."
Legolas tore his gaze from her with some difficulty, realizing he’d said too much already, revealed too much. The guards behind him were beginning to murmur amongst themselves. Besides, she was right. They couldn’t be together. Not now. Not after she’d done this to his father. However good her reasons were in her own eyes, and however thoroughly she believed in them, the fact remained that she had betrayed her own people and renounced her loyalty to her king. He had been a fool to think this might change anything.

“You loved little enough,” he said with renewed coldness, not looking at her. “I wonder that your new king trusts you at all. He knows you’ve turned your back on the one who’s done so much for you, the one to whom you’ve been loyal all the long years of your life.”

Tauriel flinched and closed her eyes, as though his words were an arrow, struck deep into her heart. Indeed, that was exactly how it felt. Legolas had targeted her weakness, and she knew it. She's always been fiercely proud of her own loyalty. Her responsibilities, her duties, her life.... The she-elf felt as though something inside her were slowly crumbling away, leaving a chink in her armor.

"I wonder," she answered in Westron, bowing her head slightly, "if I am worthy of trust at all. But I can only act as my heart leads. I must fight. I must." Her voice broke slightly, and she turned away from him. "My king, if I may be excused," she whispered, struggling to control herself, wishing she were free to shed the tears that made her throat ache so.

Thorin nodded. He had not understood much of the exchange, but it was fairly obvious these two had a long history, and the she-elf was facing a keen sense of loss. Whether there was more to it than that, he couldn’t tell, and didn’t care to speculate. Tauriel left quickly, and the door swung quietly shut behind her.

There was a beat of silence, and then Legolas dipped his head in a manner that would only barely qualify as a bow. “As she has sworn fealty to you, Thorin Oakenshield, she is no longer the concern of the Woodland Realm.” He glanced back at the others again, looking slightly anxious. “Our business here,” he turned to the Master and performed a proper bow, “is finished.”

With that, he strode purposefully toward the door, pausing only momentarily to see that the others followed. He allowed them to pass him, and turned back in the open doorway, waiting until they were out of hearing range. His voice was quiet, and the words barely had a chance to register before the prince, too, was gone. “Treat her well, Oakenshield.”

Balin watched the door close once more and then turned slowly to look at his king. "Well. I won't pretend to know what half of that was about, but I'm glad it's all sorted." The old dwarf’s white eyebrows were high on his wrinkled brow and he shook his head. Turning his attention to the Master of the Lake, he gave a friendly, slightly forced smile. "Was there anything else, m'lord?"
Tauriel was master of herself again when she stopped Thorin outside the common room shared by the dwarves. "Thorin, we need to talk. About your burglar." Her tone was grave, but seemed too tired to qualify as anything even approaching hostile. "I know not how she managed to wander our halls for so long and avoid detection--I don't even know what she is. I would like to be informed before we go any further, since I am to be in your service."

Thorin hesitated, looking vaguely distrustful. This sort of questioning made him uncomfortable, even as disposed as he had been earlier to believe she was completely genuine in pledging her loyalty to him. "What's it to you?" he asked, guardedly. "What difference does it make?"

"It makes quite a lot of difference." Tauriel had no intention of beating around the bush with him. Today had been more than enough without getting into an argument with her new king, too. "I rather dislike the idea of being allied with a sorceress or demon or some kind of orc--if your burglar is of the same Shadow I seek to destroy, then we may be at odds."

Thorin practically laughed at that, the thought was so absurd. "Sorceress? I'm sure she'd be amused by that idea." He shifted the towel-wrapped hot stone he'd been carrying to his other hand (he'd been on his way from the kitchen to Billa's suite). "No, whatever else she may be, she's not evil. Not remotely."

His face became grave again, though, when he considered, as he'd often done these past few days, the ring. That ring she had that made her invisible, and, as far as he knew, was the only thing that distinguished her from an ordinary halfling. He frowned slightly, thinking. Could that be evil? Where had she gotten it? He'd meant to question her on that point at the earliest opportunity, but she'd been so ill, he'd practically forgotten.

He met Tauriel's gaze strongly, not in the least intimidated by her height advantage. "I do not know how it is she managed to elude you during the time we were imprisoned. What I do know is that I trust her to tell me when the time comes. Will that satisfy you for now?"

"I suppose it must," she agreed with a slight bow, a bow which said far more to her trust in him than her words implied. "But I would request to know of what race your burglar is a member. She is no dwarf, I know this, and she's certainly no elf." There was less concern in her green gaze now, and more curiosity. Thorin said the creature wasn't evil, and for now she would trust him. When she met the burglar, she would be able to judge for herself. In the meantime, what harm could she do in Laketown?

Thorin shook his head a little, shifting the stone again. "With all your long years and the wisdom
with which your race is so often credited, one would think you’d be at least vaguely familiar with halflings.” When she showed no recognition of the term, he was reminded of just how inconsequential hobbits were to the rest of the world, reminded of how little he himself had thought of them but a few short months ago.

"Halfling?" Tauriel seemed intrigued, but satisfied. "Perhaps another time, when you aren't otherwise occupied, you might impart some of your wisdom to me. I've never heard of halflings." There was no shame in admitting a deficit in one's knowledge of the world. After all, one couldn't know everything, right?

Thorin nodded lightly. “Perhaps. Now if you’ll excuse me.” He brushed past the she-elf and disappeared into Billa’s suite, shutting the door behind him.

Darkness. Solitude. The silvery light of the moon, illuminating a square patch of the floorboards. The distant lap of the water under the town. It was the quiet of the room that eventually broke down the hardy barriers Tauriel had built around herself. The door was closed, Kili was asleep. A more private moment was unlikely to present itself to her.

The she-elf rested her forehead against her knees and let the tears trace warm paths down her cheeks. Her home. Her fellows. She would never see them again. Never walk beneath the trees of the Greenwood, or watch the moon rise from the northern hills, or hear the wind whisper its secrets through the branches of her beloved forest. Tauriel's shoulders trembled with grief. Why was it that she was punished so for defending her world?

Kili roused at the muffled sobs, pulled from the light, healing sleep Oin had induced. His eyelids fluttered open, and through blurred vision, he saw a red and green smudge huddling beside him, which, after several more blinks, became Tauriel. So he hadn't been dreaming. She truly was here. "What's wrong?" he asked, his voice slightly raspy with disuse, but obviously very concerned. "Why're you crying, milady?" He tried to sit up, but his limbs were stiff and weak, and his leg still shot through with debilitating pain, even amidst the constant flood of opiates Oin had administered. He winced and lay down again.

Tauriel went abruptly and disconcertingly still. The silence between them lasted no more than a heartbeat, but it seemed much longer than that. When she spoke, her voice was clear, but unsteady. "I am... fine. There are merely consequences for my actions. A price I must pay. I'm paying now." Her words became muffled toward the end, as the tears overflowed once more, against her wishes. Still, she unfolded lithe limbs and moved to help Kili take a drink. Her duty now was to tend to the wounded and guard them with her life. Even if that was all she did for the rest of her long years, she would not count it a loss. She refused to.

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Kili stirred uncomfortably as she set the cup down again and propped him up on another pillow, wishing he could find words that wouldn't sound empty and hollow. "I... heard about that," he said softly. "Oin told me when he was here last. Said you'd... defied your prince. I... it's... it's a lot for me to take in." He sighed, looking rather dazed. "For what it's worth, I'm very grateful. For what you did." He stared up at her, astounded by her beauty even with eyes reddened by tears. "Thank-you, Tauriel."

The elf looked down at him, and her eyes, already filled with grief and tears, seemed to grow even sadder. "I did not do it for you," she told him in as gentle a tone as she could muster. "I am a terribly selfish creature, Kili. I do this... out of fear. I love the light too much to live in darkness." Tauriel let out a shuddering sigh and turned her face away from him, feeling quite overcome.
"I wouldn't have wanted you to do it for me," said Kili seriously. "Still, I'm thankful. I know it wasn't easy." He forced a smile, but it faded quickly. "I know how loyal you were to your king, but you did what had to be done. I'm... sorry, though, about... what happened with your prince. That must've been very hard on you."

"He... honestly believed..." Tauriel trailed off. Could Legolas had really thought that she loved her home and her people so little? Could he have truly thought that she was so fickle, that her affection for him was nothing? She rested a hand on Kili's head, lacing her fingers through his thick black hair. It felt stiff with dried sweat. With a low sigh, she reached toward the basin and dipped the rag that hung over the edge into the water. She was, in a way, grateful that Kili needed her attention now, when things seemed so very, very wrong. With gentle hands, she bathed his face and neck, rinsed his hair and attempted to soothe him back into sleep.

An odd feeling of unworthiness struck Kili as she doted on him. It was borne of Thorin's words in the Elvenking's dungeon. "We're nothing to them." But... how could that be true? Certainly it wasn't true of her. Before he'd gone much further with this train of thought, though, he drifted off once more.

Billa inhaled the steam from her tea, relaxing as the tight scratchiness in her throat eased. She wasn't delirious with fever anymore, and she could speak normally without it turning into a sincere attempt by her lungs to escape through her mouth. Life was definitely looking up. Thorin, however, wasn't.

"Alright. What is it? You've been staring at the floor for ten minutes--it can't be that interesting." The halfling ran a concerned eye over her troubled leader. He sat with his head down, dark hair hanging loose and wild, hiding his face from her.

Thorin looked up, finally, his hair falling back as he turned his gaze on her. "Billa, there's... there's something I've been meaning to ask you about. I've held off because you were so ill, but now... I think it can wait no longer." He sighed and scooted his chair a little closer to the bed. Clasping his hands together, he stared at them intently. "I need to know about this ring. What it is, how you came by it. I know something of magic rings, but I have never heard of one that makes its wearer invisible."

Billa tipped her head gently to one side, a faint, crooked smile playing about her lips. "Is that all? Well, I found it in the goblin tunnels. It was just lying on the ground, so I put it in my pocket and took it with me. Didn't learn what it did until later."

Thorin didn't seem comforted in the slightest. "Just... lying on the ground," he repeated, frowning. "Not of goblin make, certainly. They've no magic of that sort, if they've any at all." Then he remembered how evasive she'd been when she showed up once more after they'd escaped the goblins. It had struck him as very strange at the time.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked, concerned. "Why didn't you tell Gandalf?"

Billa's expression became immediately guarded. Her hazel eyes narrowed slightly as she turned, almost as though to defend herself against him. "It wasn't important. I escaped. That was what you wanted, right? I heard you from the trees, thinking I was dead. I survived, and that should have been enough." The halfling's tone had become sharp, and her suspicious gaze didn't leave him for a second. With one hand, she held the mug of tea. With the other, she was searching her pockets.

There was no doubt about what she meant to find. Her knuckles turned almost white on the mug before she relaxed, her free hand closing around something in a pocket under the covers. She didn't make a sound, and her expression changed only subtly, but once the ring was in her hand, she
seemed to calm down. Thorin didn't like the look of this. It wasn't like Billa. It was as though he'd threatened her somehow. Threatened something very close and dear to her. No, he didn't like this at all.

"I asked only," he said gently, "because Gandalf may have been able to tell you something about it. May have known whether it was dangerous or not--who'd made it, and for what purpose." Not for the first time since the Wizard had gone, Thorin wished he were with them again. "I'd be careful about wearing it, in future. It is risky to make use of power when you've no idea of its source. If you found it in the goblin tunnels, it may well have some dark origin."

Billa hesitated, and the silence seemed all but gravid with her uncertain expression. When at last she spoke, it wasn't in the sharp tone she'd used before. "I dislike the thought that it may be an evil thing," she whispered, her gaze on him and yet not, looking through him, rather than at him. "When you say so, the idea is repulsive. Yet... it makes me angry, in a strange way. I don't like it." The hobbit closed her eyes and shook her head hard, as though tossing autumn leaves from her curls. Withdrawing her hand from her pocket as if burned, she clamped the mug between both hands, shoulders hunched. "Let's not speak of it. The thing is heavy on my mind. I don't like it."

Thorin exhaled heavily through his nose, unclasped his hands. "I would not use it idly. But I trust you to know your own weakness. Have a care." He decided to let the matter rest. He was no less uneasy, but until the Wizard returned, he would not broach the subject again. That wasn't to say he wouldn't keep an eye on her, watch and wait, see if there were more to it than perhaps even she realized. "I'll fetch your lunch," he said, and pushed himself up. He could feel the eyes of the halfling as she watched him go, and wondered, not for the first time, nor for the last, what he was getting himself into.

Chapter End Notes

We received a comment at one point that, while primarily positive, communicated a certain disappointment in our lack incorporation of the Ring in the story. We like to think that we addressed the issue fairly well, and that, while it's not the main conflict, the Ring definitely has a presence in the story.

Was this just one, out-there comment, or was there more to it?
The following day, Thorin found his burglar looking much improved. She'd been very cooperative with Oin's healing efforts this time (as well as Thorin's devoted care), and the rest she'd been able to take over the course of their stay saw a return of much of her strength and vigor. She looked (and felt) very much herself again, and was beginning to tire of Thorin's tyrannical demands for her to stay in bed.

"Oin says you could relapse," the dark-haired dwarf explained earnestly, offering her another spoonful of soup. "Another day's rest, at least, and then we'll see about you getting up."

Billa scowled at him, but there was a smile lurking behind her hazel eyes, and she accepted the spoon with moderately good grace.

"You're impossible. I told you before--I'm fine. Hobbits don't 'relapse.' We get sick and get over it." She was sitting up, propped (at Thorin's insistence) against a ridiculous pile of cushions. There were blankets across her legs, and she submitted to his fussing with only minor disagreements--for one thing, she didn't like having her feet covered all the time. Currently, the blankets were folded back so her large, hairy feet were exposed to the light and warmth of the fire.

"Couldn't I just come out to the common room for a bit? I'm dying of boredom in here." Thorin rubbed an eye thoughtfully, then nodded. "But only for an hour or so. The others will probably... overwhelm you with their good wishes and affections." He gave her another spoonful of soup, then set the bowl on the table. "I'll move some of your pillows out to the chair."

When the halfling was safely settled near the fire in the common room, Ori moseyed over, smiling. She was carrying the grey shawl she'd knitted, looking alternately bashful and proud. "For you, Billa," she said, wrapping it gently around the hobbit's shoulders. It had a pleasing drape to it, and little tassels at the edges. "Thought it might keep you warm."

Billa touched the shawl, a warm, open smile on her round face. "Oh, Ori... this is beautiful! You made this?" When Ori indicated that she had, the little halfling sprang out of her chair (followed closely by Thorin's protests) and gave Ori a tight hug. "I love it, Ori."

Ori was a little surprised by Billa's crushing thankfulness and intimidated by Thorin's reaction. "I'm glad you like it. It was the least I could do."

Scolding Billa good-humoredly, Thorin helped her back into the chair and tucked the blankets around her again. Bombur waddled closer to express his relief at seeing Billa looking so well, and Dwalin nudged Thorin's shoulder. The bald dwarf had a look of concern and displeasure on his face, and pulled his leader aside, to the far corner of the commons. He jerked his thumb toward Billa.

"Some o' the lads have been... talkin'," he said in an undertone. "Wonderin' just why you've been
spendin' so much time with the halfling lately. There's been some amount of... grumblin'. About the business you've been neglectin', preparations yet to be made."

Thorin looked mildly affronted. "That's none of their concern," he growled. "I do as I wish, and as I see fit. The burglar is a priority, and if she's not well by the time we must leave, all will be for naught. You can tell them that."

Dwalin scowled, but he wasn't angry. Thorin, who had known him and fought at his side for years, could to see the subtle differences--Dwalin was honestly worried.

"Thorin, this ain't like you," he growled, peering into his comrade's face. "You're fussin' and hoverin' over that halfling like a mother hen, and we're not even armed yet. She could be the thrice-blessed Flower-Maid herself--she's done somethin' to you, lad."

"No, she has not." Thorin's blue eyes leapt up to pierce Dwalin's gaze with sudden intensity. "You know as well as I do, we need her. I care for her because... I am the most suited for it. She knows me. She trusts me. I gave her my word I'd see her well, and that is precisely what I intend to do. So I'll thank you to mind your own business, Dwalin." With that, he turned away.

Bombur was presenting Billa with a plate heaped with slices of some strange, bright red fruit he'd found in the market. "They said it'd cure anything that ails ya," the fat dwarf said, chuckling. "Don't know if it's true or not, but it's worth a try."

"I dunno, Brother," came Bofur's cheeky voice from across the room. "More'n likely, it'll give 'er a bad case of indigestion!" Billa was laughing merrily, seeming very much at ease and much happier out here with the others than she had been cooped up in her room. She took a slice of the red fruit with dainty fingers and tested it as only an experienced cook would, squeezing, smelling, and tasting it before deciding to eat it.

"Not like anything I've tasted before," she commented with a thoughtful smile. "Might make a decent pie."

The dwarves were, apparently, far too preoccupied with showering Billa with attention to notice their leader's discomfited expression. Dwalin had been mistaken, of course, but to say the thought hadn't occurred to him before would be a lie. As Bofur and Dori settled by the fire to play a song or two for Billa, the halfling's gaze picked Thorin out of the shadows, where he lurked, apart from the group. Her smile faded slightly, and her features took on a worried cast as their eyes met. She could tell he was uncomfortable, and even if she could see nothing more than that, it was enough.

Thorin was having trouble deciphering the look. What was it? Concern? Why should she be concerned for him? Dwalin's words were troubling him, though. Perhaps she saw that in his face. He forced a faint smile, then turned away. Oin, he decided, could help her back to bed. Touching Balin's shoulder, he led the older dwarf some ways apart.

"What preparations are yet to be made? We need to be ready to leave in... no more than two days. Dwalin's expressed some... concerns."

The white haired dwarf had just opened his mouth to reply when there was a knock at the door. Not an insistent, impatient one. A rather... decorous knock. Thorin caught Bofur's glance and then nodded toward the door. Bofur set his instrument aside and made his way across the room, lifting the latch and bowing politely to the man in the hall. A human servant, wearing the uniform of the Master's house, bowed in return and stepped just over the threshold.

"Thorin Oakenshield," said the man, clearly enough to be heard by all, "Dwarves of Erebor, and
honored guests,” his eyes flicked over Billa, "the Master wishes you to attend a feast, to be held in your honor two days hence, at sundown. Any preparations you may need to make for the occasion, any clothes or other supplies you require, may be requested at your leisure." The servant's eyes landed on Thorin. "How shall I tell the Master you have received his invitation?"

Thorin hesitated, glancing from Balin back to the messenger. So... a parting celebration, then. He shrugged slightly. It certainly wouldn't hurt the morale, provided they had at least a day to recover afterward, as the lads were sure to drink themselves out of their minds. "You may tell the Master we gratefully accept. In the meantime, there are other preparations to be made. Balin here will tell you what we'll be needing." With a small bow, Thorin turned away, having a quick word with Oin before retiring to his chambers. It was clear he needed some time to think. Dwalin's concerns, however firmly Thorin rebuffed them, were not so easily dismissed from his mind.

A knock came at the door to Thorin's room, and Bofur's hatted head popped in, squinting around in the dim lighting for--"Ah! Thorin, there's someone to see ye. The bargeman that brought us 'ere, no less."

Thorin sat up slowly, blinking the sleep from his eyes. "The bargeman?" He stretched a little, then eased himself off the bed. In the common room, he saw that Bard had already been admitted, and was waiting for him at the central table, his already dour face distinctly troubled. There was, happily enough, no sign of Billa. She had, apparently, been returned to her room, where she belonged.

Thorin looked puzzled, but greeted the man with a nod. "What brings you here?"

"Nothing good, I'm afraid," responded Bard with a sigh, standing and bowing slightly to the dwarf king. "I'm here to... well, to request you don't travel to the Mountain. It'll end in disaster, right enough, and that'll apply to us, as well as you."

Thorin stiffened, fixing Bard with an incredulous look. "What?" He crossed his arms. "What do you mean? You would ask me to abandon altogether the very reason for which I have come? You must be mad."

Bard grimaced. He'd clearly expected a reaction like this, but that made it no less difficult to deal with. The other dwarves had fallen silent, and were now listening intently to the conversation at the center table.

"You were right when you said the memory of men is short. But we haven't forgotten entirely. There is a prophecy, spoken many years hence by one of the ravens of yore, which foretold disaster, should the King Under the Mountain return." The silence seemed to deepen, if that was possible. Bard took a deep breath, and recited the old prophecy, eyes half-closed to help his memory.

_The lord of Silver Fountains, the King of Carven Stone,_

_The King Beneath the Mountain shall come into his own._

_And the bells will ring in gladness at the Mountain King's return,_

_But all shall fail in sadness, and the Lake will shine and burn._

Thorin shrugged. "What of it?" He was inwardly troubled, but to show that to his Company, whose morale was already fragile with the possibility of imminent death... that he could not afford. "Why place so much credence in an old, naysaying poet's words? You'd rather live forever in terror of the dragon's coming? If we do not go, no one will. And I have good cause to believe we will succeed." He glanced at Balin for support, but found the old dwarf looking markedly concerned. Shaking his
head a little, Thorin turned back to Bard. "We do not go to wake the beast, or rouse him to wrath--we go to scout, to see if a weakness may be found. All care and caution will be taken, and if he is awakened, I shall see that his ire falls upon... my people alone."

"Whether that is what you go to do or not," replied the bargeman doubtfully, "there is always the chance. The dragon is sure to waken sooner or later, and should it be you to wake him, the deaths of my people will be your burden to bear, to the end of your days."

"Oi, now," Bofur exclaimed in protest. "There's no call fer that, lad. We'll succeed, come hell r' high water, an' by my beard, there's not a dwarf among us that'd not lay 'is life down te see this dragon dead' n gone." He nodded firmly, and the others murmured their approval.

"I will accept the responsibility," said Thorin gravely, "should our plans miscarry. My grandfather's greed brought the dragon. It is only right that I do not rest until it has been slain." He eyed Bard with an evaluating air, seating himself at the table beside him. "You have a noble look about you, bargeman," he said finally, more quietly, "and you can doubtless understand the sense of duty I carry. It is my destiny to rid the land of Smaug--I am sure of it. If your grandsire had failed his people, would you not wish to do right by them?"

Bard studied Thorin at great length before he answered. "My great-great grandfather was Lord Girion of Dale. It was he that wielded the Windlance over the Eastern Gate, he that failed to kill the dragon before it could rout the Mountain, as it had already destroyed his home." The man's tone was grave, and he paused to run a large, calloused hand through his unruly hair. "I understand better than most, I think. Even as a mere bowman, reduced to running a barge for the Master's profit, I feel responsible for my people." There was another lengthy pause, but he eventually turned his gaze on Thorin again. "I'll put my trust in you, Mountain King. I believe you will succeed, though I fear the cost of that success."

Thorin nodded soberly, a new sort of wonder in his face. He'd known the man to be of noble heart, but he certainly would never have guessed at the particular lineage he claimed. "I am honored by your faith, descendent of Girion. Your warning, also, I value. I hope to see the day when Dale rises one more from the ashes, and your family is restored to its rightful eminence."

Bard sighed heavily and stood. "I'm not sure my taking my grandsire's place would do the men of Esgaroth any good," he admitted, a bit grimly, "seeing how it turned out in his time. In any case, I wish you the best of luck, my friend. Oh, and if you happen to see my coat around--I'd like it back at some point. It's the only one I own."

Thorin turned to Bofur. "Fetch the man his coat. It's probably in Billa's room." Bofur retrieved it as asked, and handed it to Bard with a light bow. "I thank you for its use," Thorin said courteously, recalling now with strange fondness the unpleasant trip across the lake. "And may fortune grant you a better one ere long."

Bard pulled his coat on with faintly relieved expression, bowed to Thorin and turned to go. Bofur stopped him briefly and shook his hand heartily, wishing him well in his business, and pressing a small package into his hands. Bard, clearly confused, unwrapped one end of the parcel, and found two exquisitely carved toy horses, and detailed wooden replica of Billa's little sword. When Bard glanced at Bofur in surprise, the hatted dwarf shrugged with a crooked smile.

"Me brother wanted ye te have 'em. As thanks."

Bifur glanced at Bard and grunted softly, looking pleased with himself. Bard's mouth twitched into a smile.
"I... accept, and gladly. My children will enjoy them." Slowly, and with a wondering look still on his face, the man departed.

After Bard had gone, Thorin turned to Balin, catching his eye, and moved off into his own chamber again. The white-haired dwarf, of course, followed. "What do you make of that?" Thorin asked, collapsing into his chair by the fire. "Does this portend ill? He does not seem... a man who trifles. There is grave truth in him. It worries me."

Balin stood quietly near the hearth, staring pensively into the flames. "Well, I certainly don't think it bodes well for us," he confessed after a long moment. "On the other hand, as you say, it may well be the nay-saying of a poet of old. It claims the status of a prophecy, but we have no way of either confirming or denying that claim, and it'd be downright foolish to delay or default now, simply because we received an ambiguous warning." Balin fell silent, and his intelligent gaze shift from the fire to his young king.

"I know," Thorin replied, massaging his temples. "It's just... I've never been fond of uncertainty. Particularly uncertainties that could result in the deaths of thousands. Will my name be spat with hatred in years to come for the path I pursue today?" He turned a plaintive look on Balin. "I suppose having such doubts is a sign of weakness. Why do you still follow me, Balin? Why do you trust me?"

Balin smiled faintly, moving over to clasp Thorin's shoulder in a fatherly fashion. "Asking why I trust you, is like asking why the sun rises, Thorin. I trust you because you've proved to me again and again that you're worthy of that trust." He closed his eyes for a moment, as though remembering. "I don't believe a lack of doubt is a sign of strength any more than a lack of fear is a sign of courage. Would you say that you weren't afraid, the day you faced Azog among the burning pines? Or when you fought him before the gates of Moria? It is your courage in the face of fear, your strength in the face of doubt—that is why I follow you. That is why you are my king."

There was a moment of quiet between them when he finished, broken only by the soft crackle of the flames in the grate. When Balin spoke again, it was with the faintest of laughs in his voice. "How would you respond, if I asked you why you trusted me? Or Dwalin? Or Miss Baggins?"

Thorin half-smiled. "I would tell you to stop being ridiculous. Without you, I'd be nothing. The strength to face death, again and again, I don't know from what well that is drawn. All I know is I do what I must, and I'll continue to do so until the dragon falls... or I do."

"And that's why I trust you, my lad." Balin gripped Thorin's shoulder bracingly, a confident smile on his bearded face. "You know where your priorities lie. Is there anything I can get for you? You look like you could use a stiff drink."

"I'll wait until the feast." Thorin eased himself out of the chair, brushing past Balin with a grateful nod. "I need to look in on Billa."

Tauriel sat with her back to the bedpost, legs folded neatly under her lithe body. Her head was tipped back to rest against the wood, her eyes closed. If it weren't for the absolute stillness of her, one might think the elf was asleep. When Kili stirred, waking from what had seemed to be a deep and restful sleep, Tauriel rose fluidly to stand over him, passing a hand gently over his brow. A faint smile crossed her face.

"The fever's broken," she murmured, sounding relieved. "Recovery will be a much easier road from here." As Kili's eyes opened, she turned a way to pour him a cup of water. His expression was clearer than it had been since the arrow had entered his leg. Kili's dark brows were slightly knit, as
though he were remembering something, or trying to figure something out.

After a moment passed in silence but for the sound of Tauriel filling the cup, he sat up a little. "You shot me!" he blurted out, as though that fact hadn't fully registered in his brain until now. His tone was more incredulous than angry. This whole situation, perceived vaguely through half-remembered images interspersed with dreams, was very, very confusing. Tauriel paused, then turned slowly to face him. There was regret in her face as she nodded slowly.

"Yes... I did." The elf watched him with some amount of apprehension, unsure of how he would react now that he was in full possession of his mental faculties.

Kili was staring very hard at a knot in the wooden wall. He swallowed heavily. "You shot me," he repeated quietly, still not looking at her. "Why? Why would you...? It doesn't make sense."

Tauriel took a deep breath, then, calmly, answered as she pressed the cup of water into his hand. "To save your life." She let him process that a moment, then went on. "I was commanded to shoot. Another would have killed you where you stood. Another would have taken my place if I refused. So... I shot." Another beat of silence. "If you would prefer, I'll let another tend to you. I merely wished to make up for the damage I dealt."

Kili thought this over a moment, halfway considering, holding the cup in his lap. Was he angry with her? Her answer made sense, of course, but still... it was hard to take. It wasn't a betrayal, but all the same, it felt as if it somehow were. "That... really hurt," he said at last, with a rather puzzling expression on his face. As if he couldn't really decide how to feel. "But... I guess it could've been worse." He smiled faintly, brushing his hand lightly over his bandage. "A fine shot, m'lady."

Tauriel looked at the bandage and sighed. "A non-lethal one. That was what I cared about. Enough to stop you, not enough to kill you. But... I needed to give you more time..." The elf's brow creased in what was almost a frown. As though she herself were still trying to figure it all out. "So I shot again. Slowed the others. Nearly pinned your hand to the lever." It was an observation only. After a moment, she shook her head. "Shall I leave you to think?" He looked like he needed the time.

Tauriel acknowledged the thought that Kili may no longer be her friend. She was willing to accept that price in exchange for his life.

Kili reluctantly nodded. "Yeah. Maybe... maybe send Fili in. I wanna talk to him." He took a tiny sip of water, then set it back on the table beside him. "I mean, it's not that I want you to go, it's just that... well... oh, I don't know what to think. Maybe I'm a little... overwhelmed by it all."

"I understand." The elf touched his shoulder gently as she glanced toward the door. "Call me, and I will come." And with those words, she turned from him and left. Only moments after the door closed behind her, it opened again, admitting Fili. The dwarf seemed tremendously relieved to see his brother awake, and not delirious.

"Brother! Kee, you're awake! Thank Mahal."

Kili's face brightened a little at his brother's exuberance. "Aw, you act so surprised. Like I might not've pulled through or something." He grinned, patting his leg. "This is nothin'. Gimme a day or two and I'll be right as rain for the trip. Wounded leg or not, you and me'll still be miles ahead of those old-timers, eh, Fee?"

Fili's expression seemed to fold suddenly, and his relief vanished in a twinkling. With a grimace, he took a seat at the edge of Kili's bed. "You'll... not be coming with us, Brother. We don't have the time to wait. Durin's Day is less than a fortnight away." Fili sounded deeply disappointed, nearly grieved by this.
Kili thumped his brother's arm. "Don't joke about things like that. Honestly." When his brother's somber demeanor didn't give way to a telltale grin, Kili's face fell. "You're... serious." The dark-haired dwarf shook his head firmly. "No. No no no. We've talked about this moment our entire lives, Fili! Entering the Mountain, seeing the long-lost halls of our people." His expression became suddenly very determined, his voice resolute. "Uncle is not going to take that from me. I'm going with you."

He flung his legs over the side of the bed, grimacing at the pain, but trying to ignore it. "I'm just... fine," he continued, as if trying to convince himself. He slid off the bed, but as he put weight on his leg, he uttered a strangled yelp and crumpled to the floor.

"Just fine," he hissed through his teeth. Fili was just a moment too late to catch his brother. He hooked his hands under Kili's armpits and heaved him back into the bed again, his pallor as grey as cold porridge. It was clear he'd thought over all the arguments, all the ways of it—and had come back to the single nasty thought again and again. Kili wouldn't be able to make the journey to the Mountain in time.

"I'll stay, Brother. I'll not go without you." The very words seemed to pain him, but the same stubborn determination that have made his dark-haired brother attempt to walk in spite of the pain now made Fili make the offer of, what was to them, the ultimate sacrifice. Kili winced a little, trying to settle in a position that didn't hurt as much. He turned to look at his brother, the full weight of his offer suddenly registering. After considering a moment, he sighed, shaking his head.

"No, Fee. I wouldn't want you to. It's... not something that would really help me, you staying, and... Uncle needs you with him. Besides, I'd rather at least one of us went." He smiled grimly. "You can tell me all about it afterward, I guess. Won't be the same, but it'll be something."

Fili tried not to look too relieved. With a faint smile, he laid a hand on his brother's shoulder. "You'll be healed in plenty of time to help us fight the dragon. No worries there." The smile became a grin. "Imagine the tales we'll tell, eh?"

Kili nodded slowly. "Yeah. I just... I hope you all come back. I hope Billa doesn't wake him." He nearly shuddered at the thought. Dragon wrath was one thing to speak of in tales, quite another to encounter in truth. One part of him felt ashamed to leave such perils up to the rest of the Company while he stayed behind, safe, in Laketown. The other part reasoned he'd be more hindrance than help in his condition.

He gripped his brother's arm suddenly, looking Fili straight in the eye. "Don't die. If you do, I won't have anyone to tell me when I'm being an idiot. Just imagine what sort of horrible trouble I'll get myself into!" As tongue in cheek as his words were, there was a root of seriousness beneath them. He couldn't imagine life without his brother.

Fili's grin faded slightly as he confronted the fact that some, if not all of them, might die. He opened his mouth, but found it too dry for words. After several false starts, he nodded slightly.

"I'll do my best, Brother." Life without Kili would be... wrong. He could only imagine his little brother felt the same.

"Billa's up and about again," he said, changing the topic somewhat inelegantly. At Kili's confused glance, the blond explained. "She got sick after that dunk in the river. For a while, it looked like she'd have to stay here. But she's better now, or mostly so. And the Lake Men are throwing us a party in a couple days. How's that for respect, huh?"

"A party?" Kili perked up a tad. "Music to my ears. You'll probably have to carry me there," he
mused. Then he grinned. "And you'll definitely have to carry me back, so don't get too plastered. Besides, knowing Uncle, he'll put a damper on everyone's fun and tell 'em they can't drink themselves under the table. Wouldn't do to be fighting headaches all the next day' and such. That's what he'll say." It was nice to be able to speak of such homey things--parties and drinking and brotherly fun--even if their respite was only temporary. Even if he was going to be left behind. Alone, as far as he could tell. Unless... but surely she wouldn't stay behind. She was a warrior, not a nursemaid.

"Aw, you're no fun! I'll get Tauriel to carry you back. No way she's getting so much as tipsy. She's so... serious." Fili made a face, then laughed. "Still, it'll be fun. What say you we spike Uncle Thorin's drink? It'll do him good to loosen up a bit."

"Ohhh." Kili grinned mischievously. "That's just plain wicked, you know that? After what happened last time! He all but vowed to skin us alive if we ever tried something like that again." He nudged Fili, snickering. "Not like that would ever stop us, though."
Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Chapter Notes

You won't be seeing actually drunk! Thorin for a while, so enjoy everybody else being drunk in the interim. *grins*

That day and the next passed in blessed, uneventful quiet. Thorin saw that the Company was re-armed, equipped, and supplied, Fili and Tauriel kept Kili's spirits up, and Billa made a full recovery, though Oin cautioned she shouldn't overexert herself, as she could easily relapse. Nothing more was heard from the elves, and it seemed most of Laketown's denizens didn't give a fig for how their support of the dwarves might anger Thranduil (though, to be fair, only a few had seen the prince and his entourage's coming and going, and perceived only that it had involved the dwarves, and hadn't gone well).

When the hour of the feast arrived, Thorin instructed that the Company should make an effort at civility and courtesy, and should look "decent." The Master had provided them all with appropriate attire, all tailored especially for their unusual proportions. Thorin wore a blue velvet tunic with ornate embroidery down the front and across the hem, and had consented to having a more elaborate, braided hairstyle, courtesy of an over-zealous Kili, who was hobbling to the feasting plaza with one arm over his brother's shoulder and the other on a specially-made cane.

When the group rounded the corner beyond which was the plaza, their eyes widened in surprise. It was clear the Master had spared no expense. The courtyard was its own separate platform, wide and spacious as the deck of a great ship, with three or four wooden walkways leading to and from it on each side. A series of adjoined posts surrounded the entire platform, creating a sort of roofless enclosure, and dozens of lanterns had been strung from one side to the other like a canopy of stars. The lights glinted off the dark, rippling water, making the whole place seem, if not cheery, then at least more inviting. The townsfolk had spotted the guests of honor, and were even now cheering and applauding and beckoning to them. Genuine or not, Thorin appreciated the warm welcome.

"Come," he said, and stepped onto one of the walkways. The Company seemed to be very much enjoying the reception they received. Each had been scrubbed to within an inch of his life and dressed and braided to impress. At the back of the group came Ori (who had decided to keep up with the charade of being male so her brothers wouldn't hover too much during the festivities) and Billa, who was, for the first time since leaving Bag End, wearing a dress. It was made of heavy, velvety fabric, and though she hadn't liked it at first, she was grateful for it now. Despite the fires in their iron grates spaced around the plaza, it was cold.

The Master gave a short speech absolutely no one listened to, and then the feast began in earnest. It
was more a party than a feast, as the band started playing almost immediately, and though people ate and drank, there were others dancing, and some singing, and others playing games of cards or dice. But the food. It was enough to make even Billa and Bombur stop and just look at it for a long, reverent moment. Roasted birds and suckling pigs, sides of beef and whole fish. Puddings and pies and soups and stews and gravy, baked potatoes, mashed potatoes, fried potatoes, heaps of thinly-sliced squash and interestingly-spiced vegetables they didn't know the name of. Rolls and biscuits, loaves of steaming bread, dishes of whipped butter, honey, and jars of jewel-colored jellies. Bowls of candied fruits, cakes and pastries, and a mountainous confection of sparkling sugar and whipped cream, topped with preserved strawberries. Salads were, to no one's surprise, rare among the dishes, it being the wrong season for leafy greens. Wine, ale, beer, rum, mead, cordial, mulled cider and all manner of alcoholic beverages were served in abundance, and nothing at all was lacking.

Fili nudged his brother, grinning hugely and biting his tongue. They couldn't do anything to Thorin's drink so early in the evening, but the anticipation was killing him. Kili winked, grinning cheekily.

"You did bring the stuff, right? Didn't forget it in all your exuberance to braid your hair 'just so' and dress all pretty?" He poked his brother in the ribs. Over the past day or so, it had become increasingly apparent that his brother had eyes for a certain female dwarf, who sat across the table from them, shyly tucking into some mashed potatoes and trying to hide.

"'Dress pretty?'" Fili tried to look insulted, but couldn't stop grinning. "Watch your tongue, little brother, or I might put the stuff in your cup and see what happens." Still, his blue-grey eyes flicked over to Ori. It wasn't hard to tell the blond was a bit disappointed by the fact she'd decided to keep up the guise of being male. He would have liked to see her a little more dressed up.

"'Oh?" Kili snickered. "Well, I'd probably enjoy myself. Not nearly as much as Uncle will, though. He'll have the time of his life... and then spend the next day beating himself up about it." He noticed Fili's glassy stare at Ori and poked him again. "Hey, eyes over here. Don't want the locals to get the idea we're boy-fanciers."

"What?" Fili turned slightly pink. "No, I- it's not..." He could see the mischief in his brother's grin and gave up on denying anything, opting to gulp down some ale instead.

Billa chuckled, nudging Ori with a smile. "Suppose you're trying not to notice someone making eyes at you over the gravy boat?" She smothered a grin in a soft honey-roll, savoring the warm freshness of it. Her eyes, however, were on Ori. Kili and Dori had descended on them earlier in the day, and both females had braids and beads in their hair, though in very different ways.

Ori shrugged lightly, smiling at Billa. "You... you really think so?" she whispered. "I'd thought... well, I don't know just what to think." She lowered her face to hide the blush that was rapidly creeping across her cheeks.

"Yes, I really think so, silly. Any fool with eyes in his head can see that Fili fancies you." Billa chuckled and glanced toward Thorin--he was looking at her. Not in his usual, brooding way, but more vacantly. In fact, there was a passing similarity to the way Fili had been looking at Ori a moment ago. The halfling shifted, more confused than she would have liked to admit. But before she could think on it further, Thorin's gaze slid away from her, exactly as though he were simply staring into the distance. A strange mixture of relief and disappointment made Billa glad to take refuge in food and drink.

"Try some of the pork, Ori. It's delicious."

Ori timidly forked a slab of the pork and dropped it onto her plate. It was a beautifully shiny dish, engraved pewter, and she spent the next minute or so staring at the design on it and absently cutting
Thorin was at the head of the table a few seats away, trying to relax but finding it impossible. He felt out of place at feasts—not that he'd attended very many. Balin was merrily chattering on and on about the journey ahead, the dangers it entailed quite thoroughly swallowed up in drink. Dwalin was chewing thoughtfully at Thorin's other elbow, nodding and commenting at appropriate intervals and trying not to rain too much on his brother's parade. Thorin tuned them out after awhile. Not intentionally. It just... happened.

He realized too late he'd been staring at Billa because she was looking at him now with a puzzled expression. He blinked and slowly shifted his gaze to Gloin so as not give the impression he'd been "caught." When she turned away again, he sneaked another glance. She did look rather... different, he decided. Her hair. It had been braided and beaded in the dwarven style, and he had to admit it did look rather... fetching on her. And the dress—it flattered her figure so well he wondered why he hadn't noticed before that she was so, well, female. It had been hard to tell her shape in a jacket and loose-fitting trousers. She was rather lovely. He wondered, then, why he was thinking such thoughts. It was a distraction. Nothing more.

Kili took another gulp of wine, cackling at Fili. "Aw, come on, Brother. Don't be shy. You should at least ask 'er for a dance--while you can still stand, that is. A few more drinks, and you'll be flat on the floor."

"I will not!" But Fili took another draught of his ale, emptying his tankard. He stood, hesitated, then tore his eyes away from her and looked at his brother, feeling just slightly panicked. "Kee, I can't be thinkin' about stuff like this. 'snot right! We're on a Quest! Uncle warned us not t' git distracted. You remember, what he said 'bout Billa?"

Kili shrugged, only slightly sobered by his brother's words. "Maybe. By the looks of things, Uncle's not really following his own advice." He grinned, nodding subtly in Thorin's direction. "Have a peek at that moony face of his. Probably daydreaming of her as we speak." He snickered at his own incisiveness, then patted Fili hard on the back. "Go on, Fee. It's not a marriage proposal, it's a dance." Fili lifted his tankard and glanced at his uncle from under his arm. Sure enough, he was giving Billa one of those disbelieving looks one might see on a dwarrow who'd just realized his best friend was a girl.

Billa nudged Ori again, now looking a touch concerned. "Are you alright? Awfully quiet tonight."

Ori shook her head determinedly for a second or two longer than necessary. "It's just... uh... well, I'm afraid." She looked up finally, straight into Billa's eyes as though they were a kind of solace, a grounding force. "Is that odd? Is it odd to be afraid of... something wonderful?"

A human servant, in the time between Fili's last drink and this moment, had refilled his tankard with ale. The dwarf gulped down half of it and slammed it down on his empty plate, looking determined. Striding around the table to stand beside Ori's chair, he looked down at her, remembering belatedly that the townsfolk would think it odd if two apparently male dwarves were dancing together. Oh well. Too late now.

"Ori? Would you... I mean... may I have this dance?"

Billa, who was watching another servant refill her own glass with wine, covered her mouth with a hand, stifling a giggle. Fili was still steady on his feet, but she could see the slightly unfocused look in his eyes and knew things were ripe for meddling. She nudged Ori and whispered to her.
"Don't let fear keep you away from a wonderful thing, Ori!"

Ori set her fork and knife down with two, demure taps, smiling nervously, heart trying to beat its way out of her chest. She bit her lip, looking up at him, her eyes gleaming in the lantern-light. "But... I... I'm not a very good dancer," she admitted.

"Don't worry," Kili called helpfully across the table, "neither is he." Mildly comforted, Ori nodded slowly, accepting his hand to help her up.

"Alright. I'll give it a try." She smiled weakly, shaking a little. This was all very new and frightening.

Fili was a little flushed as he led her out to where the dancers were congregating, an open space before the enthusiastic band. Kili hadn't been bluffing. In spite of his years of training as a prince among dwarf-kind, the blond was hesitant and self-conscious as he led Ori through the steps. They gathered some attention this way, not the least of which was Nori, who sat at the table, grinding his teeth loud enough to deafen his neighbors.

Billa watched the pair with a pleased smile, shaking her head slightly. When she scanned the table, her eyes crinkled with hidden laughter. There was a good deal of elbowing and back-slapping going on, and Bofur was teaming up with Kili and Gloin to lead a rousing drinking song they only knew half the words of.

"Darling idiots," she accused fondly, reaching past the wineglass in front of her for a pint of frothy ale. She wasn't much of a drinker, but she had a respect for beverages that didn't taste like fruit.

"Suppose you could do better?" growled Gloin challengingly.

"Aye, lass," urged Bofur, grinning. "Sing a nice song fer us!" He roared with laughter, and it was clear neither of them believed she would. Kili was watching her expectantly, though.

"Well, if you insist," agreed Billa with a smirk. She stood up on her chair, and Gloin's smile froze as she belted out a lively tune that had the Lake Men stomping their feet and clapping their hands.

It went something like this:

Gather 'round my mates n' lads
To hear th' right ol' tale
Of Buck th' Red an' all his lot,
An' th' day 'e fell!
Ol' Buck, 'e swaggered through the door,
Roared out for beer an' ale.
Served 'is lads full pints around-
So say who tell the tale.
Never a man or lad alive
Could out-drink Ol' Buck,
But every night a man or two
Would go n' try 'is luck.

An 'andsome youth, strong as a bull

Came t' Buck one night.

'E cocked 'is cap with a fearsome grin,

Called out fer a fight.

"Ya kissed me girl, Buck ol' lad,

That ain't th' way o' things.

Now on yer feet an' put 'em up.

We'll see 'ow Bucko sings."

"No need fer that," says Buck th' Red,

Though 'e weren't scared a bit.

"More ways than one te skin a cat,

Let's sit an' drink on it."

So sit they did, and drink were brought

Enough to lay 'em low.

Canny Buck, 'e raised 'is mug-

"Son, I 'ope ya know

This ain't no game ta men like me,

This drink's both 'ealth an' life."

Young Bull, 'e stood an' knocked Buck down-

"Next time, don't kiss me wife."

Kili whooped and hollered, slamming one palm on the table and raising his mug in the other, sloshing ale all over Oin. "Now there's a drinkin' slong!" he slurred. Even Thorin had been caught up in the fun, and there was an amused smile on his face as Billa bowed and curtseyed.

"To Burglar Baggins!" Kili called, and the others willingly took up the toast.

"To Billa," Thorin said quietly, and sipped his wine.

Ori tried to follow along best she could, but she was even less graceful than Fili, and more than once at a sudden twist of their entwined hands, or when he tried to spin her, she'd falter and nearly cause them both to fall. Still, by the time the second lively song had finished, she was grinning like an idiot and didn't care. For the third song, a fiddler took center stage and began to play a slow, longing melody, his bow sawing gently in a swaying cadence. As Fili began to lead again in an easier, side-to-side dance, Ori smiled shyly, some of her self-consciousness creeping back now that the emphasis
was no longer on staying upright. It was harder, she thought, to focus when he was looking at her like this, and even though he'd clearly had an ample amount of drink, she was affected by the fondness in his gaze.

"You're a lot better than your brother gives you credit for," she whispered. "Sorry I dance about as well as a... lumbering ox."

"You dance much better than that," he assured her, smiling. "And if we danced more often... I bet we'd get better at it." Fili chuckled, astounded by his own boldness. She was a little shorter than he. Just enough shorter that if he wanted to do what he was thinking about doing, he'd have to bend down. Not a lot, but enough to be noticed. He weighed the options in his head.

Don't do it: miss opportunity, regret it, possibly never get another chance.

Do it: possibly regret it (but not until the drink wore off), possibly get beaten to a pulp by Nori, then tended to by Ori.

Totally worth it. Fili lowered his head and, with only the slightest hesitation, stole a gentle kiss.

Ori was so shocked by the sudden gesture that she hardly knew how to react. She giggled, blushing bright red, then realized it hadn't been funny. "Sorry," she said, then giggled again. "Really, I am sorry," she tried once more. There was a warm, relaxing feeling radiating out from her chest, making her weak at the knees.

"Thank-you," she said awkwardly, wincing when she realized how stupid she sounded. After a moment's thought, she leaned forward a little. "I think you'd better... kiss me again. Before I say anything else."

Under the cover of the raucous cheers following Billa's song, Fili obligingly pulled Ori closer, kissing her again. A thought passed through his hazy mind that she was much better at kissing than she was at dancing. Before he could explore what that might imply, however, Fili felt a very strong hand grab the back of his neck and haul him, backwards, away from Ori. He knew without looking that it was Nori, and how tightly he was holding on to Fili's neck implied murderous intent. Dori had his hands on his sister's shoulders, and looked torn between smug satisfaction and appalled concern.

"If ya ever even think abou' doin' anythin' like tha' agin," snarled Nori furiously, "I'll cut yer idiot tongue clean out, Heir of bloody Durin 'r no."
Chapter Notes

A little more drunken revelry for you, lovely readers. Next chapter is pretty much all about Thorin and Billa. :) Hold on just a little longer, and enjoy violent!Nori in the meantime.

Billa was grinning from ear to ear. She wasn't nearly as plastered as the rest of them, but that was half the point of singing--to encourage everyone else to drink more while not a drop passed her own lips. Her gaze found Thorin and she winked at him. He didn't look too drunk either. Grabbing her ale, she moved over to sit beside him.

"Well, looks like leaving tomorrow is out," she told him, rolling her eyes a little. But before she could make any further comments about dwarvish drinking habits, there was a ruckus on the dance floor--and Fili and Nori were in the middle of it. Nori had Fili pinned to the floor, apparently trying to throttle him. As Billa leapt to her feet, Fili drove his knee into the older dwarf's stomach and rolled him over, hauling back to punch him.

"Fili!"

Kili lurched to his feet, looking halfway appalled, followed by several of the others. Thorin was quicker, though, and not a handful of seconds had passed before he was in the midst of the fight, dragging Fili off Nori.

"This is not acceptable," he growled, pulling his nephew around to face him. He turned to fix Nori with a remonstrative glare. "All of you... I thought I'd instructed you to behave with civility. You shame us before the whole of Esgaroth!"

Ori extricated herself from Dori's grasp, slipping back to the table, head lowered in shame. She'd caused a fight. Again. Could she never be with Fili without it turning into a mess?

Fili coughed, rubbing his throat. His only thought had been to strike back, to pay back insult for insult. Now his mind was a little clearer, and he knew it had been wrong. All wrong. "My apologies, Uncle..."

"But 'e attacked first," said a bystander indignanty, pointing at Nori. "Not blondie's fault. 'e was just defendin' 'imself!' The human was a young male, a gangly youth with the pinched look of one freshly out of his growth spurt. Some of the other men around him nodded and rumbled their agreement.
Billa had been right behind Thorin, tense with anxiety. Seeing her leader dealing with Fili, she turned to Nori, whom Dwalin now restrained, and endeavored to get his side of the story. Nori was all too willing to share.

"That slimy little git 'as gone an' seduced my sister!" he hissed furiously. "I swore I'd never--"

"You listen, Nori," Billa said sharply. "Either you'll shape up or you'll be left behind. We can't afford this sort of thing anymore."

"But he kissed--"

"It was a kiss and nothing more--unless you dwarves are much more talented than I'm giving you credit for, and you have a secret to doing more than that while in public without scandalizing half the town."

Nori fell silent, but his expression was livid.

"I'm sorry you don't think Fili's good enough--dunno where you're going to find one better--but don't you think this should be Ori's choice?"

Nori gaped. After a moment, he moved. Too suddenly to be predicted, too fast for even Dwalin to stop him. He grabbed Billa's arm, dragging her closer.

"You think you know everything, don't you?"

It was the drink. She knew it, but the halfling was still frightened.

By the time Thorin knew himself again, he was holding Billa protectively behind him and Nori's nose was gushing blood. The look the dwarf king's eyes carried now was a promise of further punishment, should Nori persist. Thorin hadn't meant to punch him so hard, but then again, he reasoned, there was nothing like a little pain to sober a drink-emboldened mind.

Nori moaned in a nasal tone, turning away, pinching off the bridge of his nose. Dori followed him, searching for a rag.

Thorin sighed, leaning down closer to Billa's level. "You're alright? He didn't hurt you?" He knew it was a silly question, but he wanted to make it clear he'd seen the threat of violence in Nori's manner and had acted preemptively. He didn't want her to think... well, what exactly didn't he want her to think? That he was senselessly brutal? That he was... dangerous?

"My... my arm hurts a bit... but I'm alright." Billa's voice shook only slightly, and though her eyes seemed very large and dark in her face, she trembled very little.

Thorin sent a meaningful glance at Nori, who was clamping off his nose with a red-blotched rag and glaring. He'd have words with him later, when he'd sobered. No one laid a hand on his burglar. Not while he had a say in the matter.

"Might have some bruising," Thorin murmured, helping Billa back to the table and pulling out the chair for her to sit. Retrieving the wine pitcher from Gloin, he filled a brass goblet and pressed it gently into her still faintly trembling hands. "It'll calm your nerves," he said in a nurturing tone, smiling reassuringly.

Fili had returned to his place beside his brother now, but he hung his head, looking highly unsettled and very near disgusted with himself.
"Ah, it's alright, Fee," Kili said in an undertone, jostling the blond's shoulder good-naturedly. He looked a bit more sober than he had a few minutes before. "Uncle took care of Nori. I doubt he'll risk trying something like that again. If he knows what's good for him, that is."

Fili was looking, not at his brother, but at Ori. He felt ashamed of putting her in a position like this. Twice. Three times, if one counted that night, alone by the fire.

"I guess you're right, Kee. Still... I wish things were different." He reached for a flagon of mead, but a slender hand stopped him.

"I think you've both had enough." Tauriel's smooth voice surprised the blond.

"I thought you decided not to come."

"I never said I wouldn't come--only that feasts aren't my realm of expertise." Tauriel gave him a faint smile, but firmly removed Fili's hand from the flagon. The red-haired elleth seemed to be just as clear-eyed and alert as she had been when the dwarves first departed for the feast, and that, thought Kili, was a shame.

The dark-haired dwarf gave Tauriel a friendly wink. "Oh, come on. We left Mother at home for a reason. Sit down and have a drink, Tauri. You need it." He patted the seat beside him. "'sides, I'm the one being abandoned by everybody. Might as well drown my sorrows while I can, eh? Not every day we get a feast like this."

Tauriel? The elleth eyed him for a moment, then sat down beside him. Kili meant well, but his brain obviously wasn't working at full capacity.

"You're not being abandoned, Kili. I'll be here." She scanned the beverages on the table. "You're not being abandoned, Kili. I'll be here." She scanned the beverages on the table. Ale, beer, mead, a variety of wines- including dorwinion. If she'd had a mind to... but it would do no one any good. Not even her. "I think I'll survive without a drink, thank you."

Fili poured her a drink anyway and pushed it across to her. He'd seen where her eyes went, and grabbed the dorwinion. There was an abundance of it on the table. The Master of the Lake Men was clearly endeavoring to impress them.

Kili raised his own goblet again, throwing Tauriel a pleading look. "Come on. You shot me. Th' least you c'n do is have a shot with me." He snickered at his own ridiculous wordplay.

Tauriel shook her head, both amused and appalled by his joke. Still... she raised her glass. "Very well. To your health, my friend."

"To Erebor!" Fili thrust his mug unto the air, spilling some of his mead. The other dwarves roared their approval, and drank.

Tauriel drained her glass as though it were water. Good vintage water, with an aftertaste like high summer. She closed her eyes briefly, savoring the taste. Fili refilled her glass, chuckling.

Kili's eyes widened. "Well, Fee," he murmured in amazement, "looks like we've met our match. I'd put money on her drinking us under th' table. We'll be worse off than Uncle by the time this's over."

This might end rather embarrassingly, but if he could get the dour elf to lighten up even a little, the sacrifice would be worthwhile. He grinned at Tauriel, refilling his goblet again from the pitcher of mead. "So how 'bout another?"

Tauriel let out a short laugh. "You really think to make this a contest?" She checked her glass and found it full again. The red-haired elf shook her head. "You're both mad. Alright. One more. I won't
endorse you two drinking yourselves stupid." But it was with one of her familiar, barely-there smiles that she lifted her glass and drank it off with just as much ease as she had the first.

Fili slammed his empty mug triumphantly on the table, and found Tauriel watching him with something like a smirk playing around her eyes. He grinned, pointing at her.

"Oh... you like this, don't you?" His tone was incredulous, but not unhappy.

"Hush, you." Tauriel rolled her eyes. They weren't going to last nearly long enough to make her suffer on the morrow, but she was feeling a bit more lenient toward them now. Might as well humor them.

"Hey, Kee, did you, uh, do the thing?" Fili glanced at his brother, who was grinning like a madman.

"I most certainly did!" He nodded slightly toward the head of the table, eyes gleaming with mirth. Tauriel decided she didn't want to know.

Billa drank the wine off, and offered Thorin a shaky smile. "I'm fine, really. Just a little startled. That's all." She shivered a little, but she didn't seem terribly upset. The halfling glanced at Ori and sighed. Then she looked at the goblet in her hand--empty. A familiar aftertaste in her mouth, and the fuzzy, warm, tingly feelings that drifted through her mind made Billa chuckle resignedly. Of course. Elven wine.

"I... think I've done enough damage for tonight, Thorin. I'm... going to bed." Before I can make an idiot of myself.

Thorin looked somewhat disappointed, but nodded understandingly. "I suppose it'd do no good to keep you out too late. Exhausting yourself so soon after an illness isn't wise." He quickly downed the rest of the contents of his cup and shrugged into his overcoat, preparing to get up. That was odd. The wine was good, but he'd only had a single cupful--not enough to feel as heady as he did, and certainly not so quickly. But since the feeling wasn't at all unpleasant, he dismissed his concerns and stood.

"I hope you don't mind an escort back to the rooms," he said softly. "I'd like to... make sure you get there safely." That and he was quickly realizing the feast would hold little appeal for him in her absence.

"Your company's appreciated." Billa flashed him a smile, pushing herself out of her chair and spreading her large, fluffy feet to accommodate for the slightly dizzy, tipsy feeling swimming around in her head. "Hate t' get lost an' wind up in a' wrong bed. Can only imagine th' reaction t' that in a' mornin'."

The hobbit shook her head to clear it and tottered off. Last time she'd had that wine, it had been on an empty stomach. This time, she'd already had... oh. Well, that explained some of it. She'd already had a glass. Earlier in the evening, with her dinner. Then the ale, before and after her song. It was a wonder she could walk at all! Billa realized belatedly that the rough boards of the walkway would fix that. She paused at the edge of the floating plaza uncertainly, looking at the boardwalk and the water below and trying not to imagine the sort of thing that could happen to a drunk hobbit in an icy lake.

Thorin pulled up beside her, feeling strangely warm and relaxed, as though the chill night air were somehow balmy, comfortable, and safe. But he noticed Billa was swaying precariously and put out a hand to steady her. Perhaps she'd been more affected by the wine than he'd thought.
"Billa," he said, trying to sound like he was actually asking her permission, "I think I'd better carry you. You're not... sober enough, and in that dress...." He reached down and scooped her up--gently--allowing the trailing hem of her gown to drape over his right arm.

As he negotiated the walkway, he turned back to see Kili grinning at him like he knew something his uncle didn't and nudging Fili. Thorin sighed and kept moving. His heart felt very light of a sudden, as though nothing could ever go wrong again and this moment was the only one that mattered. She was in his arms, safe, and they were alone beneath the concealing dark of the cloudy night sky.

"I c'n walk by m'self. I was jus'... thinkin'." It was a lame excuse, even to Billa’s own ears. She let it drop with that pathetic, token protest, and rested her head against his shoulder. "You mus' like carryin' me," she murmured, feeling the softness of his tunic against her cheek, the warmth of his arms about her body, and remembering just how much larger than her he really was. Nearly twice her size. "Least, you seem t'do it a lot. Goin' inta Rivendell... an' comin' inta Laketown...” She wasn't tired. Her mind was very awake, though spinning lazily with the effects of the heady drink. But she was very comfortable. Safe. Billa giggled in spite of herself. "'r maybe I git hurt on purpose, 'cuz I like bein' carried."

Thorin snorted in amusement. "I was beginning to wonder." He rounded the corner into the courtyard of the great hall, unintentionally slowing his step a little. "I... I'm pleased... that you like it," he admitted, somewhat inelegantly. He admired her soft, drowsy face in the diffuse moonlight, and how the light played off the lustrous waves of her chin-length, light brown hair, and glinted on the metal beads at the ends of her braids. His heart began to thud a little harder, and his breath hitched. He paused at the steps leading into the hall. "You're... beautiful, Billa," he rumbled, leaning in a little closer to look into her eyes. He was halfway... awed by her. She felt so perfect in his arms, beside his chest. So warm and soft and... close. Very close. For the first time--and it came as something of a shock--he realized he wanted her. And he wasn't sure just how frightened he should be by that thought.

Billa blushed darkly under his gaze. She didn't think he (or anyone, for that matter) had ever looked at her like that before.

"You don't mean that," she scolded softly, hoping he argued with her. "I'm not..." But words wouldn't come. The space between them was at once too much and not enough. She took a moment to remind herself how to breathe.

"Wha... wha' were we doing?" It was a dazed question at best. Billa wasn't even sure why she asked it.

Thorin looked a bit puzzled. "I... I was taking you back... to the room. Your room, I mean." He spoke slowly, haltingly, as though his mind were elsewhere. He moved up the steps and past the guards at the door, proceeding slowly through the dimly lamplit main hall and toward the corridor.

"Billa," he said softly, heart pounding, "I... I feel... I haven't felt this way... about anyone." He caught her gaze again, swallowing, looking somewhat troubled.

Billa giggled breathlessly. "Me neither," she whispered. "S'pose... that's why I never... got married." Under other circumstances, she would have been absolutely mortified that those words had actually come out of her mouth in the hearing of another living person, let alone in conversation with Thorin Oakenshield. At the moment, however, she was far more interested in studying the contours of his lips than in the words she was actually saying.

"You should kiss me," she told him faintly. Yeah. A kiss would sort things out.
Thorin hesitated a handful of seconds, studying her face. She was serious. She was attracted to him, too. That knowledge stirred his heart, made him nearly weak with relief. He smiled at her, glancing from her eyes to her mouth, and leaned down. Their lips met, gently, and parted again. Hers had been so soft, even softer than they'd looked. And there was no describing the feeling. An instant later, he could hardly believe what he'd done.

"In the room," he stated, and moved quickly into the main hall of the guest chambers and into her suite, pushing the door shut behind him. "Better," he growled, and leaned down to kiss her again.

Tauriel did, in fact, drink the brothers under the table, and Kili was now moaning, his head down, his hair plastered to the side of his face. "Fee," he muttered, eyes half-shut, "ah think ahm gon'be sick."

Fili flapped a hand listlessly at his brother from his position on the floor. "Jus' don'doit on me." He felt pretty ill also. But at least he wasn't thinking about what's-her-face... with her soft brown eyes and... cute nose....

Tauriel smothered a laugh behind her hand. "I warned you," she managed to say around chuckles. "You can't say I didn't." If they did throw up, they'd probably feel better, but Tauriel had no desire to be part of anything of the sort. She finished her sixth glass of wine and shook her head as she set it aside.

"I have something that'll help." The she-elf produced from her belt pouch two small green bundles—dried herbs she'd brought with her from the Woodland Realm. She gave one to each brother. "Eat this. It won't do a thing for tomorrow's headache, but it'll help you sleep tonight."

Kili fumbled with the little thing she'd handed him, his vision blurring it into a fuzzy green smudge in his hand. "Thank'oo?" He hesitantly slid it into his mouth... and nearly spit it out again. "Ach! What'sat? Tastes 'orrble." He chewed it a moment and tried to swallow it quickly, but it was having trouble getting past his gag reflex. With a remarkable effort, he managed to choke it down.

Ori had been looking on with some interest throughout this entire competition, if it could be called that. She'd played along a bit herself, secretly, aware her brothers' eyes were on her. Now she was rather tipsy, and the crestfallen, defeated looks on Fili and Kili's faces struck her as ridiculously funny. She giggled, and tried to hide it. When she saw Tauriel glance at her, she leaned forward a bit and smiled. "I think you taught 'em a thing or two."

Tauriel chuckled and winked at the young female. "Oh, I certainly hope so. She bent down and lifted Fili back into a chair, where he slumped over the table. "Keep an eye on this one for me," the elf said with a smirk. "I'll be back for him after His Royal Drunkenness is in bed." And with that, she stooped and slid Kili onto her back. She was just as light on her feet as ever, but carrying a grown dwarf isn't precisely a walk in the park, not even for an elf. Still, it was easier for her than it might have been for anyone else present.

When she'd gone, Fili blinked at Ori, still chewing the herbs Tauriel had given him. "Yer purty," he informed the female dazedly. "More'n purty. Yer byoo'ful. An'... if e did cut m' tongue ow... it'd be werf it. Ya kiss like a goddess."

He may as well have told a coarse joke for the look with which Ori favored him. Should she find this flattering? Was it flattering to be told one was beautiful by someone who had, moment's before, been drooling into the floor? She didn't have the faintest idea how to reply, so she settled for a weak nod and a thank-you that sounded like it may have been squeaked by a mouse. Still, the idea that Fili might, beneath all the drink that was affecting him, be telling the truth caressed her heart a little, made
her feel the slightest bit... prettier.

As light as Tauriel's step was, Kili was in no condition for even the slightest jostling. He desperately fought to keep the contents of his stomach down, beginning to go a bit green about the gills, his features scrunched tightly with effort. A nice, dark, soft, unmoving place to sleep this off was the only thing he wanted right now.

It was to precisely this sort of place that Tauriel took him, and set the unhappy dwarf on his bed as gently as she could manage. With deft hands, she had him out of his boots and tunic in a trice, not giving him a chance to protest. She bathed his brow, and smiled down at him through the shadows.

"Rest now, my prince," she murmured. "The morning will be unforgiving, but better, I think."

Leaving him with a mug of water and an empty pail beside the bed, she returned to the feast for Fili, who was still talking. Ori seemed fixed to her chair, eyes as wide as dinner plates, cheeks approximately the color of beets.

"Is this miscreant bothering you?" asked Tauriel lightly, kneeling and pulling Fili on to her back. She didn't wait for a response. "My apologies. Off we go." Fili groaned in protest as she stood. So very drunk. So not fun.
Billa's head was spinning, and she was pretty sure it wasn't the wine this time. It was an entirely different kind of intoxication.

"Yeah... that's why-" But Thorin interrupted her with a second kiss. The halfling shuddered in his arms, her heart doing a series of backflips and twisting everything up inside.

She'd expected his beard to be scratchy and unpleasant. It really wasn't. It was... for lack of a better word, smooth. Not silky, but definitely softer than it looked. Releasing a handful of his tunic that she'd been holding very tightly, Billa ran her fingers through his short, dark beard, humming softly into the kiss that eventually ended because they needed to breathe. Light-headed and dizzy, the hobbit giggled weakly.

"Don't... don't kiss me like that 'less you really mean it."

Thorin carried her over to the bed and sat, cradling her in his lap and leaning down. "You know me," he whispered, his voice nearly overpowered by the sudden settling of embers in the hearth. "I'm terrible at pretending."

He ran a hand through her soft, silken waves, and nuzzled her cheek, caught up in natural impulses he'd never before felt, let alone indulged. Her scent was intoxicating, earthy and fresh like a spring rain, and her fingers were just as soft and gentle. Relaxing, and at the same time... electrifying. It was a strange drive, he thought in passing, but it was what it was. He needed to be closer to her. Needed. Pivoting a little, he leaned down and pressed her to the bed, supporting himself over her on his elbows, panting, fixing her with harder, more relentless kisses.

Billa's hand slid over his jaw and around the back of his neck, pulling him closer, deeper. Her kisses took on a hungony, searching, heated quality. He was sparkling things inside her she didn't know what
to do with. She could feel his hard, warm body, muscular after the fashion of those who worked hard for a living. Never saw hobbit lads with arms like those.

As drunk as she was, Billa knew what she needed to do. That shirt needed to come off. Now.

Encouraged by the urgency of her responses, Thorin shifted himself so he was fully astride her, kicking off his boots, moving in to plant soft, teasing kisses beneath her chin and along her neck. His long, dark hair kept slipping over his shoulders and getting in the way, but he hardly noticed, and she didn't seem to mind. He felt her fingers working at the clasps on his tunic and paused a moment to assist her, shrugging the heavy velvet off his shoulders on to the floor behind him, then hurriedly pulling off the linen shirt he'd been wearing beneath it. Exposing himself to her--even partially--was something of a vulnerable feeling, but it passed quickly. He eased himself to the mattress beside her, pulling her close to his chest.

The feeling of her soft, yielding body against him (even through the fabric of her dress) made him practically frantic with need, and his lips met hers again--gasping, reckless kisses--his hands stroking her hair, caressing the sides of her face, her neck, her gently pointed ears. He was awed by every inch of her he saw... and intrigued by every inch he didn't. His mind turned to the lacings at the back of the dress, and before he knew it, he was reaching for them, as if compelled by some irresistible force.

Billa let him fumble with her dress for a minute, exacting her revenge along the underside of his jaw, her fingers tangled in thick black chest-hair. She'd never even dreamed of so much hair and muscle all on one body, and it was enough to turn her head most thoroughly. When the halfling remembered his attempts to remove her dress, she huffed into his neck and slipped her hands under his, untying the dainty laces and unfastening the little hooks that held the stifling fabric on her.

Her shoulders came first. Billa pulled her arms free next, then proceeded to ignore the dress in favor of more important things--like exploring more of this glorious, hairy chest, like a gift from Mahal himself. Her linen shift was much lighter and more bearable, though somewhere in the back of her mind, the halfling knew it would soon become stifling also.

For now, she was content to caress hard planes of muscle and thick forests of curly black hair. Billa was startled, fascinated, by scars that twisted their way over his ribs and across his strong chest. She paid special attention to them, kissing every inch of dark, knotted memory burned into his body.

It was taking every ounce of Thorín's concentration to make anything of the yards of fabric hiding her from him, and once she began caressing him in earnest, he gave up. Her touch occupied his whole consciousness, made him shut his eyes, made him forget that he still needed air. His hands moved gently but vigorously along her soft, pale shoulders, down her arms, jumped to either side of her surprisingly small waist. Just to hold her, to breathe her, to experience her. There was nothing else in his mind. No quest, no kingdom, no throne, no Arkenstone. No unlocked door that anyone might come through at any moment.

"Billa," he panted huskily, but couldn't get out the rest. What have you done to me? He leaned in and kissed her from her collar across her shoulders, savoring the sensation of his lips against her warm, silken skin, the feeling of his hands about her tiny, delicate frame. At last, he took hold of her shoulders and drove her to the bed, trying not to rest the full of his weight on her while still getting as much contact with her body as possible. He began to shift against her, his kisses deep, ravenous, and unyielding, his blood beginning to burn within him, his natural impulses driving him on and on. He needed her. He was gasping now, hyperventilating, almost as though he were in pain. His hands dove beneath her shoulders, gripping her, fingers trembling. "Billa." Her name was hissed through his teeth this time, as though he were holding himself back. "The dress...."
Billa gasped sharply as he broke away to speak. This was all rather overwhelming, but she wanted—no, *needed* more. More of his kisses, more of his touch, more of *him*. Frantic with desire and seeming inexplicably less clumsy now than she had been on her feet, the halfling used Thorin's solid bulk to lever herself forward, shucking the dress like a cornhusk, rubbing her body along the firm length of him as she went. The result was that she was now sitting on the bed in front of him, rather than lying under him, clad in naught but her shift and a healthy blush.

"Thorin," she whispered, her breath hitching in her throat. She could hear—she could *feel* the deep, primal rumble of his voice as he responded. What he said was absolutely lost on her, but as their lips collided in a needy kiss, she surrendered completely to him, her mind lost in the euphoria of his scent, his taste, his touch. Rough. Everything about him was rough. As though he'd been scraped raw by the world. Every scratch of his calloused palms made her shiver, and Billa was no longer sure where dwarf ended and hobbit began.

Billa shifted slightly as she woke, trying to relieve the pressure in her head. The movement, however, brought on a terrific throb of pain. With a faint moan, the halfling made to roll over and sit up. Several sensations registered simultaneously in her aching head, and Billa froze, sorting through them.

1. there was a significant weight pinning her to the bed.
2. the weight was in the shape of a person, much larger than she.
3. the person was holding her like a lover might.
4. the person snored like a dwarf, and had an extraordinary amount of attractively dark, curly arm-hair.
5. the person wasn't wearing any clothes, as far as she could tell.
6. as far as she could tell—neither was she.

Billa nearly had a heart-attack. She could vaguely remember the events of the previous night; that is, there had been a lot of touching and kissing and a frantic, all-consuming need. The culmination of their (mutual?) desperation registered in her mind barely a second before she shot out of bed, hitting the floor with a yelp and immediately regretting it. The floor was very cold, and she wasn't wearing so much as a stitch of clothing.

Thorin turned his head toward the sound, squinting. The light—even as grey and subdued as it was—hurt his eyes, and made his head throb. "Billa?" he said, a note of tremendous surprise joining his tone at the end, as she finally came into focus. He sat up sharply, then instantly regretted it. A pain like someone or something bludgeoning the back of the head registered, and he moaned and collapsed back onto the half-askew pillow again, wincing. "So... it... it happened."

There was a certain incredulity in the statement, as though he'd thought these vague recollections of a night of passion with the Company's burglar might've been... some kind of drunken fancy. He peeked at her again, and quickly looked away. No, he definitely wasn't imagining *that*. She was quite... erm... in a state of undress. Not to say the sight wasn't pleasant, but... well. And now that very thought was making him uncomfortable.

Billa's eyes widened to the size of saucers. It had been him? *Him?* "Thorin?" She sounded absolutely thunderstruck, and hastily grabbed for a blanket to cover herself. Heat positively radiated from her face. She felt like she might die from humiliation. "So, uh... that was... wow. " Of all the things to
have done. "I am... so sorry. I didn't mean--I just... I'll never touch alcohol again, I swear." As though suddenly remembering that she had a nasty hangover, the halfling winced. Everything made her head hurt. Even blushing.

Thorin forced himself into a sitting position, face drawn, pulling the rumpled blankets with him. "It's... it's alright," he said, after a moment, keeping his eyes respectfully averted. "I just... I didn't realize...." He thought a minute, and his face paled a little. "I'd thought... oh, Billa, I'm sorry. I... I accept full responsibility for what happened. I wasn't... I didn't mean...." He trailed off, taking some time to collect himself. "The last thing I wanted was for you to be hurt. I shouldn't have... lost control of myself. Forgive me."

The long-term consequences of his actions began to dawn on him. Would this jeopardize the journey ahead? Cause a rift between him and the burglar? And what if the others found out? Would he lose their respect? What would Dwalin say if he knew? And worst of all--would this... change things between him and Billa? Had she only been attracted to him because she was drunk? That thought was practically unbearable.

Billa let out a soft, embarrassed laugh. "No, this is... my fault. I didn't exactly stop you." To think she had actually thought, even for so short a time, that Thorin thought she was beautiful? How conceited could she get? There came a knock at the door, and almost immediately thereafter, it opened. Dwalin held the half-open door like a shield, looking around it, scanning the room.

"Thor-" The warrior froze, his gaze slowly shifting from Thorin, to Billa, then back again.

Thorin tried not to die of shame on the spot. "Out," he said distinctly, making a sharp gesture that meant the same. So much for the Company not finding out. No one--certainly not Dwalin--could've mistaken the scene for anything but what it was. Thorin, hair tangled and mussed, Billa, her wavy locks wild and sticking out every which way, both obviously unclothed, hiding behind blankets. Dwalin, with a look of absolute horror and unadulterated disgust, managed a mute nod and disappeared once more, shutting the door behind him.

Thorin glanced at Billa again, looking faintly mournful. "I'm sorry about... that. I'll take care of it, I promise." He shifted to the edge of the bed, pulling the blanket over his shoulders. This was Billa's suite. The walk of shame would be his. After a brief scavenger hunt for his things, he managed to clothe himself behind his impromptu dressing screen.

He turned to Billa again. She seemed practically stricken, clutching her blanket to her, head lowered. Shocked. He could hardly stand to see her like this, to know he was the cause of it. "I... it may be a bit bold of me to say this, but," he smiled faintly, "that was easily... the best night of my life." Would that make her feel better or worse? He had no idea. All he knew was that it was true.

Billa's head snapped up, and from the way she winced, it had hurt quite a bit. She stared at him for a moment, open-mouthed, then started to laugh, her mouth curling into an incredulous smile. "You... you..." Laughing became crying, and she leaned limply against the bed behind her, not bothering to hide the tears that were leaving shiny wet tracks down her flushed cheeks as she tried to master herself.

"Oh, spirits--I thought... oh, nevermind what I thought!" She struggled to her feet, staggered across the gap between them and buried her face in his tunic, not caring what she looked like or whether he thought she was mad.

Thorin was a little surprised by her reaction, and at the same time, relieved. He put his arms around her and held her tightly to him, leaning down to gently kiss the top of her head. "So... you're not angry with me?" he ventured, lifting her chin so he could look into her face. Even with tears
"Angry?" Billa gave him a strange look, half smile, half smirk. "I don't think I could be angry with you right now, even if I tried." Taking a deep, shaky breath, she raised herself up onto her toes, stretching up and pulling him down with arms around his neck to give him a kiss. "If you give me a minute, I'll get dressed and come with you. Not right for you to face them all alone."

"Facing them," as it turned out, wasn't nearly as dramatic of an affair as either of them had feared. Most of the dwarves were still asleep, and those that weren't were at the table nursing hangovers. Fili and Kili were nowhere to be seen, which was a blessing, Thorin thought, because they would've noticed, regardless of the the others' lack of reaction.

Dwalin was standing, arms crossed, in the corner. If one had to put a name to the look he was giving them, it might have been something along the lines of "betrayed." Thorin cleared his throat, gesturing for the hulking dwarf to follow. Dwalin did, but looked none too happy about it. When they were in Thorin's room with the door shut, the dwarf king spoke.

"I... I'm not pleased you walked in when you did, Dwalin. If we had been sober, I don't think anything of the sort would've happened in the first place." He absently ran a hand through his tangled hair, glancing at Billa. "But I don't regret what happened. When I told you there was nothing between us some nights ago... I was wrong. I was very wrong."

Dwalin snorted, and it was unclear whether he was agreeing emphatically or disagreeing with equal fervor. "I could'a told ya that th' night ya said it," he growled.

Billa exchanged a look with Thorin, thinking to herself that Dwalin had every right, and yet no right to be reacting like this. Her head hurt to much to pursue the thought much further, and besides that, Dwalin was talking again.

"What ya do an' don't do with yer burglar is none of my business. I'm here to protect ya, nothin' more." There was a dangerous sort of glint to his gaze that may or may not have implied the rest of his warning; And I'll protect you, even against yourself. Even against her.

"Your service to me has been no small matter, Dwalin," said Thorin, moving into something of a diplomatic tone, fighting to ignore the insistent hammering in his head. "I trust this will not change things between us. And," Thorin glanced down at the floor, somewhat uncomfortable, "I expect you will not speak of this to the others, in case that wasn't already clear. They will doubtless suspect as it is; I'd rather keep them guessing, if it's all the same to you. If we're to succeed in this venture, we can afford no further... distractions." He was well aware this applied equally to himself.

Dwalin exhaled through his nose, his beard bristling unhappily. If he had a hangover, it was impossible to tell. He looked just as grumpy as he ever did. "As my king wishes," he muttered with a slight inclination of his head. With that, and not waiting to be excused, he turned on his heel and left.

Billa looked up at Thorin with a sigh. "We've really made a mess of things, haven't we?"

Thorin shrugged. "If we don't make an issue of it, it won't become one." He wasn't sure what gave him the confidence to guarantee this; all he knew was that he couldn't afford to have it become a problem. He closed the space between them, took her hand and kissed it tenderly. "I think it would be best, Billa, if we didn't... flaunt our affections for each other. Not now, at least."
Billa’s gaze dropped from his face to their joined hands, then flicked back up to his face again. After a moment, she nodded slightly. "Alright." There was, despite her efforts to keep her tone neutral, a slightly disappointed quality about the word.

As much as the thought pained him, Thorin knew this was necessary. He couldn't allow her to distract him from the mission at hand, from the task before him. Love was for peacetime, and not to be indulged until the dragon lay dead.

The dragon. How had he managed to forget that tiny detail? All along, he'd been planning to send her in after the Arkenstone. That had been the idea from the start. How quickly it had become... repulsive to him. He couldn't, he decided. There had to be another way. Had to be. He released her hand. "I suggest you go back to your room and... clean up a bit. I'll do the same. I have some things to discuss with you. Later, when you've had some time."

Billa studied his face, as though trying to memorize it. Then, with a low sigh, she nodded, kissed his palm gently, and turned to go. Things between them had been irreversibly changed, and she was still figuring out how everything had altered. There were many new facets to explore, now, and new limits to test.

When she appeared some time later, Billa's hair was damp and free of braids or beads. She was dressed in the clothing the Lake Men had provided for her (trousers, not a skirt) and looked much less like she was in pain. This last she helped along by drinking a good quantity of water with her breakfast.

"Alright. You wanted to talk?" The halfling stood before Thorin without fear or shame, her bright hazel eyes searching his face for a hint of what was to come.

Thorin had bathed and done his hair in its customary style, clad again in the simple attire he'd selected when they'd first arrived in Laketown. By all appearances, the night of the feast was behind them, and yet, Thorin knew it would never leave them. He nodded gravely, leaning on the railing overlooking the water some twenty feet below. Out here on the viewing deck, it was quiet and calm, peaceful, if a little chilly.

"There is... something that has come to my attention," the dwarf said, carefully choosing his words. He was all but certain it would be nothing short of a battle to get her to see things his way. They'd had a similar conversation in the house of the skin-changer, only now, things had changed. She was more than a burglar. He'd spent a long time denying that fact, but no more. "Billa, I cannot allow you to enter the dragon's lair."

At her instant look of protest, he raised a hand. "Let me finish. I am no longer willing to... risk you. I know you have your ring, and I know you're the quietest on your feet, but this is different. This is nothing like what you've faced before. Whether we reclaim the stone or not, I cannot... will not... lose you, Billa."

Billa pursed her lips, watching him and staying well away from the railing. She liked water no better now than she had when they arrived. But there was a stubborn fire in her expression that refused to simply yield before the will of Thorin Oakenshield, king or no, mate or no.

"And would you send another in my place," she asked softly, "one who would almost certainly wake the beast, should he be woken, ending our Quest and his own life in one moment? I think not. I see your purpose and I'll have none of it." Billa was frowning now, and doing small things to stop herself making this into an all-out row. Flexing her hands, shuffling her feet. For all intents and purposes, it looked like she was getting ready for a fight.
"You mean to keep me behind and go in yourself. You would have me kept safe in Laketown with the injured and watch while you went to your death, and I'd be no better off than if I'd stayed in the bloody Shire as you'd always said I should. Well, I'll not see it happen, Thorin. I told you once I'd not watch you risk your life, and I meant it. I refuse to sit idly by. So by your leave, Your Highness, but I'll be fulfilling my duty as burglar with or without your blessing- if only because I'm the least likely to die doing it."

Thorin had turned to look at her midway through her reply, and the determined set of her shoulders told him this was going to be even harder than he'd thought. He crossed his arms, took a slow step toward her, fixed her with a look that was both plaintive and very, very firm. If there was anyone who could match the stubbornness of the halfling when she'd made up her mind, it was Thorin.

"Billa, when I first contracted you as my burglar, I didn't know anything about you. I certainly never anticipated you and I would..." This wasn't an easy thing for him to put into words, but he did his best. "Would... become bonded to one another... this way. The thought of watching you disappear down the dark passage into the dragon's bedchamber..." There was distinct emotion in his voice now. "I can't do it, Billa. Don't make me do it. Please."

He closed the gap between them, took both of her hands, knelt so he could look her straight in the eye. Reasoning with her, arguing with her, none of that would do any good. This was the only appeal that might. "We'll find another way," he whispered. "There has to be another way. I won't send you to your death, Billa. I..."

He swallowed, looking away a moment. Why was it so hard to be the one to admit it? Pride. Always pride. He met her gaze again. "I love you too much."

Billa expression softened considerably. She lifted a hand to cup his jaw gently in her palm, rubbing the dark scruff of his beard tenderly for a moment. "I love you, too," she murmured. "And that's why I go. Because I'll come back. I promise. I'll always come back."

Thorin raised his blue gaze to the tiled awning above, sighing heavily. How could he ever refuse her like this, when she was so sure? When she did what she did out of love? Love. It seemed that no balance could be struck between his need to protect, and her need to serve--between his heart and hers.

"Billa," he said at last, seeming as though much of the life had fled him, as though she were asking him to kill her on the spot, "do you know how dwarves love?" He allowed the question to linger a moment before answering it himself, some amount of the vigor he'd lost returning to his voice. "We guard. We protect. We hold. We love with our whole hearts, and that love is stronger than iron, fiercer than fire. We would die before allowing a loved one to come to harm. What you ask me to do runs counter to every grain of my being. But," he seemed resigned now, deflated, "I will endure such hurt... if to do other than your heart bids would grieve you so."

He stroked her hair gently, looking for all the world like he was already in mourning. Billa's eyes were a little wet as she smiled up at him confidently, not at all as sure as she wanted him to think.

"Thorin, there is absolutely nothing you can say that'll stop me." She took a breath, swallowing heavily before she continued. "It may be selfish... but I'd rather die, having the night we shared, than live, knowing I'll never have another like it." She pressed her face into his shirt, holding him tightly. "I'll see you on that throne yet. Just you wait. If I have to bring you Smaug's head myself, I'll see you home." Home. The halfling felt a thrill, and shivered.

"Uncle?" Fili stepped out onto the balcony and hesitated. "Oh. I didn't think--sorry. I'll... yeah." He turned to leave, looking rather embarrassed.
Thorin stood again, only reluctantly releasing Billa. "It's alright, Fili. You don't have to go." Now his eldest nephew knew, but Thorin wasn't about to give the impression he was ashamed of it. That was not the way of a king—or a king-to-be. "What is it?"

Fili slowly stepped back out onto the balcony, squinting against the light, his gaze a little over Thorin's left shoulder (as his mother had beat it into his head from an early age that princes never stared at the floor). He cleared his throat slightly, and while the blond delayed, Billa shifted so she was standing beside and slightly behind Thorin, rather than directly in front of him. She seemed to be wiping her eyes.

"I... I had hoped we could talk about the, uh... situation that came up last night. Nori and I.... This isn't the first time it's happened, but I'd like it to be the last." Fili touched his throat gingerly, and the motion brought to Thorin's attention a line of faint bruising, yellow-green against his fair skin.

"That is something I've been meaning to address," Thorin said, moving a step closer to his nephew. "Firstly, what are your intentions toward Ori? Are you... pursuing her, Fili?" The look he fixed the blond with was distinctly concerned. Fili was supposed to be the responsible one, Thorin's heir. Surely he knew better than to complicate things like this, especially in the final stretch of their journey to the Mountain, when solidarity was so important.

Fili looked quite frankly terrified at the thought, though he didn't immediately deny it. A handful of heartbeats passed while the young dwarf's mouth opened and closed soundlessly. Finally, seemingly rather distressed by his own answer, he bowed his head. "No, sir."

Billa frowned slightly, but made no comment. She could see, perhaps clearer than anyone else in the Company (being female and all) how much Fili and Ori had really started to come together, how much each wanted the stability of the other. It didn't seem at all fair that either should be deprived of that comfort, especially considering the danger they would be walking into.

Thorin nodded, suspicious of Fili's reaction. "Very well. Then I suggest you refrain from doing anything her brothers can misconstrue as some form of an advance." He turned to Billa with an apologetic look. "We'll... continue our discussion. Soon. I have to settle this issue with Ori before it gets any more out of hand." Leaving the cold air, the gentle lapping of the water and the burglar behind, he followed Fili back inside. Fili kept his head down and offered no explanation as he led his uncle inside to the common room. Nori waited there, looking sour, but repentant. He sat up they approached, and winced slightly, clearly suffering the same indulgence-induced ailment as the rest.

"I was a fool last night. I'll do what I can to make amends."

Thorin clasped his hands behind him, cleared his throat. This was a peculiar circumstance—in point of fact, one of his initial reservations about bringing Billa along. Only, it wasn't Billa who was causing strife amongst the Company. Well, not exactly, anyway.

"I see," he said thoughtfully. "And should I expect any incidents like last night's in future?"

Nori's gaze flicked over to Fili, and something seemed to pass invisibly between them. "No," they said in unison, though in entirely different tones. Nori was firm, confident, and unyielding. Fili sounded nearly woebegone and defeated.

"Good." Thorin didn't seem terribly convinced. He moved to within striking distance of the seated Nori, fixing him with a scathing look. "Because if I catch the barest hint of something like that happening again, it's more than your nose that'll be hurting next time." His tone was dark, a low, threatening growl. "We can't afford to have discord within this Company. We face a dragon in a few days. If your focus is not completely with us, and with this quest—if you are not completely in unison
with your fellows--you could be the death of us all. Do I make myself clear?"

Some of Nori's aggressiveness seemed to drain from him, and a sober look overtook his face. The dragon. After a moment, he nodded. "Yes, sir."

Fili reached over, gripping Nori's shoulder bracingly. "Uncle," he paused, then forged ahead, meeting Thorin's gaze for the first time since the previous night. "She should stay here." He paused again as Nori turned sharply to look up at him, his expression suddenly suspicious. "I want to be with you, one hundred percent. And you're right. We can't afford... distractions."

Thorin nodded slowly, considering. He felt some amount of pity for his nephew--this was obviously painful for him, even if he wouldn't admit it. "That may be for the best. At least she wouldn't be the only dwarf left behind, and she'd have the elf to look after her. What do you say to that, Nori? Surely you can see it would be better for all concerned."

Nori looked for a moment as though he very much resented giving in to Fili's idea, but sighed and nodded all the same. "There's wisdom in it," he admitted reluctantly. "As long as she's safe, I guess I can't complain."

Fili exhaled softly, closing his eyes for a moment as though offering a prayer of thanks.

"See that she's told soon, then," Thorin said, turning away. "We leave at first light." His tone was tense, aggravated. With all the major preparations out of the way, it was unclear why he was still stressed. He disappeared back up the stairs to the verandah.

Ori had been sitting in the high-backed chair near the fire, quietly knitting. As soft as their voices had been, she'd heard them quite distinctly. At Thorin's parting words, she lowered her head, the needles dropping from her suddenly weak fingers with a light clatter.

Fili's head jerked around to stare at the back of the chair, his heart performing a spectacular swan dive into his stomach. She'd heard. He took half a step toward the chair, but Nori's hand on his wrist stopped him. The older dwarf shook his head slightly, and indicated that he should go. Fili swallowed hard, steeling his resolve, then turned away. His tread was heavy and slow as he made his way back to the room he shared with Kili.

Nori waited until Fili was gone before he stood and moved over to his sister's seat. "You heard, then?"

Ori's chin moved slowly up and down, a nod so slight it was hardly one at all. A weak sigh followed. She was staring straight ahead into the flames, her brown eyes glossier than usual in the shifting light. "I... I thought he...." The words died in her throat and she glanced at Nori. "I understand." She didn't, but it seemed the most likely thing he would want to hear, the thing to make him leave her to simmer in her humiliation. That's what she wanted now. She should've known she'd just been fooling herself.

Nori felt a twinge of unease as he watched his sister. She looked so... like he'd plunged a harpoon into her breast with a smile. "It's to keep ya safe, Ori," he assured her, hating the confused sadness in her eyes, hating the knowledge that he'd put it there. "We only want to keep ya safe. You believe me, don't ya?"

"Yeah," Ori said distantly. "Of course. I'll stay here, keep busy." His voice--Fili's--it had seemed so... forceful, so urgent. "She should stay here." A distraction. That's all she was to him. Just a distraction.

"Go on, Brother," she whispered, forcing a half-smile, "I'll be fine."
I never thought he had gone so deep, Sister. Forgive me. Nori nodded silently and gave her hand a squeeze before he moved off. If they survived, he and Fili would be having a long talk about this.

Billa was sitting on the balcony with her back to the railing when Thorin reappeared. She glanced at him, but didn't stand, huddled inside the blue coat the Lake Men had given her, a deeply pensive expression on her face.

"How much treasure do you think that dragon has?" she asked softly, frowning up at him. "Even with the ring, it might take me hours to find one particular gemstone."

Thorin crossed his arms, looking up thoughtfully. "It was the greatest treasure in all Middle-earth in my grandfather's day. But dragons gather plunder from far and wide, and are continually adding to their hoard. There's no telling just how much the Worm has now." He moved to the railing, glancing askance at the shivering halfling. "Cold? That coat is practically threadbare."

"Maybe a bit," she admitted with a shrug, "but I like the quiet out here. Lets me think." She hadn't the faintest concept of how much treasure they were talking about, or even how large the dragon was, but she did know that if it was anywhere near as much as she was imagining, it could take her longer than was safe to search through it for the Arkenstone. "I guess I might have to make more than one trip. Too much all at once might be too dangerous." She pursed her lips. "Still, it'll only be one room. Can't be that bad."

Thorin drummed his fingers on the railing, his expression flat. "It's more of a hall than a room. The task will be nothing short of monumental." The drumming stopped and he gripped the weather worn wood. "Billa, I know you feel you must go to seek the Arkenstone, but... I think it would be best if I went with you, at least far enough that I could still hear you if you called. Where I could make sure you were alright." He turned to look at her. "I just can't abide the thought of sending you down there alone, a place where I'd never be able to get to you in time if... if something were to happen."

"If something is to happen, it will happen regardless of whether you're there to die with me or not," she responded tiredly. "And no, you're not coming with me. Half the reason Gandalf suggested a hobbit in the first place is because the dragon knows the scent of dwarf too well. If you're near enough to hear me, you're near enough to be scented, and I don't want your presence to be the cause of any sort of incident."

Thorin frowned unhappily at this, but nodded. She was, of course, correct. "I just wish... I wish it didn't have to be this way." Without another word, he turned on his heel and stalked back down the steps.
End of the Line

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

OMG are you people real? T_T Your comments on the last couple chapters have been absolutely fantabulous. Thank you thank you thank you--you guys MAKE MY DAY.

Many thanks to Fog, who pointed out a plot hole I'd completely overlooked--Dori. Poor, neglected Dori. We'll see more of him soon, but there's only so much we can do when there are 15+ characters. SO MUCH DEVELOPMENT. I think we did pretty darn well, considering. Anywho, enjoy the chapter.

Tauriel couldn't support Kili comfortably while he hobbled from place to place, being ever so much taller than he was, but she stayed beside him in any case, watching while he used his hardy cane to get around at what he obviously felt was a painfully slow pace. Besides that, it was bitterly cold. They stood together at the top of the steps (she refused to help him down them under any circumstance that wasn't life-threatening) with their breath hanging in the air before them in clouds, watching the Company move toward the dock, where a barge waited to carry them to the shore nearest the Lonely Mountain.

"I think it may be even harder, watching others leave, than to do the leaving," she murmured, shaking her head sadly.

Kili nodded mournfully. "I think you're right." This was a moment he'd been dreading ever since he'd known it was coming. Now it was here. He was being left behind by everyone he loved, everyone it was his duty to protect. He knew his staying behind was part of that duty, and that was a hard thing to swallow. "Tauriel?" He turned to her, the tears he was holding back escaping in his voice. "What if... what will we do if... they don't come back?"

Tauriel turned her head slightly to meet his gaze, and there was infinite sadness in her green eyes. She had been left behind by those who had died, or faded into the West, taking a long journey to a land she would never see. "We will go on, and carry their memories with us until the day that we, too, follow them." She sighed, and put a hand on his shoulder. "Memory... is a heavy burden at times. But I don't think it is a thing to regret."

Kili swallowed heavily, shading his eyes against the bright rays of the sun as they pierced the low-hanging clouds, glinting off the oversized armor of the Company as they grew small and blurred with distance. "I can't imagine... just moving on. I mean, it's all I've ever known. Fili. Uncle Thorin." He glanced at her. "Without them, I'd be lost." He wasn't sure what good it would do to share this with her; still, he appreciated the sympathetic ear. "Well, at least... at least I'd still have you. And
Ori," he tacked on quickly.

Tauriel gave his shoulder a gentle squeeze. "I'll help you, if that is how I am to serve. With luck, however, your uncle and brother won't be leaving you with memories to bear. Have faith in them. We can worry about memories another time." He looked too grieved to be allowed to continue. "Come, Kili, let's go back inside."

"Not yet," Kili said, throat constricted. "Not until I can't... see them anymore."

When the boat and its occupants had faded completely into the ever-present blue-grey of the lake, he sighed heavily, grabbed his cane from where he'd leaned it against the railing, and turned away. Now would begin a long, fretful, agonizing wait. Each moment that passed might be the one in which they all came to grief, and Kili wouldn't know. He'd have no idea whether they were dead or alive.

Tauriel followed him inside, watching his dark, bowed head. "I can't decide," she murmured, endeavoring to eliminate the shivers from her slender shoulders through vigorous rubbing, "whether you'll hate me or love me by the time I'm done."

She wouldn't reveal more until they arrived back at the common room, where there were a great number of damaged objects that awaited them, as well as the tools required to repair them. Most were set in neat piles in a corner, though some of the smaller ones were on the table. Fishing gear, armor, weapons, clothing, bits of chain and rope and damaged pots.

"Elves," Tauriel explained, "do not believe in waiting. I dislike that melancholy look you have, therefore, we'll do something about it. Your uncle informs me you have some skill with repair work." Her eyes gleamed a little, and she gifted him with a rare smile.

Kili slanted a questioning look at her, and then it registered. She was going to keep him busy. Very busy. He wasn't sure whether he liked that idea or not, but he had to admit it was better than sitting around. "Might as well get started," he muttered, moving to one of the nearest piles of gear and seating himself with a grunt, setting his cane aside. Tauriel had thought of everything, it seemed, and all the tools he needed were present. He picked up a leather shoulder pauldron and set to work.

Ori peeked out of her room after a while, her eyes red and puffy, her face creased on one side as though she'd been sobbing into a pillow.

"They're safely on their way," Kili informed her, threading a large needle.

Ori nodded, looking mournfully at Tauriel. "It's... it's so quiet with everyone gone. It feels... eerie."

The elf looked over at the female, her expression softening slightly. "We still have each other. Why don't you join us, Ori? I may yet be persuaded to tell a tale or two." Tauriel's hands were busy at mending a fishing net, but it seemed she didn't need to look at it to do the work. She had never been one to ask others to do what she herself would not. So, as Kili worked, so did she.

Ori sniffled, moving over to the table to see what she might be able to work with. Seating herself beside Tauriel, she reached for an old, torn leather coat. "I think I can mend this," she said meekly, glancing at Tauriel with a weak smile. Of one thing Ori was glad--Tauriel obviously cared, and knew what she was doing. In the absence of her brothers, it was a great comfort.

The dwarves shouldered their heavy packs, slowly moving off the barge and through the frosted mud toward the grassy flatlands between the Lake and the Mountain. Billa was among the last to disembark, carrying her own, Hobbit-sized pack and swathed in a cloak the Lake Men had presented her with immediately before their departure.
"How is it," started Bofur, watching her with a strange expression as she hopped down onto the mud, "that ye can walk on ice wit'out freezin' yer toes off?"

Billa glanced down at her furry feet and chuckled. "Can't tell you that, Bof. It's a Halfling secret."

Thorin looked back at the others, unfastening the heavy, ornamental cloak he'd been wearing. "Leave your armor; it'll be no use against a dragon, and the extra weight will slow us down. The Lake Men have had their show." He let the cloak fall, and it pooled in folds of thick, red velvet at his feet. "Our respite ends and the struggle continues."

A few of the others murmured unhappily, but in the end, all unstrapped their gleaming metal armor--nearly all comically oversized--and left it in a heap on the ground near the barge.

"Move out," Thorin called, and the group shouldered their packs again for the journey ahead. They moved single file, mostly, since it was easier to wend along the narrow path that stretched across the rocky plains moving gradually upward, on and on. The Lonely Mountain was always straight ahead, looming above them like a great dark beast, veiled now and anon by passing walls of white mist.

It was nearly mid afternoon when Thorin glanced back and saw that Billa was lagging behind, looking somewhat dizzy. Trying not to be too obvious about it, he fell back and joined her, bidding Dwalin lead for a time. "How are you holding up?" he asked gently.

Billa was breathing deeply, but not very hard, and her gait had taken on the swaying quality of one who finds oneself very dizzy or very tired. She gave Thorin a smile and hitched her bag a little higher on her back, trying to straighten out her steps.

"I'm alright. Just a bit tired, I guess." She shook her head slightly, making a face. "The air out here seems... thin. Like watered-down soup. Have you noticed? There's no green, earthy smells out here. It's all rock and ice." The halfling gave him a sidelong glance, noting how easily he seemed to be able to just... keep going. His strong legs worked steadily, as though the rough terrain were flat ground. She envied him that strength and stamina, and wished (very briefly) that she were a dwarf. Billa let out a snort of laughter. I'd make a really lousy dwarf.

"As you wish." Thorin furtively tousled her hair and moved back to the head of the Company.

The rock under their feet sloped gradually upward toward the Mountain, and the Company trudged along in relative silence. Strung out as they were over the hills, it was easy to tell the family groups apart. Fili and Thorin walked side by side, Bifur, Bofur and Bombur stayed close to one another. Billa found herself near the back of the group, behind Dori and Nori. Looking at them from behind, it was hard to tell they were brothers at all, but she realized this was primarily a matter of mannerisms. One aggressive and wild and cheeky, the other proper and cultured. The halfling was startled to find that, of the members of the Company, Dori was among those she knew the least about, and it wasn't because he was secretive like Nori, or taciturn like Dwalin.

She made an effort to catch up with them, trotting along until she was beside Dori, and trying not to
feel too guilty about never really connecting with the meticulous dwarf. There were thirteen of them—someone was bound to be overlooked.

Nori had been saying something in an urgent tone, and neither seemed particularly happy. He fell silent when Billa joined them, though, and gave her an odd look. Did he feel bad for bruising her arm the night of the party?

Dori cleared his throat somewhat primly, looking—if anything—guarded. They'd been discussing what happened the night of the feast, when Fili had kissed Ori, and Billa had intervened in Nori's protection of his sister. Intruded, really. What business was it of hers?

"Something wrong?" The grey-haired dwarf fidgeted with the silver casing into which his beard was tucked, glancing nervously at the hobbit.

Not every dwarf could be as good at hiding their thoughts as Thorin was. The thought made Billa smile slightly, and she looked up into Dori's face. "No, nothing's wrong. Not with me, anyway." She glanced at Nori, who was, rather than avoiding looking at her, staring her down with a frown. Well, if she'd thought he might feel guilty, she'd been wrong.

"Ya shouldn't butt in where you're not invited," Nori growled softly. The halfling flushed and looked away.

"I was only trying to help."

"Help someone else, then."

"Ori's my friend."

"She's _my_ sister."

"You can't protect her forever."

Her words touched a nerve. Nori tensed, his frown turning into a dangerous scowl. "What your tongue, half-pint."

"We'll protect her as long as we can, at whatever cost." Dori's face was set, his tone hard. "She's our treasure, worth more to us than any gold or jewels or," he shot a pointed glance at Fili's back, "crown. She's priceless, you understand?" He sighed, his gaze deepening a little. "That was the last thing she said to us, our mother. 'Don't let anything happen to my little Ori.' She made us promise her. Ever since then, we've raised her ourselves. Kept her out of trouble." He exchanged a look with Nori. "Mostly."

Billa tried to contain herself. Out of respect to their mother, if nothing else. But the words burst from her regardless. "But... is it so wrong to fall in love?"

She didn't notice that Fili was moving gradually closer, slowing to walk with each group as they moved along, and passing around what looked like a wine skin.

"It's not love!" Dori echoed Billa's passion, hands clenching at his sides. When he saw the group ahead turn a little, he composed himself. "Look, Miss Baggins. We know how these things work. We're not fools. We've been in the world for a while." A pause. "It's infatuation, plain and simple. He's the first dwarf to pay attention to her, and she's eating it up. Right, Nori?"

Not waiting for his brother to comment either way, Dori forged ahead. "Besides, think about him. Thorin's heir. These royals... they're different. He'll have his fill of her, I'll warrant, and then be on to
the next. There's no future for our sister at his side."

The look on the halfling's face wasn't unsettled, or even angry. It was **appalled**.


But at that moment, Billa walked straight into Fili's back. The blond dwarf was standing motionless in the path, ashen-faced. As Billa stumbled, he reached out mechanically, catching her arm before she could fall.

Nori was stiff, hands balled into fists, ready for a fight, but Fili shot him an unreadable glance, then moved hastily away from them.

Dori put a hand on Nori's shoulder, looking troubled and the slightest bit guilty. "Calm yourself, brother. It's alright." His gaze fell upon Fili's retreating back, and he glanced at Billa, feeling as though he had to explain himself. "I didn't mean for him to... overhear that. It may be true, but all the same...." He trailed off, crossing his arms. "I just... can't stand the thought of Ori... wasting her love."

"Wasting?" Billa struggled to get the word out, so great was her outrage. After a moment of wordless gestures, she pointed at Dori. "I expected better from you. I thought you would understand. After all we've been through, you really think Fili would abandon her. You're both *blind*." And with that, she stalked off, stomping so her pack made soft rattling sounds behind her.

Fili stumbled a little as he fell in with Balin, trusting the old dwarf not to say anything. The thought of "having his fill" of Ori and just leaving her was... unthinkable. It would break her.

*What if I've done that already?*

Panic filled him.

*What if Ori thinks I'm never going to come back for her, because I've *had my fill*? What if she thinks I don't care?* As if unaware of his own actions, Fili started to turn back. He needed to explain to her, needed to let her know that wasn't what he was doing. Balin's hand on his arm stopped him from completing the maneuver, though, kept him moving forward. The old dwarf didn't say anything, though. Just shook his head slightly, and glanced meaningfully at Thorin, who was looking over his shoulder at them.

When dusk fell, they set up camp in yet another of Dwalin's "defensible" places, a hollow between two low hillocks. Most of the Company were groaning and rubbing their freshly calloused feet while Bombur prepared supper, and Thorin sat by the fire, sharpening his new sword on an oiled stone and wishing he had Orcrist instead. Few things might've instilled more confidence than bearing a blade hafted with a dragon's tooth.

Oin was sitting nearby, looking thoughtful (and just short of exhausted). Thorin caught his eye. "Have a look at Billa," he said in an undertone. "I don't want her wearing herself down. If you think there's a chance she may be straining herself too much, I'll... find an alternative."

Oin glanced at him and pulled his ear trumpet from his belt, leaning closer to Thorin. When Thorin had repeated himself, Oin nodded and moved over to where Billa sat, leaning against Dwalin's pack, which was the largest, heaviest, and least likely to tip over. As he approached, the hobbit listed slightly to one side and her arms shifted, dropping her head to her shoulder. The movement startled her, and Billa sat up suddenly, blinking rapidly and glancing about with the look of one who's checking to make sure no one saw her do something embarrassing. Spotting Oin looking at her
curiously, she flushed faintly pink.

"Must've dozed off," she mumbled.

Bifur sat nearby with a small block of wood in his hand, working diligently at it with a short knife. If he'd seen anything of the exchange between Oin and Billa, he didn't show it. It was therefore a surprise when he spoke in a barely audible rumble to his leader, the rough, gravelly quality of his voice adding to the dark sound of the dwarven tongue he used when he spoke, which was rarely.

"Good at gettin' attached."

Thorin peered at him strangely across the fire, pausing in his work. "What do you mean?" Most of the others within hearing range were listening now, too. Bifur was a dwarf of few words; when he spoke, his companions took notice.

The wild salt-and-pepper head lifted slightly, and a pair of deep-set eyes met Thorin's gaze over the flames. Bombur was holding a spoon, suspended halfway between the pot and his mouth, watching his elder cousin closely. Bifur eyed his leader for a long moment before he spoke again.

"Attached," he repeated, the Khuzdul word rendered guttural by his rough voice. He twitched oddly, twisting his head to the side in a sudden, jerky movement, then lifted a hand to rub the twisted scar on either side of the shattered ax-head still embedded in his skull. "The Quest, the mountain, the... hob-bit." He seemed to struggle with the last word, frowning. With a snort, he lowered his head again, clearly returning to his prior task.

Thorin made a dismissive sound and went back to his sharpening. Attached. What exactly was he getting at, anyway? The hobbit. Did he know of what had happened between him and Billa? It came to Thorin's attention after a time that the others were being strangely quiet. The only sounds to be heard were Bombur's spoon stirring the pot, a bit of rustling here and there, and the dull scrapes of his blade against the stone. He looked up searchingly, and saw several of the dwarves look away quickly, as though they'd been watching him.

Oin was still looking over Billa, as he'd been ordered, and Fili was sitting on his bedroll, eyes downcast, face a perfect picture of regret. With a grunt, Thorin got up and moved over to his nephew. "You're alright?" he whispered, leaning down. "What's wrong?"

Fili looked up at his uncle, seeming surprised by his presence, as though he hadn't heard the older dwarf approaching. "I'm... fine." The blond didn't sound at all convincing, not even to himself. He cleared his throat and made another attempt. "I was just... thinking about Kili." Not exactly a lie, but definitely not the whole truth, either. Fili snuck a look up at Thorin's face, and saw that his uncle wasn't fooled at all. He winced and looked away quickly.

Thorin crouched down beside him, resting his hands on his knees. He pitied the young dwarf, but there was nothing to be gained by making himself miserable. "Fili, you did what you had to. Don't fixate on things that can't be helped. She's safe and you're not distracted--why so forlorn?" The dwarf felt an odd sense of envy. What Fili regretted, he wished he himself could have done. But Billa was here with the rest, and would soon be in grave danger--more danger than any of the others. And he wouldn't be able to do a thing about it.

Fili hesitated a moment, scanning the stars overhead as they started to peek through the dusky heights as though they held the answers to his uncle's question. "I... didn't say goodbye." The confession was just above a whisper. He'd spent his time that morning with Kili, lacking the courage to face Ori again with the knowledge that it was he himself who had taken away her right to be among the first to step back into the Mountain.
"You can make up for it by coming back to her," said Thorin. "And you'll have a better chance of doing that if you keep your focus with us. Think of that when you allow yourself to pine." He looked away thoughtfully, running a hand through his short beard.

"Really, Fili," he sighed, "I'm not happy you've chosen this particular moment to... become attached. I'd expect something like that of your brother, but not you."

Fili shot his uncle a glance, but refused to voice the thought that came to mind, something about hobbit-lasses and attachments. Avoiding Thorin's gaze, he nodded slightly.

"Yes, Uncle. As you say." Chose. Had he chosen to become attached? No. But if it bothered his uncle so much, he'd show him that he was just as capable now as he'd ever been.

Fili sat up, his expression stony, and glanced at the twin blades the Lake Men had provided him with. He'd need to get used to them, for they were heavier than his old ones. And they needed sharpened.

Thorin nodded, satisfied by the resolved look his nephew's face now carried. "Good." He laid a firm hand on Fili's shoulder. "Now try to get some rest. Night changes many thoughts, but they fade with the morning light." He released him and got up, moving softly over to where Oin and Billa still sat.

"Well?"

Oin looked up at Thorin with a tired smile. "Nothing at all wrong with her. Fit as a flea. Just tired, like the rest of us." Bill gave Thorin a 'seriously?' sort of look and shook her head, though there was a smile hiding at the corners of her mouth.

"Honestly," she muttered, standing up and elbowing him gently as she passed on the way to the fire. Thorin's look was mingled fondness and sheepishness. He shrugged lightly at Oin, and with one last glance back at Billa, strode off to his own bedroll, shaking his shaggy head. Bifur, who had the first watch, smiled knowingly at his back, the dull swipe of his carving knife accompanying the crackling quiet late into the night.

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The next day went along much like the first, with the Mountain looming ever closer. The terrain slowly evolved from a flat, rocky expanse to low, rocky hills. The Company was, as a result, strung out like a thin chain, Billa bringing up the rear with her shorter legs and determined expression.

Camp that night was quiet as the dwarves cast subdued glances up at the Mountain.

"Shouldn't it have only taken a day and a half to reach the Mountain?" Billa asked Fili, watching him go through his forms with his new swords.

"To the front entrance, sure. But we need to go around to the west face, and the land out here is kinder to travelers than the lower slopes."

"Oh."

The night was deep and dark around them, broken only by the flickering light of the fire. It was into this stifling darkness that Thorin was suddenly jerked into consciousness. Bombur was leaning over him, looking uncharacteristically grave.

"Listen," he whispered.

Out beyond the ring of firelight, there were sounds. The crunch of gravel, the pant of heavy, canine breathing. The sounds were near, but still faint enough that Bombur could have only just heard them.
"Everyone up," Thorin growled, nudging the sleeping forms closest to him. They happened to be Gloin and Nori, who mumbled groggily, but seemed to catch on very quickly that this was serious and began rousing those within reach. Within a handful of seconds, the Company was up and armed, forming a ring around the fire. Their shadows shifted anxiously as they waited, tense as the string of a drawn bow.

Muffled whispering in guttural Black speech and the distinctive snuffling of wargs met their ears, carried on the icy breeze with a foul stench like rotting meat. Then something seemed to snap. There was a deep, baleful howl, and a great, jagged black shape, taller than Dwalin, bounded into the firelight, followed by two more just like it.

"Stand fast!" Thorin bellowed, one hand on his sword, the other shoving Billa behind him a bit more roughly than he'd intended.

Billa stumbled, unprepared for Thorin's usual method of protection. Why she'd thought this time would be any different, she didn't know. Still, the halfling held her sword at the ready, her heart in her throat as the sounds of battle rose around her. More orcs followed the first, and now others were streaming down into the hollow from the hillsides, accompanied by enormous, snarling wargs--six or seven of them in all. The hobbit's leg twinged with the memory of an injury not long healed. Dwalin let out a battle-cry like the roar of some huge beast, his battle-ax flashing in the firelight. Fili protected Thorin's flank, and Gloin and Nori were defending old Oin, who seemed to be putting up a pretty good fight of his own.

Billa was most surprised by Bombur. The friendly cook wielded wicked-looking curved blades that looked far too heavy for him, swinging them in great arcs about his fat body. As she watched, he beheaded an orc, and with the same blow, took two legs out from under a charging warg.

On the crest of the hill an enormous pale shape towered over them, blocking out the stars, hideously illuminated by the red glow of the dying fire.

The orcs had regrouped since their rout on the hillside in the Misty Mountains. Their numbers had swelled to some twenty-five now, not including those that had made the initial attack, and they formed a wide ring around the embattled dwarves, steadily tightening the noose.

"You have no chance!" the Pale Orc snarled over the baying, growling din of the wargs. "Surrender Oakenshield to me, and I may allow a few of you to crawl back to your Human harborers."

A beat of weighty silence followed.

Then there was a commotion in the ring of wargs. One of the orcs seemed to have lost control of his ferocious mount, and it lunged forward into the dwarves' line, ravenous jaws snapping shut on Bifur's shoulder and shaking him like a rag doll before plunging landward, twitching in its final throes with an ax buried in its skull. Chaos unfolded an instant later.

Driven mad by the scent of fresh blood, the wargs charged unbidden, incongruous and unruly, fangs bared. Two turned on their riders at the last, catching them out of their own saddles and tearing into them with sharp, gleaming teeth. Billa had been able to follow the battle before. Now it was absolute mayhem. Before too long, the dwarves’ circle started to break up, and Billa had to deal with her own foes. Luckily for her, it was only the small, quick ones that got through. That didn't stop the whole mess from being utterly terrifying, however.

The sound of swords singing through the air, the clash of metal against metal, the shrieks of pain and rage, the hungry growling and baying, the thud and squelch of a weapon striking its target. The smell of hot blood, singed fur, wet metal, sweat and fear. The feeling of her own blade sinking into a body,
the nasty wet crunch of bone under blade, the terrifying grip of a hot, sweaty hand on her arm. She nearly impaled Fili in her panic. The blond had a nasty cut over one eye, and his lower lip was swollen and bloody. The halfling could hear Thorin roaring "keep her safe" and felt Fili pushing her down, bringing his off-hand up to bury one of his blades in an orc's throat.

Azog strode down the hill, a look of disgust twisting his pale features. A swing of his heavy mace sent Gloin reeling into a warg; another swing and Dori crashed into Bombur, and they both fell.

The Pale Orc caught Thorin's sword with the claw-like metal contraption that had replaced his missing hand. Thorin twisted his hand in a way that would ordinarily have freed the trapped sword, but this weapon wasn't forged of dwarven steel. Instead, the brittle blade snapped with a devastating, metallic ring, and Thorin leapt clear barely in time to evade his opponent's mace. The remaining orcs redoubled, pushing the dwarves back, working to separate them from their leader, to isolate him from those who might interfere.

Thorin, now weaponless, backpedaled from the charging brute, casting about frantically for a discarded sword amongst the dead. He found one, a jagged falchion already slick with black blood, and scooped it up. Azog's mace split the air again, and this time the blow grazed Thorin's ear. The dwarf didn't seem to notice. With a fierce cry, he slashed at the orc's thigh, but his blow was deflected by Azog's iron claw and followed by another barely dodged swing of the mace.

This terrifying dance of evade-deflect-dodge-retaliate went on for what seemed an eternity. In the end, it was Thorin who faltered. His focus was so firmly fixed on the Pale Orc, he failed to notice the huge warg bounding up behind him in time.

The beast slammed him brutally to the ground, its teeth poised for the back of his neck. Instead, it got a mouthful of mace. Azog's mighty blow threw the creature fully backward, nearly end over end, and it lay twitching a while, strangled whimpering sounds trickling from its mangled jaws. Thorin lay stunned, the sword having flown from his grip. He came to just in time to hear Azog's deep laugh of triumph, and withheld a cry of pain as the orc tangled his metal claws in his hair and lifted him bodily from the ground so he was staring straight into those burning, ice blue eyes. Azog had a long knife in his hand, angled for Thorin's throat.

"And so Oakenshield falls by my blade," he vaunted, enjoying watching the dwarf dangle helplessly, his hands gripping the tines of the iron claw in his hair. "Your line ends, Durinson, as it should have long ago."
This was it. The end. Death had found Thorin on the very doorstep of the kingdom that was rightfully his, on the eve of his return to the halls of his fathers. Death had come with an iron claw and an icy gaze.

As Azog pulled the blade back for a proper swing, clearly meaning to cleave the dwarf's head from his shoulders, a warg sprang over the scattered, dying remains of the fire, howling in pain. The beast slammed into the Pale Orc's back with a yelp, and its rider roared curses in Khuzdul. Azog grunted and staggered, nearly dropping Thorin in the process. He snarled a curse of his own and turned to face the warg and rider. In fact, there were two dwarves on the warg, which now writhed on the ground, snapping blindly at Azog's legs. Bifur had an ax in one hand and a handful of the warg's soft, bleeding ear-flap in the other. Nori sprang off the warg's back from behind Bifur and swung his sword with all his might, burying the blade in Azog's shoulder.

Azog's knees buckled. With a sword buried in his shoulder and a warg's fangs sinking deeply into his ankle, he roared in pain. He was, however, far from helpless. The great mace swung upward unexpectedly, clipping Nori's leg and sending him spinning into the darkness. Bifur snarled wordlessly, hurling himself forward to stand over his fallen leader, ax at the ready.

Thorin, nearly winded, lurched to his feet behind Bifur, scanning the ground for the sword he'd dropped. Azog struggled to his feet, kicking the injured warg aside, his mace describing a blurring arc that Bifur and Thorin only just managed to avoid. The Pale Orc, mad with fury that his vengeance had been yet again delayed, moved with impossible swiftness and agility, apparently oblivious now to the pain of his injuries, and it was all the two dwarves could do to keep out of the range of his tireless, powerful strikes.

Then Nori reappeared out of the darkness, limping, his spare ax at the ready, and Azog turned aside a moment to assess his own peril. Thorin seized the opportunity, leaping past Bifur with a sudden stab. The blade caught Azog in the side, and with a yelping roar, he swerved away, dropping his mace to cover his spouting wound. Seeing the other dwarves rushing now to join their leader, the brute decided on self-preservation over the shrinking chance of vengeance. With an enraged roar and a few massive bounds, he fled their midst, leaving a trail of black blood to taint the ground behind
him. Thorin did not pursue.

With the retreat of their leader, the remaining orcs were quickly run off. They fled into the night, those that were still alive, squealing and screeching, chased only by the voices of the dwarves and their own evil fancies.

"Thorin, are you alright, lad?" Balin approached, a smear of crimson in his white hair, leaning on his sword as if it were a walking stick.

"Bif!" Bofur was grinning like a lunatic. "Mahal's hammer, Brother, where'd ye learn to ride a warg like that?"

Bifur grunted, seeming vaguely pleased. Nori, however, didn't look so cheerful. "Where's the burglar?" he growled, sitting down and favoring his injured leg.

"I'm over here." Billa's small voice came from the shadows near the crest of the hill. A moment later, she materialized, pulling her ring off and swallowing heavily. The halfling looked like she was going to be sick, but she was at least mostly unhurt. She tottered down the hillside, trembling so violently, she was nearly vibrating with fear.

Thorin looked fairly stable for his recent brush with death, and tossing the orc blade aside, he turned toward the sound of Billa's voice. A wave of tremendous relief washed over him, and he staggered toward her, breathing heavily and massaging his rather tender scalp. Not apparently caring what the others thought just now, he enveloped the trembling halfling in his arms.

"I'm glad you kept out of it, Billa," he panted. "I could have tolerated my own death. But not yours."

Realizing, then, that he was covered with blood--his own or the Pale Orc's, he couldn't tell in the darkness--he held the hobbit at arms' length. "Oh, I'm... sorry. Didn't notice..." He cleared his throat. "Are you alright?"

Billa's complexion was hard to see under the smeared mud and blood, but her expression was clear enough. Her stomach churned and she swallowed again, closing her eyes. Keeping them closed, she nodded slightly.

"When we're done with this," she whispered shakily, "I never want to see anything die, ever again. Ever." She burrowed under his arm, still shaking. This was so much worse than the spiders, or the orcs on the cliff, or the goblins... so very much worse. The dead things were still there, their faces twisted in anger and surprise and pain, the air heavy with the scent of their blood--some of them were still alive, twitching and moaning and growling.

"Let's get away from here," said Dwalin firmly. "Anything within ten miles must know where we are now."

"Everyone, sound off and gather your gear," called Fili, scrubbing the blood from his face. The Company dug through bodies and mud to salvage what they could, each calling out their name and status. Bifur was the worst off, with one useless arm. Billa seemed to be the only one of them that wasn't bleeding.

"Don't bother with the fire. There's no disguising the fact that we were here." Thorin held Billa tightly against his side, shivering a little as an icy draft penetrated his heavy traveling clothes. The others had finished packing up their gear and were starting to assemble, Oin frantically applying makeshift bindings to the more grievous wounds. Dori assisted him best he could, muttering under his breath that they were in no shape to be "rushing off into the dark."
"Will it be a problem for you to keep up with the rest of us?" Thorin whispered gently to the poor halfling tucked beneath his arm. "My offer still stands."

Billa let out a breathless, shaky laugh. "Much as I'd like to take you up on that," she whispered back, "you know I'd slow you down more like that. Where's the fairness in the world, right? Let's just... get away from this place." The hobbit sounded a little steadier under his arm than she had on her own, and she likely would have stayed there quite happily for the rest of the night. But such a position wasn't conducive to travel, so she was forced to relinquish the safety of her spot so close to the Mountain King's heart as they started moving, though she did so with obvious reluctance.

The Company staggered on through the cold, rugged darkness, bundling up best they could against the icy wind and trying to navigate by the spare moonlight, as they wouldn't risk lighting what few torches they had. Two hours they went on, longer than any of them believed they could, and Thorin finally called a halt. They'd reached something of a hillside traveling steeply up, at the base of which was meager shelter from the wind.

Gloin knelt down stiffly to start a fire, but Thorin stopped him. "We can't risk it," he said, glancing apologetically at the very cold-looking Billa.

The coppery-haired dwarf grumbled into his beard, but offered no real protest as he stashed his kindling away again. None of them did. Better cold and tired than dead. Billa touched Oin's shoulder and quietly offered him what help she could in tending properly to the wounds that wouldn't wait until morning to be cleaned and bandaged. Somewhere along the way, the halfling had managed to pause long enough to empty her unhappy stomach. The details of the trek here were fuzzy to her, and she decided it wasn't worth thinking about. The morning would be better. It had to be.

The bed squeaked noisily as Kili rolled over again, frowning into the darkness. Without Fili's snores to drown out the silence, it felt far too much like the world was off-balance. Like disaster could strike at any moment, and he, vulnerable and alone, wouldn't be able to fend it off. The few moments of sleep he'd been able to steal so far had been restless at best, filled with nightmare visions of his brother and uncle perishing in various painful ways--ways he could have prevented. At length, he swung his legs over the edge with a heavy sigh, reaching for his cane. The fire in the common room was still lit--he could see its light flickering in the gap below his door. Perhaps it would seem less empty out there.

It wasn't until he was quite near to the hearth that he realized the chair he'd been making for was already occupied. A cascade of loose, red locks hung over the arm opposite him, and now that he was close enough, he could see Tauriel's lithe body, curled cat-like on the deep cushion. A long, curved knife rested near her knees, within easy reach, the naked blade gleaming in the firelight. He had no doubt if he were an enemy, she would have little difficulty killing him before he'd even touched her. The beautiful creature before him was dangerous--the twinge in his leg testified quite well to that.

All the same, there was a... vulnerable quality about her now. She needed sleep, too. It wasn't that he'd thought she didn't sleep. It was simply that he'd had trouble imagining her actually, well, sleeping. As he moved around the chair a little, her fingers leapt out and curled around the dagger, as if on pure instinct. Kili recoiled a bit, nearly tripping over one of the uneven floorboards.

"I'm sorry!" he blurted automatically, not really sure what he was apologizing for.

Tauriel's green eyes snapped open. In a bare second, she was out of the chair, blade in hand, scanning the room for threats. A moment later, she started breathing, and relaxed again.
"Kili." It was as though she were reassuring herself. Sinking back into the chair, she rubbed her face with her free hand. "Apologies."

"No, it's fine, I..." Kili started, looking rather sheepish. "I didn't mean to wake you. I was just... I couldn't sleep." He shuffled sideways a little, turning his back to the fire. Her eyes were glimmering like a cat's in the orangey glow bathing the room as she watched him, at once intimidating and... alluring. He sighed, pointing toward her knife. "I guess I'd better watch my step around you when you're sleeping."

Tauriel glanced down at her hand, surprise flickering across her face, as though she hadn't realized before that she'd been holding the weapon at all. "Ah, yes... sorry about that. I... was keeping watch." She seemed almost embarrassed by the admission as she sheathed the dagger. "Not very well, apparently. You made it all the way across the room before I woke." With a sigh, she ran a hand through her hair, pushing the mess of red locks away from her face. "Can I get you something? Tea, or wine, perhaps?"

"Ah, it's alright," said Kili, waving a hand. "I can get it. Wouldn't want to deprive me of what little I can still do." The kettle was sitting on the mantelpiece, still half-full, and he hooked it over the fire. "Think these must be the tea leaves." He removed the lid from a little clay pot and reached inside, pulling out a handful of dark, dried plant material. "Wonder what would happen if I smoked this," he mused, grinning cheekily at her.

A startled smile flashed across her features before she could master herself, and she shook her head slightly. "Nothing good, I'm sure." The elleth was uncertain what appeal there was in breathing smoke, but others seemed to enjoy it, and she wouldn't hold that against them. Tauriel stretched, arching her back and reaching for the ceiling with an expression of quiet pleasure. "Are you sure there's nothing I can do? It seems unfair to have given you such a scare and do nothing to make it up to you."

"Scared?" Kili winced, burning his fingers on a half-charred piece of wood as he tried to shove it further into the flames. He flapped his hand frantically, then blew on it. Eventually, he turned back to the elf, looking the slightest bit breathless and embarrassed. "I wasn't scared. I was just... startled."

Tauriel bowed slightly. "Apologies. Of course you weren't." Though the words seemed the kind that were scripted, the kind of words she was supposed to say, her tone wasn't at all condescending or false. Rather, she seemed genuinely apologetic for the thoughtless comment that had implied his fear.

Kili winked at her. "Don't worry about it. My manly pride will live." His cane tapped gently against the wooden boards as he moved toward the table to retrieve the cups. When he returned, holding two large mugs in one hand by their handles, he sidled up to her. She seemed pensive, and he wondered what thoughts occupied her so. Was she thinking of the home she'd left behind, the home she'd never see again? Or was her mind with the others and the danger they might even now be facing? "What troubles you, Tauriel?" he asked quietly, his voice grown serious.

Tauriel turned her gaze on him and took the mugs, setting them on the hearth to warm. "Thinking of things that were, and things that will never be. Things that are yet to come, and things that may be naught but passing fancies." She shrugged, then lowered herself to sit on the warm brick with a sigh. "Kili, your uncle has urged me on more than one occasion to impress upon you that there is no hope of romance between us." Her gaze found him again as the kettle boiled and hissed over the fire. "What are your intentions, if indeed you have any?"

Kili's mouth fell open a little, and he paused mid-reach for the kettle. That question had certainly been very... direct. He used a thick rag that had been set on the mantelpiece to remove the kettle from the fire, and the action gave him some time to think his response through.
"I can't honestly say there's any intent behind my... interaction with you, milady. I can't choose who I'm attracted to." He set the kettle on another thick rag, filling the bowl-shaped strainer built into its lid with the loose tea leaves and replacing it. "Does that... bother you? That I'm attracted to you?" He glanced back at her, some amount of nervousness in his dark eyes.

Tauriel relaxed, shaking her head with a chuckle. "No. The attractions of men have ever followed me--it's the ones that plan to do something about it that bother me." Her green gaze landed lightly on his face, studying him minutely, as though she were dedicating his features to memory. She thought about telling him that she wasn't attracted to dwarves in the least, but didn't want to hurt him. She thought about telling him that a relationship of mutual attraction was pleasant, but unlikely in the face of her present lot in life, but defaulted to silence again for the same reason. In the end, she simply said nothing more, watching him instead.

Kili couldn't conceal all the disappointment he felt; some of it escaped in the way his lips tightened, the way his brows turned up. Was it all men, or just... him? He'd never attempted genuinely romancing anyone before. The subtleties and customs of that particular pastime weren't very well ensconced in his head, but he did know that some women rebuffed male attention as part of a game. "Playing hard to get," it was called. Still, he couldn't bring himself to believe the noble elf before him would stoop to such foolishness--she was very direct in every aspect of her life and character. In the end, he nodded slowly, eyes sad.

"I understand, Tauriel. I'm happy to remain friends only, if that's what you want."

Tauriel blinked, unadulterated surprise apparent on her pale features. Then, inexplicably, the expression softened into one of intense gratitude. "No one, in all my years, has ever said that, and meant it." She looked away, smiling in spite of herself. "Thank you."

Kili met her gaze with a slightly sad smile. "You're welcome. Least I could do when you... saved my life." It had taken him some time to get past the somewhat unfounded sense of betrayal he'd felt when he'd first learned she had shot him. But get past it he had, and now he felt nothing but gratitude. He owed her his life--he had no right to expect more than that from her.

Tauriel toyed absently with the hilt of her dagger, not meeting his gaze. "You know... I never thought you would actually forgive me for that." The elf looked practically self-conscious as she admitted this. "I expected distrust, maybe even hatred. I... underestimated you. And your kin, as well."

Kili sighed, turning to lift the lid off the kettle. "I guess I've never really understood all this dislike between elf and dwarf kinds. Uncle's bitter, of course. Always been that way. But honestly... we're not so different. It is possible for people like us to be friends." But what about more than friends? He replaced the lid and filled the two cups with steaming liquid, handing Tauriel hers. "Cheers," he said, toasting her, and took a sip.

She was above him, in more ways than the obvious. Thorin had said as much. If she opened the door for him to pursue her, he would. If not... he would respect her preference. She was his friend--she had been for a while now. He wasn't about to compromise that to appease his own (possibly misguided) impulses.

Tauriel raised her mug to meet his with a dull clunk, more relaxed now than she had been since the night of the feast. "To friends," she murmured, and took a cautious drink of the hot beverage. The tea was a little strong, but not bad. Her newfound respect for the young dwarf seemed only to grow the longer she was with him. Though she'd fancied herself unbiased, Tauriel was learning that her opinions had been more influenced by the anger her king harbored than she'd ever suspected.
"To friends," Kili echoed with a little nod. He chuckled, easing himself onto the brick shelf beside Tauriel. "You know," he said softly, appreciating the way the firelight danced in her lustrous hair, coloring it a dozen different shining shades of red, "if someone had told me a month ago I'd be taking tea with an elf, I'd have laughed in his face."

Tauriel chuckled in agreement. "Our situations aren't all that different," she mused aloud. "If someone had told me that one day my best friend would be a dwarf, I think I might have told them they'd had too much wine."

Kili twitched slightly in surprise as her words registered. "Best friend? You mean...?" Then he remembered she was an outcast among her people now. He was, quite literally, the only friend she had. Still, he smiled at her, pleased. "I'm honored, Tauriel. Really, I am."

Tauriel smiled and nudged him with her shoulder, a friendly gesture she wasn't sure she'd ever made with anyone but Legolas. "Oh, don't be so surprised. You're an excellent friend in your own right, race aside. I'd be honored to fight beside you."

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that," Kili said, somewhat cheered by her friendly gesture. "I'd really rather not be incinerated by a dragon." His grin was somewhat weak. Thorin and Fili were not setting out to slay Smaug, but there was always the chance they'd accidentally wake the beast, as Bard had warned. They might well have to make a stand against the dragon... something for which they were ill-equipped, at best. The thought was terrifying, and as confident as he was that Thorin knew what he was doing, he also knew his uncle wasn't invincible. Not being by his side to protect him during this time, as an Heir of Durin should, both dismayed and ashamed him.

Tauriel glanced at him, and as though reading his thoughts in his eyes, touched his hand gently. "If there were words to ease your burden, rest assured I would say them as many times as I needed to. For now... let us think of other things." She shifted slightly, her restlessness filtering through the chinks in her stoic facade, the mask that Kili was slowly chipping away.

Kili sipped his tea, nodding thoughtfully. "You're right. Worrying never changes anything." He glanced at her again and chuckled lightly. "So... what's it like having hair like that? You must have a pretty strong neck to hold up that much weight." He mentioned nothing of the fact that he'd been itching to braid it--he imagined it would be rather fun to weave a design upon such a voluptuous canvas.

Tauriel touched her hair in surprise, then shook her head, shrugging slightly. "I can't remember it ever being another length. I suppose it must be heavy, but I've never noticed." She paused, then smiled faintly. "Well, I guess that's not entirely true. It does give me headaches sometimes." It was strange, she thought, to talk about such normal, domestic things like this with him, as though they'd been friends for his whole life. Tauriel liked being comfortable with him, and not needing to remember at every turn that he was a prince--the she-elf blinked.

"You are a prince," she said suddenly, giving him an odd look.

"You could say that," Kili said, nodding. "I don't really think about it that much." He paused, his brows knitting slightly. "I wonder if Fili thinks about it. Fortunately, I'll never have to be king. I don't think I could carry that kind of burden. That's what it is. Uncle is just... crushed beneath it. Beneath his sense of duty. Until Billa came along, I never thought I'd see the day when he smiled. She's... changed him. I could almost envision him being happy. Someday." He stared down into his steaming mug and sighed. "Is there something... wrong with that, you think? Two races being attracted to each other like that? Is it... unnatural?"

Tauriel lifted an eyebrow at him, as though to say 'are you really asking me?' but she didn't seem
condescending as she answered. "There is a difference, I think, between attraction and love. But... I'm not sure there's anything unnatural about either. It can be very inconvenient and painful, when two of different races find love--I suppose you know little enough of elves that Lord Elrond of Imladris is not in the histories you’ve learned." Tauriel's eyes became distant and sad.

"Lord Elrond and his brother Elros were born of a human mother and an elven father. They are forever separated by time and death, one living out his immortal years without the comfort and trust of the brother he knew and loved as a youngling." To tell the whole story would take too long, she thought, but it was enough. She could see how much Kili loved his brother.

Kili looked down at his mug again. She'd spoken of brotherly love, a love to which he could relate. He imagined romantic love would make the inevitable separation even more painful. "I didn’t know that about Lord Elrond," he admitted finally. "I suppose there was a certain sadness to his face. But he was very kind to us. I'm afraid my brother and I behaved rather... impishly toward his sons." He smiled wistfully. It seemed almost a lifetime ago now.

"I've heard his sons are rather impish themselves," murmured Tauriel with a smile. "I've had the pleasure of meeting them a time or two during my service as guard captain. They are..." She paused, searching for words as she took a drink. "They are not afraid to enjoy life. I hope to be as free with laughter as they, when I reach their age."

"I hope so," Kili agreed, looking a bit sad. "I don't suppose I'll be around to see it, though. We're longer-lived than Men, but still, nothing compared to your race." His tea was cool enough to drink less carefully now, and he took a proper swallow. "Stuff's not bad," he pronounced, swirling the contents of the mug a little. He glanced at the elf. She seemed rather pensive again. "Well, maybe the defeat of Smaug will lift your spirits. I know it will mine."

"Well, if it doesn't, then I ought to be ashamed of myself. The death of such a foul creature ought to be celebrated by all." Tauriel nodded firmly and fingered her dagger's hilt with her free hand again. "Would that I were among those who shall strike him down." The fierce expression of a young warrior overcame her face for a moment, but it passed quickly as she glanced at Kili again. "But... I suppose that's selfish of me. There are others who deserve that honor far more than I."

The elf paused to drink again, but her attention was caught by something that was beyond Kili's ability to observe. She turned to look toward the closed door to Ori's room, and worry flickered through her green eyes. "Excuse me." Setting her tea aside, Tauriel stood and moved silently across the common to Ori's door, which she eased open. It didn't seem at all meet to tell Kili that it sounded like Ori was having a nightmare, but that didn't excuse her from trying to help.

The young dwarrowdam was tangled in her blankets, twitching and whimpering quietly. Tauriel eased herself through the shadows to the bed, which squeaked under her weight as she perched on the edge. "Ori," she said softly, touching the dwarf's shoulder. "Ori, wake up."

Ori woke, panting, tears streaking her cheeks. Her eyes fell upon Tauriel's reassuring face, mostly in shadow, but still recognizable. "I--I'm... I thought-" she stammered, gripping the elf's wrist like a lifeline. "Where is he? I saw--I saw the dragon!" There was terror in her wide eyes, but not for herself. "Tell me he's alright. Please. Tell me he's not dead."

Kili stood in the doorway, frowning a little. "Who? Smaug?"

Ori blinked at him a moment, as though disoriented, still breathing heavily. "No, no," she said at last. "Fili. Is Fili alright?"

Tauriel held Ori's hand, and her heart beat a little faster in spite of herself. "They won't have reached
the Mountain yet," she reasoned. "He's safe with the others." The elf glanced at Kili, silently asking him if he'd known about this. No time to ask now, and she wouldn't want him to answer in Ori's hearing anyway. With the soft fabric of her sleeve, Tauriel gently dried Ori's tears. "There, it's alright. It was just a dream."

Ori didn't release the elf's wrist. There was a frantic note in her words, and her eyes flicked back and forth, as though she were vividly recalling something. "But... he was here. A great, hideous red dragon. I went outside, and he saw me." She swallowed, trying to remember. "But then... Fili was here. Fili came back--he'd known we were in danger. He came back for me, Tauriel." Tears welled up in the dwarf's eyes again. "And... he led the dragon off. I screamed at him not to, but he wouldn't listen. It was like he couldn't hear me." She sniffled quietly, squeezing Tauriel's wrist. Her voice weakened to a constricted whisper. "Then I saw... fire over the tops of the houses, and I knew. I knew...." Her chest began heaving with sobs, and she turned, burying her face in the pillow.

Tauriel gathered the little female against her chest and cradled her there, rocking her gently to and fro as if she were a child. She wished she could say that Fili wouldn't do something like that, except... that sounded like exactly the sort of thing the blond dwarf would do, if he thought those he loved were in danger. Tauriel didn't know him well, but from what she'd observed, he had no fear of pain or death in him. Only of being alone. Much like his brother. The elf's gaze found Kili again. Would he do that, if she or Ori were in danger... would he risk himself to save them? There was no doubt the answer was yes, but why? Why would he do it?

For the same reason I would, I bet, she thought, and felt her throat constrict slightly. "I won't let that happen, Ori. No more tears now. No more tears." And, although she didn't precisely know why, the elf held the crying female, stroking her hair gently, and began to sing a lullaby she could no longer remember the origins of.

Though the night is long
And the shadows deep and dark,
Though the nightmares come
To haunt us.

Don't forget my child
That the dawn will come again.

Don't forget the light
That guides us.

It was a simple tune, but soothing and low, and her voice, like all of her kind, was clear and mellow.

Kili watched silently, sobered by Ori's dream, and at the same time, comforted by Tauriel's almost maternal manner. It reminded him of home, of the way his own mother used to hold him and calm his nighttime fears. Dis was a wonder that way, much like Tauriel--both fierce when needed, and yet also capable of the most profound gentleness. He leaned against the doorframe, listening, his spirits soothed, his mind far away. Her voice was mesmerizing; he felt as though his cares were wrested from him, swept away for a time in music like a beautiful woodland stream. So this was elvensong.

By the time her voice had faded away once more, Ori had been lulled back to sleep, and seemed much more peaceful. Kili, too, felt his mind eased, felt as though he could sleep. As Tauriel left the room and shut the door, he gazed upon her with a new kind of amazement.
"Your voice is like moonlight," he mused softly. "Gentle, golden, restful. I've never heard anything like it."

It was hard to tell in the warm, flickering red glow of the fire, but it looked like Tauriel might have actually turned a bit pink. Certainly her gaze slid away from his and a smile fought to curve her solemn lips.

"It's nothing special," she murmured. "But... thank you." In a moment, the somber look had returned, and she gazed into the fire, brow furrowed with concern. If her worries could be put into words, she was clearly reluctant to do so. Ori's dream weighed heavily on her, and she wondered if it had been wise to allow Thorin and his Company to depart and leave her behind. It wasn't conceit or flattery that assured her that she was an excellent warrior, but long experience and many deep wounds, both her own and others'.

* I wish Legolas were here. He would know what to do. *
Three lacerations, one useless arm, several cracked heads, and more cuts and gashes than you could shake a stick at— but in sum, no life-threatening or Quest-stopping injuries. "So long as they're willing to go on," finished Oin with a scowl, which said in more ways than words could manage that he thoroughly disapproved of the fact that they were, indeed, willing, "there's no reason they can't. They shouldn't, but that's beside the point, I guess."

Thorin nodded, absently brushing a hand past his ear. The cuff was missing, he realized, swept off by Azog's mace. Fortunately, the rest of him was still intact. He glanced at Billa, who was helping Dori apply more permanent bindings to some of the dwarves' injuries. The moon, though dimmed by thick cloud cover, provided adequate light for this somewhat unpleasant activity, and the halfling, though clearly exhausted, was determined to do her part.

"And Billa?" Thorin asked quietly. "She'll be alright? Just nerves?" Oin looked annoyed before he'd even finished speaking, but Thorin, evidently, needed further reassurance.

"Just nerves," confirmed the old healer irritably. "As far as I can tell, she hardly took more 'n a couple knocks. She's the least injured of the Company at the moment. Now focus. Ya got injured dwarves here, an' I don't think it's wise to let 'em go on in such a state."

Gloin, who was closest, glared at his brother. "What are ya tryin' ta pull, Brother? Ya can't go on without us!" The others were taking note now, and adding their protests to the argument, which was quickly becoming incoherent.

"If they're willing to go on, then I will not prevent them." Thorin's tone was firm in the face of Oin's peevishness. "We have, perhaps, another day's journey ahead of us, and then we'll have a chance to rest and recover. To turn back now, or stay here longer than necessary will help no one. We'll get what sleep we can here, and move on at first light." Nodding as though it were quite settled, he turned away to find his own bedroll. The Company settled a little, though there were still heated discussions in rumbling undertones. Oin grumped, but there was a look of respect in his old eyes as he glanced after his leader.

Finishing with Nori's leg, Billa did a quick circuit to encourage the dwarves to drink plenty of water before they passed out for the night. That done, she made for Thorin's bedroll and joined him there, without shame or hesitation.

"Oh, don't make a fuss," she muttered as he made a surprised noise. "Bebother and confusticate subtlety. I nearly lost you today. I'm not gonna waste time being polite and hiding things everyone already knows anyway."

Thorin had been half-asleep, exhausted as he was with the cares of the way, the journey, and the battle he'd fought. "Billa?" he mumbled softly, enfolding her beneath an arm.
"Go to sleep," she whispered, pressing herself into his side and relaxing slowly. He was warm, and she was not. This would soon be fixed. The world turned quietly about them, the stars locked in their celestial dance, watching them with silent smiles and unheard blessings.

Dawn, as it always did after nights like that, came too soon. None of them could sleep through the blinding, icy sunrise, and so it was with groans and incoherent complaints that the Company roused themselves once more. As stiff and sore as they were, none could quite suppress the excitement that came of seeing the huge bronzed gates of Erebor, gleaming in the distance. They were moving away from them, of course, but it was an inspiring sight nonetheless. Balin looked back at Thorin, deep longing for his long-lost home in his old eyes.

Thorin managed a faint smile. For him, the feeling was more bittersweet than encouraging. Their home lay in ruins, defiled and desolated by a dragon. He was glad they had somehow managed to skirt the ruins of Dale during the night. That sight was not one he wanted to see--and it certainly would have done nothing for the group's already weakened morale.

"Keep moving," he said at last. "We must find the hidden door before nightfall." The trek was a difficult one, but not terribly long. They'd reached the western face by late morning, and the dwarves set to searching for the door with a will. There was a small valley where they left their things--though their supplies were much diminished by the night's fighting, what with being trampled or bled on or burned.

Even with as much daylight as they had, it wasn't until late afternoon that Bofur and Nori called the others up to a high, rocky shelf. The miner pointed to a flat expanse of unblemished stone when Thorin reached their perch.

"There's a tunnel be'ind that wall right there. Dunno about a door, but that's a way in if we c'n crack it open."

"There will be a keyhole," Thorin said, a distinct hint of excitement edging his voice. "The last light of Durin's Day will reveal it." He turned to Balin, clapping his shoulder in a comradely way. "Well, against all hope, my friend, we've made it this far." He lowered his voice. "Let us pray this bodes success, and we haven't come all this way for nothing." The dwarves took up positions around the ledge, each one pretending not to stare at a blank stone wall. The sun sank ever lower, until the light turned red and the shadows spread like dark blankets along the shelf. The Company was tense and restless, and Bofur had returned to quietly tapping the wall and listening intently to the stone. Billa alone was at ease, her head resting against the rough stone at her back, eyes closed. She might have been asleep, but was too still for that.

At long last, the sun's golden glow winked at them from behind the rocky western hills. Thorin snapped out of whatever reverie he'd fallen into, becoming suddenly animated. He uncrossed his arms and jogged the few steps toward the cliff face.

"Come on! Everyone. Look for the keyhole." There was desperate hope in his face. If this didn't work--if they'd somehow read the signs wrong--then he would have failed. Failed just as his father and grandfather had.

Dwalin leapt forward, too, ax in hand. "It has to be here!" he bellowed, rapping and scraping the broad blade against the stone face as though to dislodge a chip that might be concealing the keyhole from them. Everyone was aware of the light growing dimmer and dimmer behind the darkening hills.

"Hurry!" Thorin urged, looking halfway frantic.
The Company was nearly panicked in their searching, elbowing each other and feeling along the unmarked wall, some kicking and bashing at it, others peering along it with their cheeks pressed against the stone. Only their burglar stood back and watched, her face creased with a worried frown. She knew better than to interfere. She knew nothing about tunnels and secret doors.

As the last of the sunlight faded, the clamor of search died away. A deep disappointment settled over the group as darkness gathered around them, the distant horizon slowly dimming from fiery red-gold to pale pink.

"It's not here," growled Gloin, his shoulders sagging.

Bofur looked particularly defeated. "I'm sorry, Thorin," he mumbled. "I really thought this was the place."

Balin sighed, taking a step away from the wall. "Well," he said at last, "that's that, then."

Thorin looked stunned. This couldn't be. It wasn't possible. He'd been so sure. The portents. The Wizard. Both had said the time was right. This had been his destiny, then? To lead a company through countless dangers and perils, only to be defeated by a stone wall? He turned to Balin finally, his eyes suspiciously wet. "What did we miss?" His voice broke. "Where did we go wrong?" He fingered the key on its familiar cord about his neck, where it had lain so long next to his heart. How could this have happened?

Balin gave his leader a helpless look, and for once, had no words of comfort for him. Oin's head was bowed, as though the weight of it were now too much for him to bear. He had read the portents. He had seen the signs. He had been the one to send word to Thorin that now was the time. He must have been wrong. He must have been too hasty in his predictions. Slowly, he shuffled toward the long, rough climb that would take them down to the valley. The others, one at a time, followed him, each with a defeated hang of his head or a tired droop of his shoulders.

"Wait." Billa's tone was almost pleading as she watched them. "You can't just... give up. We've come too far. We've come too far. We're too close!"

Thorin shook his head weakly, unable to meet her gaze. With a heavy sigh, he brushed past her, the map fluttering from his hand. "It's over," he said, voice pure despair. He made it another ten steps before collapsing on the stone shelf, head in his hands.

"No... no! It can't be." Billa snatched the map, looking desperately from the runes she couldn't read to the blank wall, as if by some miracle, she could see what they couldn't. "We've come too far," she muttered, seeming to get more and more frustrated as the seconds ticked by. "Too far to be stopped here. This can't be the end."

Where was her infamous good luck now? Where was the Wizard when they needed him? Billa tried to remember the poem, the moon-letters.

"Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks," she whispered, frowning, "and the setting sun, with the last light of Durin's Day... will shine upon the keyhole." She looked over her shoulder at the horizon. No sun. Just a few scraggly clouds. It didn't make sense!

"We can't give up, we can't, we just CAN'T!" The halfling crumpled the map in her fist, stomping a large, furry foot. Then... something happened. A flash of movement. A bird darted past her, snatching up something off the ground and settling on a large, roundish boulder. The thing in its beak, she could now see, was a snail. The bird flicked its head, knocking the snail sharply against the stone.
Clack, clack, clack.

The moon, as a cloud moved aside to reveal its pale glow, cast a shadow in the shape of a perfect arch on the flat stone wall. In the silence, there was a sharp crack. The bird fluttered away, startled by the sound. And there, in a cleft in the stone that hadn't been there a moment before, was a tiny glimmer of tarnished silver. Billa gaped.

"Thorin, Thorin! This is it! It's the keyhole! The last light--it's the last light! THORIN!"

Billa's excited voice pulled Thorin from his capsule of despair and self-berating, and he looked up, surprised. "The last light? But Billa...." Then his gaze followed hers to the cliff face. He leapt up in an instant, closing the gap between himself and the burglar. "That's it! The moonlight. The last moon of autumn." Hope returned to his face, hope and overwhelming relief. Before he even knew what he was doing, he'd grabbed up the startled halfling, swung her 'round, and kissed her full on the lips.

Billa, as startled as she was, as pleased and happy, didn't return the kiss. She pushed at his chest, reminded anew of how much stronger than her he really was.

"Unlock the door! We can celebrate inside!" Perhaps it was a little harsh, nearly yelling in his face, but Billa couldn't really control the rush of exultation that filled her. "We found the door! We found it!"

Thorin smiled, sharing in the pure elation of the moment. The others were returning now, as they'd apparently gone no further than the ground below, and all were gazing upon the hobbit and the door with looks of wonder. She'd found it. She'd saved them. Again. Thorin set her down and turned away, snapping the key from its leather cord. With a nodding glance at Balin, he fit it into the lock. It turned, and the mechanism within emitted a deep, resonating clunk.

A reverent silence followed as Thorin put his hands to the flat stone and pushed. The square edges of a door were outlined where an instant before there had been nothing, and with a low, grinding noise, the chamber within was revealed in the pale glow of the moon. "Light a torch," Thorin ordered, and Gloin happily obliged.

Fili was among the first to step tentatively forward after Balin and Thorin, his expression awed. Awed and strangely grieved. Kili should have been here with him. Together, they could have charged into that dark passage, filled with pride and excitement. Gloin handed him the lit torch, and the blond gripped it tightly, shivering as he passed through the secret door. Balin's eyes glistened wetly in the torchlight as he passed a hand over the dark stone.

"I remember this stone. We're home." His voice was soft, muffled with the weight of emotion.

Fili glanced back, and saw the others slowly following them inside, and to a dwarf, each looked as though he, personally, were beholding something of infinite value. The halfling, however... Billa stood outside the door, watching them with a peculiar expression on her face. Half radiant joy, half deepest sadness. Fili didn't understand it.

Thorin's joy, too, was soon tempered by the knowledge that the time had nearly come for Billa to put her burgling skills to the ultimate (and possibly fatal) proof. The others were still marveling at the stonework of the chamber and an ornate carving over the doorway when he turned back to catch the hobbit's gaze. He shook his head slightly, mouthing at her "You don't have to do this."

Billa met his gaze and smiled faintly. "Yes I do," she whispered. Taking a deep breath, she stepped forward into the chamber, following Gloin's second flickering torch.
"Night will be the best time for me to go," she said in a low voice, which was nonetheless carried to
the ears of every member of the Company. The chamber resounded with the sudden silence that fell
upon them. "I'll go now. Be ready to flee or fight, should the need arise."

"Billa," Thorin protested, "you're not rested. Wouldn't it be best to wait... rest an hour at least...? You
can't just... go off like this." He knew his argument was weak, against her in particular, but he had a
mind to delay her as long as he could. The others had moved off further down the
passageway leading from the chamber. Their hushed voices echoed dully off the stone walls as they
went. "Just an hour," Thorin urged, taking her hand gently. "For me."

Billa hesitated, her expression reluctant despite the way her hands tightened around his. "Alright,"
she agreed softly. "One hour. For you." Pulling him closer, she embraced him. "I love you, Thorin.
No matter what." He needed to know. They both did. With luck, this wouldn't be the last time she
ever said it. And luck, the halfling thought grimly, is something I have in abundance.

Thorin stroked her hair gently, not caring if the others might turn back and see. This was more
important than whatever impression they might get of their leader. "I love you, too, Billa. And if I'm
to endure the sight of you vanishing down the dark tunnel in an hour, I suggest you at least consent
to... taking your rest in my arms." As heady as the others were with the excitement of their
admittance into the Mountain, they were still exhausted and wounded, and most were now settling in
for the night, glad to have a stone door between them and the danger that lurked outside.

Billa considered. She couldn't really afford to fall asleep. She'd sleep until morning, and then where
would they be? She didn't particularly want to go down to the dragon's chamber at a time when it
was likely for him to be waking up. She held him while she tried to decide, her hands barely
overlapping by finger-lengths in the hollow of the small of his back.

"You'll wake me," she asked hesitantly, "in an hour?"

Fili watched his uncle from a distance, setting his pack against the wall and unfolding his bedroll.
Seeing what passed between them made him grateful that Ori wasn't here, that she was far away
from the danger that slept beneath them. Of course, if Nori had his way, this would be the only way
he would really be able to protect her. Still... it was better than never being able to protect her at all.
Setting his jaw, he nodded slightly and turned his attention to organizing his gear.

Thorin leaned down to kiss Billa's forehead. "As you wish." Turning to move down to the end of the
chamber, he retrieved his bedroll from the pile of gear and laid it out on the flat stone, settling into it
and beckoning to the halfling to join him. The others did, of course, notice, though most wisely
pretended not to.

Billa let out a relieved sigh and obeyed without hesitation, squirming into the gap between his arm
and his body, a gap that was exactly the right size for a hobbit. The right size for one hobbit, and one
hobbit alone, she thought fiercely, if somewhat incoherently. No other hobbits.

Billa turned over and pressed her nose into the hollow of Thorin's neck, inhaling his scent and
fighting the heaviness of exhaustion. She was just as tired as the others, and already, several of them
were snoring. Bifur was the closest to them, and smiled slightly as he settled into his blankets.

"Attached," he grunted cheerfully, closing his eyes.

Thorin stroked her hand gently and listened to her soft, even breathing. If he could have lived in a
single moment forever, this would have been the one he picked. Almost, he hated the quest itself
now, the quest that threatened to rob him of her. He hated that this was necessary at all.
The hour passed all too quickly, and he erred on the rather lengthy side of it. To see that beautiful, relaxed face leaning into him, aglow in the golden torchlight, knowing in a short while he might never see her again... and have to wake her, send her down to what might well be her doom... this task he loathed. But it had to be done. He had agreed. With a sigh, he nudged her lightly. "It's time."

Billa woke with a gasp and lifted her head--for a moment, there was fear in her face. When she saw Thorin, his worried gaze fixed on her, she let out that hasty breath, and with it, the tension that had flooded her in that moment. Pressing her forehead against his shoulder, she took a moment longer to rest in his embrace before she rolled stiffly to her feet.

Most of the dwarves were still asleep, though Dwalin sat near the entrance, a stubborn set to his jaw as he watched the partially open door. Fili curled quietly alongside Balin, who was sleeping propped against the wall. Bifur and Bofur were back to back, their axes near at hand, while Bombur sprawled gracelessly to one side, head thrown back and throttle snores in full voice. Oin was using his brother's stomach as a pillow, while Gloin competed gamely with Bombur for the title of loudest sleeper. Nori lay face-down, half off his bedroll, and Dori sat beside him, eyes sleepy-heavy, but still awake.

Billa surveyed them all, drinking in the little details as though this would be her last chance to do so. Even she admitted it might be, though it was less likely for her to die than another, should he go in her place. At last, the halfling took a deep breath, tightened the belt that held her coat shut, and made her way toward the dark, yawning mouth of the tunnel beyond the chamber they slept in.

"This is what I came for," she whispered encouragingly to herself. "This is why I'm here. Scout and return. Bring the thing if you find it. Nothing more, nothing less."

Thorin watched her go, contemplating going after her, having a final word, giving her advice. Saying goodbye. Goodbye? So had he given up, then? Did he truly have so little faith in her, after all she'd done? But this was different. This was a dragon, a dragon that had killed thousands of his people. He'd seen it himself, felt the heat of its breath and the hurricane-force of its wings, heard the hideous rumbling of its mocking laughter. Imagining Billa going anywhere near such a beast filled him with horror. But he didn't, in the end, go after her. She was on her own now, as she'd wished. All he could do was wait. Wait, and send up a plea to Mahal.
The tunnel was dark and quiet, a current of cool air sifting past her ankles. Down. Always down. 
Thorin had told her the secret door was almost directly above the main entrance to the treasure hall, so when she came to a fork in the tunnel, blinded by the darkness as she was, she found the side with stairs that led further down and took it.

The silence was oppressive, and the darkness felt almost like a physical thing, pressing against her eyes and muffling her senses. Part of her sincerely wished that she'd agreed to let Thorin come with her. No. This is for his own good. And mine.

"Just scout," the halfling whispered to herself. "Get in, take a look around, get out." It had seemed like an easier task back in Beorn's house.

The air around her feet was getting warmer now. She didn't notice at first, but gradually, she came to realize that the stone under her toes simply wasn't cold anymore. She paused to consider this, and ahead, she could see the vague outline of more stairs.

But if I can see, that means there's more light up ahead. Did the dragon light torches? Is he awake already?

The absurd image of the dragon taking midnight tea popped into her head, and Billa swallowed a nervous laugh with difficulty.

Slowly, she made her way down the stairs, more aware now of the rising temperature of the air around her. A dim ruby glow bathed the doorway below her in a bloody light. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she padded down the last few stairs as silently as she possibly could, and peeked out into the treasure hall.

Whatever she'd expected, it was nothing like this. Billa felt her breath leave her and for a long
handful of moments, she could do no more than stare. Comparisons utterly failed her, and even her inner poet was at a loss for words.

Gold.

Gold, as far as the eye could see, stretching out into seemingly infinite darkness. Heaps and piles and mountains of it. Coins, bars, plates, crowns, cups, helmets, bowls--armor and weapons and jewelry and objects she had no name for. Precious gems were heaped to overflowing in half-buried barrels, winking colors truer than any she'd seen in the world under the sky.

Even Billa, who had no love for precious things, was awed by the massive hoard. Slowly, she managed to focus on the bigger picture, overwhelmed as she was by the sight before her. Here and there, peeking through the glittering stuff, were patches of rough, red stone she couldn't identify. It wasn't until she saw the tip of the enormous tail that she realized this was the dragon. Mostly buried in his gleaming bed, Smaug slept, motionless and quiet.

And now that she knew, she could feel it, so low as to not be heard, a deep, rhythmic rumbling.

So, dwarves aren't the only ones that snore.

A wiser hobbit may have left right then, reported back to Thorin and given herself time to recover. Billa, however, wasn't yet old enough to be considered wise, and the cautiousness of her days in the Shire had long since been worn out of her. Silent as a puff of smoke on the breeze, she put her ring on and slipped down the stairs. She noticed, with a feeling akin to disgust, that the stairs no longer reached the floor, but were buried also in treasure. How much further below this monstrous hoard did the floor lie? Why would anyone, even a dragon, desire this much wealth?

It's tainted. Thorin would probably argue... but I don't think there's anything good in this place.

With a shudder, she stepped out onto the gold--and felt it shift. A clatter of coin rose from under her invisible, furry feet, and Billa froze, looking swiftly toward the nearest exposed bit of dragon. The tail. It was long, powerful, and barbed, each black spike as long and thick as her leg. It didn't move.

Just an hour, Billa. Just an hour. Then back to the others. You're not going to risk spending all night here.

Shaking slightly, she began her search, trying to be as quiet as she could manage as she made her way to the nearest pile of gems. She tried to remember Thorin's description of the Arkenstone. As big as her fist, white, luminescent. Luminescent? Did he mean that it glowed? That would be convenient. Billa glanced around. No glowing stones. Ah, well. If it was too easy, then the accomplishment wouldn't have been worth as much. Steeling herself, she dug through the gems, determined to use every minute of her hour to her best advantage.

Slowly, she moved further and further from the stairs, pausing to pick up this or that. There were a great number of white gemstones in the hall. Some the wrong shape, the wrong size, too clear, too jagged. Thorin had described it like an opal, and she had seen one or two of those in her time.

If I finish searching within my lifetime, I'll be lucky. Billa paused to look back toward the entrance. By the red glow of the dragon, she could still see the stairs, but they seemed very far away now. Her hour was probably up. Might have been up for some time. She took a step forward, deciding it was time to go. Then, something changed. The rumbling of the dragon's breathing was louder now, high enough that she could hear it. Billa suppressed a bolt of panic.

It's probably nothing. Just a dream or something. Just get back to the stairs.
It was the smell that’d woken him first, not the little clinking sounds her feet had made tiptoeing between the mounds of coins. Smaug’s great golden eye slid open, glowing as though a fire burned behind it, the dark slit of his pupil widening to scan the treasure hoard. There was nothing there. His nose told him differently. Limber as a cat and frighteningly quick, the beast stretched his long, spiky legs and eased all his massive, scaly bulk to his feet, sending a shower of coins cascading back to join their fellows below with a ringing cacophony like thousands of little bells. He shook off the rest of the encrusted wealth and took another evaluative glance about, long tail twitching sinuously.

"Well, thief... I smell you. I feel your air. Where are you?" His voice was like the roar of the ocean tide, fathomless, powerful, overwhelming. It echoed throughout the cavern, a deep, low, resonant booming that sounded every bit as frightening and glorious as the beast from which it had come.

Billa froze. The coins had been bad enough. Her ears rang with the tumult, and now that voice. A voice like a hundred rivers, like a thousand furnaces—a voice like Death itself. She didn't answer, of course, but held very still, praying he would just go back to sleep and knowing without a doubt that this course of action was the last thing on the dragon's mind.

Smaug swung about, searching, sniffing, sending out wispy puffs of smoke that curled upward and dissolved against the high ceiling. "Come now, don't be shy. It's not good manners to lurk in the shadows. Why not come out and introduce yourself?" The long line of his mouth curled into a snake-like grin.

If it's all the same to you, I'd really rather not.

Billa didn’t have time to think about the painful, fiery death that was waiting behind those jaws. She didn't have the presence to worry about her final words to Thorin, or how the dwarves were going to get away safely. The one, all-consuming task that seized her mind in a death-grip was the simple act of escaping. Until the dragon moved, however—there! He shifted his weight, and a cascade of gold and gems rushed down the slope like glittering, clinking thunder. Billa took off at a sprint for the stairs. The door she entered through actually opened onto a wide platform. If she could get under the shelter of the pillars that supported the raised stone, then she might have a chance of getting out of this alive.

The clinking cacophony faded before she made up half the distance, though, and Billa slid to a stop, resting on her back now, trying to breathe as quietly as possible, too tense to tremble, too focused to scream.

Smaug's keen ears caught the tail end of her break, and his head swung around toward the source of the noise. "So you aren't a phantom, then, my little thief. Whatever else you may be." His long, forked tongue flicked out in a hissing sound of amusement, and he took a heavy, thundering step toward the platform. "Well, you're not a dwarf. Not a man. Not an elf. You're a riddle. I enjoy riddles." The way he spoke hinted he might enjoy them in more ways than one.

Billa gulped. As the dragon moved, she rolled to her feet and prayed he couldn't hear her heart threatening to shatter her ribs. Huge claws crashed behind her, even with her—the halfling threw herself to the side as the dragon nearly stepped on her, tumbling down the slope pell-mell. The hall whirled around her in dizzying spirals. There was no way he’d miss the noise she was making now. Before her insides had properly settled, Billa was scrambling for cover, throwing herself behind the nearest pillar.

Smaug snorted disgustedly. Out billowed a thick puff of black smoke. He’d caught a scent he did recognize. Very well, at that. The corners of his mouth lifted in a growl. "You're in league with dwarves, then. I thought as much." A more menacing quality joined his tone now, less curiosity and more hatred.
"Their scent lies thickly on you, thief. I wonder if what the Dark One's servants say is true. Have you come after the Arkenstone?"

Billa pressed herself against the stone. "I came only to... gaze upon your tremendousness, O Smaug the Inexorable!" She hadn't the faintest idea where she was going with this, but she knew she had to protect Thorin. "I heard the tales of your magnificence, and I'm ashamed to say, I did not believe them."

"They sent a female?" Smaug laughed deep in his throat, greatly surprised. "I knew Oakenshield was a coward, but this... well. I'm sure you earned your keep with them. I swallowed up so many of their women, they're bound to be a bit... desperate." He grinned, his feet shaking the ground as he moved slowly around the pillar. "So thief, now that you've had a look at my greatness, why don't you let me see what pathetic creature that sniveling craven-heart dared send down here? Who knows? Perhaps I'll show you more pity than he did."

The world seemed to go still. Billa's mind slowed to a crawl, and the only thing that really registered was anger. Overwhelming, righteous anger.

"It was an honor to serve him," she snapped, leaning away from the pillar. No. This was playing right into his claws. Billa mastered herself and swallowed hard, funnelling her anger into as much intense concentration as she could muster.

"Though I traveled with them, you don't honestly think I let him send me down here, do you? I came of my own accord, O Smaug the Terrible, to pay homage to your greatness. After all, who can know your power and might, the strength that routed the Mountain and sent an entire kingdom into exile?"

The halfling kept up her stream of flattery, determined not to be caught off-guard again. Edging around the pillar, she eyed the dragon's massive, sinewy hindquarters. He didn't seem to be particularly tense, but she'd seen his speed and knew he didn't need to be in order for his attack to come swiftly.

Smaug knew he'd hit a sensitive spot, and had been determined to persist. The flattery, while obviously fake, nonetheless pleased him, and he found himself momentarily distracted. "Pay homage? What could you, in your insignificance and small years, know of my power and might? You've heard nothing but your grandmother's fearful fireside tales, no doubt. But to see me in action-that's quite another thing. You would not have eyes with which to marvel at the blinding flash of my breath, little thief, or ears to hear the hurricane winds of my wings. You could not watch. You could only... die. Die along with all the rest."

Slowly, surely, his long, snakelike body began to encircle the pillar, his intent to hem her in. Corral her so she couldn't escape. "Come now, thief. Why not reveal yourself? The riddle begins to confound me. What are you?"

Billa steeled herself. The noise of his movements, while not as great as it had been at first, was still sufficient to cover up what small disturbance her passage stirred up. She dodged behind his hind legs, and slid another thirty or forty feet down the hill of treasure before she spoke.

"As you said, I am the Riddle. I am the Lucky Number, the Ring-Winner. I am the Stinging Fly, and the Answer Unlooked-For. I am she who walks unseen." Billa's voice had taken on a chanting quality, as though she were taunting the dragon, though it was more because she was winded from her fall.

Smaug tried not to show his irritation that she'd escaped his noose. Anyway, it was forgotten a few moments later when she began to be interesting again. "Lovely titles," he rumbled, turning his head in the direction of her voice. "What else do you claim to be?"
"Perhaps, O Greatest of Calamities, I am the Riddle that has no Answer. Could it be that you don't know what I am? That you haven't a name for the scent I carry? Dwarves are simple, and pungent besides, but you don't know me." Billa knew this was a dangerous game, but as he continued weaving to and fro, searching for her, she kept moving. Sometimes before him, sometimes behind, often under his very belly, low-slung and scaly, rippling sinuously as he walked. It was in this place, full of danger (and yet the brightest-lit) that she spotted it as it fell, dislodged from a crevice between two plate-like scales. A white stone, smooth and round as a polished opal, about the size of her fist.

"I am nothing to your greatness, O Smaug, Chiefest Terror of the Third Age, but I have been promised a great reward, should I survive this little game of ours." Billa bent double as she ran, scooping up the stone. She was about to stuff it in her pocket when she noticed a faint bluish glow emanating from the stone, surrounding her fist. She wondered, as she had in the goblin tunnels, if the invisibility the ring granted her extended to the objects she held--especially when those objects were glowing. Sting had glowed then, and Gollum hadn't seen it, but she suspected Gollum might be blind anyway.

"There is but one problem," Smaug crooned, thoroughly enjoying himself. "You are a pawn, and I am a king. You have no chance of surviving. You exist only to be sacrificed to your own side's ambition." He chuckled, beginning to search in earnest for any sign of the thief's passage. Now and then, he'd see and hear things that might have been her. But he couldn't be completely sure.

"And if a pawn makes it far enough," Billa puffed, shoving the glowing rock into her pocket, "she becomes a queen. What then, Your Majesty?" This verbal sparring was only doing so much to distract him. The stairs were several lengths away, but it was all uphill from where she was. The halfling forced herself to keep running, slipping and stumbling as she went. A huge paw crashed into the gold, only inches from where she had been instants before.

Smaug knew where she was now. Billa's legs and lungs were both burning, but she managed to cover the last couple lengths, diving under the stairs and coming to a rest, flat on her belly against the warmth of the shifting gold. The heat wasn't at all comforting, considering its source.

The long, sinewy tail swept across the surface of the horde, tossing up glittering pieces of treasure as frustration and interested warred within the dragon. It had been years and years since his last visitor, and if there had ever been one this challenging, he couldn't recall. Now the thief was hiding from him again, somewhere under that platform. He could roast her, of course, but that seemed almost too easy.

Now, a different sort of idea altogether was creeping into his mind. She might prove... useful. Division and dissension could destroy a powerful foe as surely as dragonfire itself.

"If you find the stone, little thief," he said, stooping down to look beneath the platform, "you can keep it. My magnanimous gift to you for the entertainment you've provided me. Take it back with you, give it to Oakenshield." He grinned again, his eyes glowing brighter. "That's why he sent you, isn't it? So go on. Help yourself. I have plenty and to spare."

Billa couldn't help it. Perhaps she was resigned to death at this point, too exhausted to run any further, much less up stairs. Her limbs trembled and her heart pounded, but her voice was steady and suspicious when she spoke.

"Why? Forgive me my small-mindedness, but... I don't understand."

Smaug snorted two wisps of acrid smoke. "Why, indeed. Perhaps this, too, is part of the game. Can you accept a generous offer from a dragon as being simply that, or can you not? Take the stone and go, or stay here and ask me about my reasons until I change my mind."
"You'll excuse my lack of faith in your generosity, I think," Billa replied dryly. "Why would you want Oakenshield to have the Arkenstone? What could you gain from it?" He knew where she was. Giving her permission to leave might very well simply be a way to lure her back out into the open so he could eat her. In either case, she didn't fear the death so much as the threat of it.

"He believes it carries with it the blessing of the Divine," Smaug said mockingly. "I want to see the look on his face when he discovers it means nothing. When he realizes it will no more help him than it did his grandfather before him. When it brings only madness and pain." Smaug cocked his head a little so he could stare fully into the gap beneath the platform with one huge, flaming eye. "Death will come to him whether he has the Arkenstone or not. If it makes him bolder--stupidly so--less work for me to do. In the end, stone or not, the result will be the same, little thief."

Billa shuddered, horror licking through her like fire. She tamped down on it fiercely, unwilling to let this new fear overrule her better sense. "We have a saying where I come from--don't count your chickens before they're hatched. I wouldn't be so quick to count Oakenshield as dead before he breathes his last." Slowly, she eased herself out from under the stairs, doing her level best not to disturb the coins under her. Even though he couldn't see her, she hated the feeling of that bright, deadly eye on her.

The faint depression in the gold did not escape Smaug's notice, but he didn't move. Though the idea of catching her up in his teeth and seeing what the invisible creature tasted like was a tempting one, he wouldn't kill her. Not yet. Not while she was still useful.

"Go on, thief. I know where you are, and I haven't reduced you to ash. Be a good little pawn and hop up those steps back to your king. No doubt he'll be very pleased. And you needn't even tell him I gave you the stone of my own accord. Embellish your story. Make it as heroic as you like. It matters not." His tongue flicked out again in a hissing laugh.

Though she really wanted to snap back a nasty reply about what she would and wouldn't be telling Thorin, the halfling kept her mouth shut. With one eye on the dragon, she clambered onto the stairs and proceeded as silently as she could up the stone steps, deeply grateful for the lack of shifting gold under her feet. At long last she reached the head of the stairs, and there she paused, looking back at Smaug. The beast had lifted his head, tracking her progress to the platform, and it was a very unpleasant sort of surprise to realize that the dragon would have no trouble at all eating her from where he stood. It was therefore a relief to indulge her fear and pelt into the blessed, concealing darkness of the tunnel as fast as her furry feet would carry her.

There was nothing at all comforting about the rumble of satisfied laughter that followed her mad flight toward the secret door.
Not Scared for Me

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

This is your extra chapter for the day—an apology for disappearing during FantasyCon. More Smaug is coming, don't worry. :) We had a real blast writing this part of the story. Now we can return to our normal updating schedule. You may expect the next update on Wednesday.

Billa had made it perhaps halfway up the tunnel when she collided with Thorin. The dwarf had heard the boom of the dragon's laughter at her back, issuing from the treasure chamber below, and feared some great burst of fire to follow. Scooping her up, invisible or no, he turned and sprinted back the way he'd come, not slowing until they burst into the chamber where the others were still asleep.

Thorin panted, face relieved and anguished and frantic all at the same time. "Billa," he gasped, realizing he was holding an invisible halfling. The ring had made no difference in the nigh absolute darkness of the tunnel. "Are you alright? What happened?" He set her down gently, placing his hands where he guessed her shoulders would be and groping around awkwardly until he got it right.

Billa realized his problem and yanked the ring off, wincing slightly as it caught on her knuckle and tore the skin. Until then she'd been silent, part of her still fearing the dragon's wrath.

"He knows where we are. We need to move." Her voice shook slightly, but the rest of her seemed steady enough. "I'm not hurt, Thorin, please, we need to move. Now."

The feeling of his strong arms around her, the instinctive longing for safety—she would have loved to give in, but there was no time for that right now. Her heart was in her throat, knowing without a doubt that if he wanted to, Smaug could kill them all where they slept.

"He's awake, we talked, I escaped, I found it, let's go!"

Echoing Billa's urgency, Thorin turned to the others, who were already mostly awake now and staring at them questioningly. "Everyone up! Grab your gear, and don't waste time with questions. We're going. Now." His tone left no room for argument, and within a minute, the dwarves were packed up and jogging toward the stone door, weapons in hand.

"You found it? You said you found it?" Thorin asked Billa as they went out into the cold night, gazing out from their vantage point across the moonlit land below.
"Where are we going?" Dwalin barked, looking very confused.

Billa ignored Thorin's query, flapping her hands agitatedly at Dwalin. "Out. Away. Far from here. For all I know, he let me go so he could follow us and eat us one at a time." Smaug's taunts about the Arkenstone were still ringing in her ears, burning in her mind. Was it really so useless a thing? It was just a stone, she knew that. A gem like any other. But the dwarves had obviously attached some great meaning to it.

"He let you go?" asked Balin, startled.

"Yes, yes, he said take it and go, and so I went." She fixed her eyes on Thorin. "He gave it to me, Thorin. He knew I had it and he let me walk away with it."

Thorin looked at her as though she might be half-mad. "You're sure it's the Arkenstone? Why would he-? Did he give you any reason?" He didn't seem to be able to make any more sense of it than Billa had been able to.

Billa pulled the stone from her pocket and waved it under his nose, unsettled by its unearthly blue-white glow. Because it wasn't really blue-white at all. It was white-white, with traces and dashes and glimmers of other colors laced through it, exactly as though there were a rainbow of flame trapped inside it.

"Yes, I'm sure it's the bloody Arkenstone, Thorin. You said I'd know it when I saw it, and sure enough I did. And you should be darn pleased I saw it when it fell--it was wedged between the Worm's scales. Nearly hit me on the konk, too. Can we go now, please?"

"That may be just what the beast wants," Balin interjected, looking a bit baffled by this whole business. "To get us away from the Mountain where we can hide, and out into the open. It'll be a five-day journey back to Laketown with as many wounded as we have, and he'd have no trouble hunting us down and incinerating us during that time, not to mention the potential for another Orc attack." He took a breath, intentionally trying to calm himself. "Just let's please be sensible about this and think a moment!"

The halfling rounded on Balin, brandishing the luminescent stone at him. "And you think he can't roast us all in that tunnel of yours? It's nearly a straight line from the treasure hall to this door, and he knows right where we are, now."

"Whoa, slow down there, little burglar." Bofur put his hands on her shoulders and forced her to back up a couple steps. "Calm yerself down, lass. And don't go wavin' that t'ing around. Ye'll drop it."

Thorin glanced between her and the glowing stone, frowning slightly. He didn't have time to marvel at its beauty, though. They were all in on the dragon's deadly game now, and what his next move might be had them stumped. This was too peculiar for words. "Billa, if he knew he could kill us all so easily, why wait? Why the charade? Why give you the stone and allow you to warn us?"

"I don't know!" Billa glanced at him, a gleam of desperation in her eyes. "He said that he wanted me to bring it to you, because it meant nothing and was nothing and he'd kill you either way!" Her voice was climbing higher, into the hysterical range. Bofur shook her slightly, and the halfling fell silent, breathing hard. For all that she'd been so competent in the treasure hall, she was shaking now. "There has to be a way out of this."

"Uncle." Fili was standing nearest the tunnel, his expression unreadable. "Let me go to the beast's chamber, see what he's doing. If we can at least know what direction we can expect an attack from-"
"Are yer brains jangled, lad?" Gloin scowled at him. "If ya think we'd let ya go off ta that place on yer own, then ya've less sense than I thought."

"We'll wait out here, at least until morning," Thorin said, taking the stone from Billa and pocketing it without a second glance. "If the beast means to incinerate us from within, that'll save us. If, failing that, he flies out to get us here on this shelf, we have a good chance of getting back inside before he does."

The others murmured anxiously, but ultimately saw it was the only plan that--for the moment--made much sense. They began unshouldering their belongings and bedrolls again, keeping as close as possible to the face of the stone wall. This, at least, sheltered them from the worst of the occasional gusts of icy wind that battered against the shelf.

"Come here, Billa," Thorin pulled the frantic hobbit into his arms. It was clear she'd been through quite an ordeal, and it would take her a long while to calm down again. "It's alright. I won't let him hurt you. You're safe now."

Billa pressed herself against him and tried to control her own trembling, screwing her eyes tight shut. "It's not me I'm worried about. I can live without me." She chuckled weakly at her own joke.

Fili wasn't about to give up, though. "Uncle... I can... please, let me help." He could see that Thorin needed to stay here with Billa--the hobbit needed him. But if they just knew what the dragon was doing, if they could predict his next move, then maybe things wouldn't be so tense.

"No, Fili." Thorin shook his head. "For the time being, we keep together. Get some rest. We'll hold decision-making for the morrow. Billa and I will take the first watch." He escorted the now-frail halfling toward the wall, setting his back to it and then drawing her into his sturdy shoulder. "It's alright," he whispered again. "We're safe."

It took much reassuring and comforting to calm her down, and even then, she wasn't at all easy with their situation. Nestled under his arm, she gazed out at the rough valley, searching the deep shadows for any hint of movement. The night was quiet, though, and the only sounds that broke the stillness were the occasional calls of nocturnal birds.

"I don't like it, Thorin. I don't like that dragon, and I don't like that stone. It's not right." She shifted against him, shivering as a cold breeze swirled briefly against the wall, tousling her hair.

Thorin had been thinking much the same. It didn't seem right. The dragon would never have given it up if he didn't have some foul purpose in mind. Of that, he was certain. "I know little of it," he admitted. "In my youth, I watched my grandfather fall to madness, cradling it at night like a newborn when he thought no one was looking. It troubled me then, but I don't know if the stone was to blame or the entire, overwhelming treasure. But this thing," he patted his pocket, "whatever it is... if Smaug wants me to have it, it cannot be good."

"But it was to serve such good," she whispered, her brows lowered in confusion. "I don't understand. It's just a stone, nothing more and nothing less, a stone that you've given meaning to. No more or less valuable than my mother's glory box, and for the same reasons." She trailed off, frowning, shoulders hunched against the wind and uncertainty.

Thorin shook his head gravely. "I fear it's far more than that. Like you and your ring, we dwarves have never fully understood the Arkenstone. I've heard tales of jewels over which the elves warred in the First Age, jewels that destroyed nations and toppled kingdoms. The silmarili. I fear... my grandfather may have discovered something similar, and never knew the truth."
Billa glanced at him nervously, shivering, though not from the cold. "I wish we could throw them both in the Lake and be done with it." As though she were ashamed of the confession, she spoke quickly, so the words almost blended together. She wanted to speak no more of the evil things, nor of anything else. She wanted to sleep and forget, but knew she wouldn't be able to. Closing her eyes summoned the image of Smaug's great orange eye, gleaming at her under the stairs. The silence resounded for her with the deep rumble of his taunting laugh.

"The burden is ours to bear, for now at least," Thorin said, placing a hand over hers as it strayed to her pocket, a gesture he had begun to notice. A gesture that was becoming a habit. "Wiser minds and hands may take them from us in time, but until that time comes, we do what we must." The Arkenstone was his now, against all hope. The jewel for which this quest had been undertaken, the jewel which meant his kingdom. The battle was half-won. He had only to send word to the other dwarf families now. With their help, the dragon would surely be slain. All the same, it was beginning to gnaw at him, the thought that this small, smooth orb in his pocket might be a thing of evil. This move Smaug had made was very puzzling, indeed. He dismissed it temporarily.

"I... didn't get a chance to thank you yet for... for your courage, Billa. I don't know how any of this will play out, considering Smaug's strange behavior, but all the same... I thank you for what you did. For all you've done. I could ask for no truer, more loyal companion." He smiled down at her.

Billa looked up at him, his strong face illuminated only by faint starlight. She could see the deep eyes, the heavy brows, the strong jaw that had so convinced her of his wildness so long ago in the doorway at Bag End--she could also feel the gentle tenderness in his hands, the beating of his heart. Things that told her over and again, "I love you." But what use was love?

Billa shifted restlessly, gripped his hand and winced, suddenly remembering the way she'd torn her knuckle when taking the ring off earlier. The blood was dry now, but the loose skin caught on Thorin's callouses, and she desperately wanted to hit something. She shifted again, longing to get up and pace, to run inside and see the dragon--to do something.

The halfling swore under her breath. "Why can't I enjoy this? We have peace right now, in this moment. I want to be happy with it."

Thorin leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "Restlessness," he whispered into her wavy hair. "Never truly appreciating a good moment until it's gone. Always thinking ahead, planning, waiting for something else that might never come. Maybe," he planted a gentle kiss behind her pointed ear, "we both can learn to love what we already have. To enjoy it while we still have it. A moment, a breath, a heartbeat. A kiss."

That was a hint if ever she'd heard one. She didn't bother telling him that until he walked into her life, that was how she'd lived. That was how hobbits had always lived (with the possible exception of Lobelia, may the hair on her toes grow ever thinner).

Turning in his arms, ears a-twitch, Billa paused only a moment, their noses brushing. His breath was warm on her face, and smelled nothing like sulfur. She leaned forward until their lips met, finally repaying the kiss he'd given her when she had found the keyhole. Right place, right time. That was all there was to it.

Thorin savored the kiss. It lingered, sweet and heady as mead, long after their lips had parted again. Smiling, he drew her into his shoulder, slowly caressing the soft curve of her back. "Sleep, Billa," he whispered. "I'll keep watch. You'll be no use in the morning if you've had no rest."

"Neither will you," the halfling protested, but it was halfhearted at best. This was what she wanted. What's more, that kiss had taken every ounce of restlessness and drained it right out of her. I should
be thanking my lucky stars that I have you, she thought, looking up at him from under his arm. I will never deserve this.
How or when she finally drifted off, Billa didn't know. She recalled a minor age of sitting in the cold night air, snug against Thorin's warm body, savoring the aftertaste of a kiss like a gift from the sun. The next thing she was aware of was the sudden return to reality, that falling-out-of-bed, splashed-with-cold-water sensation that comes with waking too fast. It was at least mid-morning, and sunlight spilled over the shoulders of the Mountain behind her. Not that she took any notice of it at first.

The hand on her arm, the cold air in her face, the terrifying memory of impossibly heavy gold and impossibly hot, red scales, under the baleful watch of a huge orange eye, ringed in fire. Billa was on her feet in a second, lungs fit to burst, reaching for her sword.

"Thorin!"

The dwarves all paused in their individual tasks and looked at her curiously. Billa blinked, the beginnings of embarrassment dawning on her. It had been a dream.

Thorin had been speaking in hushed tones with Balin and Fili, but was now looking at Billa, clearly concerned. Gloin had taken over the watch during the night, followed by Nori, and Thorin had been able to get some rest, but it was clear he was still tired.

"You're alright?" he asked, noticing the slightly flushed look about her face. Billa forced herself to rock back on her heels and glanced at Dori, who still had a hand out toward her. The neat dwarf looked concerned, and so did a number of the others, now that she took a second glance. Clearing her throat, the hobbit averted her eyes.

"Ah... it was nothing. It was... why did you let me sleep so long?" A pathetic attempt at changing the subject, to be sure, but an attempt nonetheless.

Fili stretched, cracking his knuckles noisily. "You needed the sleep, Miss Baggins. And as long as you could, why not let you?" Settling against the rock again, he turned his gaze on his uncle. "I really think it's best to check on the dragon again before we make any further plans. See what he's up to. Let me go, Uncle. I'm the quickest and quietest of us, other than Billa herself."

Thorin hesitated. Fili was right, of course. When it came to making plans, it wasn't wise to leave a live dragon out of one's calculations. But to send his nephew, who had no ring to keep him out of
sight...? Well, he wouldn't send Billa again if he could help it. He'd go himself if he thought the Company wouldn't practically riot at the suggestion. Finally, he nodded. He didn't like it, but it had to be done. "Very well. But I expect you to exercise extreme caution. Don't go any further than you have to, and return as quickly as you can."

Fili perked up, eyes brightening with excitement. "Thank you, Uncle-"

"Hold on just a minute." Billa was beside Thorin now, and had apparently gotten over her embarrassment. "I'm the one that can get in and out without being seen. Shouldn't this be my job?"

Fili gave the hobbit an injured look. "You can't do everything yourself, Billa. Besides, I'm better rested than you anyway."

"Better rested my ear," growled the burglar, and for a moment, the two of them stood nose to nose. It was comical, how the little halfling had to crane her neck and stand on her toes to be even with Fili's chin, and yet there was no doubt the two were facing each other as equals.

Thorin hated to admit it, but if he had to bet on one of the two returning unharmed, it would be Billa. And yet, he'd just gotten her back, had sworn to himself he'd not send her down again. In the end, though, there was very little contest. He had no reason, other than protective love, to prevent her going. He sighed. "She's the designated burglar, and therefore the expert in tasks of this sort. If she wishes to go... she has the right to."

"Ha!" Billa dropped back onto her heels, smirking triumphantly. Fili's expression of deep disappointment gave her pause, though. It didn't look like he was giving up a dangerous mission, but rather as though she were stealing something very precious to him that he felt he had little right to. She hesitated, feeling a twinge of guilt. A moment later, she steeled her resolve and looked away. It would be easier to stick to the plan if she couldn't see his sadness. Looking at Thorin was no better. The dwarf looked as grieved as the first time she'd gone--as though he were preparing to bury her with his own hands. This time, she understood a little better, but that didn't make it any easier to bear.

"Don't look so glum. I'll be right back," she assured him with smile she didn't quite feel.

Thorin put his hands on her shoulders, leaning down to speak more in confidence. "Be careful. The dragon may have let you go once--for whatever reason--but I doubt he'll do so again." He swallowed, looking troubled. "Find out where he is and come back. Nothing else. Don't even set foot in the treasure chamber if you can help it. He'll recognize your scent now, and if you linger too long--even invisible--he'll know you're there."

Billa met his gaze seriously, glanced at Fili, clenched her teeth and nodded. She shivered only slightly as she leaned up to kiss his nose. "Have faith in me, Thorin." With a bright smile, she turned and dodged past Gloin, through the door. Before anyone could say a word of protest, she was trotting into the shadows and out of sight.

"Are you sure that was wise, lad?" asked Dwalin gruffly, his eyes on the dark doorway. He was as stoic as ever, arms crossed over his broad, muscular chest, but there was a touch of concern in his dark eyes. Even he had gotten attached to the little burglar.

Thorin glanced unhappily at Dwalin. "I would've had better luck trying to forbid the raging sea from rushing up to greet the sand." He turned away from the entrance, schooling his face back to its usual composure. "Fili, stay just within the door and listen for anything unusual. The rest of you, pack up your gear, repair weapons, and do whatever's necessary for us to be able to move out in a hurry, should the need arise."
With nods and murmurs of agreement, the others turned away. Oin began making his rounds, changing bandages, adjusting splints, and re-applying ointments and salves. Balin approached Thorin as he ostensibly oversaw these activities.

"Water's running short. We can't stay here but another night at most without sending someone to fetch more."

Thorin nodded. He was frowning, his arms crossed, eyes distant. "Noted. For now, we stay put."

Tauriel paced restlessly from one end of the common room to the other. She couldn't sit still, even to apply herself to work. A dark weight rested over her mind, and she couldn't shake the feeling of imminent danger. The elf checked the windows and doors repeatedly, then went back to prowling silently from one wall to the other. Her bow leaned against the stool in the corner, along with her quiver. Occasionally, she glanced at them.

The red-haired elleth tried not to look at Kili and Ori too often. She knew her actions must be nerve-wracking for them, but the sense of danger that compelled her to keep moving seemed somehow linked to them. Would they be frightened if they knew? Should she tell them? After this had gone on for some time, Kili finally sighed, setting down the sword-belt he'd been repairing with a loud clatter.

"Tauriel, enough." He turned a pitying gaze on her, shaking his head slowly. "Go on. Go after them. We can fend for ourselves. I'd hate to see you go, but... I hate it more, seeing you so restless and unhappy. Go after them, Tauriel. You'll be more use with Uncle than here." The corners of his mouth quirked up slightly. It was a forced smile at best.

Tauriel froze, every line and muscle tense. When he finished speaking, she turned to face him, her eyes flickering from him to the door and back again, as though illustrating the tremendous battle raging inside her. To go or to stay. To fulfill her duty as a protector, or to indulge her warrior's paranoia. At length, she crossed the room in five tense strides and sat stiffly beside him, her lips thin and white. Her entire body quivered, as though she were a bow string drawn too tightly. Though she was obviously forcing herself to relax, it didn't seem to make much difference.

"I can't. Or I won't." Her tone was clipped, her words short and efficient as she let her gaze pass briefly over each dwarf in turn. "I am needed here. I was ordered to protect you." And that's what I must do.

"My uncle gave that order because he was too proud to give you a place in his Company." Kili's words were spoken with equal conviction. "It was wrong of him. Besides, since I'm not with them, he's short an archer. You could go in my place. I'm sure once he got over his anger, he'd be glad to accept your service." Kili wasn't sure why it was so easy to plead with her to go when he wanted desperately for her to stay.

Ori was nodding in agreement. "As much as I've enjoyed your company," she said politely, "I think Thorin needs you more than we do."

Tauriel closed her eyes briefly. "I would never forgive myself," she said, slowly, and with forced calm, "if I, charged with your protection, allowed either of you come to harm. You," she glanced at Kili, "are injured, and you, no offence, Ori, aren't much of a warrior. While you wouldn't be defenseless, you're safer with me here." Tauriel shivered slightly, then shook her head, as though to clear it.

"I do not have the same gifts of Foresight that some of my kin do, but... I feel as though there were a great danger waiting for us. Whence or when, I know not--but it comes."
A miasma of fear settled over the room. Both Kili and Ori, if they'd looked confused before, now looked apprehensive and anxious.

"You don't think they, " Kili lowered his voice, "woke the dragon?" He'd been determinedly barring that possibility from his mind these past few days. Keeping busy had helped, but still... it gnawed at him, kept a constant cold feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Tauriel lifted her head, but her green eyes were haunted. "I think," she said, her tone confident, "if the dragon was awake, we'd know. There would have been some movement from the Mountain, if that were the case." She nodded slightly. Her fear wasn't of the dragon. The dragon, she could fight. But this unseen, unknown danger that hovered over them—that frightened her. So deeply engrossed was Tauriel in her own thoughts that when the knock came, she jumped. The chair clattered noisily against the floor behind her as she faced the door, dagger drawn.

"Master Dwarf? You have a visitor."

The door opened, and a little girl peeked in. She had unruly blond hair, and a pleasant face. Even finding an armed elf inside, the child seemed more curious than frightened.

"I heard some were left behind," said Bard's voice cheerfully, and he entered behind the girl. Another, a little older and with darker hair, followed. The third was a boy not yet finished with his growth, and the last, an older girl, nearly of marrying age, who had flaxen hair and blue eyes—obviously unrelated. Possibly a neighbor or babysitter.

All four children regarded the dwarves and elf with some amount of excited apprehension. Tauriel had, by now, put away her dagger, and glanced at Kili with an eyebrow raised.

The youngest girl tugged at her father's sleeve. "Da', why're they so small? Is it 'cause they didn' eat their veg'ables?"

Kili burst out laughing before Bard could answer. "No, that's not it at all," he chuckled, pivoting in his chair to face their visitors. "My mother would've skinned me alive if I didn't eat my greens. And I still turned out puny. Isn't really fair, is it?" He winked at her. "Why, I'm so short, I could practically pass for a dwarf!"

Bard chuckled and ushered them forward. He seemed much more relaxed, much happier when he was with his little ones.

"You're looking far better than when last we met," the bargeman observed with a faint smile. "And your smaller friend, the one that disappeared inside my coat? I suppose she recovered?"

The oldest girl seemed both fascinated and somehow frightened by Tauriel. The elf was setting the kettle on and clearing some chairs for their guests (since most of the room had been taken over by their repairing projects).

Kili nodded, grinning. "That was Billa. Halflings can't be gotten rid of that easily. She was back on her feet and partying with the best of 'em the night of the feast." He made a sweeping gesture that included all the children. "So who are all these lovely young things?"

The middle girl, who couldn't be much older than twelve, turned pink and hid behind her father, though she peeked out at Kili and smiled shyly at him. The littlest one giggled and stepped forward, throwing out her chest.

"I'm Tilda, an' I'm five." She held up a hand with five fingers up, as proudly as though she were showing him a solid gold thing. Bard's gaze landed lovingly on the child, and his smile softened.
"Tilda is my youngest. This one," he indicated the girl hiding behind him, "is Addie, and her friend Signe." He nodded to the older girl. "And this," the bargeman clapped his son on the shoulder, lifting his head proudly, "is Bain. I figured you lot were probably bored out of your minds. Looks like I might have been wrong." Bard ran an eye over the piles of damaged fishing gear, armor and weapons that littered the room.

Addie slowly re-emerged from hiding, sidling closer to the dwarves. "Are you really... I mean... are you really going to live in the Mountain?" she asked hesitantly, eyes shining.

Kili laughed again, obviously greatly enjoying the change of pace... and the distraction. "You make it sound as though we were planning to live under a rock. It's an entire kingdom, actually. Inside the Mountain. So big and grand and beautiful, you could hardly believe it." He looked thoughtful. "I've never actually seen it myself, but my uncle lived there when he was Prince Under the Mountain, and he's told me lots of things." He grinned, scooting his chair out a little more from the table. "Someday, when we have our kingdom back, you and your family can come and see it. I'll give you a special tour."

Ori nodded, looking a little more at ease now that introductions had been made and she realized she was no longer the shyest person in the room. "You'd all be quite welcome. I'm Ori, by the way, and he's Kili."

Addie ducked her head a little, averting her eyes. She seemed embarrassed at having the wrong impression about the home of the great Dragon. She had imagined a series of huge, spacious caves, old burned-out lanterns and charred suits of armor, maybe the ruins of long tables and benches, mine carts and tools. Of course, she'd also imagined that dwarves were all surly, bearded little men with grubby hands and funny voices. Nothing like Kili, who was young and handsome and charming.

"I'd... like that," she murmured, studying her toes and scuffing her boots together nervously.

Little Tilda, who had tried to climb into Kili's lap while he spoke and had been removed by her father (who remembered that the dwarf's leg had been injured) now toddled over to Ori and climbed into her lap. "You got a funny name," the little girl observed, reaching up to play with one of Ori's braids. "Some people says I got a funny name. Was my mama's name. Was you named after your mama?"

Ori shook her head. "That's not how dwarven names work, little Tilda. My mother's name was Lis. We're usually named something similar to both our parents' names, but not the same name." She smiled down at the precocious little girl, surprised by how unafraid she was of them.

Kili noticed her interest in Ori's braids and grinned again. "You want a braid like that, too, Tilda? I'm an expert hair braider. My brother and I have been practicing our whole lives." He nodded seriously, ignoring the puzzled look Bard gave him.

Tilda's eyes lit up with excitement and she started to bounce energetically on Ori's lap. "Braid for Tilda?" she squeaked, apparently overjoyed by this concept.

"Of course!" said Kili, eyes gleaming happily. "Come here. I'll have six of 'em in your pretty golden hair before a cat can wink its eye. Have any more ribbon, Ori?"

Ori nodded, setting the little girl down and disappearing into her room. She returned a moment later, smiling, holding a ball of blue yarn. "It's not ribbon, but it'll work just as well."

Kili had Tilda sit cross-legged on the floor before his chair, and with fingers as quick and skillful as he'd promised, braided pretty, four-stranded braids, interwoven with blue yarn, at intervals around
her head. Looking remarkably pleased with himself, he glanced back at Tauriel, who was staring at
the kettle. "Hey, is there a mirror around here somewhere?"

Tauriel nodded silently and disappeared into one of the rooms--the one that had been Billa's, as it
happened. She returned with a small mirror that had been hanging on the wall, and handed it to Kili.
Her glance, when it skimmed over Tilda's new braids, was admiring, but she said nothing.

Bard shook his head slightly, chuckling to himself. "Guess I never thought about it, but you would
be pretty good at this kind of thing, wouldn't you?"

Tilda, still squirming, asked loudly if he was done.

Kili tightened one of the blue bows at the ends of Tilda's braids. "All done." He held the mirror so
she could see something of the front and sides of her hair. "Pretty as a Mountain Princess, don't you
think, Tauriel?"

A faint smile hovered at the corners of her mouth, and Tauriel nodded again.

Bard cleared his throat. "I have business to attend to today, unfortunately. Will you be alright having
some company until I get back? Bain and Signe are as good as gold with them, so no worries about
actually taking care of the younger ones."

Addie shot her father a mortified look, clearly wishing he hadn't classified her as someone who
needed to be taken care of.

Kili relinquished the mirror to little Tilda, who was bouncing enthusiastically and beaming from ear
to ear, enchanted by her new, dwarven appearance. "We welcome the company. It's been too quiet
here."

Ori nodded heavily in agreement. "I'm sure they'll be just fine. They seem well behaved. Much better
than my brothers were as younglings."

Bard eyed the still-silent elf for a moment, took a step toward the door, then hesitated again. Tauriel
spoke at last, her voice low and serious.

"I hold no grudge against you, Bargeman, nor against your kin. These dwarves are my friends, and
I'll do nothing to harm them or their guests."

Her words seemed to soothe his fears, and with a slight nod to Bain, the man left them. Bain watched
the door for a long moment before he sighed faintly, his expression worried. Signe nudged him with
her elbow, lowering her head slightly so she could look up into his face, smiling encouragingly.
They were about the same height, though Bain was obviously the older, at about fourteen or fifteen.
Bain reacted with a huff, and dropped his shoulders a little, making his expression relax into a smile.

Tilda nearly dropped the mirror in her excitement, but managed by some miracle to set it down
without breaking it before she spun around, attacking Kili with an extremely enthusiastic hug. "Tilda
a princess!" she squealed ecstatically. Addie looked a touch jealous, but said nothing, toying with a
lock of light brown hair instead.

Kili squeezed Tilda with equal enthusiasm, and when the little girl ran off to twirl her patched, knee-
length skirt in the more open space near the fire, he turned a smile on Addie. "Would you like some
braids, too? As you can probably tell, I... really enjoy braiding hair." He still hadn't gotten up enough
courage yet to ask Tauriel if he could braid hers, and with his brother gone, he hadn't been getting his
usual fix.
Addie blushed crimson and mumbled something along the lines of "well, if you really want to," but sat down quickly in front of him, as though she thought he might change his mind if she dallied. Tauriel's green eyes sparkled with silent laughter, and the elleth wondered if this was how her fellows in the Guard had felt about watching she and Kili interact. If that was so, she was glad it had brought them amusement in such a dark time.

"My hair... used to be more blond. Like Tilda's," Addie explained, as though apologizing for the drab color of her slightly wavy locks. "Father says it'll probably keep getting darker, though, until it's the same color as his." The girl shot Kili a glance out of the corner of her eye, and secretly thought that maybe dark hair wasn't so bad.

Tauriel had, by then, convinced her big brother to play with her, and Bain bowed extravagantly, suppressing a smile. "Your Majesty," he said grandly, "it's an honor to make your acquaintance."

"Dance!" commanded the little girl imperiously, lifting her arms in a clear demand to be picked up.

Kili had nearly finished a braid by the time Addie was done apologizing for the color of her hair, and he nodded sympathetically. "Take it from someone who was always jealous of his older brother's silky, flaxen locks as a child. It's really a matter of preference, and I more than make up for it with my endless charm." He chuckled, tying the braid with a bow of yarn and shifting his hands to a wide strand a couple inches over. He really wasn't as vain as he let on, but it was fun to pretend he hadn't always felt slightly inferior.

Tauriel listened to their conversation with interest, taking down the hissing kettle and mixing tea leaves into the mesh basket under the lid. "It's a little silly to worry about the color of your hair," she pointed out softly. "You can't change it, any more than you can change the color of the leaves on the trees, or the phases of the moon. Besides, I rather like dark hair." She approached and offered Addie a mug of tea.

The girl shifted slightly and accepted the tea with a murmur of thanks. As Tauriel moved to offer the second mug to Ori, however, there was no mistaking the envious glance that followed her. Addie clearly thought that no matter which way you looked at it, Tauriel's hair was beautiful, and there was no reason for her to be jealous of anyone else's hair color.

Kili snorted. "This is rich coming from Miss Perfect-Hair herself." He winked at Tauriel in an indulgence-craving way, wondering somewhat hopefully if she might have been implying something else by her comment. "At least yours is healthy, Addie. I daresay you Lake-dwellers eat plenty of fish. Nothing better for the hair. Unless you're an elf, in which case, it doesn't seem to matter either way." He directed an impish look at Tauriel.

Tauriel's head lifted and she glanced at Kili with a queer mixture of disbelief and humor in her face. "My hair is not perfect." There was significantly more variation in her tone as she spoke now, as though she'd finally broken out of her servant's role and remembered that she, too, was a person. With a shake of her head, she tugged on one of the slender braids that hung by her ears and glanced sidelong at Kili.

"If only you knew what I had to do to make my hair presentable--you have no idea." There was, however, a hint of humor in the smirk that curved her lips--just enough of a hint that it might even imply that she was teasing him.

Kili turned fully in his chair to look at her, dark brows raised with surprise. She sounded strangely... playful. He wasn't sure what to make of it. Maybe she was finally coming out of her shell. "Really?" he said, recovering, shifting back to continue with Addie's hair. "Could've fooled me."
Ori looked a bit puzzled. "I've never seen you touch it. It always looks... flawless."

Tauriel huffed softly through her nose, a sound reminiscent of laughter. "Do you think these braids stay in place without any effort?" The elf reached up, both hands now free, and worked out a piece of silvery wire in the form of a spiral from the end of each braid. They started to unravel almost immediately. She took the thicker braid at the back of her head, and from this one, too, she untwisted a heavier silver ornament that had, until then, gone unnoticed. This braid came undone as the others had. Glossy and smooth as the hair that hadn't been braided at all, the strands unwound from one another and fell around her shoulders and face.

"I suppose you'd like to know my secret. Legolas would be furious if he knew I'd told you." There was a distinct note of pleasure in her voice at the thought, as though she and Woodland Prince were still the best of friends.

Addie stared enviously at Tauriel's lustrous red hair. "That's just not fair," she muttered jealously.

"Tell me about it," said Signe, sitting down beside her and tugging at a lock of her thin blond bangs. "I'd kill for hair like that."

Kili tried not to reveal his discomfort at the mention of Legolas, but it wasn't easy. "Go ahead," he said, forcing a grin. "Tell us your grand secret. Let me guess: being elven."

Tauriel chuckled. From her ever-present belt pouch, she produced a small, round bottle, half-full of a thick, golden liquid.

"Oil?" asked Addie, incredulous. Tauriel nodded.

"In truth, I have to use it on more than just my hair. My skin's naturally quite dry." The elf shot a glance at Kili, a smile breaking across her pale face, ever so much wider and more open than anything she'd shown him before now. "Oh, don't look like that, Kili. I'm not flawless, no matter what you might think."

It was clear Kili's surprise was somehow doubled by this revelation, and he paused once more in his braiding. "That's Legolas's secret?" He chuckled. "I guess he isn't as perfect as he seems, then, either? Still about as close to perfection as any being could be, though."

"I wish I had dry skin," murmured Addie enviously. Tauriel stowed her bottle away and gave the girl a serious glance.

"Don't. Oily skin is somewhat uncomfortable at times. Dry skin is painful and damaged. Trust me--having dry skin is not fun." With a slight nod, she moved toward the kettle again. "Bain, Signe, would you like some tea?"

Once those who desired a drink had been served, Tauriel folded her legs under her body and sank gracefully to the floor. Not that anything she did was ever less than graceful.

Tilda chose that moment, perfect as it was, to throw herself into the elf's lap and grin up at her. "Tehw us a stowy!" demanded the little girl. Bain retrieved her with an apologetic grimace.

"Til, that's not how you ask. How do princesses ask for stories?"

"May we pwease have a stowy pwetty pwease?" recited the little one with exaggerated politeness.

Kili finished with Addie's braids, and she moved off to find the mirror. He was curious as to what sort of story the elf might tell. As much time as he'd spent with Tauriel these past few days, and off
and on before that in the Elvenking's cells, he knew very little about her past. He hoped she might bring some of it to light, though it was a little disconcerting to think of just how many stories she might tell, having lived hundreds of years already. And how many of those stories might involve a certain elven prince. He turned his chair to face her, leaning forward, propping his chin upon his palms.

Tauriel glanced from one expectant face to the other and let out a low, resigned sigh. "Oh, very well. I suppose it can't hurt. What sort of tale shall it be?"

"A love story!" urged Signe, bouncing slightly. The elf nodded slowly. Shifting her position a little, she sat with her back very straight, and let her eyes close halfway, so a sliver of emerald green glistened from under a fringe of dark eyelashes.

Tauriel's story, rather than coming in the form of a fireside tale, was a song. In the Elvish fashion, she sang them one of the tales of old, swaying slightly to and fro as her voice wove lilting rhymes through the air. In the children's imaginations, battles and magic and sacrifice all came to life, each one as enraptured as the others. Even Bain, who had been disinterested in the concept of listening to a story as though he were still a babe in arms, found himself caught up in the grand adventure of a daring hero, who fought to rescue his betrothed love from the king who had stolen her away.

The subjects of the story were mortal, which was probably an effort on Tauriel's part to make them easier to relate to, but that in no way diminished the beauty of the epic. More than once, one of the girls averted their faces, casually drying tears on their sleeves. Even Kili seemed a little moist around the eyes a time or two. When the tale at last came to an end, the tea was cold, and the silence seemed much deeper than it had been. Not a one stirred for a long minute or two.

Kili was as moved by her singing as he had been the night of Ori's dream. It was truly like being swept up in the story, like seeing it before his eyes. Like being there. He didn't think he could ever grow tired of it.

The awed silence from the children endured a moment longer, and then Tilda piped up. "When I big, I gonna sing just as pwetty as you!" She frowned in concentration, trying to count on her fingers. "When I this many," she held up ten fingers, "will I be big?"

Bain chuckled and cuddled his little sister with a smile. "You bet you will."

Tauriel slowly stood up, her gaze distant, directed toward the window. The lower slopes of the eastern side of the Mountain could just be seen, rising up and out of sight behind the solid planking of the wall. The elf's expression, which had been pensive, became very, very serious.

"Kili." She shot him a glance, and her green gaze was nearly afire with urgency. "The dragon."
Endgame

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

o.O Chapter 50. I think I just had a little mini-heart-attack.

In other news, I want to officially apologize for dropping off the face of the earth. It was very much an impromptu hiatus. My best friend and I are parting ways again tomorrow (pray for peace for her family, if you don't mind--mucho big thanks) so I should be able to get back to a regular updating schedule. No promises, though. Consider any updates between the 17th and the 26th of this month completely bonus (since I'm supposed to be at summer camp, controlling a cabinful of middleschool girls).

**Hiatus: 17th-26th, July 2014.**

The reason I'm not driving right now is because I have an itchy red rash all over my arms, and the camp leaders didn't want me to spread it to the kids. I'll keep you lot updated as much as I can. Enjoy chapter 50!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was indeed the dragon, huge and red, winging toward the Lake. If you want to know why Smaug was so intently bearing down on the floating town, we must go back to earlier in the day, when Billa had disappeared so bravely down the dark tunnel to Smaug's bedchamber.

She was an exceedingly intelligent and courageous hobbit, but one must admit that she didn't always think things all the way through. The smell of sulfur, the heat rising from the stone under her feet, the sound of a massive beast breathing slowly in and out. Billa was surprised when she stumbled down the last step and onto the platform, the wide open space around her echoing with the faintest whispers of her own presence and the breathing of the beast. Darkness pressed in on her from all sides in the absence of the dragon's ruby glow. The halfling hesitated. She knew he had to be here. The hall would be frigid without the dragon's huge body warming it up. But Thorin had sent her to find out what the dragon was up to. How could she report back if she didn't even know where Smaug was? Could he be in the next room? Down the hall?

Straining her eyes in every direction, stretching her senses to the utmost, she still couldn't tell where the dragon was. Was he asleep? An idea struck her. A crazy idea that could possibly get her killed. Or pique Smaug's interest.

Taking a deep breath, the little burglar spoke over the low, constant rumble of the dragon's breathing. "I have delivered your gift, Smaug." She hastily slipped her ring on, wincing as she was reminded of the tear in her knuckle, where she'd jerked it off before. A moment of eerie silence. Then, out of the warm darkness, a familiar voice washed over the halfling, slow and satisfied, like a hot desert wind.
"I trust he was pleased. Or not? Maybe you told him it was a gift, and he spent the night quaking in fear, trying to guess my motives." A rumbling chuckle, like boulders rolling down a mountainside. "And what did he do then? He sent you down here to find out what I was up to, didn't he? To see what scheme I had in mind. Between the two of us, I think I'm enjoying the game... more."

A faint reddish glow, like dying embers, sifted up through one of the dark hills of treasure, accompanied by the slow, subdued ringing of coins and jewels tumbling off. A bit of the dragon's snout, maybe, peeking up from beneath the hoard. He'd buried himself more deeply this time.

"I believe he was... unnerved." Billa eyed the sliver of red she could see between layers of gleaming gold. "He suspects you plan to hunt him down if he leaves the Mountain. It seems to me that a predator such as yourself wouldn't... expend much effort for such mean prey." She watched him, moving cautiously toward the stairs. The outline of the smooth stone steps was barely visible in the dim light, and she wanted escape options if the dragon decided her usefulness had been spent.

Smaug shifted slightly, and more little slivers of light peeked out from beneath the gold. "Oh, I wouldn't make it nearly so easy for him. He isn't worth the breath it would take to make him ash. No. He and all his ilk are nothing more than gnats buzzing about. Annoying, but harmless. I'll kill him eventually. But not until he has a chance to truly suffer. Not until he destroys himself, and becomes something else entirely." Another rumbling chuckle. "Believe you me, it will be worth the wait."

Billa felt a thrill of fear run through her. In the shadow, she misstepped and stumbled badly. Recovering only just before she took a spill down the stairs, the halfling tried to control the pounding of her heart. "It... it doesn't surprise me, I guess. After so many years of heavy sleep, it must be hard for you to... work up the energy to do anything much."

The dragon snorted at this, two acrid plumes that rose, backlit, from the gold, like smoke from a volcanic vent. "And I suppose that's meant to anger me? I have nothing to prove. I was young when I laid low the Mountain King's army. These 60 years make little difference. I am still strong—strong! Clad in iron, every inch of me, and yet I move like the daintiest of birds, agile and quick." Smaug's head rose fully from beneath the wealth now, and reddish light washed over the chamber like a blood-red sun had crested the golden hills. With a little shake, the beast dislodged whatever pieces had clung to his scaly head and neck, and grinned, revealing again teeth as long and sharp as scimitars.

"To kill your precious Oakenshield would be like crushing an ant. It's much too quick for him. I want you to see him fall, little thief. That will be far more interesting for me. It's not a dragon that stands in his way. It's his own weakness. His madness. I need merely pull a thread, and his façade will unravel like an old tapestry."

"He won't." Billa was dismayed to find that her voice was shaking. Think, Billa, THINK. He's trying to get under your skin and make you panic. Use that brain of yours. What could she say to make this Worm reveal his plan? Well, he'd already done that. Arrogant, that's what he was. He believed Thorin would fall to madness, like his father and grandfather.

He won't, thought the hobbit fiercely. I won't let him. If defensive planning was out, it was time for a new tack. Edging carefully away from the stairs again, mind racing, Billa looked down at the massive, scaly head of the half-buried monster.

"Wings that bring hurricanes on the Mountain, breath hotter and deadlier than any forge of Men or Dwarves. I've heard the tales, and surely, O Smaug, even in your youth you were terrible. I've heard tell, though," and here Billa's words took on a sing-song quality that was just as much to anger the dragon as to cover her own fear, "that dragons are not so impossible to slay as you want folk to think. That even you, Smaug the Impenetrable, fear the bite of a Black Arrow."
"Black Arrow?" Smaug's voice dripped with mockery. "Is that what the Lake Men who harbored you said, then? That they'd nearly felled me, the day I burned their pathetic Dale?" The scoff that followed only barely masked the genuine rage beginning to build within the dragon. His front claws crept up through the shifting, clinking metal, and Smaug's great flaming eye was staring at the place where the little burglar stood, unseen, but sensed in every other way. "Perhaps the fools' memory of me has grown dim. That's the way it is with all rule. Show an iota of benevolence, and your subjects imagine you soft. Weak."

The dragon huffed, his great wings unfolding above him, sending showers of ringing wealth off on either side. "Perhaps it's time they were reminded that their king has not changed. Lessons in fire and blood are not soon forgotten. I've left them alone too long."

"Who said the Lake Men had anything to do with it?" Billa's voice broke into a squeak despite her best efforts to control it. Red glow, glittering coin, deafening gold. The hobbit shuffled to the side, hating the feeling of that huge, fiery eye on her, though she knew he couldn't see her. "They've done nothing against you, Smaug. Loosing your wrath on them will prove nothing, other than the fact that you're a conceited, ruthless tyrant with no sense of honor!" Billa was babbling, and she knew it. The memory of her dreams haunted her, and the reality of the scaly death that waited before her was nearly crushing in its immediacy.

Smaug grinned with genuine pleasure. "Done nothing? Didn't they harbor a party intent on slaying me? That you care about them so much is proof enough. But I'll crush their hopes for good, and when I return, I'll hunt the rest of your friends down. One by one. The moment any of the skulking cowards dares to venture outside, which must happen, as the only clear stream in miles runs by the front gate. That's when I'll strike. Like a swift shadow.

"When Oakenshield's party has dwindled to you and him alone... then I'll take him alive." The gleam of pleasure in the fiery eyes intensified as the beast's long snout moved to within a few feet of where Billa stood. His hot, acrid breath washed over her. "I'll keep him alive just long enough for you to see him descend into madness like his forebears. For him to become the monster he truly is. Before I kill you both."

Smaug flicked the claws of one forepaw at her as if to shoo her off. "Go on, little thief. Go and tell your weakling king my move. See if it eases his mind to know."

With a hideous rumble of laughter that reverberated off the chamber walls like thunder over the hills, the dragon turned away, propelling himself with the same, terrifying speed he'd exhibited before toward the smashed doorway at the far end of the hall. His wings, like the winds preceding a gathering storm, swirled the treasure in his wake with a raucous report, and the last Billa heard of the dragon was the shuddering rumor of his furious passage through the ruined interior of Erebor.

Darkness closed around her in the echoing, churning chaos. Silence fell gradually but for the ringing in her ears, and the hobbit only knew that her knees had given out because of the pain shooting up her legs. Laketown. Gone. Doomed to perish in fire and water. Billa couldn't help but feel somewhat responsible for this impending destruction.

"Thorin," she whispered, feeling the tears collecting in her invisible eyes. "Bard was right. The Lake will shine and burn."

Fili was keeping a sharp ear out, just inside the door as Thorin had instructed. When the rumble of Smaug's laughter reached him, the blonde jumped back out into the sunlight. "Uncle!" He pointed toward the tunnel, from whence now came the the whistling rush of wind and the cascade of coins unnumbered.
The silence had barely settled before Dwalin called a warning from the edge of the shelf. "The
dragon is out! Everyone inside!"

Thorin leapt up from where he'd been leaning against the cliff wall, dropping a whetstone and
retaining his blade. "Inside! Now!" He gestured frantically toward the half-open door, though the
command was, perhaps, a bit superfluous considering the terrified speed with which the Company
was already dropping everything and rushing pell-mell for the tunnel. When they were all safely
inside and the heavy door pushed shut, they stood in the darkness, panting, trembling. Listening. A
long, horrible moment passed, and nothing happened. No sound of the beast or his fiery breath
against the cliff wall. Nothing at all.

"He doesn't attack? Why would he give up so easily?" The voice was Nori's, but it might as well
have been anyone's, as that same question was on every mind.

"I don't think he was after us." Thorin seemed to be in some amount of shock. He'd been the one to
heave the door to, and had thus had the last glimpse outside. "The dragon... wasn't headed this way.
He saw us--I'm sure of it--but didn't turn aside." A beat of heavy silence. "He's going to Laketown."

If the Mountain had suddenly split asunder and spewed gold to the very clouds, Fili wouldn't have
noticed. His world had gone suddenly, awfully, dreadfully dark. He moved blindly toward the door,
pushing the others aside. He tried to open it, but there was no catch on the inside.

"No. No, we have to stop him. We have to stop him." The blond wished he could have screamed
and torn out his beard and pounded the stone until it gave way. But where there should have been
unbearable emotion swirling inside, there was only painful emptiness. "Kili." The door refused to
budge. "Please, no. Brother." His hands slid against the stone as he sank to his knees. "Ori."

It would have been easier to bear if Fili had been frantic. His quiet, broken protests tore at Balin's
heart. "Thorin, the only way out is through the front gate. We need to go while he's away." Only
then did the dreadful thought dawn on him. "What about the burglar?"

Thorin turned away silently, taking one of the torches Gloin had just lit and moving with heavy tread
down the tunnel. He didn't care overmuch if anyone followed. One thing alone occupied his
thoughts, and he could scarcely breathe for the tightness in his chest. Something had gone very, very
wrong, and he couldn't understand now why he'd dared to hope it wouldn't end this way. He'd
foreseen this, and still he'd sent Billa back.

*I failed you. I didn't try hard enough to stop you."

When the torchlight shot up to reveal a high, stone ceiling and glinted off a rolling sea of gold, as if a
thousand thousand eyes had opened all at once to stare accusingly at him out of the darkness, he
didn't notice the staggering wealth. It might've been tin for all it moved him. His gaze passed over it
apathetically as the dancing light illumined a fraction of the enormous hall, and an immense sigh
issued. Either she was in hiding, or. *Or* He didn't want to finish that sentence.

"Billa?" There wasn't much hope in his voice, but all the same, he hadn't quite despaired of finding
her.

His voice echoed quietly in the huge hall, a startling change to the absolute silence that had preceded
it. Or the silence had seemed absolute. Billa, kneeling on the stone, hadn't heard the others approach,
her thoughts consumed with the sheer, terrible death that they had unleashed on those that had sought
to help them.

"Thorin?" Her voice was thick with tears, her cheeks dripping with them, and she scrubbed them
Thorin's heart leapt, and he nearly dropped the torch. So she was here. His eyes closed momentarily in a prayer of gratitude, and he moved a step toward where he perceived her to be. "You have your ring on, Billa. I can't see you." His voice caught a little, and he strove to master it. "Are you hurt?"

The halfling's weak laugh drifted from the edge of the platform. She blinked into view as she removed her ring, still having difficulty with the fact that she couldn't stop crying. "I'm not hurt. He didn't even try to touch me. He just said... said that if any of us set foot out of the Mountain, he'd kill you one by one, then force me to watch you go mad before he killed you, too." This summation made the tears fall even thicker and faster than before, and they splashed onto her trousers as she wiped them away desperately.

This display was interrupted as Nori let out a surprised cry. Fili had charged past him and grabbed his torch, face set in lines of fury and grief. Without even a glance for the mass of treasure or the crying halfling he made for the stairs and leapt down them with all speed, skipping three steps at a time in his haste.

"Where are ya goin', lad?" Oin's voice echoed as Thorin's had, but Fili plunged doggedly on, even as his feet hit the gold.

"I have to stop him. Kili and Ori are still there. I won't let them die!"

"Fili! Wait!" Thorin's voice echoed after the blond, but Fili didn't even slow. "You know it's no use! Smaug will finish with Laketown and return before you've made it five miles from Erebor!" Even this didn't dissuade Fili, and Thorin wondered if the young dwarf had heard him at all.

"I'll bring him back." Dwalin sheathed his axe with a dull clunk and plunged intently down the steps.

"Don't go beyond the front gates, Dwalin." Thorin's command was firm, but tinged with something the others couldn't readily place. "If you can't catch him before then... you must let him go." He held out little hope that Dwalin would succeed—not with the lead Fili had, and the madness of grief lending wings to his feet. All the same, if anyone among them could, it would be Dwalin.

The light from Fili's torch was already disappearing into the vast track of gold and shadow when a strangled sort of groan came from the area near Thorin's feet. He was almost surprised to find that Billa hadn't moved, though she was now staring after Fili, her expression stricken.

"He'll be the first," she whispered. "Spirits... what have I done?"

Thorin sank slowly onto his haunches, shaking his head mournfully. "I wonder if I wouldn't have done the same thing at his age." He pulled the devastated halfling into his arms. "Don't blame yourself, Billa. This has always been my quest, and what's happened is on my head. Not yours."

Billa only shook her head in response. She buried her face in his mantle and tried to get herself back under control. There was a very Baggins-ish voice near the back of her mind that whispered "I told you so" in haughty tones. If she'd never come, if she'd stayed in Bag End where she belonged and sent these dwarves on their way as she ought to have, then this terrible burden wouldn't be hers. She would never have seen such death and pain. And she never would have woken the dragon.

I never should have come.

But the idea was followed almost immediately by a much stronger, louder, more Tookish thought.

Then who would have cut them down from the spiders' trees, or broken them out of the Elvenking's
The halfling tightened her grip on Thorin, eyes tightly shut. "I don't regret coming," she told him in a muffled voice. "But I wish we could have saved them."

Dori and Nori, hovering at the top of the stairs and looking after the disappearing light that was Fili, exchanged a troubled glance.

It was a long, exhausting hour trudging through the dark, forsaken halls before they reached the main gates. There, quite as Thorin had expected, sat Dwalin, leaning against the base of the stone doorway, his forehead resting against his drawn up knees. The dwarf king glanced at Balin and shook his head sadly, placing a hand on the hulking dwarf's shoulder. "You gave it all you had, Dwalin. I asked no more than that. Fili's made his own choice." Now the rest of them had to make theirs.

"Alright. Dwalin, you'll lead a party--four or five will do--to Dain in the Iron Hills. Tell him the stone has been found and bid him honor his oath by sending every dwarf he can muster to our aid. You may not make it back in time to help us, but I trust you know Dain is a capable leader and would make a worthy king should I fall here." He spoke quickly, flatly, as though these words issued only from duty and did not touch whatever emotion he may or may not have been feeling. "Take those who are the most fit. The rest of us will stay here and wait for the dragon, distract him as long as we can so you can make it far enough away before he realizes our move."

Dwalin grunted an affirmative and pushed himself to his feet, beginning to organize a group to go with him. Bofur, Dori, Gloin, and Balin were the fittest, but Balin refused to leave the Mountain, and Dwalin wouldn't force him. Nori watched his brother move out of the front gates, following Dwalin with short, mincing steps. They were all losing someone. There wasn't a family in the Company that hadn't been torn apart. Except Billa, who apparently had no family to be torn from. Bifur followed them out the gate, but not very far. The clear stream that had long served the dragon's needs flowed directly out the front gates, dividing the long, sloping causeway into two smooth paths. Bifur would refill their water skins while the others made their way southeast to the Iron Hills.

"Thorin." Billa was looking at him, her eyes dry and red, her expression full of grief. "We're not going to live through this, are we?" There was a defeated sort of tone to the question, as though she had never honestly expected to die.

Thorin glanced at her, face mournful but not completely desolate. Not yet. For someone facing the imminent end of not only his own life, but also that of his remaining male kin, he was remarkably composed. "Perhaps. You will, if I can help it." He turned to Balin. "If you still honor me as king, old friend, you'll follow my next order without question. Take Miss Baggins as far from here as you can. Where you go doesn't matter so long as she's not in danger." He gripped the old dwarf's arm bracingly. "Save her, Balin. Do what I cannot."

"What?" Billa stiffened all over, eyes wide. "No! I can't--I'm not--Thorin, you can't mean that!"

Balin's expression was dark with pain, but he reluctantly nodded.

The halfling cried out as though his nod were a death sentence. "You can't send me away, Thorin! I won't go! Don't make me. Please."

Thorin's face was adamant. Whether his heart was also as firm, though, wasn't immediately clear. "Billa," he said gently, lifting her chin a little, "this is my wish. Don't make me die knowing I've caused the death of everyone in this Company I love. Please. Go with Balin. Remember this time, and remember me. Live, and hold on to what we shared."
Billa gazed back into those fathomless blue eyes, and felt the burning anger and grief in them as though it were her own. Her chest felt tight, and the halfling nearly hated herself as she slowly reached up, pulling him down into one last kiss.

"I'll be back," she whispered, her eyes filling slowly with tears she hadn't known she had left. "This isn't goodbye. It's not. I won't let it be."

Balin gently separated them and steered Billa out onto the causeway, a rucksack over one shoulder. She went, without a look back or a complaint. Bombur sighed heavily as he watched her go. Of the thirteen that had set out together, five now remained in the Mountain. Bifur was just returning with the water, and looking tremendously sad. He had clearly seen Billa and Balin leaving. The quiet dwarf turned a slightly reproachful look on his king.

Thorin acknowledged Bifur's look, nothing more. At the great, ruined gates, he watched the little hobbit lass grow fainter and finally disappear between the hills, knowing full well this would be the last time he saw her. His burglar would be safe. And Balin... old Balin, his faithful friend... he'd be safe, too. All the same, the parting was very bitter. The crushing weight of it settled within him, and he swallowed, turning away. He had only one task now--he and the others who remained. In a way, that made it simpler. They all knew they were little more than a distraction now, bait for the dragon so the others could get away. It was a noble death, one any dwarf would be proud to claim. Didn't make it much easier, though. The dying part.

"Come on." Thorin's voice was decisive, but faint. The voice of someone who had lost everything but his sense of duty. What remained of the Company slipped back into the shadows of the Mountain. They had a dragon to prepare for.

Chapter End Notes

Gotta say, one of the perks to having a coauthor is that even rewriting entire chapters becomes a treat. :) The original version of this chapter was, in comparison, utterly lame and nowhere near the standard set by the first Smaug encounter. After we’d already written about ten more chapters, we agreed that it was lame and went back to rewrite it, and it was just. So. AWESOME.

Loki deserves ALL THE COOKIES.
Behind lay the Mountain. On their left, the river that fed into Long Lake. Billa refused to look back at Laketown, from whence the terrible sounds of destruction issued. The vision her imagination supplied was terrible enough without making it a reality. Balin set a stiff pace, steering north and around the low, black line of Mirkwood. As the halfling looked at that dark, mysterious place, a radical idea formed in her mind.

"Balin, we're going south."

"Pardon?" The old dwarf fixed her with an odd look. They weren't going south. They were going north. Was she addled by grief?

"I mean--we need to go south. Follow the river."

"But that would take us-"

"Into the Woodland Realm." Billa's tone was grim, her face set and determined. "We're going to ask for help."

"Billa, stop. This is madness. We'll only be imprisoned." Balin reached for the hobbit's arm, but she dodged away from him, southward.

"You can run away and give up if you like, Balin. I'm going to see Thranduil. Maybe he can still be redeemed, and the others saved. I'm not giving up."

Balin watched the little burglar as she turned her back on him, fully prepared to go on alone. He felt a surge of admiration, and was reminded powerfully of a young prince with naught but an oaken branch. He followed her, praying to Mahal that this wouldn't be the last time he did so.

The dragon was bearing down on Laketown, and Tauriel's keen eyes could distinguish the tongues of flame licking along his jaws, the twin streams of black smoke streaking from between his long, sharp teeth. Above them, in the Master's bell tower, someone started to sound the alarm.

"Kili, you and Ori keep the children together. Bain, there are serviceable weapons in the corner, over there. Stay close to me, and keep your eyes on the group. I'll be watching the dragon. We're getting to shore." The elf was a flurry of activity, stringing her bow, grabbing her quiver, checking her weapons, grabbing the bag she'd had perpetually packed since she'd arrived--this, she handed to Ori. She pushed Kili's cane into his hand, made sure both males were armed, and ushered them all out the door.
The dragon's roar shook the floorboards under their feet, and dust fell from the ceiling above them. The frightened little creatures that lived out of sight squeaked and scratched and scrabbled. Many tiny, scurrying feet were rapidly making their way toward the nearest exits.

Once they were in the street, Bain grabbed Tauriel's arm. "We're not leaving without Da'."

"We have no choice, Bain," Kili shouted over the din. "He can make it out on his own. We have to get your sisters out of here."

Bain hesitated at this, then shook his head. "No. You take the girls. Da' won't leave. He'll stay and fight. I have to find him."

There was a shuddering boom as the first of the dragon's fiery breaths torched the roof of a house on the far side of the city. The screams and shouts of the townsfolk began to fall loudly on their ears. Kili sighed, seeing the fierce determination in the boy's eyes. "Fine. Bain, you and I will find your father. Tauriel," he glanced at the elf, "I think you'll have to manage without me. Get them out of here. We'll find Bard and... drag him to shore if we have to."

Tauriel hesitated, her internal conflict clear on her face. She didn't want to let Kili out of her sight, but she saw the wisdom of him going with Bain. Kili had his bow, and a knife at his hip, but with that cane....

"Alright. May the Light of the Valar protect you, mellon nin."

Touching his shoulder briefly, she turned quickly to Ori and the girls. Tilda was in Signe's arms now, and looked very frightened, crying silently into the girl's shoulder. "Let's go. Addie, take the lead. Ori, stay close." With an arrow on the string, Tauriel ushered them hurriedly forward. She would have to come back for Kili once the girls were safely ashore.

The town was in chaos. The walkway under their feet shuddered from the combined assault of a hundred panicked feet and the raging of dragonfire. Kili hobbled after Bain, wincing in pain as his leg twinged at its sudden overexertion. A lot of use he'd be against the dragon--that huge, dark, horrifying shape darkening the sky above them as surely as it had darkened his thoughts ever since he'd first heard the tale of Erebor's fall. Smaug was strafing the rooftops with bright orange flames, and what few men weren't fleeing for their lives were gathering buckets and trying to put out the fires, to limited success.

"Where would he be, Bain? Would he have gone for his bow?" Kili strove to keep his tone even, to distract himself from the whirlwind of thoughts threatening to overwhelm his focus. If Smaug had come here... Thorin had not been able to slay him. The odds were good the Company was gone. Dead. This, he couldn't entertain. Not now, at least. Right now, he had to do what he could to save these people from what his uncle had done.

Bain scanned the boardwalks feverishly. The main path was under the heaviest threat, being the widest and most full of people. "The house," he said shortly, and dodged down a side street. "He told me a few days ago--he has the last Black Arrow. It's at the house." The boy grit his teeth against a wave of frustration. Most of the people, even the men, were too panicked to think, running stupidly every which way. Some to the bridge, others to the boats, still others from one house to the next, looking for a place to hide. Where was their pride, their courage? Where was the warrior spirit of their fathers? In that moment, Bain hated them.

Kili nodded. "Alright. Let's go. If we're not out of here in a few minutes, we'll go down with the town." They moved swiftly through the crowded rows of houses--many already aflame--until they finally turned a corner and reached the flight of stairs leading up to Bard's house. Bain pulled up short, a dumbfounded look on his face. There was nothing at the top of the stairs. The entire second
floor of the structure had been reduced to a few charred timbers, still glowing orange, jutting upward at the sky.

Kili put a hand on the boy's shoulder. "I'm sure he's fine, Bain. Your father knows what he's doing. He probably took the arrow already and headed for the windlance."

Bain nodded dumbly, turning away from the building that had been his home for as long as he could remember. Well... at least no one had been in it. He hoped. Licking his lips, he nodded again.

"The windlance. It's... above Town Hall, across the square from the Master's house, where you were staying." Bain's voice grew stronger as he spoke. He gripped his spear a little tighter and tilted his face up, hatred for the great beast boiling in his gut. Leading Kili back through the flaming town was harder. There were fewer people, but the folk that were left seemed all but mad with fear and pain.

Tauriel fired three arrows in quick succession as the dragon banked overhead. One struck the wing joint and stayed there. The other two clattered harmlessly off of gem-hard scales where there ought to have been weak points. Addie was being sick into the lake. The owner of the little boat they'd found was sitting in the bow, slumped over the gunwale with her hands trailing in the water. The dead woman had sustained nasty burns, and a shard of smoldering wood protruded from her chest. Tauriel heaved her over the edge and did her best to ignore the pool of blood in the bottom of the boat.

"Get in. Quickly."

Signe had Tilda in her lap, cradling her against her chest and gazing upward fearfully. Ori was too short to use the oars, and Addie was still shaking, staring at her own scarlet reflection. Tauriel set her bow across her knees and grasped the oars. She knew relatively little about watercraft, but it was enough. With a strength borne of fear, the elf shoved their little boat away from the dock, digging the oars into the water and propelling them along at a decent speed, down the channel, out into the open water, toward the shore. Her shoulders burned and her back ached, but they were away from the acrid smell of things burning that ought not.

Smaug, sweeping over the town on strong wings, caught the scent of dwarf. An outrage such as he had never known before rose in his gullet, and the dragon let out an ear-splitting shriek. Robbing him hadn't been enough. Plotting to kill him, oh no. Now they had the audacity to remain in his glorious shadow, when no dwarf had ever deserved to live at all. He started to bank, to turn 'round, but caught the scent again--from a little boat, halfway to shore. Smaug turned and dove, folding his wings, filling his throat sack with living fire. He would burn them all.

Kili and Bain reached the hall, panting, the townsfolk's panic reflected in their eyes. "There he is!" Kili pointed up at the roof. Sure enough, silhouetted against the roiling sea of orange and angry red, beneath the black, smoke-choked sky, was Bard. It could be no one else. He stood, aiming the windlance, focusing. He had only one shot--if he failed to fell the beast, as Girion had... Laketown and its people would be as Dale in the days to come. A desolation. Little more than a ruin sunk beneath the lake. The arrow's point moved slowly left in the windlance, following the dragon's flight.

Kili could see him now as his long, massive body, glinting golden in the firelight, dove ever lower toward the dark water, underbelly glowing like live embers. The young dwarf realized what was happening with a rush of horror. "The children," he whispered, knowing full well there was absolutely nothing he could do.

Bain looked at him uncomprehendingly, then up at his father in the tower, then at the dragon. And suddenly, he understood. The terrible truth struck like a lightning bolt. "Addie. Tilda." Without
another word, he took off at a dead run.

Bard didn't see his son or the dwarf in the square below. With flames licking up the length of the tower, he knew he didn't have much time left. He sent up a prayer as the dragon let out a blistering roar and a mouthful of flame, swooped--there. Bard let the Arrow fly. *Fly straight and fly true, Black Arrow, or we all may suffer Girion's fate.*

In the little boat, bobbing erratically on the turbulent water, fear descended with the dragon as it stooped on them. Tauriel had time for only one thing--action. Dropping her bow, she threw herself from the stern of the dinghy to the fore, grabbing Ori and Addie, who were closest, and leaping head-first into the water. And not a moment too soon. Above them, the surface of the water exploded, boiling and churning angrily. The heat traveled only a short distance in the icy water, but it was enough. All three were briefly, but thoroughly burned. More like the burns one might get from hot tea than the inferno of dragonfire. They surfaced, spluttering and choking, as Smaug rose into the air again.

"TILDA! SIGNE!" Addie thrashed desperately at the water. Above them, a terrible scream rent the air. Tauriel, who had been watching the dragon, saw his flight stutter, slow, then turn into a freefall.

No time. There was no time.

With all the strength she could muster, she threw Ori out of the way. The dwarf lass actually left the water for a moment. Tauriel wrapped her body around the struggling Addie and forced her down, under the water.

Smaug hit the lake in a confusion of heat and thrashing limbs and strangled roaring. Blood pouring from the open wound in his breast stained the lakewater crimson, which his rapidly cooling fire turned almost immediately to red mist. And though the dragon was dying, he was not yet dead. Huge claws and wicked teeth and long blackened tail-spikes still posed a significant threat as Smaug fought against the thrice-cursed water. It was relatively shallow here, and though no human or elf could stand, a dragon could. In his wild struggling, Smaug floundered toward the shore.

"I am king!" he snarled, even as the fire faded from his eyes.

Tauriel did her best to avoid the powerful limbs and sharp claws and teeth and spikes, but an elf could only do so much. One hind paw struck them, driving her and her panicked charge to the bottom of the lake. The elf felt searing pain, but couldn't tell from whence it came. The boiling, frothy water confused and dazzled her. Was this how it was to end? No. Of course not. Tauriel forced herself to the surface. Addie was nearly senseless--she must have taken a blow when they hit the lake's bottom. There was no way she would be able drag the girl to shore. But she had to try.

Through the red mist, as Kili struggled along at as fast a pace as his leg would allow, he heard splashing and wailing. Screams from the ruined town behind him only confused things more. The air was rank with smoke and blood.

"Unca Keekee?" A small, blurry shape up ahead pulled him up short, gasping for breath.

"Tilda?" What was she doing here? Wasn't she supposed to be with Tauriel?

"Unca Keekee, it's dark. I'm scayurd."

He limped forward, trying to suppress the fear that seared his insides like fire. Where was Tauriel? Where was Ori? But when he got closer, the shape dissolved. There was no sign of the little girl. In a
minute, he heard her voice again, still before him, just out of reach, just out of sight.

"Scayurd, Keekee. Wanna see Da'."

He sped up, a prickle of dread creeping down his spine. "I'll take you to him, little one. Just come here. I'll keep you safe." Everything was covered with a thin layer of red. Sticky, dripping--it smelled like death and clung to his skin and hair and clothes, the boards beneath his feet slick with it.

"Tella Bain I wuv him."

"No, Tilda... please."

But there was no answer. A moment later, Kili plunged off the broken edge of the bridge and into the water, which was now strangely lukewarm. Ahead, he could hear the slow, tired splashing of an exhausted swimmer. Tilda. It had to be. Kili swam toward the sound, finding his leg oddly soothed by the water. But it wasn't Tilda. It was Tauriel. The water around her was the color of a fine garnet, and her face was deathly pale.

Perhaps it was adrenaline. Perhaps it was fear. Perhaps it was some enigmatic affection for the beautiful elf that Kili didn't dare think too deeply about. Whatever the case, the young dwarf found new strength he hadn't known he had. Swimming hard for Tauriel, he caught her exhausted form about the shoulders.

"Hang on to my belt," he gasped, finding himself unable to swim properly without the use of his arms. He could see now that she was holding up the unconscious Addie, which was slowing her down even further.

The huge carcass of Smaug the Dragon was now still, though steam still issued in thick billows from about his scaly form as it settled into the deep mud of the lake bed. On shore, he could see Ori, keeping well away from the dragon's maw as she waved them over. Kili's heart sank into his boots, just as his boots sank into the mud. Where were Tilda and Signe? But before long, he could see Ori's tear-streaked face, and the dreadful truth locked claws around his grief-stricken mind.

The Company.

Uncle Thorin.

Balin.

Fili.

Gone.

And he couldn't save even those few that he'd been asked to watch. Little Tilda, dancing like a princess with braids in her hair. Kili almost couldn't make it to shore. Ori splashed into the shallows to meet him, and took Addie from Tauriel, who couldn't seem to walk properly.

It wasn't until then that he saw the ragged gash across the elf's arched back. *Oh, Mahal. Please don't let me lose her, too.*

Chapter End Notes
Yes, we are absolutely terrible people. No, we won't apologize for it. :D Because the drama is totally worth it.
Chapter Notes

I couldn't think of a way to answer all your loverly comments without repeating myself, so I'll answer them all at once right here.

Yes. We are horrible, terrible, evil people, who intentionally introduced an adorable little five-year-old girl for the express purpose of letting Smaug kill her. It was important for the gravitas of the story for you as readers (and for us as authors) to feel the depth of loss that the Second Desolation is for the folk of Laketown. It's easily skimmed over, but hundreds of people died in the dragon's attack, and Tilda and Signe were the lucky ones. They didn't suffer. But there are those among us who don't know what it is to lose a home, let alone a family member, and we thought the emotional impact of a character death ("on-screen," so to speak) was more important than our (or your) sanity.

Forgive us if you will. We can't genuinely apologize, though. The character development is worth it.

Many of the other survivors had been wounded, and though the dragon was clearly dead, none seemed particularly keen on lingering near the shore, despite the strain it put on them to stagger or support their fellows further inland.

Ori's eyes were wide, her breath issuing in short gasps. Addie was heavy, bigger than the female dwarf, and dead weight. But terror and panic lent her a mad strength, and she managed to haul the unconscious girl to shore. Her burns smarted, but she hardly noticed. She knew she would notice them aplenty after the fear wore off. Kili looked exhausted and desolate, barely holding together.

"Into the... grass," he panted, allowing the much taller elf to lean full on his back. Jolts of fiery pain were shooting through his leg, but he didn't care. Still, it didn't make things any easier. Ori followed him, half-dragging, half-carrying Addie to the drier grass Kili had indicated further inland. Kili helped Tauriel settle into the grass on her stomach, staring numbly at her injured back, afraid to do more than dab at the blood. He was no healer.

"Tauriel, I..." he choked out, clinging to what little of his composure remained. "I... what do I do? Tell me what to do. You're the healer." Cuts and bruises he could handle, but this was a far different thing—bleeding fiercely, her dress torn such that he could see her flesh where it had been sliced through to reveal muscle and bone. This he hadn't the faintest idea how to treat.
"How... how bad... is it?" Tauriel was clinging to consciousness. The pain was making everything sort of fuzzy. "Kili... I... I'm sorry."

Kili shook his head fiercely. "No, don't you dare talk like that, Tauriel. You're not leaving me, too." He leaned down and to the side so he could look into her pain-filled gaze. What he saw there was enough almost to make him wish he hadn't. He swallowed, feeling quite as though his entire world had fallen to pieces. "Stay with me. Please. You can't give up, Tauriel. Tell me what I need to do."

Tauriel's reaction to Kili's plea was, perhaps, less surprising than it seemed. Closing her eyes and clenching her jaw, she took on a very determined expression. "That bad?" she asked faintly. "My pouch. Needle and thread. Close the wounds. Stop the bleeding." Her voice was unsteady, and she spoke in short, choppy sentences. "Make sure... no debris. Might infect." She was stopped by shallow, tight coughs that made her shudder and let out soft, pained noises.

Kili cringed. As desperate as he was to help, he was afraid. Suturing was very technical work. He'd seen Oin do it, but he'd mostly averted his eyes. It made him queasy. He didn't want to hurt her, or make her condition even worse. But... what choice did he have? He glanced about. The other refugees had a haunted, traumatized look about them, and were moving off further inland. Certainly none of them would be any help. Trading a look with a trembling, shocked-looking Ori, he swallowed, and finally reached for the elf's pouch.

The process was, in a word, horrifying. Especially for someone unused to the nauseating feeling of trying to pierce tough skin with a needle, held with trembling fingers, no less. It took a surprising amount of strength, and more than once he winced and briefly shut his eyes, but in the end, the rift had been sutured back together. Panting lightly, sweat pouring down his smoke-blackened face and leaving a pattern of lines, Kili cut the thread with his teeth. Pray Mahal I did it right.

As Kili tended to Tauriel, Ori rested Addie's head gently in a tuft of grass, leaning down over her chest. The heartbeat was there, but very sluggish. The girl was a horror, her dress and hair singed, her face red, skin beginning to swell and blister. Ori tried not to think about her own burns, as painful as they were--there'd be time for that later. Jumping in the icy water had helped, of course, but damage had still been done. The girls who had been left behind, Ori tried even harder to forget. That was a pain far worse than any burn could ever be. She'd never really hated the dragon before, and she knew it was senseless to hate the dead, but this... this made her want to.

Suddenly, Addie began to cough and splutter. She rolled over and gagged, a good amount of water gushing from her mouth. It was painful to watch. Even after her lungs were clear, she continued to cough and gag, vomiting more lake water onto the grass. When at last her body had evicted the invasive liquid, Addie collapsed limply, his breathing labored. If there was anything going through the girl's mind, she wasn't letting on.

Ori released the breath she'd been holding, comforting the sobbing, shaking Addie. The girl was disoriented, her eyes open but seeming to see nothing. Ori dabbed at the girl's dress, soaking up some of the lake water she'd vomited. She didn't seem to know what else to do.

Kili collapsed beside the elf, all his strength gone. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

Tauriel's mind was chaos at best. The greater part of her concentration had been on remembering to breathe, and not screaming when the pain peaked with each tug of the thread. Now that things were settling, she felt an incredibly unpleasant heaving sensation in her stomach, and twitching, juddering cold setting in as her body registered anemia through the shock of trauma. She knew in some distant corner of her mind that she was barely coherent, but the need to guide and protect her friends was stronger than the pain.
Shaking all over, feeling sick and weak and fighting the searing pain in her back, the elf rolled on to her side, unable to keep from giving voice to the all-consuming hurt. On her side now, she lay still for a moment, breathing hard. "Ori... bi... bui.. fire. Please." She clench her hands into fists, but could barely feel her nails against her palms. Never before had she felt so weak and helpless. Never before had she felt such overwhelming, agonizing, fiery pain. She wished Legolas were here. She wished she had some athelas. She wished a hundred things that were dismissed one at a time from her practical, sluggish mind. Legolas wasn't here. She didn't have her normal supplies. She didn't even have her bow, as that had been incinerated along with the boat and their lost companions. They had each other, and that was just about it. So that was what they would work with.

Kili, shaking, forced himself up again, swaying weakly. "There's some... flint in her pouch. Felt them." He reached toward the small, waterlogged bag at her side, then hesitated, noticing the blood encrusting his fingers. He realized his concern was foolish--as if she'd care about such things at this point. At least, he thought vaguely, the red mist (dragon's blood, he realized with a grimace) had been washed off in the lake. With his remaining strength, he retrieved the flints and tossed them to Ori, sinking to the ground again with a light moan. He'd done all he could for now.

Ori picked the little grey stones up, looking dubious, holding them out in front of her as if they were some kind of squirming lizard. She'd seen the men starting fires, of course. It was just... she'd never started one herself. Swallowing anxiously, she began scooping together some of the drier grass and twigs from the nearby locust trees, heaping them somewhat haphazardly together. "Right," she said, positioning one flint at the base of the pile. She began to strike the stones together, rather clumsily. She scraped her fingers and winced, but kept going.

Finally, she hit the stones in such a way that tiny sparks began to shower into the dry material, glowing an instant, then disappearing. After ten cold, agonizing minutes, she was rewarded with a tenuous tongue of flame that she nurtured into a larger fire. Frantic with relief, Ori began staggering about the area, gathering more dry grass and twigs and adding them to the blaze. Soon, it was crackling hungrily, warming the surrounding air. The ruddy-haired female helped Addie move a little closer, draping her in the half-burned scarf she'd been wearing. Next, she assisted Tauriel in crawling within the golden glow of the fire, and Kili managed to make it on his own.

"We need... help," he mumbled, rallying a little. "I wonder if anything's left of the town." At this, Addie released a little sob, and he immediately regretted his words. To her, it had been more than a town. It--and the people therein she'd loved--had been all she'd ever known.

Addie turned red, swollen eyes on Kili, a devastated look stamped semi-permanently on her face. "Bain." Where was her brother? Was he dead, too? What about her father? Was she the only one left? Would she be alone in the world, now that the dragon had finally been killed? And who had killed it? A hundred questions buzzed in her frazzled brain, and none of them were willing to condense into coherent words for her.

Kili glanced at Addie sadly, the very sight of her burned, grieving face a reminder of the probability he'd been trying to forget--that the others of the Company were gone, too. He turned to look back over the dark water, past the huge, twisted form of the dead dragon, surrounded by floating chunks of black, charred wood, and the floating bodies of some of the less fortunate townsfolk. In the distance could be seen little more than an orange glow through the thick mist, where the city should have been. The fires had spread. They'd not been able to control them in time. Kili swallowed, turning back to Addie.

"Bain and I were at the town hall.... Bard was aiming the windlance for the beast. He ran for the water, maybe trying to get to you. That was the last time I saw him." As a sob shook Addie's body, Kili placed a hand on her bare arm, gently, trying not to aggravate her burned skin. "He's a brave,
clever boy, Addie. I wouldn't count him out just yet.” He had neither the confidence nor the faith to support his words, though, and they ended up ringing hollow.

As neither Tauriel nor Kili were in in condition to be walking anywhere, and Addie was too grief-stricken to do much more than hug herself and cry, and Ori was busy making sure the fire didn't go out, in spite of how exhausted she was, they stayed on the lake shore, just barely out of reach of the water. Tauriel slept fitfully, groaning in pain every time she moved at all. The deep gash on her back wept around Kili's clumsy stitches, but it no longer bled freely, which was a distinct improvement. During her brief periods of lucid consciousness, she gave quiet instructions to Kili and Ori on treating their burns with what limited supplies they had at their disposal.

The air grew chill as the sun slowly descended behind the distant black smudge that was Mirkwood. As darkness fell around them, the fire became their first priority, and by then, they were utterly alone on the quiet bank. The house fires in Laketown glowed dully through the clinging mist (which was, thankfully, no longer red) as they burned, smoldered, and eventually died. Hours slipped by with no sound but the gentle lapping of the water against Smaug's cold body. It must have been near the fourth watch of the night when Kili and Tauriel were both roused by the unsteady, exhausted footfalls of someone approaching. The elf tensed, which she immediately regretted, and her dwarven friend glanced at Ori and Addie, who were huddled together and sleeping on the opposite side of the fire. It wasn't likely to be a threat, but still... if anything else were to happen to them....

A soot-blackened figure with a spear stumbled out of the darkness. "Addie? Tilda?" the figure croaked, voice hoarse from shouting and inhaling smoke. "Signe?"

Kili sat up. "Bain? Is that you?" When the boy acknowledged, Kili's heart was washed with relief. "Addie's here, Bain. She's going to be alright. Where's your father? Did you... did he make it?" The young dwarf was almost afraid to hear the answer. The odds were very much against the bargeman surviving. Being the noble soul he was, he would no doubt have gone back into the thick of the flames to save what people he could, at whatever cost. Further, Kili knew Bard had seen Smaug strafing the refugees. It was clear, even as he'd made his fatal shot, that he believed his children were among the dead. He would have had little reason to save his own life.

Bain hesitated, a look of shame crossing his face. He sat beside his sister as though his legs simply weren't strong enough to hold him up anymore.

"I... haven't seen Da'. Not since-" he paused and swallowed, fear and grief warring in his face, "not since we saw him up the tower."

Addie woke partially at the sound of her brother's voice. Rather than a joyful exclamation, or more tears, she gave a soft moan and shifted so her cheek pressed against his leg, eyes squeezed shut. "Don't leave me alone," she whispered, barely loud enough to be heard. Bain pulled her into his lap and hugged her tightly. The two sat still, holding one another as Addie slowly woke up and realized that it was truly her brother, that he was alive and at least mostly unhurt.

"In the morning," murmured Tauriel, eyes glowing faintly in the firelight, "someone will need to go out into what's left of the town and scavenge supplies. We won't last long without blankets, weapons, and food."

Bain twitched. "You don't mean that. We... we can't go back. Not now."

"We have to," said the elf evenly.

Ori glanced about at this, wondering what had become of the other refugees who'd been too afraid to linger near the shore. There was a slight, orangey glow in the distance, bright against the dark
treeline, a pinpoint of light that shifted a little the more she watched it. "Will they come back? The others? Are they going to try to get help from the Elvenking?"

"It's possible they might go to Thranduil," said Tauriel softly, shifting with a sharp wince. "But... only if they have someone to lead them, I think. Very few of the bargemen know the way to the palace."

"They're scared," Bain whispered. "They've been scared for ages. Da' says-" he hesitated, looking pained at the thought of his father, but plowed on anyway, "Da' said that there were folk talking about leaving even before you lot showed up."

Addie was nearly asleep, still half lying across her brother's lap. Bain sighed. "Look... we'll see about it in the morning. We should try to sleep." The operative word was clearly try. Bain's gaze shifted to the dead dragon, just visible as a lumpy outline in the shallows. He mouthed "Tilda" and "Signe," and a couple tears traced new tracks through the greasy black soot that coated his face. He didn't have the courage to ask about them... but in a way, he didn't need to. He knew Addie would have found them, if it was within her power.
The world under the trees was just as stifling as Billa remembered. Luckily, the influence of the deep shade under the ancient, webbed boughs extended no further than the darkness itself, and as long as they stayed beside the river, it was fairly easy to avoid getting lost like they had before. The air near the water was cleaner, too, and brighter. As it was, the hobbit spotted the elven guards before they were close enough to speak, and stopped accordingly, putting out a hand to steady Balin, who was as unhappy about this as he had been when she'd first brought it up. Ignoring her friend's soft protests for the most part, she lifted her empty hands to show the elves that she was unarmed and unwilling to fight.

"We need to speak with Thranduil. Can you take us to him?"

The two guards lowered their bows slightly, trading mystified looks.

"What business have you with the Elvenking?" asked one suspiciously.

"We have come to request his aid."

The elves swapped incredulous glances this time, and the one that had spoken relaxed his bowstring with a shake of his head.

"Dwarves." This seemed to be a confirmation of insanity, as far as the guard was concerned.

"Actually," said Billa with a polite smile, "I'm a hobbit."

This seemed to make little difference to the elves. They relieved Billa and Balin of their weapons and supplies, and escorted them along a nigh invisible path, through a small door, along many hallways, and into a place Billa recognized as the throne room. One of the guards moved forward swiftly and announced to his king the presence of the prisoners, and their desire to speak with him.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Billa," Balin muttered out the corner of his mouth. The hobbit flashed him a confident smile.
"You worry too much."

The Elvenking was ensconced in his throne, the massive antlers spiking out on either side above his golden head lending him a wild, fearsome aspect. His legs were crossed, and he looked very poised and comfortable, his long, pale fingers resting along the carved arms of his seat, the barest hint of a curious gleam in his cerulean eyes. If he was surprised, though, he didn't show it.

"Well, well," he said, his cadence leisurely, "to what do I owe this pleasure?" He appreciated the dubious look the old one gave the halfling. It was clear he had come under duress. To return to the place where he had been imprisoned not long ago showed great courage... or foolishness, as the case ever seemed to be.

The little one, though. She interested the Elvenking, and he leaned forward a bit so he might better survey her. He had not seen her before. He would have remembered it if he had. She was quite the prettiest dwarf he'd ever seen, and unlike many of the others, could never have been mistaken for a male, even in as oversized and masculine of clothes as she wore. "Come now. I'm intrigued. Why came you here again, dwarf? And who is your dainty companion?"

Balin stepped forward, his expression distinctly uncomfortable. "Your Majesty, we came only to-

"No, Balin. Let me speak." Billa put a hand on the dwarf's chest, and he stopped as though she'd pushed a button to silence him. The halfling trotted forward, slipping past the alarmed guards to stand boldly before Thranduil, meeting his gaze without fear. The armored elves glanced at their king, seeking instruction. She was hardly big enough to be a real threat, but her quickness seemed to unnerv them. She didn't move like a dwarf.

"His 'dainty companion' is a hobbit," Billa informed the Elvenking, her voice strong and carrying, "a halfling, one of the Shirefolk. It was this 'dainty companion' that wandered your halls unseen while you held Thorin Oakenshield and his Company in your dungeons, and I'm afraid that I may have helped myself to your larders. You have my deepest apologies, sir, but that's not why we're here."

She paused and inhaled, as though bracing herself for what she was about to say. The guards were even more unsettled now than they had been before.

"The dragon is awake. I... unwisely provoked him, and as we entered the Woodland Realm, he was laying waste to Laketown. Thorin and a fraction of his Company are inside the Mountain, and are likely to perish if someone doesn't help them soon." Billa's voice seemed a little less steady now, though she stood as straight as ever. "I have come, Thranduil Elvenking, to request--to beg for your help. I know there is enmity between the two of you but... but please... if you don't help him... Thorin will die. Please help him." Though there were no tears in her hazel eyes, the halfling's voice had a thickness about it that told of unspoken devotion.

Thranduil had stiffened a little at her revelation that she'd been the one haunting his halls unseen. But this news about the dragon drove such discomfiture from his mind for a moment. He shook his fair head, distinct horror eclipsing his previous composure. "I knew this could only end so," he said gravely. "Did I not tell the fool he would do better to remain in my dungeons than to continue in his mad venture? To drag all his followers with him to disaster." He sighed heavily, brow furrowed. Then his leaf-crowned head jerked upright. He leapt from his throne, turning to the nearest of the guards.

"Assemble the army. Every warrior we have, down to the newest trainees. We leave within the hour." The guard saluted and moved quickly from the room. Thranduil turned back to Billa. "Not for your sake, nor that of Thorin the Fool, do I do this. I risk my kin for the friendship of these good people whom he has wronged, whose lives he has endangered, and whose fates he may well already have sealed. Whatever you are, halfling, you have allied yourself with creatures who care no more
for the lives of others than they did in days of yore. I'm surprised they haven't sacrificed you yet. You are nothing to them but a pawn."

The hobbit's expression gradually shifted from pleading, to surprised, to irritated, then finally to furious. The elf was just as arrogant as Thorin, and even worse at pinning the blame. "Such words mean no more coming from you than they did coming from the dragon," she said in a tone of barely restrained anger. "Thorin tried to stop me, if you must know-"

"Miss Baggins," Balin said warningly, looking concerned.

"No, Balin." Billa turned her wrath on the dwarf, who flinched slightly. "He strikes at the injured and grieved with no thought for where the real fault lies." The halfling rounded on the Elvenking, tipping her head back to look into his face, not seeming at all intimidated by his stature for the moment.

"Thorin did his best to stop me doing precisely what I did--so if you're going to lay blame, do it accurately. I was the one that entered the dragon's bedchamber, I was the one that woke him, I was the one that took the Arkenstone, and it was me, not Thorin, that roused that dragon's wrath and nearly got every one of them killed."

She was shaking with anger, her voice gradually climbing in pitch and volume. She wasn't screaming, not yet, but Thranduil had clearly crossed a line. "You know, I could understand when Smaug was the one telling me that my friends care nothing for me, that I was a pawn, disposable, that they intended me to die. I know he's evil. I know he wants to create as much hatred and fear in the world as possible--but you? You, who call yourself a king? You, of the fair folk? You, Thranduil, who swore your friendship to a dwarf king, who joined in an alliance with men, who so carefully guard and love your kin? You're not a dragon. So stop acting like one." Snarling these last words, Billa turned on her hairy heel and marched back to Balin, who gave the Elvenking a startled, uneasy glance.

Thranduil seemed more amused than offended. The corners of his mouth quirked up a little, but he'd soon reclaimed his regal, impassive bearing. "Fierce little thing, aren't you?" he said, not completely patronizingly. "And very, very loyal. So loyal to a king not your own. But he's more than that, isn't he? I haven't lived all these years to miss such subtle nuances. How ardently you defend your lover's honor." He smirked when she flushed a little, pleased by her tacit admission.

"No fear, little halfling. I'll save him if I can. How could I pass up such an excellent 'I told you so' opportunity? You may have woken the dragon, but as I said, you're a pawn. What else were you there for if not to retrieve the Arkenstone, an act that could only have ended the way it did? Even if he hadn't sent you, he would have sent another, achieving a similar outcome. The errand was a fool's one, no matter who carried it out. In a battle, soldiers are not at fault for the orders they receive."

Billa's cheeks were very warm, and her eyes were very wet. The need to change the subject was overpowering. "The dragon gave it to me. The Arkenstone. Let me leave with it. He didn't get angry until I went back, next day." Why she said it was a mystery, but she felt, somehow, that it needed to be said.

Now Thranduil looked surprised. "Gave it to you?" He took a step down from his dais, clasping his hands behind him. "I'd accuse you of lying, but I see truth in your face. Tell me more. Why would the dragon let you leave with it? What was he playing at?" Such an act could only be one of craft--there was no question about that in the Elvenking's mind. But craft of what sort? Did Smaug not know that Thorin's intent was to gain the loyalty of the Seven Armies? Had he lost whatever fear he might have had of military might in his long, slow, arrogant sleep?
"I don't know! It doesn't make any sense-" As Thranduil moved closer, the halfling fell silent, watching his face.

The Elvenking leaned down a little to meet Billa's gaze more on her level. "And the next day? You had the stone. Why did you not simply leave?"

Billa felt her already hot face get a little hotter. "We were planning on leaving, but we didn't want to set out without knowing what Smaug was up to. Fili wanted to go, but I said it was stupid for any of the dwarves to go down there... so I went back. But he was hiding. I didn't see him until it was too late."

"We thought it unwise to cross the open country between the Mountain and the Lake if the dragon was already outside the Mountain and hunting for us," offered Balin helpfully. Billa shot him a grateful look, and the old dwarf put a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Thranduil nodded, pursing his lips thoughtfully. His gaze turned from Balin to Billa again. "I hope you're not as flustered when you're explaining to the Lake Men just why their city is burning. Dragons are not dumb brutes that you can trifle with them so. Any creature of sense knows that. If you thought you could outwit him, or hide from him... I wonder at your hubris." He clapped his hands briskly, and a servant entered, bowing. "My armor. Be quick about it."

A moment later, Billa and Balin watched as the Elvenking donned his shining, silver plate armor. It was clear he'd not had cause to wear it for some few hundred years now, but the metal's luster had not faded. By some elven magic with which it was imbued, it appeared newly forged, without the slightest bit of tarnish, from pauldrons to greaves. Once he'd finished, looking every bit an elf king sprung from a bygone age, he retrieved his long, curved sword from a stanchion near the throne, sliding the scabbard into the leather frog at his belt.

He turned to the servant again. "Find out how much longer it will be. To tarry here even a half hour more may be disastrous." The servant backed away, bowing. "And see that our guests are given food and drink ere we depart. They have not the vigor of the Eldar that they can march here from the Mountain and back again without sustenance."

A bare minute after the servant had gone, a female servant bustled in with a silver tray. "Venison, bread, and water," she pronounced, misreading the dwarf and halfling's dubious glance at her.

Billa exchanged a look with her friend, and the dwarf shrugged slightly. He thanked the elf politely and took the cups from their glossy silver bearing, handing one to Billa. The hobbit accepted it, but a moment later, she sank weakly to the floor, her short legs folding under her, and so depositing her with a soft thump near Balin's feet.

"Billa? Are you alright?" Balin's tone was of utmost concern.

"No, I'm not alright. How could I be?" The halfling seemed to be having trouble breathing with any regularity. She downed a fortifying gulp of water, but set it aside a moment later, and buried her face in her hands. "I just... gimme a moment." She had thought she was doing the right thing. She had thought that it would be alright in the end. Thorin had tried to stop her--perhaps for the wrong reasons, but still, he had tried to stop her. If she'd just listened to him, then... then what? Would she ever really know what would have happened? Could she honestly presume to know how things would have turned out, had she acted differently? The servant looked on, her eyebrows drawing together ever so slightly.

"Here, Billa. Eat something." Balin pressed a bit of bread and meat into the hobbit's hands, and Billa ate automatically, hardly tasting the food. She would go back. She would face the consequences of
her foolishness. And if she was very, very lucky, then she might be able to scold Thorin for sending her away.

"Sire." Another guard, in full armor and bearing a beautifully carved bow, entered and bowed to Thranduil. "Refugees from the Lake have been found within our borders. The dragon has destroyed their town."

"We are ready to march on your command, Your Majesty." Legolas was just behind the guard, and looked, Balin thought, more anxious than when last they'd met.

"We're already too late, then." Thranduil lowered his head, as if in silent prayer. When he spoke again, there was a mournful quality to his voice. "And the dragon? Where is he now?"

The guard bowed soberly. "Dead, my liege. Dead in the lake."

The Elvenking turned about slowly, nothing short of astonished. "Smaug, dead? By whose hand?"

"They do not know, Your Majesty. He fell from the sky, they said, and there was no clear reason for it."

The king nodded. "Then we go to offer aid of a different kind. See that adequate provisions go with us, as well as the best among our healers. As for the refugees, feed and lodge them for now."

Another twenty minutes passed while these orders were carried out, and then the army marched, the Elvenking on his mighty elk, the others on foot, out into the cold night.

The spiders, whether out of some form of intelligence, or simply fear, did not attack them as they marched through the dark trees. Balin and Billa were surrounded by grim-faced elves, moving along as tirelessly as though it were perfectly natural to be awake and traveling at night. The dwarf, with his shorter legs, had to lengthen his stride considerably to keep up. Billa, on the other hand, had to trot. Both of them were tired, and it was hard to tell which was worse off.

In the end, Balin's stamina won out. The little burglar, despite her valiant efforts to the contrary, was slowing down, stumbling and tripping in the darkness and breathing hard enough to be heard over the quiet tramp of many elven feet. One of the guards nearest them took pity on her, and scooped her up off the ground as she stumbled again, settling her on his back with soft word of comfort in Elvish. Billa mumbled a reply, but didn't protest. Within minutes, she was fast asleep.

Refugees in the trees. At the border. Along the river. At the lake shore. The town was absolutely ruined. A few charred frames, scattered walkways, and, miraculously, the spiky, smoldering tower. That was what remained of Laketown. Not even the Master's grand house had survived Smaug's wrath. The largest group was under the leadership of a tall, lean man, wearing a battered longcoat and a bow and quiver across his back. He approached the elves with a grateful smile that didn't reach his haunted eyes. There were burns all over his face and hands, and it was clear from the state of his coat that he had been in among the flames quite a bit.

"Welcome, Elvenking. You have our gratitude, for we have nothing else to offer."

Thranduil had seen devastation in his time, great cities razed to ash, thriving populations decimated. He had hoped never to see such things again. "Would that the King under the Mountain were here to survey what his foolish pride has brought. Your people gave him succor in his need, and he repaid you with fire and death." The elk beside him lowered its head, ears twitching as though it had understood the solemnity of this talk, and the grief hanging in the air like raindrops unable to fall. "You seem to be speaking for the Men of the Lake now," the Elvenking continued. "Does the
"The Master is dead," answered Bard in a hollow tone. "I speak for those without voices, and I lead those who have nowhere to go." He paused, gazing at Thranduil, but not seeing him. "I fear that the King, like those he left behind, has already perished. We'll see for ourselves when we have strength enough to go to the Mountain." Pain passed over the man's face. Kili and Ori and the elf had promised to entertain his children. This brought a new thought, and Bard refocused on the Elvenking. The other refugees that had met with the elves on the way were now joining his slowly growing band. Women and children and men alike. A few dogs here and there.

"Your Majesty--there was an elf with the dwarves that were left in our care. A female with red hair and noble bearing. Why was she with them, and not with you?"

Thranduil's thick brows knit, and all but a few missed the slight tensing of his jaw. "She is not one of mine." There was a hard edge to his voice. "She renounced her ties to my people, betrayed the trust of her king. Had she not aided the dwarves in escaping my dungeons, this," he glanced at the destruction around them, "would not have happened. No, that one has no place amongst my people."

He sighed, unable to ignore his son's expression of hurt and shame as it all but melted into his armored back. "Let us turn our talk to what must be done now, Man of Laketown. Do you have a name?" Bard told him, and he nodded. "I see, Bard, by your face that you have suffered great loss. Your wife? A child?"

Bard's look of haunted suffering intensified. "My wife has been dead these five years," he said in a tone that spoke of renewed grief. "We had three children. They were with the dwarves, in the Master's house when the dragon attacked." The bowman turned and cast a slow, mournful look over the town and the thin wisps of smoke that rose into the pale morning sky.

"I have avenged them," he said softly, still watching the decimated town. "I slew the dragon. Nothing more can be asked of me."

"I see," said Thranduil, nodding sympathetically. "To have slain the Greatest of Worms unaided, to have done alone what an army of dwarves could not.... No more shall be asked of you other than that you serve your people in the capacity most suited to you--leading them. I see now, Bard, your noble lineage. Girion himself looks out at me through your eyes. He would have been proud to know one of his blood did, indeed, complete the task he could not." The elf king turned to Legolas. "See that the provisions are brought forward. There are fish aplenty in this lake, should they not have been tainted by the hateful blood of Smaug, but they will not fill the stomach like bread and meat."

At a gesture from the king, a group of fifteen or so healers stepped forward through the ranks, then, scanning the assembled crowd of shivering, shocked townsfolk for those most in need of immediate attention, reaching into their satchels for bindings, ointment, and carafes of herbal infusions that would ease some of the pain of the intense burns many had sustained.

"Your people have no shelter, Bard," said Thranduil presently. "I have canopies to house an army. My soldiers are hardy, and can make do with minimal shelter. I shall give you as many tents as we can spare for your use. In the meantime, my most skilled architects will begin consulting with what craftsmen of yours remain for the rebuilding of Esgaroth. What Smaug took from you, I can restore in part. The most valuable of that he stole, however, nothing on this earth can return."

"No more will be asked, except that hardest of tasks set upon men." Bard sighed heavily. "I will lead as long as I must. Your generosity, Your Majesty, is greatly appreciated. If you might spare some of your folk to help me, there are more refugees scattered about the Lake. I will lead a group to find them and bring them back here. Some may be seriously injured, and few among my own people can handle such a burden as of now."
"Granted." Thranduil watched as the supply division moved forward, having relieved their beasts of burden of what food they'd carried. There were crates and baskets full of fine food, and they began unloading them, using the bottoms of the empty crates to form a low table of sorts. "Bid your people help themselves to what they need. My son will arrange a party to accompany you in finding the refugees."

The Elvenking turned to catch Legolas's eye and was surprised by what he saw—if he didn't know any better, he would've thought the blond looked... stricken. Almost dazed. Legolas tried in vain to hide it, swallowing, his blue gaze flicking quickly away. Thranduil frowned. "Son?"

Legolas knew there was no real point in trying to hide it, but there was a very insistent part of his brain that reminded him of how much his father disliked weakness—how much more he had disliked this particular weakness. Tauriel. Beautiful, devoted Tauriel. His best friend and first, perhaps only, love. Dead.

What had she felt in those last, terrifying moments? Had it been nothing but all-consuming pain, or had she thought of him, and regretted their last parting? Was this somehow his fault? The elven prince shook his head slightly.

"It's... nothing, Father." Perhaps the Elvenking would spare himself the trouble, and leave this ugly lie to die in peace.

Bard watched the (relatively) young elven prince, a certain measure of pity moving him to ask, "The elf-maid, the one that was with the dwarves. Was she precious to you?"

Legolas flinched. Was. Tauriel was doomed to the past tense forevermore.

Thranduil decided to nip this conversation in the bud. "It is of no consequence. There is no time to lose, my son. Go. Now." The Elvenking was not untouched by the news of Tauriel's death. Certainly not as untouched as he seemed. But what was done was done. Tauriel was a traitor, and as much as he had valued her, cared for her in his own way, appreciated her long years of service, mourning her fate was best done in private. "Do you have another man to whom I might speak in your absence? Someone you trust? Much must be done now, planning, making arrangements. I do not intend to be idle here while you are gone seeking the refugees."

Bard had been watching Legolas, concern written on his grim face. When Thranduil addressed him, however, his gaze returned to the Elvenking. Bard shifted, seeming slightly uncomfortable with the question.

"Not currently, sir. Perhaps, in light of this, it would be best for the worthy prince to lead the refugees back here, while we handle the... planning and arrangements." There was something to the falling tone of his final words that implied a distaste for the job.

Thranduil nodded. "That would be best. You look weary, Bard Dragonsbane. The night was a long one, and you are in need of rest." He signaled one of his officers. "See that my canopy is set up. Have food and wine brought. Bard and myself will be retiring shortly, for there is much to discuss."

Legolas had withdrawn while his father was still speaking, selecting suitable members of his party. It was a group of fifteen, and included healers and scouts in addition to warriors. "We'll search the ruins of the city, as well," he said numbly, moving off into the cold, grey mists of dawn. "There may be survivors there yet to be found."

As Legolas's group moved away, toward the lake shore, a small forest of tents and canopies was being raised behind them. Bard was giving instructions to the frightened, dazed Lake Men, and
several of the younger refugees were moving forward to take food from their elven friends, seeming hesitant, but too hungry to bypass the opportunity.

There were few survivors along the shore, more in the brush; sooty, wild-eyed folk who approached warily or hid from them. None ran, though, and that was a blessing. Many were injured. Many, many more were dead. Legolas hated the slight jolt he received every time he saw a figure in the water, face-down, washed up, burned, dismembered, impaled, floating or half-submerged, tangled in unseen bonds. Each one, no matter how briefly, resembled a loved one or friend. Most often, he thought he could see red in the blackened hair, a point to a pale ear.

"Leave the dead," he ordered hoarsely. "We can help their kin bury them later. Let us see to the living for now." There were more inland, hiding among the bushes, some cradled by grieving loved ones, others abandoned in the brush. Cold, charred faces, wide, staring eyes. The elves passed too many to be counted, and cared for the survivors.

As horrible as the shore had been, the town was ever so much worse. Legolas led the way, forcing his way through collapsed doorways, poking under smoldering ruins, climbing charred remains of half-demolished stairs. Of all of Esgaroth, only three were left alive in the town. One was an elderly man, who had been unable to flee. The second, a little girl with a badly injured leg and many painful burns. The third was the saddest of them, a young man who watched them as though they were orcs, brandishing a broken table leg at them when they tried to approach, yelling incoherently in an effort to scare them off.

"His mind bears many scars," said one of the healers with a sigh. "We'll do what we can for him."

Legolas stepped onto solid land again and took a deep, unsteady breath. Three of his healers and two of his warriors stayed with those who were too injured to travel under their own power. The majority of the survivors could be treated and sent back to the main encampment, which was now easy to find. As the party moved on, Legolas's eyes landed on the twisted, ruddy form of the dead dragon, half-buried in mud.

It wasn't until they were much closer, the clear morning sun casting the dragon's shadow across the shallows, that they saw the little group in the shrubs about five lengths from Smaug's ugly, snarling head. Two dwarves, two humans, and a motionless, red-haired figure.
Tauriel opened her eyes and winced. "They're here," she whispered, not knowing if the others could hear her, or if they were even awake.

Kili sat up quickly, looking around. "Who's here?" His question was answered by his own eyes, and he stiffened. "The prince. He'll--they'll take us. Back to the dungeons." This was spoken with surprising apathy. At this point, what did it matter? It was either that, or die out here. He prayed they'd have mercy on Tauriel, at the least, and give her the care she needed.

Ori nudged Addie and Bain softly. "The elves are here. They'll help us. You'll be safe soon."

Kili regarded the blond and his party pleadingly as they approached, forcing himself to his feet. "She's gravely wounded," he said, gesturing to the elleth. "Help her. Please."

If Legolas heard Kili's words, he showed no sign of it. His blue eyes were fixed on Tauriel, whose back was to him. Tauriel, who wasn't moving. Tauriel, who may yet be saved. With a silent gesture, he signaled two of his remaining healers forward. One knelt beside the injured elf, the other moved toward Kili, then reluctantly bypassed him as the dwarf insisted that Addie and Bain be seen to first.

There was a storm of outraged Elvish from the first healer, who gestured sharply to Tauriel's injured back and the sloppy stitches that held the wound shut, and plucked at the ex-captain's torn dress. One didn't need to know Elvish to get the gist of what she was angry about. The tone of "what the hell is this?" communicated itself quite clearly, even if the words were foreign.

"No," said Tauriel in a voice harsh with pain. "Leave it. Too deep."

"You'll scar!" protested the healer, sounding utterly appalled at the thought.

"Better scarred and alive than unblemished and dead," snapped the traitor. A moment later, she let out a low, pained moan, and seemed to pass out.

Legolas glanced at Kili, his eyes communicating what he couldn't afford to say. If she dies, it'll be your fault.

Kili saw little merit in defending himself. It was a botched job, and may have done more harm than
good. If he weren't so caught up in his concern for her, he would've have been overwhelmed with shame. But this wasn't about him. "Will you be able to... fix it?" His dark eyes locked with Legolas's for a moment, at once contrite and beseeching and hopeful. The resentment he saw in the elf's face did not faze him. Legolas cared about Tauriel as much as he did--he saw that clearly--and right now she was what mattered, not what may or may not happen to him as a result. "Will she be alright? Is... is it too late?" The thought was unbearable, but he had to know.

Legolas hesitated visibly, his mind spinning in a hundred different directions. Then he looked at the healer, asking her wordlessly if Tauriel would live. The elleth swept dark hair from her face and sighed as she prodded the long, ugly wound with gentle fingers.

"It won't be an easy fix," she replied at last, "but she's not in danger of bleeding to death, at least." This answer was, of course, issued in a fluid stream of Elvish. Legolas shivered slightly.

"I don't know," he said softly, his gaze shifting back to Kili. "Tell me what happened. How was she hurt?"

While Bain and Addie were directed to the main camp, and Tauriel's wound was properly cleaned and treated, Kili haltingly related the tale of their harrowing escape from the town, splitting up, and the dragon's attack. Seeing Bard with the windlance, the dragon strafing the Lake--the conclusion that he was attacking the only other dwarf near Laketown, who was with the girls. Ori's portion of the tale came after Kili told of pulling Tauriel from the water. Ori spoke of Tauriel's bravery and quick thinking, how she'd saved as many lives as she could, and how she'd been injured by the dragon in his death-throes.

Bain and Addie were well out of sight by the time the story was finished, and Tauriel was solidly unconscious, being lifted gently onto a makeshift stretcher. Legolas sighed heavily and closed his eyes. "Go back with her," he instructed the dwarves. "And if I find her unattended when I return, I won't hesitate to put an arrow through your other leg, Dwarf." There was a pregnant pause before he spoke again. "You will find Bard with my father, and no doubt your companions will be near at hand. Go. And peace be with you." There was a tired sort of resignation in the prince's voice as he gestured to them, and dismissed the two elves that were poised at either end of the stretcher. Without another word, the blond turned away from Kili's little group, leading what remained of his party off around the edge of the lake, in search of any more survivors.

Kili nodded, mildly cheered by the news that Bard had survived, if only because it was the only good thing that had happened today. Resisting the urge to correct Legolas on his opinion of dwarves as prone to leave the injured, he turned to follow those carrying Tauriel. He'd sooner die than leave her, especially now, when she actually needed him.

Ori gave Legolas a grateful look before going after Kili, the pain of the burns she'd been ignoring beginning to throb across practically every square inch of her body now that she was aggravating her skin with movement. She hoped, now that the more serious injuries had been tended, that someone would see to her. She didn't know how much help she'd be to those she meant to care for if she could barely walk for the pain. For one thing she was very thankful, at least: things could only improve from here on out. So she hoped.

By the time they reached the camp, Kili was wincing with every other step, and limping something terrible. Ori, on the other hand, was hobbling along, a grimace of pain etched deeply across her face. One of the healers met the three injured with a shake of his dark head and a pitying look in his one bright eye. The other was covered by a long strip of soft leather, worn diagonally across his face, so it passed over the supposedly missing eye, and above the healthy one. He set younger elves to treat Kili and Ori, who were swiftly installed in low cots piled with blessedly soft bedding, while he
personally saw to Tauriel's injuries. There were four very familiar, though unexpected faces watching them expectantly.

Bain and Addie had been waiting for them, both looking morose and lonely. Beside the two children was a sleepy-eyed, but very much alive, white-haired dwarf, who was just as surprised to see them as they were to see him. The fourth was quite solidly asleep. Nearly hidden in a heavy blanket of her own, the little halfling lay curled up, very near the beds Kili and Ori had been put in.

Kili, exhausted as he was, toppled out of bed when he caught sight of Balin, staggered across the space between them, and enveloped the old dwarf in a tight embrace, much to the consternation of the elf who had been examining his leg. The intense pain of this exertion registered shortly thereafter, but the look of boundless relief on his face masked any signs of hurt. "You're alive, Balin. I'd thought... You can't begin to imagine how glad I am to see you." A moment passed, and then he pulled away suddenly, holding the old dwarf at arms' length. His smile faded. "And... the others? Where's Uncle? Where's... Fili?"

Balin hefted the young dwarf back onto his bed and made signs for him to keep his voice down, though his beard could hardly hide his own incredulous joy. Swiftly, he filled in the two injured dwarves on what had happened after they left Laketown, culminating with the separation of the Company, and Thorin's plan for his final stand. Fili, he told the anxious pair, had set off for the Lake on foot and alone when the attack began. He didn't presume to make predictions about Fili's arrival. He didn't know whether the grieving blond had thought to take water and rations with him, whether he stopped to sleep, or if (though he loathed the thought) he might have run into Azog's pack along the way.

Both Kili and Ori looked a little stunned as they absorbed all this new information. They were, therefore, unprepared when Bard approached, an almost painful hope in his weary face. He had barely nodded his greeting to Kili when he spotted Bain and Addie. With a cry of unspeakable joy, he fell on them, holding both to him as tears of wordless relief coursed down his rough face.

"Bain. Adelaide. I thought... but you're alive. Thank heavens." He loosened his grip on them after a long moment, and looked about hopefully. "Where's Tilda?"

Bain looked away, and Addie's face contorted, her body jerking with a silent sob. Silence a moment, and then Bain turned back to his father, swallowing heavily. "She... Tilda..." His features tightened as he strove to speak the unbearable, the unthinkable. "She's gone, Da. She... didn't make it."

Bard's entire body communicated nothing but deep, ravaging grief. His shoulder sagged, his head drooped, his arms and legs no longer seemed to have the strength to do as they were meant to. The man sat down hard, his face tight with anguish. After a moment, he started to breathe again, and lifted his head.

"We can... mourn properly, later. Are either of you hurt?" Despite the pain of losing his youngest, Bard mastered himself, focused on the survivors. He had to keep on. There were too many depending on him. And now, at least, now he had his son back, and Addie. The three of them together, they would survive.

Bain shook his head, and Addie swallowed a sob. "Just a little burned. Not nearly as bad as... as it could've been." She leaned into her father, burying her head in his shoulder. "I'll miss her, Da. I can't... I can't imagine just... going on without her. But..." She sniffled, her eyes beginning to water. "She's... she's with Mum now, isn't she? Isn't she, Da?"

Bard didn't answer immediately, but held his daughter tightly against his chest. "Yes," he whispered at length. "She is. So don't feel sad for her, alright? She's... she's in a better place now." The words
seemed too stiff. Too... awkward in his mouth. But he had to believe them. His little girl couldn't be
gone. No. Not gone. Just... moved on.

There was a slight cough, and Bard glanced over his shoulder at the elf--one of Thranduil's advisors,
though he couldn't remember which one it was. Obviously, he was neglecting his other duties. After
a moment, he swallowed and straightened. "You two get some rest, and something to eat. I have...
things to see to. Look after your sister, Bain." He gave Addie a kiss on the forehead and clasped his
son's shoulder firmly. He glanced at Kili and tried to smile, with limited success.

"I'll collect your story another time, then. So long, Kili. Ori." His gaze landed briefly on Tauriel, who
was being tended by the lead healer, then on Ori, whose burns were being treated by a younger,
gentler-looking female elf, and nodded slightly before he turned, reluctantly, to go.

Kili watched him leave, a pained look on his face. He couldn't help but wonder if things might have
been different had he stayed with Ori, Tauriel, and the others instead of going in search of Bard. If he
would have been able to save the two girls who now existed only in the hearts and memories of
those who'd loved them. Little Tilda, so innocent, so joyful, untouched by the cares and fears that
come with living too long in a world marred by evil... had been touched by them all the same. Never
would she grow into the beautiful woman she had promised to become; never would she know the
joys of love. Taken too soon, her life burned away all in a horrific instant by the dragon. The dragon
that would never have attacked had the dwarves not disturbed his sleep. These thoughts twisted
inside him, tying themselves into tight, agonizing knots. He couldn't bear it. The look on Bard's face,
the tears of the children. It made him feel sick.

The thought of his brother racing frantically through the wilds, starving, exhausted, cold.... that
thought, too, nagged at him. Though he knew Fili had made his own choice, and going after him
might well seal his fate into the bargain, lying here in safety knowing his brother was anything but
safe was unbearable.

He glanced across the room at Tauriel. Hours had passed, it seemed, for the elf was asleep, her back
rising and falling evenly, her face more relaxed than he had seen it in as long as he could remember.
He'd sworn to himself he wouldn't leave her, but... he hadn't known about Fili then. Besides, he
knew if she were aware of his dilemma, she would understand. He certainly wasn't helping her in
any significant way by staying. In the end, the decision was made fairly quickly.

The healers hadn't tarried with them long, once they'd all been stabilized. They had many other
charges, and were shorthanded as it was. Billa was still snoring soundly, and Balin and Ori had
dozed off some time ago. Kili wouldn't wake them. They would say he was a fool for what he was
about to do, running off on his own with a bad leg, and he couldn't allow them to detain him. Fili
needed him. Of that, he was sure. Of course, it wouldn't do to simply vanish without explaining, so
Kili resolved to leave some kind of note. In lieu of paper and a pen, he used one of the nearby
suturing needles that had been left behind to prick his finger, biting his tongue to keep quiet. It
smarted something awful, but in the end, he was able to coax enough blood out to leave a brief
message on the blanket. Went to find Fili.

Then, grabbing the makeshift walking stick from against the canvas wall, he tiptoed from the tent and
out of the camp, unnoticed in the bustle of healers and workers and refugees. Mahal, I hope I know
what I'm doing.

The trek from the Mountain had not been an easy one. Fili squinted at the sky, feeling sick with a
combination of hunger, exhaustion, and fear. He had traveled through the day, seen the dragon fall,
heard his roars die away; through the night as the ice came again; into the morning, desperate to keep
the feeling in his hands and feet; into the the day, as the sun swung in its daily arc overhead. He'd
been a fool to leave the Mountain and the Company behind. He'd been stupid in any number of ways. But he had chosen his path, and to turn aside or turn back would be a weakness he couldn't tolerate, least of all in himself. So Fili kept going.

He didn't remember very well when exactly he was forced to stop and sleep (primarily by his body simply refusing to go another step). When he awoke, the sun was setting, half of his face felt like it had been baked in the oven, and his mouth and eyes were full of grit. Sprawled full-length on the ground between two rocky hills, the blond had apparently just collapsed. As his mind sluggishly caught up with the "I slept on the ground all day" concept, Fili got unsteadily to his feet and forced himself to stumble on, spitting out pebbles and dirt as he went. His tongue was roughly the texture of sandpaper, and his throat felt like a chimney. He was parched.

*But the lake isn't that far,* he told himself, grinding his teeth together and trying to ignore the little crunches of the remaining grit. Sure, he'd be useless when he got there, but not forever.

*Kili.*

*Ori.*

He would search. Every inch of the town, every length of the shore, under every shrub and scrubby tree—he'd dredge the lake if he had to, but one way or another, he would find them. They had to be alive. He refused to believe anything else. There was a desperate flavor to the belief, but he ignored that. Kili was clever, and they had the elf with them. Tauriel. Together, she and Kili would keep Ori safe.

Fili stumbled, and paused a moment, rubbing his eyes. He wasn't altogether sure where he was, but he had to be close to the lake by now. When his vision cleared a little, he saw his brother. The dwarf blinked. That couldn't be right. His brother was in Laketown.

*Maybe I'm hallucinating.*

It would make sense. He was dehydrated, exhausted, and hungry. Still, imaginary company was better than none. Fili smiled at the dark-haired, limping figure that was moving toward him. He looked awful. There was soot clinging to his clothes and skin, though it looked like some of it might have been scrubbed off.

"I was looking for you," he told the hallucination hoarsely. "If you left Ori alone, I'll box your ears something fierce."

Kili had been staggering top speed for his brother, and pulled up short at the words, panting, holding his side. "You look... horrible, Fee," he gasped out at last, closing the last bit of distance between them. "And no, I didn't leave your precious Ori alone. She's got several dozen healers at her beck and call, plus Balin and Billa." He clicked his tongue good-naturedly, gripping Fili's arm to steady him (there may have been some need in steadying himself as well, but he wasn't about to admit that). "I oughtta kill you for being a blooming idiot. It's my job to pull stupid, reckless stunts like sprinting off into the wilds with no supplies. What were you thinking, Fee?"

Fili jumped when his brother touched his arm. That wasn't something hallucinations could do. Staring at Kili in amazement, he started to sway slightly, clearly overwhelmed.

"But... but you're in Laketown," he muttered, trying to swallow, and making himself gag instead. Kili pressed a water skin into his hands, and the blond drank gratefully. When his beard was as wet as his tongue, he lowered his head. Things were starting to clear a little. "I look horrible? You look like you haven't bathed in a year, little brother."
"Oh? I thought the 'singed by dragonfire' look flattered me." Kili grinned, exhausted, but relieved. 
By all appearances, his brother was going to be alright. He rummaged in the small satchel at his side (he'd snatched it on his way out of the camp with only a cursory glance inside at its contents). 
"Looks like some biscuits. Probably shouldn't eat, though, 'til you've got a bit more fluid in you."

The perpetual wind that scraped the hard lands beneath the Mountain droned on as the two began the slow walk back toward Laketown, their bodies heavy, but their hearts lighter for the moment. At Fili's insistence, Kili related what had happened during the dragon's attack, and when he spoke of the loss of Bard's youngest, the blond lowered his already drooping head with a sigh. It was clear this tragedy--a tragedy their Company had caused--weighed heavily on him. Perhaps not so much as on Kili, for Fili had not had the now bittersweet pleasure of meeting the precocious little girl, but nonetheless, it was a great sorrow.

"You'll want to speak to Ori about... what happened," Kili was saying. "She hasn't said anything, but I can tell she feels guilty. Guilty that Tauriel saved her and not... Tilda."

Fili agreed, though he wasn't at all sure how he would broach the subject. Nor was he sure he could be appropriately sympathetic. In his secret heart, he was grateful that it was Ori that had been saved. The alternative would surely have broken him, inside and out.

Together, the brothers ambled toward the refugee camp, taking turns explaining what had happened when. Kili mentioned that Balin and Billa had come to the lake with an army of elves, and Fili tried not to choke on his biscuit.

"What, were they captured?"

"No," Kili shrugged, not completely at ease with Balin's telling, but deeply grateful for the healers and their arts all the same. "Apparently, Billa marched right into the Woodland Realm and asked for Thranduil's help. And he gave it, just like that."

Fili didn't know whether to be impressed or angry. The Elvenking had turned his back on their uncle when he begged for aid at the first Desolation, but had turned out an army to help when Billa asked?

It was full dark by the time the two of them reached Thranduil's encampment, and the biscuits and water had vanished between the two of them. Kili led his brother to the tent where Ori, Balin, Billa, and Tauriel had been when he left, only to learn the dwarves and halfling had been moved to a separate location. The injured she-elf was still laying on her soft pile of bedding, green eyes half-open, watching the pair with an unreadable expression on her burned, reddened face.

"Found him," Kili said weakly, smiling a little. "Are you...? You look better, Tauriel." Maybe that was wishful thinking on his part, but she honestly did look more herself, less lost in painful wanderings. He moved over to her cot, swaying unsteadily apart from the forward rocking motion he'd grown accustomed to these long hours past. It occurred to him she might be upset he'd left her, and his chest tightened a little with anxiety. "I'm sorry I left you. I--I wouldn't have if there was any other way. I had to find my brother."

Tauriel let out a faint huff, and her lips curved slightly into a barely-perceptible smile. Now she just looked very tired, like someone had given her something to make her sleep fairly recently.

"Don't be sorry for doing what you had to," she told him softly. "I'd look out for Legolas, though. He was pretty angry when he found out you'd left." Confusion clouded her green eyes for a moment, and it was as though she weren't really looking at him anymore, though her gaze didn't shift so much as an inch from his face. "I was... sad... but I know... you love your brother." The elleth blinked slowly and sighed, shifting on her cot.
Fili moved forward and put a hand on his brother's shoulder, his gaze flicking from Kili to Tauriel. Things seemed to have changed, though he wasn't really sure how. "We should let her sleep, Brother."

Kili nodded mutely, wisely deciding anything his exhausted brain might come up with to say at the moment, beyond a farewell, would probably do more harm than good. "Rest, Tauriel. I'll have the healers send for me when next you wake."

The brothers found their companions in another tent nearby, and while Billa and Ori were already asleep, still recovering, it seemed, from the rigors of their respective ordeals, Balin was sitting on the edge of his cot, hunched over, the trailing ends of his white beard in his lap. He seemed in some state between sleeping and waking, meditative perhaps, and if his eyes were open, Fili and Kili couldn't tell.

"Think he's dozed off sitting up?" Kili whispered, nudging his brother. The thought didn't strike him as particularly funny--certainly not as it might've some weeks before, when life had seemed to him little more than a game. "Maybe... he was waiting for us."

Balin lifted his head with a faint groan and arched his back, several loud pops and cracks heralding the movement of stiff, tired joints.

"Of course I was waitin' for ya, lads." Turning his wise old eyes on them, his brow creased with a pensive worry. "Gone 'til dark, Kili--I thought even you knew better."

"It's a good thing he didn't," said Fili defensively. "I wouldn't have made it if he hadn't come to find me."

"Then ya both should have known better. I know I taught ya better than that." Balin's admonishment had both brothers hanging their heads. They both knew they shouldn't have done what they did, but it wasn't hard to tell that neither one of them truly regretted their actions.

Fili's eyes kept drifting to Ori's sleeping form, curled up beside Billa under a heap of blankets. He hoped that sleeping close to the hobbit would make her night's rest easier, and tried to ignore the twinge of jealousy that came of not being the one lying beside her.

Kili tried not to notice. For a fleeting moment, he wondered if Fili had set off sprinting toward Laketown more to save him... or Ori. He inwardly shook his head. That was a stupid, stupid question. As if his brother wouldn't have been just as ready to die for him as for any other... even the female he'd clearly been fancying for some time now.

"Have a cot, Fee," he said finally. "Peel off those boots. They're probably half fused to your feet by now." He turned and grabbed a spare blanket off a pile in the corner and tossed it on the cot Fili was closest to. When the blond proceeded to stand where he was, eyes partially glazed over, Kili eased him into the sturdy, elven-made canvas, forcibly removed his boots, and swaddled him in the soft wool blanket. "There. Now relax. We're all safe. By the look on your face, one would think you were still hurtling away from the Mountain trying to save us from a dragon."

"It... it was a fool's hope," Fili muttered, trying to focus on his brother. "I... I couldn't... if you were both dead...." He shook his blond shook his head hard and took a deep breath to steady himself.

"They're not dead, lad." Balin's comforting tone said more than his words could of the relief that fact was to all of them. "Now rest. From what Bard's told us, we'll be heading to the Mountain in the next day or two--you'll need your strength."
Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Chapter Notes

I think my brain must have exploded and died. I have no idea how I missed an update day and didn't even notice. To make up for it, I shall give you two chapters today, and one of them is a loverly fluff chapter. :)

Have FilOri fluff, my poor, traumatized readers!

Ori woke to the perpetual buzzing of activity outside the camp, cold and stiff, but rested. The elves' ointment was powerful, and already her burns were healing, but they still stung, particularly when she moved, as though they were some kind of severe sunburn. As she sat up on her cot, wincing, her vision cleared and she caught sight of something that puzzled her. In a cot a few rows over, there were familiar flaxen locks interspersed with a few messy braids, like a strange, frazzled bush, peeping out from the lumpy hills of a blanket. Her heart did a somersault, and she practically fell off her cot.

Fili.

Balin was awake, munching on an apple and shaking his head. He muttered to himself, but Ori couldn't make it out. Eventually, he heard the rustling behind him and turned to regard her. Ori swallowed, pointing timidly at the sleeping "bush"--all of Fili that the blanket hadn't eaten. "How-? Did he..." She looked like she might be about to explode from the pressure of withheld emotion. Just what emotion was unclear. "He... he made it?"

"Oh, aye, he made it all right," the old dwarf assured her with a faint smile. "Kili brought 'im in late last night--they looked like a couple o' right tramps, they did. But they're both alive an' well."

Fili shifted a little, and his face, which had been covered in a layer of soft green wool, now came into view. The change in position also altered his breathing slightly, so rather than the soft, heavy woosh of air entering and leaving the dwarf's lungs, the sound became a lusty snore.

The sudden change in the volume level inside the tent startled Billa awake, and the halfling floundered around in the blankets beside Ori for a minute before she identified the source of the noise. She glared at Fili, her curls sticking out in odd directions, and grumbled something about dwarves and 'never do anything quietly.'

Ori sank back into her cot, trying not to smile at Billa's unruly hair. "I'm... glad. I was so afraid he'd... but he's alright. He's safe." She would have to thank Kili when he woke. She thought, after the fact, that this would be a silly thing to do. Why should she thank him for saving his own brother? He would probably look at her like she was crazy. All the same, she was very grateful.
Balin looked like he might be about to say something when an elf popped his head through the tent flap. "Tauriel requested I let one of your... group know she's awake." He had the distinct appearance of someone who felt ill-used as a messenger, and Kili, snorting awake at the mention of the red-haired elleth's name, didn't bother sending a message in return. He was on the edge of his cot in a trice, his boots practically flying onto his feet. Ori followed him, hesitant to leave Fili now that he'd returned against all hope, but realizing she'd do him no good staring at him all day when she might be more useful elsewhere. By the looks of him, she'd have plenty of time to plan what she would say when he did wake up.

Tauriel was actually sitting up, though there were a pair of healers that were eyeing her very disapprovingly. She was cross-legged on her cot, back ramrod straight, eyes closed and brows lowered slightly with discomfort. She didn't seem to be in a lot of pain, though, for as Kili entered, the elleth opened her eyes and smiled at him before shifting to lay down on her stomach again, with a pillow and thick blanket tucked under her torso so she had the illusion of sitting up. The movement clearly caused pain, since she held her breath and grimaced, but once she was settled her expression relaxed again.

"I recall you stopped by last night." Her voice was clearer now, and she sounded much more like herself. The rest and treatment were clearly doing her good. "I wanted to make sure... everything was alright." Tauriel hesitated, glancing at Ori. "Are you alright, Ori?"

Ori wasn't looking at the elf. Her gaze flicked up for a moment to acknowledge she'd heard, then returned to its place on the rocky floor of the tent. She shifted uncomfortably. "It's... it's just that... oh, I don't know. I don't really like to think about it." Was seeing Tauriel going to remind her every time of the fact that she had lived only because the elf had grabbed her and not Tilda? Why was the guilt pouring on so strongly right now? Now, when she had so much to be grateful for, and should have been thinking on that.

Finally, she sighed, glancing at Kili apologetically. This wasn't supposed to be about her, and while Kili's face was sympathetic, she could tell he hadn't wanted this morning to be overshadowed by the same grief that had been nagging at him through the night. "I just wonder.... I was wondering... why did you save me, Tauriel? Why didn't you save Tilda? Or Signe?"

Tauriel watched her for a long moment, and the silence between them was not a thing of peace. The elf closed her eyes and sighed before speaking. "You were closer," she said simply. "The chance of saving you was greater, and I had very little time to act."

Ori swallowed, finally looking up at the elf. "I guess I understand." It was a hard truth, to be sure, that one might or might not have been saved simply because of the seat one had picked in a boat, but such was life. "I still can't help but feel... guilty. I would gladly have died instead of that innocent little girl. I see her face when I close my eyes, the way she looked the instant we saw the dragon above us and it was too late.... I can't stand it, Tauriel. I can't."

Tauriel was silent a long moment, looking first at Ori, then at Kili. They were both shedding silent tears. And though the elf's face was lined with pain and grief, she seemed somehow... at peace. She gestured for the two dwarves to come closer, shifting with a slight wince to make room for them on her cot.

"What happened," she said softly, "was not your fault. Either you will come to terms with that, or you will live with guilt for the rest of your life. But that choice lies with you."

Kili put a hand on Ori's shoulder as she sank slowly onto the cot beside the elf. "You know, if anything, I should be the one feeling guilty about what happened. Not you. If I'd been with you, I might've been able to save her. I didn't do much good running after Bain, did I?"
Ori didn't know if this made her feel any better. Now that she considered it, she realized another uncomfortable truth. Shivering a little, she glanced at Tauriel. "Tilda wouldn't have died if I hadn't..." She spoke weakly, trailing off. She didn't want to make it sound like she was blaming Fili. It wasn't his fault. "If I'd gone with the others... if I hadn't fallen in love with Fili and... become a distraction for him." A large, angry tear plummeted to her lap.

Tauriel saw Kili make a pained face, and wondered if he felt sorry for the pair, or if he was jealous. The elf reached out and touched Ori's hand, looking at her very seriously. "Don't feel guilty for falling in love, Ori. It is the greatest of gifts, both to give and to receive, and there is no shame in it. If you let your love be tainted that way, it is..." the elleth hesitated, unwilling either to be harsh or to soften the truth, "it is an insult to that love, and to he whom you would give it." Tauriel had never thought she would be speaking like this with dwarves, much less ones she counted as such good friends as these.

Kili lowered his gaze thoughtfully, wondering if these words were just as aptly applied to his feelings for Tauriel. He knew she didn't reciprocate, but all the same, it was mildly encouraging. "Ashamed of love," he whispered, glancing at the elf. "I wish... I wish I didn't have to be."

"Don't be," Tauriel assured him, meeting his gaze. Those green eyes seemed softer than they had once been. "Not even if it's love for one you believe is beyond your reach. You may yet find that they are not so far beyond you as you think."

That was a hint if Kili had ever heard one. Smiling faintly at her, trying not to let on just how excited he was at this turn, he nodded. "I'll keep that in mind." His smile widened to a grin, and he reached for her other hand. "Well, Tauri, now that we've thoroughly discussed how guilty Ori and I feel, how are you doing? Still in a lot of pain?" He found it somewhat ironic that they'd come to cheer her up, and she'd ended up being the one doing the cheering.

Tauri. There it was again. A nickname no one had used since she was very young. It made her smile. "It hurts less now. The healers say I should be alright in about a week." They also said she would have an ugly scar across her back, but she didn't mind it. It would make sure she always remembered. Tauriel caressed the bandages around her body lightly, and sighed. "Have you ever had a scar you didn't want to get rid of... because of the meaning it held?"

Kili looked surprised, but nodded. His free hand moved slowly to the side of his leg, the one wounded by Tauriel's arrow. There was still a nearly constant, throbbing ache in it, but it had become such a loyal companion he hardly noticed it anymore. "I think so. Maybe for different reasons than yours. Do you value it because... you were wounded by the dragon in the moment of his defeat? I can't see much else about it that would bring happiness." Certainly not his horrific job of suturing it, at the thought of which he was barely able to conceal a shudder.

Tauriel glanced up at them, turning her head slightly to study their faces. They both seemed attentive, but distracted. Kili was inspecting his injured leg, and Ori kept looking out the open tent flap, toward the place she suspected Fili was still asleep.

"It's... a flaw," the elf said simply. It was a tragedy that so many elves fell into the trap of relying on their own strength and perfect reflexes. *I am not perfect. I will never be perfect, no matter how many years I train. People I protect will die, and it's not because I didn't care enough. That is what I must remember.*
snores. Fili was in the same position he’d been when Ori and Kili had left to see Tauriel, little but his dirty, tangled, blonde bush of hair visible over the covers. He’d come back for them. Risked his life. Run night and day, ceaselessly, fueled by little more than desperation. And perhaps something else. Ori couldn’t say. She knew he had had feelings for her, once. That’s why she’d been a distraction.

But now? Now, she didn't know. As close as Fili was with his brother, no one would think twice about attributing his mad return to fraternal loyalty. All the same, she respected him for it, and thought him very brave. When he woke, she’d tell him as much.

It wasn't long before she got her chance. Addie entered with a tray of food and nodded to Ori with a faint smile. If nothing else, it was the aroma that roused the blond dwarf. With a grunt and a snort, Fili sat up, blinking owlishly at Addie.

"Lunch." The girl's announcement was enough for Fili. He gave her a sleepy smile, mumbled "thank you," and reached for one of the dry sandwiches on the tray. Spotting Ori, however, he froze, mouth partially open.

"Ori." He tried to stand quickly, but nearly fell over in the process. His legs no longer felt like legs at all, but like leg-shaped cramps. Sitting down again rather harder than he'd meant to, he winced. "Are you alright? I mean... you look awful." Her skin was red and burned, like Tauriel's had been, and looked painful. Ori winced in turn, remembering just how much pain she’d been fighting to ignore these past few days. Feeling a distinct urge to hide behind her blanket, instead she slowly nodded.

"I... I was fortunate." Pushing down the resurging guilt, she tried, somewhat awkwardly, to shift the focus to him. "And you... I was so worried. I thought that... and before then, I had this horrible dream. You came back, came back for us. But," she smiled faintly, "it didn't turn out like my dream. You're alright."

The look of pain on his face quickly erased her smile. " Aren't you? Are you hurt, Fili?" The tone of her voice sharpened a little with concern. Fili winced, but felt his heart soar. She still cared. She didn’t hate him for abandoning her.

"My legs hurt a bit," he said, somewhat sheepishly, "but it's not bad. I'm sure things will loosen up once I'm up and moving again." Remembering the food and his achingly empty stomach, he reached for the sandwich a second time, and managed to grab it and lean back on his cot before his legs decided to give out properly.

Ori accepted a sandwich, too, but didn't eat it right away, evidently preferring to watch Fili eat his. "Well, I... oh. I guess I should've thought of that. Is there... I mean..." Ori's cheeks were beginning to flush again. Fortunately, her face was already so red, it was hardly noticeable. "Is there anything I can do to, you know... help?" She glanced at his legs. "If your muscles are sore, I might be able to," she practically crushed the poor sandwich between her hands as she forgot she was holding it, "rub them. Oin taught me... a few things."

Ori's sandwich was being reduced to pulp, but suffered in silence. Fili, on the other hand, began to cough, choking on his food. Before he'd really cleared his airway, he tried to speak, his expression so very startled, it was hard to tell if he was gratified or just embarrassed.

"You-" cough "you, uh, you-" cough choke "you would do that? For... for me?" Fili cleared his throat noisily and accepted a water canteen from Addie before she set down the tray and retreated. The blond gulped down some water and cleared his throat some more, looking more than slightly flushed. "I mean, if you... if you would... I mean... I'd like that."

Ori nodded, looking more concerned than nervous now. She glanced down at the mutilated
sandwich, and with a half-amused half-disgusted snort, set the poor, tortured thing on the cot. "Didn't realize..." she murmured, getting up quickly and circumnavigating the other cots to get to Fili. With a demure look, she plopped down at his feet. "I'm happy to do it, Fili. Honestly, you've no idea how... useless I feel sometimes."

She reached out, somewhat tentatively, and Addie, apparently determined to help in this endeavor, had already returned with a water basin and dry towel. "If you don't mind," Ori cooed, placing the blond's calloused and blistered feet in the basin. "It'll be a bit," she poured the water over them gently, "cold."

Fili sucked in a sharp gasp, tensing for a moment (which was particularly painful for his legs). "Oh, wow. Yeah that's... that's..." The blond relaxed with a faint, surprised "ah." "That feels... really good." His blisters had been hot and aching. Now that faded slowly. Addie looked particularly pleased, and left again, only to return shortly with a small bundle of lavender and a vial of oil. She traded a glance with Ori and stifled a laugh. A moment later, the girl's smile disappeared, replaced by a lost, confused expression. She set the herbs and oil down gently. Barely audible, was the sound of her broken whisper.

"Tilda."

Ori had been busily scrubbing--gently, of course--at Fili's abused feet, but at this, her fingers momentarily lost all strength. Heaving a tired-sounding sigh, Ori continued, stripping off layers of dirt and grime before finally patting his feet dry with the towel. She wanted to say something comforting to the poor girl, but simply couldn't find the words. Everything she might've said to that end rang hollow, even as she mentally rehearsed it. Shaking her head a little, she moved the basin aside and picked up the vial of oil, emptying a generous portion onto Fili's left foot.

"I'll try to be gentle," she whispered, beginning to apply light pressure to the toes and working her way up. He had such strong, muscular feet--hard, rough. Like her brothers', but even more so than theirs. Her heart fluttered at the thought.

Fili chuckled warmly. "Don't worry about it. Nothing you can do could be worse than what I've already done." He braced himself on his elbows and glanced at Addie. The girl was sitting on her heels beside Ori, fiddling with the hem of her tunic. She looked so sad...

"She was...?" he began, but trailed off when Ori shot him a cautionary glance. She seemed very... eager, for lack of a better word, to protect this girl.

"My sister." Addie's whisper was just as unsteady as before, a herald of unshed tears. "They... the dragon got them." As Ori's hands went still again, Fili felt a sinking sensation in the region of his stomach.

"I'm sorry." It wasn't enough, but what more could he say? After a moment, the dwarf extended a calloused hand to Addie. She gazed at his fingers in surprise for a beat or two before taking it hesitantly. He gave her hand a comforting squeeze. Words weren't enough, but maybe.... Addie gave him a watery smile, and Fili's heart lifted.

Shortly, the girl excused herself, leaving Fili and Ori alone again. The air seemed somehow heavier as he concentrated on making his lungs work normally. "Kili... told me about them. She'll be one of Bard's, then?"

Ori nodded slowly, leaning down to blink away the moisture that was accumulating in her eyes again. "Those girls... they were too young. Don't even know if they...." She wasn't able to finish her thought, and glanced up at Fili apologetically. "Sorry. Got distracted." She resumed her work, gently
massaging up to the ankle, avoiding the most inflamed of the blisters, and back down again. "I guess I... I wish you'd been here, Fili. I can't help but think it would've turned out different. I wasn't much use."

Fili sighed faintly and sat up, touching her head, running his fingers through her hair. "I would have, if I could. I'm... I'm sorry. I'm sure you did all you could." He paused, remembering what Kili had said. "It's not your fault, you know."

Ori's scalp tingled a little at his touch, and for a moment she almost forgot to listen to what he was saying. But she did listen, and found herself shaking her head again. "Doesn't matter. I... I'm responsible, even if only partly. If we hadn't come here... she'd still be alive. She would be. None of this would've happened."

Fili's hand slipped down along her temple to her cheek, and he cupped the warm skin, directing her gaze up to meet his. "It's alright to feel responsible. But you shouldn't feel like it's your fault. It makes no more sense than me feeling it's my fault for you getting hurt, or for Kili's leg, or... you know." He sighed and stroked her cheek gently with his thumb. "I was scared. I thought you were dead. And I knew it was my fault."

"I can't say I wasn't upset about being left behind. Mostly because I knew why, and I... well... I thought you just considered me a distraction. That you didn't... want me anymore." She couldn't look at him, and focused instead on each stroke of her fingers as they kneaded the tense muscles. These words tightened her throat, issuing in a strangled whisper. "When that dragon swooped down on us... and I saw its throat glowing... in that instant, I wished I could've looked into your eyes. One last time. Because I knew then I would've been... brave."

Fili made a soft, pained noise as she found a place in the arch of his foot that shot pain up to his knee. He was quiet for a minute, but eventually spoke, letting his hand drop to her shoulder. "I... couldn't stand the idea that you might... die. I thought you'd be safe here." The dwarf lowered his blonde head and buried his face in his hands. "I thought you'd be safe. I'm sorry, Ori."

Ori paused, wiped her hands on the towel, and reached for Fili's. "It's alright. I'm safe. We both are. You don't... you don't have to be sorry, Fili." They were very close now, and, after a moment of heart-pounding internal debate, she pulled his hands away from his face so they were looking straight into each other's eyes.

Ori smiled a little, gripping his cold hands tightly with her warm ones. "Just... just don't leave me again. Please. I'd rather die with you than be safe and alone." Fili gazed into her eyes and saw the same frightened loneliness he'd felt himself, running across the scrubland toward the lake. He saw every fear Dori and Nori harbored for their little sister--the certainty that he would leave her, that it wasn't love at all. His heart pounded.

"Never," he promised in a whisper. He held her hands tightly, tilting his head forward until their foreheads touched. "You'll never be alone again, if I can help it." A thought struck him and he felt foolish for not thinking of it before. Releasing her hands, he fumbled with one of his braids and pulled the heavy silver bead from his messy blond locks, pressing it into her hand. Not a proper courting gift by any stretch, but it was close enough for now.

Ori's eyes widened slightly as her fingers closed around the bead. "But this... this means...." Her face brightened, and all traces of her previous worry and anguish were suddenly eclipsed. "Oh, Fili. I..."

She smiled, a real, genuine smile, and leaned down to kiss his hand. "I can't even... this means so much to me. Th-thank you." Twisting the end of one of her braids, she quickly slipped the heavy bead midway up its length and tied the ribbon beneath it to hold the bead in place. "How does it look?"
The blond couldn't stop smiling. Burns and all, she was beautiful. "It looks perfect," he whispered, beaming.

"I won't take it out," she vowed, squeezing his hands again. "Not even if my brothers work themselves into a frenzy over it. I don't care what they think. Not anymore. I want to be with you, Fili." It was a hard decision to make. She loved Nori and Dori dearly, and had ever been one to defer to their protective efforts, but this was different. She'd found something she wasn't willing to part with. Even if this was rather new and frightening. It would have been more so if it had come before all this business with Smaug had transpired. A brush with death tends to (at least temporarily) sweep away other, lesser fears.
"What are you two doing?" Billa shuffled into the tent, looking tired, but no longer exhausted. Sleeping for a day and a half had helped on that count. The hobbit watched them, feeling bemused and a little pleased as both dwarves turned a delicate shade of brick, but didn't immediately lurch away from one another.

"Just... exchanging gifts," Fili muttered, glancing at Ori and trying to swallow a grin.

"Exchanging?" Ori managed, glancing between Fili and Billa. "Oh. Oh, yes. Silly me." She untied a little knitted circlet of yarn from her wrist (she hadn't had enough left to make anything else from it), and pressed it into Fili's hand. "I know it's... not much. Not nearly equal to your gift. But it's something." She smiled a bit sheepishly, settling onto her seat again to continue with his massage.

"His feet are hurt," she said, by way of an explanation, wiping down one foot with the towel and moving to the other. She wasn't sure why she felt she needed to explain--surely Billa could see, plain as day, the necessity. "I mean... I don't know much about healing or anything, but Oin said that l-"

Just then, Kili burst in, looking concerned and uneasy. "Fee, there's a... a man outside." He spoke in an anxious whisper. "Wants to talk to the 'Heir of Durin,' he says. Guess that means you." He glanced back at the tent door and swallowed. "He doesn't look very happy. Downright hostile, actually. Didn't say much."

Just then, Kili burst in, looking concerned and uneasy. "Fee, there's a... a man outside." He spoke in an anxious whisper. "Wants to talk to the 'Heir of Durin,' he says. Guess that means you." He glanced back at the tent door and swallowed. "He doesn't look very happy. Downright hostile, actually. Didn't say much."

Fili swapped anxious looks with Ori, then nodded to his brother. "I'll be there in a minute." A man, asking for the Heir of Durin? They had probably assumed that Thorin was dead. "Ori, help me get my boots on. We can finish this later." The happy glow from moments before was gone. With a quick twist, he tied the yarn bracelet around his wrist and reached for his coat.

Ori had to help him out into the sunlight. It was late afternoon, and his legs hurt like no one's business with each step. "Alright, Kee. Who wanted to see me?"

A dark-skinned man with rings in his ears and a shorn head appeared around the corner of the tent. His face was grim, and there was undisguised hatred in his black eyes as he stared down at the blond. "You are 'Heir of Durin,' yes?" He spoke slowly, and his accent betrayed his origins in the
South. A merchant, Kili thought. Not a rich man, by any means. His simple, tattered clothing attested to that.

When Fili nodded, the man drew a step nearer, arms crossed, gaze never faltering. He trembled a little, so intense was his focus. "Heir of Durin, from the Northern Mountain... did you bring the great beast upon the Men of the Lake?" His voice was low, half furious disgust, half exhaustion. "Is it so, what I hear? What they tell me? Did you bring the dragon?" Fire seemed to blaze up from the dark depths of his eyes, and his fingers tightened around his bare arms as he leaned expectantly toward Fili.

The young dwarf shivered slightly, but straightened, squaring his shoulders and facing the man without apparent fear. "I fail to see what that has to do with you, even if I did." Perhaps this wasn't the smartest thing to say, but Fili spoke with an even tone. "Who are you, and why have you come?"

The man moved a step closer, and Kili's hand shifted to the dagger at his belt. "You ask me who I am, little dwarf?" He scoffed, and it was bitter. Mirthless. "Why do you not ask who they were? My wife, who was to bear my child. Both taken by fire from the beast brought down on us like a curse from Morjaku." He was shaking now, though with rage or grief Kili couldn't tell. "I come to find the truth of your guilt. It is the Southron way to ask him that stands accused for his own story... before judgment. What do you say, Heir of Durin?"

Fili felt the man's words like a punch to the gut. The Lake Men. The traders from the South. The Elves. Who else was suffering now because of what they'd done?

"I am Fili, son of Dis, daughter of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain. The blood of Smaug's victims is on my hands."

"Fili." Billa strode forward, scowling in spite of the tears in her eyes. The blond started, realizing that she must have followed them out of the tent. "Heir of Durin or no, none of this is your fault. I was the one that woke the stupid beast."

"Billa, it's my duty to accept responsibility-"

"No it isn't!" Tears were streaming down the hobbit's face now, and she dashed them away angrily. "It's my fault these people are suffering, it's my fault their loved ones are dead!"

"It would have happened regardless of who went in, Billa," Fili snapped furiously. "Let me do my job." Ori had ducked back inside when the Southron had first shown himself, and unable to stand Fili's ridiculous shouldering of all the blame, she burst out again, firmly taking his arm.

"Don't do that, Fili. It wasn't your fault. You can't do this. It's not... right."

The Southron was only momentarily thrown off by all these little folk coming out of the woodwork. He sighed, shutting his eyes. "You still have your woman, I see. Fate does not smile on the innocent. My Zaria died, burned alive in the inn with countless others. The one who did this--all his people--they go unpunished." He shook his head, opening his eyes again. "No. I cannot allow it. For my Zaria, for my child who will never be, I will see that justice is done." He pointed at Fili. "You, Heir of Durin. You, too, will lose what is most precious to you... before the end."

The Southron, eyes suspiciously wet, turned away, moving with slow, heavy strides back through the warren of tents.

"Wait right there!" Fili felt a thrill of terror and shook Ori off, taking several painful steps forward. "If you desire a bid for revenge you shall have it, but not against those who had no choice in this. Ori
is just as innocent as those who lost their lives--she nearly shared in their fate. If you will claim your vengeance, do so with honor. Fight me, if you will."

"Fili, no!" Billa gaped at Fili, then looked pleadingly at his brother. "Kili, stop him!"

Kili grabbed his brother's shoulder firmly and pulled him back. "No. Fee, you can't. I won't let you, and you know Uncle wouldn't."

The Southron halted, halfway turning. "Would that I had such a choice. To die instead of she I loved." He forged ahead, rounding the corner of the nearest tent and out of sight. Ori's eyes were wide as she looked between Billa, Kili, and Fili, too shocked to speak.

"You can't take her from me! I won't let you!" Fili's voice cracked, but he let his brother hold him back. It felt like his heart might explode. Looking back at Ori was possibly the hardest thing he might have done. Taken away. Hurt. Killed. This Southron's vengeance frightened him. It wasn't until Billa stomped on his foot that he realized the hobbit was yelling at him. Not that he heard a word she said. He was sure several of his blisters on that foot had popped, and his eyes watered with pain.

"... idiot I've ever met! What'd you mean by trying to throw away your life like that?! I swear, the line of Durin is soft in the head, to the last dwarf!"

"Don't you see, Fili?" Kili added from behind Billa. "You're only making this worse. He wants to hurt you, and you're helping him." Ori had collapsed into a little ball on the ground, muttering about how she'd "ruined everything," and Kili thought he might have kicked her if he weren't too decent for such things. Everyone was being so melodramatic.

"Look," he said, pulling his brother aside. "He wants to destroy you. Make you jump at every noise, see a killer in every shadow. Drive you mad. Maybe he comes for her, maybe he doesn't. Either way, you need to get yourself under control. Approach this reasonably. Like Uncle would. He'd never lose his head over something like this. You know he wouldn't."

As Kili's fingers dug painfully into his brother's arms, and Billa forced Ori to her feet, Fili had a moment of most curious clarity. On the one hand, he was still terrified and more than slightly distraught over the thought that this trader, this Southron merchant, might find a way to take Ori away from him so shortly after he'd gotten her back. On the other hand, Kili's disapproving gaze was like an anchor, like a ray of lantern light, like a lance driving through the darkness. Uncle wouldn't fall apart like this.

Fili nodded. He wouldn't fall apart. He would be the heir his Uncle needed him to be, now that Erebor was theirs again. That thought came like lightning on a clear day. Fili looked at his brother. "Erebor... is ours."

"Darn tootin' it is." Billa shot him a determined look. Whatever she'd said to Ori, it must have had some effect. At least, the female was no longer curled in a terrified ball on the ground. The halfling continued. "And after I get things sorted out here, I'm going back."

"Don't be ridiculous, Miss Baggins." The heavy tread of a grown dwarf and a tired man heralded the arrival of Balin and Bard, both of whom looked tired, but satisfied. "We're all going."

The last winter star was just vanishing from the chill morning sky when Thorin, King Under the Mountain, roused his single, portly escort. With a certain amount of clanking, mostly lost in the icy wind gnawing away at the stony path, the two cut an exhausted, though splendid figure in the golden light of dawn, clad in shining mail and plate armor taken from the horde of the worm who would
never return. Oin had remained with the wounded, as was his duty, but Thorin's heart was too restless to wait any longer. And so a day of travel had turned into two, and they were growing weak with hunger and thirst, as most of the dwindling food and water had been left with those who'd remained behind. Still, Thorin set a dogged pace for himself, and Bombur was forced to keep up or be left behind.

Thorin's face was grim, his eyes hard. The dwarven-made sword at his side chimed in time with his steps, and was the only noise to be heard between haunting gusts of cold, moist wind. Smaug had not returned. Nor had anyone else. Billa was safe--Thorin had no choice but to trust Balin on this matter. Fili, Kili, Ori: of their disposition he was less sure. As the dragon had not returned, was it too much to hope that he'd been slain? Had the Lake Men succeeded where their ancestors had failed? Unless the worm had truly grown fat and slow as the odd wishful fancy suggested, it seemed impossible.

"D'ya think Fili made it to Laketown?" Bombur's wheezing voice pulled him from his thoughts. He glanced back, but didn't slow.

"At the pace he set for himself? And with no food or water?" Thorin shook his head. "I don't dare to hope."

Bombur's plump face seemed to sag. He'd been hoping Thorin would speak some encouragement to him. Not that Thorin had ever been much for encouragement. Inspiring, sure, but not encouraging. Wheezing and puffing, he toiled after Thorin in silence once more, absently wishing that Bofur were with them.

The loose, gritty dirt and patches of gravel made unpleasant grating, scratching noises as the wind raked across the ground, and crunched wherever a dwarven boot landed solidly upon it. Over the land and in the sky, thrush, sparrow, lark and raven gave voice to their praise for the new day, but neither of the tired dwarves seemed to notice in the least. Bombur was falling behind again by midmorning, jogging in spurts to stay with his king, and lagging again as soon as he tried to catch his breath. The previous afternoon's rhythm reestablished itself, and the puffing and blowing of the fat dwarf came at regular intervals as he struggled to keep up.

The journey, indeed, was so monotonous that one could have said they walked in a daze, on and on, one foot before the other, step breathe step jingle. So much so, indeed, that when the first of the blue banners of the Lake Men, then the green banners of the Woodland Realm fluttered in the dell between two hills some half-mile distant, neither Thorin nor his companion seemed to see them. They may have bypassed the group entirely if there were not a long, brassy horn call from one of Bard's men.

"Look! Over there!" Bombur's irrepressible spirits rose as he pointed to the group, an entirely unnecessary, but satisfying gesture.

The horn had been Balin's idea, to wind it at intervals so that Thorin, should he be listening, would hear their approach to the Mountain and not see them as an invading force. When at last Thorin and Bombur came within hailing distance, a cheer went up from the ragged Lake Men, and a small, curly-haired figure darted out from the neat ranks of elves that had accompanied them, led by none other than their fair-haired prince.

"Thorin, if you ever do anything like that again I swear I'll kill you myself and save you the trouble!" Billa hit Thorin hard enough to knock him over, not seeming to care that he was in full armor or that she was grabbing fistfuls of chain mail, rather than fabric. "Confusticate you dwarves. I thought I’d never see you again."
Thorin didn't know quite how to react. For the moment, he merely held Billa at arms' length, looking beyond her at the assembled armies and their flowing banners. The Elves. Thranduil's folk, no less. Suddenly, the idea that they might have slain the dragon themselves and were now advancing on the Mountain to lay claim to whatever portion of the treasure they felt they deserved was running rampant in his mind. He stood a long moment, looking two different kinds of shocked, before he finally leaned down and acknowledged Billa. "You're alive. I owe Balin a great debt. But," he indicated the armies at her back, "these elves... They slew the Worm? Smaug is dead?"

Kili and Fili had emerged from the ranks of the Lake Men, and their smiles quickly faded. It was clear Thorin wasn't nearly as relieved to see them as they'd thought he would be. Either that, or the relief he felt was being overshadowed by other concerns--worse, soured by other concerns. Kili had abandoned his cane and was moving with only a slight limp, despite Tauriel's insistence that he still needed it.

"He's not happy to see the Elves," he whispered to his brother. "I guess I should've seen that coming."

Fili grimaced and glanced over his shoulder at the impassive elves. They had, however, done wonders for Kili's leg. There was no better healer than an elf. "Well, whether he's happy to see them or not, they're here. And if they weren't, I think we'd all be worse off."

Billa was somewhat disconcerted by Thorin's standoffishness, but tried to push that aside in favor of grinning at him. "Don't be so paranoid, Thorin. The Elves are here at my request, and no, they didn't kill Smaug. Bard did." Her grin faded at the thought of Bard and the price he'd nearly paid, the price his people had paid. How much the weight of those hundreds of lives weighed on her. She felt as though she must be pressed into the ground by the responsibility for their spilled blood.

Bombur greeted the hobbit much more enthusiastically, encasing her in a crushing hug as he swept her off her furry feet. "You're alive, Miss Baggins, you're alive!"

Thorin frowned, still more puzzled than pleased. He stole a hostile glance at Legolas, then returned his gaze to Billa. "You... asked them to come? You went back to the Woodland Realm? To Thranduil?"

For a long moment, dwarf and hobbit looked at one another. As Bombur set her down awkwardly, trying to remove himself before Thorin turned that piercing, questioning look on him, the halfling stumbled. For a beat, Billa seemed almost scared. Then her expression firmed and she lifted her chin determinedly. "Yes, I went to Thranduil and asked for his help. And he gave it. I did what I thought was right. And what would save the most people. Thranduil and his kin have pledged to help rebuild Laketown."

"And happy we are to accept their aid." Bard looked more careworn than he had when Thorin had seen him last, and held a full water canteen in one hand. "Glad to see you're alive, Mountain King."

Thorin's frown eased a little. He gestured to Bombur, and Bard offered the canteen to him instead. "So." Thorin shifted, crossing his arms. "You slew the dragon. It seems you've avenged Lord Girion after all, though by the grim faces of your men, I guess a heavy price was paid. For that, I am truly sorry. It was never my intent to rouse Smaug to wrath, or to wake him at all. But words such as these mean little enough, I suppose." He sighed, shaking his head slightly at the state of the men who had followed Bard, most of whom looked every bit as homeless and woebegone as they were. "I promised a fair share of my grandfather's hoard to your people, and I mean to honor that promise. But send the Elves away first. This matter is not their concern, and," he continued in an undertone, "I fear Thranduil has other motives at heart than pure, open-handed generosity. He has twice dealt deceitfully with my folk, and I will not treat with him--or you, if he is with you. Send him away.
"That is all I ask."

"Thor-rin." Billa's tone was distinctly disapproving. Bard, who'd already signaled to the others to rest and break out food gave Thorin a frown, his already grim and tired face taking on a new look, one of frustration.

"Well, you'll have to treat with them, Oakenshield. Without Thranduil's folk, a sight fewer of my people would have survived this travesty that wasn't supposed to happen. I warned you before you set out that this would end in disaster, and now not only must I delay grieving for my daughter, but I must lead the rest of my people while they grieve." Bard snorted, and waved a warrior forward who'd stopped uncertainly, carrying one of the ration sacks. He hurried to deposit the food at Bard's side. The bowman hooked his foot around the sack and pushed it toward Thorin. "Whether you like it or not," he continued, "the blood of my people and the destruction of our homes is on your hands, and the Elvenking has pledged to help us rebuild, and keep us sheltered and alive in the interim. The least you can do is to give me the thrice-cursed gold I earned by putting an Arrow through the dragon's heart."

Balin approached with a weary expression, foot-sore but whole. He paused when he was within earshot, and gazed at Bard's back with something like disappointment.

Pity, guilt, and affronted pride warred within Thorin a long moment as he stared up into the bowman's dark eyes. Was he being unreasonable, insisting the very people who had unjustly held him captive some short weeks ago left his presence? Was he not King Under the Mountain? Would Thror have tolerated this for an instant? But he felt also the weight of responsibility as surely as Bard's words indicated--lives lost, homes destroyed. Things that he'd promised wouldn't happen.

Thorin couldn't blame the man for being short with him; would he behave any differently if his own kin had been needlessly slain as a result of Bard's actions? All these considerations aside, Thorin knew he was in absolutely no position to argue at this particular moment. Meeting Balin's disappointed gaze, he sighed, reaching for a small pouch tied at his belt. It jingled a little as he offered it to Bard. "Emeralds, sapphires, and diamonds. Do with them what you will. The rest of what you are owed will be given you in time. For now, I wish only to regroup and return to the Mountain as soon as I may. Your escort," he shifted his gaze to the men at Bard's back, "is appreciated, but unnecessary."

"I think I'll determine what is and isn't necessary." Bard's tone was edged with anger as he accepted Thorin's payment with little grace. "There've been orcs in this area, and we have injured with us." Bard turned to look back at the group. "Kili, round up the others. Your gracious uncle doesn't appreciate our company."

"Why do I get the feeling that's an understatement?" Fili glanced at his brother and sighed. "Come on, Ori." Several elves, at a silent command from Legolas, moved forward, most carrying packs of supplies and small casks of water. Two were supporting Tauriel, who looked rather as though she deeply resented the fact that she couldn't walk efficiently on her own. And, though Legolas watched her go, she didn't look back at him. It was doubtful they'd spoken at all since their meeting in Laketown.

Thorin snorted at Bard's words, but held his peace. Now was clearly not the time to incite further conflict. When Dwalin returned and Thorin had a sizeable army at his back--that's when he'd no longer have to tolerate this. He glanced at Billa, and felt some of his haughty resolve weaken. He'd treated her coldly, and he could sense her disappointment in him. Finally, clearing his throat, he extended a hand to her.

"I didn't mean..." he started in an undertone, "I truly had no intention of... coming off the way I did."
It... it's just these Elves--I don't trust Thranduil. I have to keep the welfare of my people in mind before I dispense the Royal Treasury with reckless abandon. Rebuilding costs for Erebor must first be taken into account and..." He trailed off with a sigh. "Never mind all that. I just..." He squeezed her hand gently. "I want you to know I'm truly very glad to see you."

Bard spoke before Billa could, his expression as incredulous as it was frustrated. "You mean to say I won't be getting the funds to rebuild my home until after you repair your... mountain?" It was abundantly clear that "mountain" hadn't been the first word that came to his mind.

Balin stepped in swiftly. "We do have our own folk to look after-

The bowman sincerely looked like he might chuck the little bag of gems right back at Thorin. He contained himself, however, with apparent difficulty. "There are fourteen of you. I have hundreds to feed and shelter, and winter is coming on. Do you expect me to live off of the generosity of the Elves and twiddle my thumbs while you dig up more shinies for your hoard and bring another dragon down on us, is that it?"

Billa turned a scandalized look on Bard, craning her neck to look into his face. "That's not what he said!"

"Next time, how about he can lose his wife and daughter, and I'll sit on a mountain of gold and gloat?" The man was spitting mad, quivering with grief and anger. It was, perhaps unsurprisingly, Legolas that put a calming hand on Bard's shoulder.

"We should go," said the elf quietly, not looking at Thorin.

Thorin stiffened, clenching his jaw, only just restraining himself from an equally hostile outburst. While his Company was this vulnerable, it didn't seem wise to fight fire with fire. "I'll give no more ear to your rancor. You've made your position very clear. Go your way, bargeman, and we will go ours." The Arkenstone seemed warm in the inner folds of his tunic, and he wondered at this. It had always been very cool to the touch in the past few days when he'd held it.

Ori, looking fearfully between her leader and the army she'd arrived with, moved to Fili's side and took his hand. Kili limped closer to Tauriel, looking confused. Would the elf be alright to go with them in her condition, without skilled healers to tend her? He swallowed nervously, glancing at Thorin. The elves that were supporting Tauriel released her when Legolas gave them a meaningful glance. Together, they and their prince escorted the furious Bard back to his own folk, sparing only the briefest of disgusted glances for Thorin. The armies began their retreat, obvious discontent in the ranks. They were going all the same, and this was a good thing, considering the alternative.

Fili's hand closed tighter around Ori's as he led her toward the others. "Just stay close," he murmured. "I'll make sure you don't get mixed up in this. Whatever it is." It was as though Bard's madness, whatever spawned it, was contagious. Thorin was livid, and Billa was speaking very quickly in an undertone. He hoped she was trying to soothe his anger, rather than get him to explain it. He joined Kili by Tauriel, who was explaining that, in spite of her somewhat wild and untidy appearance, she was fine, and could walk on her own, just not very quickly.

"You may not have a choice, knowing Uncle," Fili pointed out soberly.

"Well, he won't have a choice at all." Tauriel's tone was dry, a faint smile in her green eyes. "My speed makes little difference to my destination. Somehow I doubt the Mountain will outrun me."

Billa glanced at 'the boys' and sighed. Thorin was still frowning after the disappearing armies, and hadn't yet responded to her. "Look, Thorin, I won't pretend to know what's going on, or what put
you in such a temper, but don't you think it'd be a good idea to get inside before it starts snowing or something? It's frightfully cold out here." She couldn't say she was pleased with his treatment of Bard, but she assumed that he had a good reason hidden away somewhere. At least, thought the hobbit as she took the water canteen from Bombur and pressed it into Thorin's hands, she hoped he had a good reason.

Thorin turned away from the plume of grey dust that was the withdrawing armies, blinking rapidly, as though he'd walked into a bright light. He nodded and took a long drink from the canteen. He handed it back to Bombur before turning his gaze on Billa. Wordlessly, he unfastened the mantle he wore about his shoulders and wrapped it gently around the halfling, drawing her into his side and moving forward along the stony path.

Billa stayed close to his side, following his lead, stretching her legs to keep up with his long strides. She didn't say anything. She couldn't think of anything else to say. It was as though a great, black chasm had suddenly opened in front of her where that had once been solid, flat ground. It was confusing and frightening, how Thorin was acting. How Bard was acting. Had the men of power all gone mad? The thought of madness made her shiver, and she shoved it ruthlessly aside. Smaug was dead. Thorin wouldn't go mad.

Thorin did think, in passing, that it was odd for Billa to be so quiet, seeing as she usually had plenty to say on any given subject, but he chalked it up to tiredness. At any rate, he was content to have her again at his side, safe, where a few days before he'd thought she might never be again. It was enough. He glanced over his shoulder at Balin, whose snowy head was downcast. Perhaps he was tired, too. "You have my thanks. I know what I asked of you was... difficult."

Balin lifted his head with what seemed to be a great effort, and gave Thorin a very faint smile, as though to say "it was nothing." Still, he said nothing. They walked quietly on, and the only sounds were the moan of the wind, the crunch of their footsteps, and the clink and rustle of the heavy provisions they each carried, save Tauriel, who was too weak to do so.

Ori leaned into Fili, shivering a little, though not from the cold. "If ever I get a share of the treasure, I'll give mine to help Bard rebuild Laketown. It's... it's the least I can do." Fili glanced down at her and nodded in agreement. Bard had earned far more than the tiny bag of gems he'd gotten today.

Kili, meanwhile, had taken Tauriel's arm to support her. "Whatever pace you set, I'm staying with you. I doubt I could move much faster than you anyway." He smiled encouragingly, aware she must now be feeling rather unwelcome in the face of Thorin's undisguised hostility toward her race.

Tauriel leaned lightly and gratefully on Kili's shoulder. He was just the right height. "Thank you, Kili. And what about you two?" She noted how close together Fili and Ori kept to one another, and couldn't quite hide a smile. "Will you walk with us?"

Ori nodded quickly, grateful for Tauriel's friendliness in the wake of the hostility she'd just witnessed. When she and Fili moved up beside the elf and her limping dwarven companion, she watched them a moment, looking concerned. "Maybe," she whispered, nudging Fili, "you should take her other arm. Your brother's not very steady on his feet right now."

Fili nodded slightly and inserted himself under the elf's free arm. "How's your leg, Kee?" The blond eyed his brother, feeling a little silly for asking, but craving Kili's answer all the same. Kili grunted, beginning to puff a little with his exertions.

"It's fine. Wouldn't matter if it wasn't, anyway." He forced a chuckle. "Oh, almost forgot. Hadn't you better tell Uncle about... what happened? That Southerner merchant?" He hated to bring it up again, and he could nearly feel Ori shudder as the words crossed his lips, but it was a subject that couldn't
simply be swept beneath the proverbial rug.

Fili valiantly suppressed a shiver and gave Ori’s hand a comforting squeeze. "When we get to—" He was undoubtedly about to say "the Mountain," but the words never left his mouth. The blond was interrupted by a long haloo, echoing some distance to their collective left. There were three dwarves waving to them. Nori, Bifur, and Oin, all far from the place Thorin had ordered ("strongly suggested," by Nori's retelling) them to stay. Bifur, despite having one arm in a sling, silently relieved Bombur of some of the provision sacks he was carrying.

"I tried to stop 'em," Oin grumped, frowning at Nori, who was eyeing his sister suspiciously, "they jus' wouldn't listen."

Kili grinned, forgetting, for a moment, the troubling topic at hand, and Ori, too, seemed pulled from the shadow of the previous conversation (though Nori's gaze was making her uncomfortable). Thorin shook his head in wonder, but said nothing. It certainly wouldn't have done any good to reprimand them, and in all truth, he'd suspected they might follow him.

Oin was still frowning unhappily. "I told 'em they were in no condition to go after ya. Ya'd think they were both deaf."

"Next time, try chaining them to the Mountain," Kili suggested helpfully, smirking. Oin harrumphed, unamused. His frown eased a bit, though, when he realized the Company was--barring Dwalin's party--again intact. That was truly something he hadn't dared hope for. Balin quickly filled the newcomers in on what had taken place in Laketown and the confrontation afterward, and the dwarves' expressions of joy were quickly dimmed. This didn't bode well at all. It was clear Bard and the elvenfolk were far from finished with Thorin--and the hoard beneath the Mountain.

In spite of all this, they divvied up the supply packs a bit more evenly and went on their way. The sun winked down at them through sparse cloud-cover, and the shadow of Bard’s anger and Thranduil’s presence, though it never left them, seemed to lighten as they went. Even Nori was distracted from his suspicions, and limped beside Kili, seeming more or less cheerful as they went along.

The day passed in relative cheer, and they moved on at a gentle pace as the sun dipped toward the horizon. Tauriel, though she tried not to lean on Kili too much, was putting far more strain on him than she ought, and knew it. The further they walked, the more her back burned, and the weaker she felt. At last, she came to an unsteady halt.

"I don't think I can make it. Not tonight."

Nori shot the elf a startled glance. "What? An elf, admitting weakness? I've seen it all, now. What's the matter? Can't keep up with a couple injured dwarves?"

Kili, irritable and exhausted as he was, had little patience for such talk, and turned on Nori with a glare. "Shut up. Your sister would've died if this elf hadn't saved her, and this is how you thank her?" He was breathing heavily, and there was a tense, strained look about his face now.

Thorin glanced back and paused. If he was tired, he was doing an excellent job of hiding it. He nodded at Oin, and the old healer muttered under his breath, but turned and shuffled over to have a look at Tauriel. Kili was still engaged in a stare-down with Nori, and Ori was clinging tightly to Fili's arm and wishing she could vanish.

"He's right, Nori," she admitted. "She did save me. I... I owe her a life-debt."
Tauriel knelt silently with Fili's help and didn't protest when the old healer lifted her shirt to have a look at her back. At first, Oin simply stared.

"When did ya get these?" he asked at length.

"When the dragon attacked Laketown."

Oin whistled between his teeth, looking impressed. The wounds, one very long and obviously deep, and the other shorter and shallower, were completely closed and healed over. Though they seemed inflamed and painful, they looked like very fresh scars, rather than healing wounds.

"So the legends are true." Oin let her shirt fall back into place.

Tauriel glanced at Kili and shrugged. "Some of them. It still hurts. The internal tears are still mending, so breathing and walking are still difficult."

Nori finally broke off glaring at Kili to glance at the elf. He caught a glimpse of her scarred back, and shot a look at Ori. A life-debt. His eyes lingered on the silver bead in her hair, but after a moment, he shrugged.

"Well, I guess she's really part of the Company, then. Not a one of us doesn't owe someone a life-debt anymore."

While Oin tended Tauriel, Kili hobbled tiredly over to Thorin. Forcing a half-smile for the bundled-up halfling beneath his uncle's arm, he took a moment to catch his breath. "I'm not going to be able to... go on any further tonight." He patted a hand against his injured leg for emphasis. "Sorry, Uncle."

"It won't make much difference." Thorin rolled his shoulders, fighting the strange feeling of unease at the prospect of prolonging his time spent away from the Mountain, at being unable to defend its wealth from whoever might waltz in and take it. "This isn't the best place to make camp, but it will have to do." It was growing very cold now, and they were ill-equipped for a night on the frozen ground, but they were used to such hardship by now. That didn't make it by any means pleasant.

Billa tried to think of something to say. Wrapped in Thorin's mantle, she was reasonably warm, but she wondered how cold it was going to get tonight. And what about the others? Would they all be sleeping in a huddle tonight? She found the idea strangely appealing. That, and being back in Thorin's arms again. She'd been afraid she'd never feel him again. The halfling closed her eyes for a moment. She could still find nothing to say. It was as though her silence thus far was a weight against a door that held her usually verbose nature, and the longer she was silent, the harder it was to speak.

Bombur and Oin tried to build a fire. Then Nori tried. But the stiff wind and the lack of convenient firewood made them ultimately give up the attempt. Tauriel stayed very close to Kili, shivering violently at odd intervals.

"Don't suppose Bard gave us any blankets, do you?" Kili's hope was spoken through chattering teeth. As hardy as dwarves were, he didn't exactly have the thickest skin of those present, and he was too worn down to cope with both his exhaustion and the cold. The young dwarf rummaged in one of the packs, his fingers so numb they all felt like thumbs, and finally brushed his hand over a rough, woolly texture at the very bottom beneath the bundled food. Thank Mahal.

Relieved, he tugged the blanket out and wrapped it tightly around Tauriel's shivering shoulders, pressing the ends of it into her stiff fingers. "You'll be alright, Tauriel," he whispered. "I'll keep you..."
warm. Of course, if it gets any colder, I may be stealing half of that blanket." He winked at her, trying, as ever, to keep the mood light.

Tauriel snorted, still shivering. "Oh just get under here." She opened the blanket to Kili and pulled him against her body, eager to get warm.

Thorin was rumbling out instructions now, as evidently it wasn't quite clear to everyone they'd have to take some precautions or risk freezing to death during the night. "Bundle up best you can. Sleep back to back. Shared body heat will keep you alive. And keep your fingers and toes covered; frostbite will claim them if you don't."

Ori glanced at Nori doubtfully, then spoke softly to Fili. "I... I don't think my brother will be happy about us... sleeping in close quarters. I don't care what he thinks, but I don't want to cause more trouble."

"It wasn't in his best interests to let us die out here," Thorin murmured. He knew Bard was a good man, but following their last exchange, he was not someone Thorin currently wished to deal with. Not until he'd mastered himself, at least. And left the elvenhost behind. That was, as far as Thorin was concerned, a fair request. "Come, Billa." He led her over to where the rest of the dwarves were bedding down together, shivering in their blankets and trying to warm up.

Kili was (understandably) delighted by Tauriel's act, and snuggled into her soft body, doing his best to spread the warmth between them. If he weren't cold and achy and exhausted, he might have had other things on his mind, but right now, he limited his focus. "Your hands are so cold," he whispered, taking both of them in his own. A minute later, after he'd begun to warm up, he chuckled quietly to himself. At least cold nights weren't all bad.

"All of me is cold," Tauriel pointed out dryly, but she was smiling. Kili was very warm. Resting her chin on his shoulder, she slowed her breathing, feeling the painful, bone-deep shivers gradually leave her. The scars on her back ached, but she figured that was just over-exertion.

"Whatever it is you're thinking," she murmured, "stop. You look like the cat that ate the canary. Keep it up and your uncle will notice for sure."

It was strange, thought the elleth, feeling Ori curl very cautiously against her back. She found Kili no more attractive now than she ever had, but... something had changed. He was somehow closer to her heart now, in a way that felt very natural and right. Tauriel was content for the moment to acknowledge the change without probing the depths of it. There would be time for exploring and questioning later.

"I wasn't--I mean, it wasn't what you..." Kili spluttered, embarrassed. He cleared his throat lightly and schooled his face into what he thought was a neutral expression. "It's nothing. Just... thought of something funny. And forgot it already. Happens a lot." He sighed lightly, rolling over a little. "Hang
on. Would you look at those stars?" Sure enough, through the gaps in the cloud cover, tiny, twinkling points of white light were beginning to appear. Kili could scarcely believe it had been so long since he’d seen them last. In Laketown, the perpetual fog—thick as rich soup—hung over the water, all but blocking them from view. Here, in the thinner airs, it was a different story.

"Downright pretty, I think," the young dwarf mused, puffing out a wisp of white mist.

Tauriel tilted her head back, scanning the heavens. The faint starlight glimmered silver in her jewel-bright eyes, and she murmured something in her own tongue. When she rested her chin on the dwarf's shoulder again, she was blinking rapidly, her eyes oddly wet. "Yes. Beautiful." The words came out in a soft whisper, and the elleth's heart seemed to beat a little harder against Kili's back.

Thorin tried to ignore the whispering coming from the general direction of the elf and his nephew. He was fairly certain nothing would come of it, but Kili's lovestruck antics were beginning to annoy. "Warm enough, Billa?" he asked softly, tucking another corner of the blanket around the halfling's tiny form, where she lay nestled beneath his arm. He'd removed his armor and mail, but kept his sword buckled at his side. They'd been ambushed once along this road during the night; he aimed to be better prepared should it happen again. With this many wounded among them, though, one handy sword might prove a negligible precaution. Nori and Bifur had been given the first watch—set to watch in a pair so they could keep each other warm, and they sat back to back, listening to the familiar chorus of snores as each one that began vied to drown out the last.

"Sounds like a pack o' mules," Nori muttered, and threw a stick he'd been fiddling with off into the nearby brush.

Billa listened to Bifur grunt his agreement to Nori's statement and smiled faintly. "Yes. What about you?" The halfling cast him a concerned look. The idea of waking up to find that her mate had frostbite... Billa shuddered. It was enough to give her nightmares. Not that it took much anymore.

Thorin snorted lightly. "As long as you're warm, that's all that matters to me." He drew the hobbit a little tighter into his side, settling into the cold ground. Mahal may have made the dwarves from stone, but none of them particularly enjoyed sleeping on it.

"It's not all that matters to me." Billa spoke hardly even a whisper, as though she were half-hoping he wouldn't hear her. Still, there was just as much truth in her words as there was in the stars above and the stone below. She wanted him to know that she cared about him just as much as he cared about her, but she had less power to show it.

Thorin merely grunted in reply. His exhaustion was definitely beginning to catch up with him. It washed over him like a wave of forgetfulness, and swept him off. His burglar beside him again, and the Company safe. Barring the exchange with Bard and what he'd learned of the destruction of Laketown, things were as good as could be hoped. His sleep was as close to peaceful as it had been in a long while, though lurking in the shadows of his dreams were fears of darker things to come.

"You alright, Tauri?" Kili had caught the sheen of tears in the elf's eyes and was concerned. He certainly hadn't meant to make her cry. Was she thinking of home now, longing for what she'd lost? "I know the sound of my voice is moving, but..." He forced a chuckle, nudging her lightly. Bad humor, maybe, but he didn't know what else to say.

Tauriel closed her eyes, taking a deep breath before wincing slightly. "It's... not your fault, Kili. I... Elves love the light, but we love starlight the best. It is... pure."

"Pure?" Kili said amidst a yawn. "Maybe. I always thought stars were cold and far away. Not like the sun, or firelight. Those are warm and... friendly." His eyelids were beginning to droop.
Tauriel considered trying to explain starsong, but thought, after a moment, that even if the dwarf had been fully awake, he still wouldn’t understand. So instead, she held her tongue and nestled a little closer to Kili, tucking her slender arms between their bodies for warmth.

The Company passed into exhausted sleep, huddled together and snoring lustily. As the stars spun silently overhead, dreams filtered through worn-out minds and battered limbs slowly recouped from various forms of abuse and overwork.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for not posting last night. *cringe* As it turned out, I ended up driving from noon until 10:00 last night (including an hour for lunch break) and when I finally arrived at my destination, I had no wi-fi. Tragic, isn't it? Anywho, so I'm posting a chapter today, and I'll post again tomorrow, and then we'll be back on schedule. All's well that ends well, right?
The morning was icily cold and blindingly bright. Blankets crackled with thick frost as the dwarves roused themselves, and tiny icicles hung from some of the thicker beards in the group. Bombur's were particularly funny, dangling in a glittering row from his mustache. Fili noticed his brother was having some trouble making his leg work properly, and he wondered if the cold had worked harm on Kili's injury.

While the blond worried about his brother, Tauriel was having similar trouble with her back. Despite the relative warmth of their sleeping arrangement, the cold had penetrated much deeper than she had ever thought possible. It was as if ice and flame had decided to have a monstrous little baby, and it had taken up residence in the fresh scars on the elleth's back.

"Whew." Kili shook the sheet of ice off his and Tauriel's blanket, and scraped off whatever remnants managed to cling to the coarse wool. "We should do this again sometime, eh?" He grinned at the elf, folding the blanket into a small square and tossing it to Bombur, who had the pack.

Tauriel arched her back and hissed softly in discomfort. "I'd rather not, if it's all the same to you." She gave Kili a wry smile. "Unless you mean 'not freezing to death,' in which case I agree completely. Indeed, let's not freeze to death every night for the rest of our lives. I think that would be most pleasant."

Fili gave the elf a strange look, but didn't ask her to clarify. "Kee, you alright? Ori?"

"Quit hovering, Blondie. They'll let you know if death comes upon them in the night." Nori dealt Fili a light punch to the arm, hardly more than a love-tap, a warning look in his dark eyes.

Kili glanced at his brother. "Really, Fee. You think I'd freeze to death without your permission?" He nudged him lightly. When Fili glanced down at his leg, Kili realized it was the healing arrow wound he was worried about. "Oh. Nah, it's fine, Fee. Really. Bit sore, but nothing I can't handle." He patted it a bit too hard and largely failed to conceal a wince.

Fili saw the wince and felt his own leg twinge with sympathetic pain. "Just don't push yourself too hard today, alright? I don’t want to drag you the rest of the way."
Oddly enough, the cold weather was very soothing to Ori's afflicted skin. Her face and hands were a lot less red than they had been (or at least, all but her cheeks, since she was blushing a little again), and seemed to be healing well. She tightened her scarf around her neck, and as she did, her hand brushed past the cold metal bead in her hair. Remembering, a smile spread across her face, and her eyes flicked to the little bracelet still tied around Fili's wrist. It made her heart quicken, thinking about it, but when she saw Nori turn to look at her again, the smile vanished. As happy as she was to see her brother, it was going to be more difficult having him around.

Fili helped the others as they sorted out who was carrying what and got ready to move, while Tauriel halfheartedly tried to convince Kili to let her carry some of the supplies.

"Not a chance," The young dwarf said, shaking his head firmly. "You'd just tire yourself out again and then where would we be? That said, if I faint along the way," he grinned cheekily, "you can carry me. Save me from being dragged by my heartless brother." He honestly hadn't set out that morning to be bucket of laughs. But away from the brooding chaos that had been Laketown and but a day's walk from the ancestral home of the dwarves--which he had yet to see--his mood was improving significantly.

Tauriel wrinkled her nose at him, but chuckled at his joke. Things seemed to be looking up. A new day, a new leaf.

Billa, for one reason or another, didn't want to come out of the blanket cocoon she'd slept in, and growled at Thorin when he tried to get her up. Somehow, he managed to coax her out of her blankets. Or coerce. Or trick. His methods might've been a bit less than fair, and involved him kissing her neck in a particularly ticklish spot until she no longer seemed interested in remaining in her cocoon. Or in being grumpy, for that matter. The rest of the Company occupied themselves in various ways whilst this was taking place, and made a great show of pretending not to notice. It's doubtful Thorin would've cared either way.

This affectionate display certainly made up for a great many things the halfling had seen in her sleep, and she seemed quite her talkative self again as they set off together. The mood of the Company was strangely improved, despite the bitter cold.

The trek back was, predictably, full of songs and stories and laughter. The absence of Bofur and Gloin was sorely felt as they swapped tall tales and sang ridiculous drinking songs. The day had warmed somewhat by the time they reached the ruined front entrance, though the energy of the Company hadn't yet flagged.

Kili gaped, wide-eyed, at the massive gates, which, flanked by mouldering statues of Thror, were as impressive, even in ruin, as any structure he'd ever seen. The sheer might it must've taken to smash through them reaffirmed to Kili just how fearsome Smaug had been, and he shivered a little as he remembered.

No secret door for them this time. Now they were returning to claim the long-lost mountain kingdom outright, marching straight through the front gates, the king, his heirs, and those most loyal to him. It was a far different feeling altogether than the first time they'd entered Erebor. In large part because there wasn't a fire-breathing dragon waiting for them.

"We have our work cut out for us," Balin remarked as they moved reverently into the main hall, dark but for the beam of light cutting through the entrance. What it illumined, though, was far from comforting. Piles of charred bones and armor littered the floor in and about long scores in the stone, and many a pillar had been toppled and lay in several crumbling pieces, each the size of a cottage.
"Not something you see every day," Kili murmured to himself, equal parts awed and discomfited.

The grandeur of the place, though greatly tarnished by heaps of rubble and gigantic claw-marks, was still quietly present in every sweeping archway, every vaulted ceiling, every pillar, whether upright or toppled. The scale of Erebor's entrance hall alone was staggering. It could have held the entirety of Laketown, albeit in a different shape than the floating city had taken before its destruction.

Billa stared up at the ceiling, which was so high as to nearly be out of sight. "Well... someone wanted to make an impression."

Balin turned his gaze on the halfling, not altogether liking her tone, which implied she didn’t truly appreciate the hall in which they stood. Rather than draw attention to it, however, he glanced at Thorin. "What's to be done first? It would take many days and many hands to remake the gates." For remade was what they needed. Smaug had bent and mutilated them to the point that repairing them would be quite as difficult as making new ones.

Thorin nodded grimly. "More hands than we have here. A massive undertaking, indeed, if they are to be remade properly. We have no draft animals to transport the reforged plates here for assembly either. No, the gates will have to wait. For defensive purposes, a barricade can be constructed quickly if we have need of it. The top priorities now are sorting of the treasure, and making some of the chambers habitable. When Dain arrives, there will be dwarves and ponies enough to begin some of the more difficult repairs."

Thorin's mind was full with planning. There was much to be done in the treasure chamber, and a short time in which to do it. One-fourteenth share of the hoard belonged to each member of the Company, and the remaining fourteenth share was all he would have with which to rebuild the kingdom and repay the Lake Men for their trouble. Having seen the treasure in all its magnitude, it would be a difficult process, the sorting. "Come on, then. Light the torches. It's a long way from here, and the path isn't easy. Watch your footing."

The Company did as they were told. The torches they carried through the great halls seemed a sad attempt by the light to retake this dark place. It felt very much as though the Mountain itself were resisting them, though the idea was simply ridiculous. In the door to the treasure chamber, Billa halted so suddenly she slipped out from under Thorin's arm. The others were forging ahead, enchanted and awed by the edge of the hoard they could see. Their torches seemed even more pathetic here, their light unable to reach even the top of the first, steep mound of precious metal and gems. Slowly the halfling shook her head.

"I'll... clean rooms to sleep in." She swallowed heavily and looked a bit like she might be sick. "I don't want anything to do with this. I don't want anything to do with this." Billa moved back into the shadows, away from the glittering hoard. She had no doubt Thorin or Balin would come show her the way. For now she was content to sit in darkness and pretend that tainted sea of misplaced value simply didn't exist.

Thorin turned away from the glittering hills of treasure, face lined with concern, and moved quietly to Billa's side, aware her seeming disgust might not be something she felt comfortable discussing in front of the others. Unless the look of distinct revulsion was a sign of illness? He couldn't imagine why seeing the treasure again would affect her so. "What's the matter? I'd hoped that you...." He trailed off, trying not to look disappointed, and didn't finish the thought. "If it's rest you need, there are guest chambers nearby that might still be mostly intact. I'll have Balin escort you there, if you like."

"I don't need rest. I'll work, just like everyone else." Billa hesitated, meeting Thorin's anxious gaze. Her voice dropped until it was nearly a whisper. "But I want nothing to do with that treasure. There's too much of pain and death about it." Her hand strayed again to her pocket, and she fingered the
smooth gold ring, looking away, into the darkness.

Ori joined the two, glancing timidly at Thorin as she passed beneath his gaze. "I'll... go with Billa, if that's alright," she said quietly, moving to Billa's side. "I think she'll need help."

Thorin found himself feeling vaguely insulted by Billa's manner. The vast treasure of Thror--the treasure that was their reward and that would rebuild Erebor--she was treating more like a mound of maggots. Why? She'd seen it twice before and it hadn't upset her so. Why was it upsetting her now, when a fourteenth share of it was hers? Preferring to leave the discussion where it was for the present, though still clearly troubled, Thorin turned to Balin. "Take Billa and Ori and anyone else who's willing and clean out some of the guest rooms. Stow our gear and lay out the bedding." He glanced beyond the old dwarf at the others. "We'll stay here an hour or so and sort. I hope to find enough armor and weapons to reequip, at the very least, and to take greater stock of what's here."

Billa gave Ori a grateful look, then reached over and tugged the braid that still proudly wore its silver bead. Nothing could have made her happier than an excuse to celebrate. It would have to wait, of course, but that didn't stop her from planning. Her friends deserved a real party, and she planned to make sure they got one.

Work took most of their energy for the following hours. Thorin had specified only one, but as usual, they lost track of time until they were nearly too exhausted to continue. Two of the larger rooms had been thoroughly cleaned, and a third was half-finished by the time they assembled for an evening meal. They shared more tales and songs, pressing the quieter members of the gathering for contributions. Ori was talked into telling a story, though she refused to tell any about Nori while he was sitting in their circle and watching her. Bifur shared an old Dwarvish poem, which Bombur translated for Billa's sake. Kili even convinced Tauriel to sing a song for them, though it had included some underhanded use of puppy-dog pouts.

Freedom is the wind,

Freedom is the sea.

They say that freedom is the chance

To run away from you and me.

I think they may know different,

When they're on their own,

That freedom is not leaving,

But the choice to stay at home.

Freedom is a hearth, a blanket and a bed.

Freedom is a meal, and a place to rest your head.

Freedom is the trust between the heart and mind.

Freedom is the peace that only love can find.

Tauriel finished her song, but didn't open her eyes, leaning against Kili and giving the dwarves a chance to dry their tears in their own time. Kili slipped his arm around the elf, appreciating the familiar warmth and closeness. The song had affected them all, but Kili was sure it had different
meaning for Thorin and Balin. This was their home. Kili had lived nearly all his life in the Blue Mountains, and as "unpatriotic" as it seemed, the place he'd left behind to journey here still felt far more like home than he could ever imagine this silent, ruined kingdom feeling.

"Well, Tauri," the young dwarf whispered into the thoughtful stillness, chuckling, "looks like you've reduced us all to blubbery babes again. Soon, none of us'll have a scrap of dignity left."

A sliver of green glimmered at him from beneath the dark fringe of Tauriel's eyelashes, and a faint smile curved her mouth. "I didn't write that song," she confessed softly. "I don't really have the talent for it. It was Legolas that wrote that one. I don't remember why."

Her voice, though as soft and smooth as you please, was fairly easy to hear in the close, quiet atmosphere of the room. Billa glanced at the elf with a surprised smile, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief that was in bad need of patching. Or replacement.

Kili's brows were knit with displeasure. The mention of Legolas was doing nothing for whatever notions he'd been entertaining that Tauriel might have developed... deeper feelings for him. He could never compete with that maddeningly perfect elf prince, could he? With a small sigh, he shifted uncomfortably, trying not to notice Fili's gaze on him as he doubtless read his younger brother's mind.

Ori, evidently unconsciously mirroring Tauriel and Kili, leaned into Fili's shoulder, forgetting momentarily that such an action would almost certainly earn Nori's ire. At the moment, her mind was wandering. Far away, beyond the Misty Mountains and more kindly lands in the West, lay the only home she'd ever known. But here, beside Fili... she began to think she could find a new one.

Beneath the Mountain, in the deep silence of settled stone, the Company passed a quiet night. Always there was at least one person on watch, sitting near the door and listening for anything that seemed more than the stirring of rats.

For two days, they worked hard at cleaning and sorting and clearing. Billa refused to go near the treasure hall, preferring to work at arranging what rooms still had intact furniture and cleaning busily to prepare for Dain and his folk. It was early afternoon of the second day, not long after their midday meal, when a deep horn sounded from the front gate. Nori, who had been set to watch for anyone approaching the mountain, had been given a horn of truly intimidating proportions, gilt with silver at the mouth and elaborately carved. One could only hope to imagine the size of the animal the horn had come from. Now, as it was winded, the sound rebounded from wall to wall, a clear, noble call. Someone was approaching the gate.

Everyone within the Mountain dropped what they were doing, armed themselves and hurried at whatever pace they could manage toward the front entrance. A team under Balin had spent most of the morning piling up rubble, tables, and broken wagons in the entrance to create something of a barrier, since it would be some time before the gates could be repaired. It wasn't, by any means, an impenetrable fence, but it gave the dwarves a little more peace of mind to know nothing could simply walk in the front gate. Thorin peered over the barricade, and his already dour face darkened as surely as if a storm cloud had passed over it. The blue banners of the Lake Men, led by Bard... followed by the green and brown standard of the Woodland Realm.

Even at this distance, Thorin couldn't possibly mistake the tall figure in glinting armor that stood at the head of his forces, gaudy as a jewel against the rocky, barren landscape. Thorin had warned Bard. He'd been very clear he wouldn't treat with Thranduil. This was no mistake.

"They've come to demand their share," he murmured. "And we're hardly in a position to deny them."
He glanced at Balin. "You know the man better than I do. Would he take it by force?"

Balin shook his head. "Threats and force aren't his style. He'd rather persuade people to see things his way." Glancing at Thorin anxiously, the old dwarf considered asking him to just give the man a portion of the treasure that would serve to get him started. He sensed, however, that input wouldn't be welcome unless called upon. Billa, who was on Thorin's other side, was either less sensitive to such things, or didn't care.

"He's come for his share, alright. How much will we be giving him?" A single small figure was jogging up the causeway, now. A young man with a face like Bard's. It was Bain.

The boy trotted to a halt before the barrier. "Lord Bard of Esgaroth and Thranduil, Elvenking of the Woodland Realm wish to speak with the King Under the Mountain concerning payment for the slaying of the dragon Smaug. What is my lord's answer?"

"Why does 'Lord Bard' bring with him such a sizeable force?" Thorin called brusquely, ignoring Billa's question. "Does he hope that I will cower in fear before him? That my resolve will crumble? I am King Under the Mountain, and I have been entrusted by my people to distribute the wealth of our nation as I see fit. The words I spoke to Bard along the road stand. If he has forgotten them, brief, indeed, is the memory of Men. I will not repeat myself. You may tell him that."

Thorin's pity for the new leader of the Lake Men was swiftly waning. Why would his people so desperately need a share of the treasure with the wealth of Thranduil already practically at their disposal? No, this had to be the Elvenking's doing. Having failed at securing the jewels he desired through abduction and coercion, he would instead use the Lake Men to get what he wanted. Was Bard so simple that he couldn't see that?

When Bain had gone, Thorin glanced askance at Billa. "They are not so desperate as they seem," he growled. "They've been put up to this. By Thranduil."

Billa stared at Thorin, a look of disbelief on her face. "Alright, I know you're angry with them, Thorin, but... are you even listening to yourself? These people have nothing! No homes, no food! If they want to do fair trade with anyone, they need something to work with, and you refuse them what's rightfully theirs anyway." She regarded him with large, reproachful, hazel eyes. "If it bothers you so much, give them my share."

Balin turned a startled look on the halfling. Her whole share? One fourteenth of Smaug's hoard? Had she any conception of how much wealth that was?

Thorin turned fully to stare at her now, disgusted. "You'd throw it away so easily, then? Just because you're superstitious. You think there's a curse on it, do you?" He scoffed. "And you want to give it to the Lake Men. What, are they impervious to its powers?" He was almost surprised by what he was saying, but the anger behind the words felt genuine enough. This was the gold that was to see his home rise from charred ruins! He wasn't obsessed with it for its own sake. But that didn't touch her the same way, did it? She'd never been without a home. How could she be expected to understand?

Now the halfling began to look hurt and angry, rather than just disapproving. She straightened, bristling as she frowned at him. "Thorin, this is stupid! I never cared about the gold, I never wanted it. What would I do with it?" She put her fists on her hips, standing at something of an angle on the messy barricade, a little higher than him so that for once, she was looking him right in the eye. "No one's out to get you or your dragon's hoard, so why don't you calm down and be reasonable?"

"I am calm." Thorin held her gaze a long moment, saying nothing. When he finally spoke again, his voice was quieter, more controlled. "Billa, I'll thank you not to undermine my leadership while you
are still a member of this Company. I can't allow it. If I bow to their demands like this, I will be seen as weak." His glanced away a moment before meeting her eyes again. "Dwarves have little use for a weak king. Trust me to know what is right for my people. The Lake Men will have their rightful share... when we have determined what amount can be spared for them."

Billa was no longer just angry. She was furious. Furious and somehow, strangely hurt, as though he'd struck her. Or... left her behind. This was not the Thorin she knew and loved. Or maybe it was, and there was something wrong with her, that she couldn't see what reason he could have for his actions. Conflicted and far too angry to form a coherent argument, the hobbit spared him a dark look before she scrambled down to the floor and took off at a run, brushing past Fili and Kili, nearly falling into one of Smaug's enormous claw-marks.

By then, Bard and Thranduil, along with a half-dozen warriors of both races, had walked the length of the causeway and stopped before the gate. "Thorin, we come as friends and allies. Why do you treat us like enemies?" Bard's voice was clear, though his face bore the marks of sleepless nights. "We've come for that fair portion you promised us. And the Elvenking has something to say to you, if you'll hear him."

Thorin's immediate reaction was rage, but he hadn't forgotten the distinct possibility Thranduil--if properly chafed--might pressure Bard to seize the Mountain. Their victory would be short-lived, of course, as Dain would not tolerate well such an offense to his kin, but before the armies of the dwarves arrived, it would be too late for Thorin and the others. "It seems I have little choice but to hear him," the dwarf king seethed, attempting to keep his tone even. "Rest assured, however, that my decision is the same as it was before. You will have your rightful share when the treasure has been counted. My people's welfare is my first concern, and I must ensure we have what we need to rebuild before I disperse the hoard to those who have had a part in the reclaiming of Erebor. Those who have hindered its reclaiming," he glanced pointedly at Thranduil, "have earned nothing, and will receive just that."

"And how long," asked Bard wearily, "will it take you to count a dragon's hoard, Thorin? I granted you aid when you were in need, and at great personal risk. Now I am in need, and ask your help, as you asked me. On behalf of my family, and my people, I ask you to help me." This eloquent request was only partially ruined when Thranduil opened his mouth.

"This is where your choice lies, Oakenshield. Will you cling to your gold, or help those whose homes and livelihoods you destroyed?"

Thorin experienced a momentary twinge of pity at the earnest, humble plea of Bard. It faded quickly as the Elvenking spoke. "You!" Thorin, peering over the undercarriage of a tipped wagon, turned a scowl upon Thranduil. "What concern do you have for the Lake Men except that you hope to profit from them? Fiend. You speak of what I have done. But had you not turned coward and betrayed my people in our time of need, the dragon would not have lived beyond his first assault. You left us to die. Much you cared for the destitute and hopeless then! But we had nothing you wanted, did we?"

He scoffed bitterly, and made a dismissive gesture. "Go. Leave this place. The Lake Men will not receive their promised aid until you and your ilk no longer sully the ancestral lands of my people."

Thranduil drew himself up to his full and considerable height, looking quite as angry as Thorin. "If I had acted that day, the dragon would have slaughtered us all, your people and mine both! Would you have me bring death upon my allies for the sake of a promise?"

Bard merely closed his eyes, seeming to desire nothing more than for the stone to open under his feet and swallow him whole.

"You have no assurance that would have happened!" Thorin spat. "Just your own cowardice. And
leaving us to starve? What's your excuse for that? And for imprisoning my companions and I when I refused to bow to your attempts at extortion? You disgust me."

"It wasn't extortion, it was a fair trade!" Thranduil's normally pale cheeks were flushed with anger. "And I'll have you know-"

"Enough." Bard's tone was like airborne ice, cutting off the elf's next words. "Your old grudge won't help feed my people fairly. Thorin." The Bowman fixed his gaze on the dwarf. "If your answer truly hasn't changed, then we will retreat and tend to our host. Without proper shelter, the lake shore is too cold for the old and injured. Keep that in mind as you count your riches. And you," here he frowned at Thranduil, who had the grace to look slightly abashed, "if you're quite done, I'd like to make sure my people are doing a fair share of the work. I'll not be indebted any more than I already am, if I can help it. We'll be back tomorrow, Thorin. Please think on it."

They turned to leave, Thranduil shaking off Bard's hand impatiently. Thorin watched their retreating backs a moment, the lines of a frown embedded as surely as if they were carved in stone. At last, catching the troubled murmuring of the others, he turned away. Balin was staring at him cryptically, and Thorin lowered his head with a sigh. "Pray Mahal Dain comes soon. I don't have an ounce of trust in Thranduil. He may send his people during the night for all we know." He felt the eyes of the others on him again, puzzled, anxious. This business with the Lake Men had soured their victory over Smaug. After all, they'd never even fought the dragon. Not even once. Aside from the initial awe and elation of seeing the long-lost hills of gold, now it was beginning to feel as if they hadn't earned it. As if it weren't truly theirs.

"Well, Balin?" Thorin moved a step closer to the old dwarf. "Am I being... unreasonable in my demands?" Ordinarily, he'd never have asked such a question within hearing range of the others, but he sensed their crumbling resolve. A supportive word from Balin would reassure him--and them.

Balin folded his arms across his chest, studying his king for a long moment. Still silent, he glanced at the others, all listening to them. His options were limited. And right now, his duty to the throne of Erebor outweighed the risks of ignoring his own judgments.

"No. Not unreasonable. Mayhap a little harsh, but not unreasonable." Balin's voice, quiet as it was, carried to all ears in the hall, including the invisible halfling, crouched against the wall.

Thorin nodded, somewhat eased. He sensed, though, that Balin was holding back, so his reassurance was tempered. He grunted acknowledgement, brushing past the old dwarf quickly. "Come. We have work to do, and Bard does not seem to be in a patient mood." As if remembering something bothersome, he shook his head. "If anyone sees Billa--ideally after she's come to her senses--ask her to come to me. I'd like a word."

Sorting was proceeding well, and yet the endless sea of gold seemed barely touched. The barrels of gold were lining up along the walls, each containing the same amount of coins, and the jewels were being separated by type and placed in large chests. Here and there, familiar pieces came to light--gold candelabras that had graced the halls of feasting, armor and weapons that had belonged to the fighting men of Erebor, jewelry Thorin remembered from his youth. It was an emotional process, to say the least, and it seemed the deeper the group delved within the hoard, the more they found of such things.

After a time, Thorin no longer said, "These were my grandmother's," or "I remember playing with this as a dwarrow." He grew silent and brooding, as though a great weight rested on him and nothing
he saw brought him any joy. To be so long parted from the things he knew when he was young, and had very nearly forgot ten about, and then have them before him again--it ravaged him inside. The dwarves in their working might as well have been sorting through Thorin's own memories, and to his surprise, the only feelings they evoked now were grief... and anger.

Billa eventually approached him, though no one had found her. She thought Ori might be worrying by now, but didn't want to upset the poor thing any more than she already was. Things between Nori and Fili were still tense, and nothing had yet been properly talked over. Now, as she touched Thorin's elbow, her heart sank even lower at the look on his face. She felt as though the Thorin that had saved her from falling, who had nursed her back to health in Laketown, had somehow been buried under a dragon's hoard.

"Thorin," she said softly, trying to ignore the tightness in her chest, "we need to talk."

Thorin jerked around, looking faintly startled, as though pulled from deep thought. He nodded. "But first, I... I have something for you. I found it and, well, I thought of you." He reached into the folds of his tunic and retrieved what looked like glinting, silver fabric, offering it to Billa with the barest hint of a smile. "A coat of mithril. Lightest mail that exists, and as impenetrable as any shirt of iron, if not more. Beautiful and strong. Much like a certain burglar I know."

The hobbit bit her lip, taking the shirt between her hands. It felt like water, woven into mail, as light and cool as you could wish. Such a rich gift... and here she was, about to tell him off for not being generous enough. She bowed her head, feeling just as though he'd taken a blade for her and she'd hit him rather than thanking him.

"Thorin, I... I couldn't take this. I mean...." She trailed off, not at all sure of what to say.

"It would honor me, Billa." Thorin lifted her chin gently, wondering why she looked so... guilty. "And I'd feel better knowing you're that much safer." He ran his fingers slowly along her cheek. "Forgive me for... what I said earlier. I just... I cannot forgive Thranduil for what he's done. He is... well, never mind that. I was angry, and I took it out on you."

Billa knew what she'd say if she had the heart to. I never asked you to forgive him. Just ignore him for a while... I don't want people to suffer. Haven't the Lake men suffered enough? But she couldn't. Not when he was looking at her like that. The hobbit looked away from him, clutching the chain mail between her hands. It didn't pinch or poke--it was really wonderful stuff.

"Thorin, I... I just... can't they have my share? Even just a little of it would help. I mean, I know you're angry with him, I'm not--I don't expect you to forgive him." It was coming out all jumbled now. "Can't you just, I don't know, tolerate him for a little bit? Soon he'll go back home and everything will go back to normal. We owe them such a lot--" Billa stopped. She knew by the look in Thorin's eyes that she'd gone too far. "That's not what I-" Too late.

"We owe Thranduil nothing!" Thorin's reply was harsh, and the faint smile his face had sported a few moments before became a distant memory. "The Lake Men will receive what they have been promised when I am ready to give it to them, and not a moment before." It was an odd thing, this reaction. The sudden flare up of anger like a gust of wind on sleeping embers. He didn't understand where it came from, or why he was so upset. Hadn't he just apologized for this same thing?

Collecting himself, he turned away sharply, pacing across the stony space that had been cleared. If he kept speaking, he knew he was only going to make things worse. But really, he reasoned, she should've known better than to continue harping on a closed subject. And so he slowly began to justify his reaction... and even to believe he had a right to be angry.

Ori appeared suddenly at Billa's side, gripping the trailing ends of her battered scarf and looking
rather defeated. "You've done what you can, Billa. I don't think there's anything more we can try."
The hobbit met Ori's anxious gaze and nodded mutely, following her out of the treasure hall on
silent, defeated feet. In the warmth of her pocket, she rubbed the smooth surface of her ring, but
stopped when she noticed the movement. When she'd put her hand in her pocket at all, she didn't
know. Her disgust and fear were only growing greater, and now--she saw what had to be done.

They'd only just reached the rooms that yet needed cleaning, and Billa leaned against the wall,
sinking to the floor. What she did tonight would make Thorin angrier than anything she'd yet done.
But... she had to do it.

"Billa?" Tauriel was watching her worriedly, now standing beside Ori with a hand on her shoulder.
"Are you alright?"

"For now... I suppose." The hobbit wanted to confide in them. But if they knew, then Fili and Kili
might learn, and then Thorin would be even angrier, with them as well as with her. No. She had to
do this alone.
Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

Because gold sickness wasn't enough by itself. *grins*

Thorin's heavy tread echoed down the silent hallway, his lone torch flickering as he walked. He looked every bit as tired as the rest of them, and less cheerful. Fili stepped away from the door to a vacant room, catching his uncle's arm as he passed. "May I speak?" A brief flash of color near Thorin’s sleeve caught his attention. The yarn bracelet Ori had given him. Fili took a deep breath, drawing strength from that soft little token. Kili would join him as soon as the burglar was taken care of.

"What?" Thorin's eyelids were heavy, and he suppressed a yawn. "I suppose it's so important it can't wait until morning?" Fili shook his head and pulled his uncle into the room in whose door he'd waited, and Kili entered quietly a moment later, shutting the door. There was a beat of silence, then the younger of the brothers spoke.

"Uncle... Fili and I... uh...." Kili hesitated. This definitely wasn't going to be easy. Not that either of them had thought it would be. As volatile as Thorin had been these past few days, he'd begun to feel as though they'd cornered a ferocious lion in a tiny room. He glanced at his brother pleadingly.

Fili lifted his chin slightly. He was the elder. He would take the initiative. "Uncle, Brother and I would like to speak with you about Bard. " He watched Thorin's face warily, alert for any sudden change in demeanor. Already, the regal brow was lowering over dark eyes, and Fili hastened to finish his suit before the storm broke. "Kili and I--we owe him a good deal. And we were hoping you would let us give him and his people a bit of our share. You know, just to tide him over until we finish counting."

Thorin's weariness seemed to fall away. A new energy--manic, almost--appeared in his face and eyes, hinting at the terrifying rage he'd flown into before. "It's not enough, is it, to have my leadership called into question by my burglar? Now my own nephews. Do I lead this Company, or do you?"

Kili, unable to look at his uncle, spoke up, aberrantly timid. "Uncle, he saved my life. Ori's life, too. If he hadn't felled the dragon when he did... we wouldn't be having this conversation now."

Thorin scoffed, turning away with a flippant wave of his hand. "He wasn't thinking of you when he did what he did. It was only happy chance that saved you."
"So we should only repay debts made intentionally?" Fili frowned slightly. "Uncle, you've always taught us that a debt is a debt, and any worthy action ought to be repaid in kind. Are you telling us that's not true anymore?" Thorin's manic anger was starting to spark the blond's own deeply-buried temper. "What's wrong with you? What's changed? Uncle, this isn't like you at all."

Thorin rounded on Fili. "Nothing has changed! You look at me as though I've become some monstrosity, some creature incapable of reason. Is this how it will always be, then, when my decisions don't suit you? Am I king, or am I not?" His tone was very dark, his face livid. Kili shot a warning look at his brother, aware they were both treading on dangerous ground. If they pushed the matter much further... he didn't know what Thorin would do.

Fili caught his brother's warning, but decided to ignore it. He took half a step forward, so he and his uncle were nearly nose to nose. He was surprised to find that despite Thorin's remarkable height, it wasn't very hard to look him in the eye.

"I haven't asked you to change your decision," Fili growled. "I asked you to give me permission to do what I like with my own portion of the treasure. Or will you deny me my due as well?"

Was it Fili's words or his manner? Thorin didn't know. Not after he'd struck Fili two consecutive blows that sent him flying back, not even after he'd slammed him against the wall, his hands at the young dwarf's throat. He was vaguely aware of Kili's pleading voice behind him, of a hand latched onto his shoulder, trying to pull him back. But the fury within him was all but blinding, and he knew little else. When he spoke, the words were ground through clenched teeth. "You will not presume to dictate to me, you arrogant pup. Until I see fit to release it, this treasure is mine. Every. Last. Piece."

And suddenly, Fili didn't look angry anymore. He was scared. Terrified. His uncle was going to kill him. His uncle, who swore a blood-oath to his mother, I will protect them, even to my last breath. This dwarf, whoever else he claimed to be, wasn't his uncle.

Maybe that was what finally shook Thorin. What reached down into his core and pulled him back. It wasn't Fili's frightened eyes he was seeing now--these eyes belonged to Dís. He'd promised her. He'd promised her he'd sooner die than see her sons come to grief.

The madness abated as quickly as it had come, hollowing him out, leaving horror and disgust in its wake. His strength followed, and his fingers slipped from Fili's neck. For an instant, Thorin looked more terrified than his nephew. He backed away, panting slightly, eyes growing distant. This was not who he was. This was never supposed to be him.

An instant later, he turned and walked quickly from the room, looking quite as though he couldn't believe this had actually happened. Like a sleepwalker who's been told upon waking that he tried to murder someone.

Fili slipped down the wall and sat on the floor, coughing. His throat felt raw and bruised, and his heart still pounded, even as the door banged shut behind Thorin, carried by its own weight. The blond tried to swallow, and winced, his eyes feeling very hot and wet. Shooting his brother a frightened look, he staggered mechanically to his feet.

"We should make sure he doesn't do something stupid," he rasped, which only set him to coughing again.

"No." Kili's voice was surprisingly firm in the face of what had just happened, though there was the distinct waver of barely-controlled rage. He reached out and steadied his brother, and a small dagger crept surreptitiously back into his belt under his free hand. "Let him go if he wants, Fee. What he did... he could've killed you. If he touches you again...." He didn't finish. He couldn't. His throat was
too tight. He blinked quickly, taking a shaky breath. "You alright, Fee?" He glanced at the line of red snaking down from his brother's eyebrow. "Let me get you to Oin. And... I think we should tell Balin."

Fili's protest was swift and hoarse. "No... let's wait and see. This might... be temporary." The hope was as hollow as the Mountain. Fili wiped the blood from his eye, gripping his brother's arm tightly. It looked like he wanted to say more, but after a spate of coughing and a few false starts, he shook his head and moved toward the door. The blond walked in an almost straight line, so Thorin couldn't have hit him too hard... but it had been enough to shatter a good many things he'd thought harder than stone. They'd always known, without a doubt, that Thorin would protect them no matter what. That no matter how annoyed he was, or how stupid their mistakes were, he would always be there. Now it was as though Smaug had taken and put on their uncle's skin, and Thorin Oakenshield no longer lived among them.

Thorin didn't join the others until the early hours of the morning, trudging in, head lowered so his face was almost completely concealed by the trailing strands of his hair. In the dim torchlight, it was hard to see the haunted, tormented look in his eyes. He stood a long moment, gazing unseeingly over the mass of sleeping bodies tangled in their blankets. It must have been nearly ten minutes before he moved, grabbing a spare blanket from a stone shelf near the doorway, tossing it down a few feet away from the others and collapsing onto it.

Rejoining the others as if nothing had happened certainly hadn't been his first impulse, but what else could he do? He'd had some time to think things over, and had come to few conclusions. He still couldn't understand how he'd lost himself like that. Had it truly been him? He shook his head. That same sort of disturbed, powerless feeling that had come over him when he thought he might be going mad in the dungeons of the Elvenking had returned tenfold, and he didn't know how things would play out. He was afraid. Of himself.

His exhausted stupor finally gave way to fitful sleep. The same guilt and fear and loathing coursed through his dreams like a hideous blight. Anything he encountered—anything he touched—he destroyed. In his dreams he was a monster, and that same look of terror he'd seen in Fili's eyes was also in Billa's. In Balin's. In Dwalin's. It was loneliness and horror like he'd never felt before, and everyone he loved... he could do no more than hurt.

Billa woke when the door opened, startled out of a dream wherein she'd been trapped in Mirkwood again, battling a never-ending wave of spiders. She was grateful to Thorin for waking her, but lay still, watching him. Fili's reappearance earlier had her disturbed. It had, in fact, disturbed everyone, though Fili claimed he'd just gotten in a fight with Kili. Billa wasn't sure if any of them actually believed it.

After Thorin's breathing finally evened out, she knew she had very little time left. The others would be waking in a couple hours, and if she wanted to get out without being noticed...

The hobbit crept over to Thorin and paused a moment, resisting the urge to rouse him. He looked so desperately unhappy, even in his sleep, she knew he must be having a nightmare. But... she needed to do this now, else she'd lose her courage and never do it at all. Bracing herself, Billa reached very carefully into his mantle, feeling around for the pocket—there. Just as carefully, she withdrew the Arkenstone. Immediately, she noticed two things. One, the stone was warm. She assumed this was because Thorin had been carrying it in his pocket for days. Two, the stone was glowing again. Dangit. Hastily, she put both hands around it, smothering the light as much as possible as she darted out of the room. Now came the hard part.

Putting her ring on, she checked that she was invisible and made her way through the halls. Though
Billa was now moderately familiar with the layout of Erebor, it was still easy to get lost, especially when it was dark and she didn't dare use a light. As a result, the sky was turning pre-dawn grey when she finally found the front gate and scrambled over the barricade.

Invisible, she trotted down the causeway and picked her way along the stream toward the camp where both armies were beginning to stir. Billa had intended to find Bard's tent and speak to him, but that plan was prematurely terminated when the elven sentries heard her fall into the stream. The hobbit shouted at them not to shoot, that she was a friend, and pulled her ring off hastily. In the end, she was escorted before Thranduil and Bard, soaked from head to furry toe and shivering. Not at all the dignified introduction she'd hoped for.

Bard lifted an eyebrow as he wrapped a blanket around the halfling. "I don't suppose it would be too much to ask why you were out here so early in the morning and alone?"

Billa blew a couple drops from the end of her nose and sighed, pulling the blanket tightly around herself. "Thorin's treated you wrongly, and it's only getting worse. I wanted to mend this whole mess before it turns into another blood feud." She glanced at Thranduil pointedly, but decided against mentioning anything specific.

The Elvenking leaned forward, his fingers interlaced before him. "What have you done, little one? You've turned against him? You no longer... love him?" For all the earnestness in the halfling’s face and voice, he was finding it hard to understand why she'd turn against Thorin. He knew well what stood between them. Or had stood between them at one time.

"I love him as much as I ever have." Billa's tone was sharp, but a moment's pause saw a knot of uncertainty taking root in her throat, her hazel eyes watering slightly. "He's not himself. This isn't... normal. It's not right. And... I think this is to blame." She pulled the Arkenstone out of her pocket and stood up to place it on the table.

A moment of awed silence passed between the two great leaders as they stared at the softly gleaming gem. "The Heart of the Mountain," Bard whispered, eyes wide. His gaze shifted to Billa, who refused to look at the stone. "Why? Why did you bring this to us?"

"I... if you could just... look. It's not right. It's not... I think it's evil."

She scowled at the rock for a moment, her gaze fierce. "If he could just be separated from it for a couple days, maybe things would go back to normal. But it's valuable to him. And... if nothing else, you can use it to bargain for a share of the treasure. One fourteenth." The hobbit looked up at them seriously from under a fringe of damp curls, unmoved by their expressions of shock.

"And if we do," Thranduil spoke with newfound caution, "exchange it for the Lake Men's share, what then? Will Thorin not have it once more? Why do you think his being separated from it for a few days will solve the problem?"

Billa hesitated, and her hand went to her pocket. Should she tell them about her ring? About the hold it seemed to have on her? She drew her hand intentionally away and took a deep breath, trying to settle her mind and banish the burning in her throat and eyes.

"I guess... I just hope that if he comes to senses, he'll lock it away or throw it in the lake or something." The hobbit clenched her fists and shivered. "I can't watch him do this to himself. It's just like the dragon said." Her words trailed off into a whisper, and Bard started, stiffening.

"What do you mean, 'just like the dragon said'?"

Billa glanced at him oddly, as though she were surprised he didn't know. Well, of course he didn't.
She hadn't told him. She shook her head, and droplets showered the ground about her. "Smaug spoke to me. Twice. Both times he said the Arkenstone would drive Thorin mad, just as it had his grandfather."

Thranduil shifted slightly, discomfited. Thorin was bad enough when he was sane. A mad dwarf king was definitely not someone he cared to have as a neighbor. "But... when he sees that we have the stone, he will know that one of his companions has betrayed him. I fear for you if you are among them. You will not be able to return to him, little one."

Billa opened her mouth to protest that he wouldn't hurt her... but she suspected he'd already hurt Fili, and wasn't his heir much more important than his burglar? She thought so. And yet, there was a part of her, the stubborn Took part, that refused to back down.

"I will go back. And if he hurts me, then I'll have earned it fairly. But promise me." She fixed Bard with a fierce look. "Promise me you'll ask for one fourteenth. I want nothing of that treasure. If I never see a gold piece of it, I'll be grateful."

Bard hadn't the slightest conception of how much one fourteenth of a dragon's hoard would be, but he knew for certain that it was far more than he could possibly need. The idea of enough wealth to sink his barge made him feel a little ill, to tell the truth.

"Miss Baggins, I don't need-"

"Then split it between the two of you! I don't care what happens to it, so long as it's put to use."

Thranduil's usually self-assured demeanor was crumbling. They were dealing with something far more complicated than he'd thought. For the first time, he began to wonder if the curse was upon more than the Arkenstone--if the madness of Thror might spread beyond the halls of Erebor. But surely... surely that was ridiculous. "I have no need of... that sort of wealth," he said finally. "If the exchange is made, I would see it go to the families of those slain by Smaug."

Billa nodded gratefully to Thranduil. "Thank you." She hesitated a moment before she continued. "I know... you're not as bad as he says. I can tell you care." Giving the Elvenking a faint smile, she sighed. A glance at the closed canvas flap revealed pale gold sunlight leaked around the edges. She scrubbed her face briskly with both hands. "I should get back. They'll be wondering where I am."

Thranduil glanced uncertainly at Bard, who still seemed stunned, then back at the halfling. "For one so small, you have such courage, such compassion. I thank you for this gift, and for the risk you took in bringing it to us. You are welcome here among us, should you find the Mountain is no longer to your liking." Standing to bow, he smiled faintly. "Best of luck to you, Billa. And be careful." When she'd bowed in turn, relinquished the blanket, and gone, the Elvenking turned to Bard, face paler than usual. His tone was very bleak. "I fear for her, my friend. I fear he may kill her."

Bard's expression was dark with concern. He, too, clearly wished to protect the courageous little hobbit. "There's nothing to be done, but wait. The others... I don't think they'll allow such harm to come to her." For her sake, I pray their reflexes are quick.

Billa entered the Mountain as invisible as she'd been when she left it. Keeping her senses tuned to the approach of the others, she moved toward the room they shared as sleeping quarters, wondering if Thorin was still asleep. She hoped so, considering how late it had been when he finally joined the others. Thankfully, Thorin hadn't stirred, and he seemed a little less tormented than when Billa had left. At least, he was no longer tossing and turning, his face fixed in a grimace. Now he was lying curled on his side, his fists gripping the blankets, his eyes squeezed tightly shut.
Kili, however, was awake, having been much too upset to sleep very deeply. This was like a nightmare from which he couldn't seem to shake himself, and the more he agonized over what had happened, the more it turned his stomach. To imagine Uncle Thorin as he'd been in that room... he realized Fili had been right. That was not Thorin. No matter how gruff and angry their uncle had been in the past, he had never lost control like that. It was terrifying. And what if this wasn't a passing thing? What if it became worse?

He just caught the soft padding of hobbit feet on the flat stone nearby and sat up quickly. "Billa?" His voice was barely audible, and he nearly choked for the tightness of his throat. Where had she been? "You alright?"

Billa paused, then removed her ring, seeming to pop out of thin air a couple feet from Kili, rubbing her finger gingerly. Most of the others seemed to be taking advantage of a late morning, and dozing quietly in various tangled heaps. Tauriel lay beside Kili, apparently sound asleep. Fili was on his other side, half lying, half sitting, leaning heavily on Ori's shoulder, and his snores sounded painful. Billa's gaze lingered on his swollen, bruised eye, and the dark tinge of a bruise along his jaw. If there were any more evidences of the "fight," she couldn't see them.

"I'm alright, Kee. Not hurt or anything. I just... went for a walk." She realized belatedly that she was still damp, and starting to shiver very much. Giving the young dwarf a faint smile, she moved toward Thorin, and proceeded to crawl under his arm, seeking what warmth and comfort she could find there.

Thorin accepted her--cold and damp as she was--beneath his arm, and didn't seem to notice. Kili lay down again, shaking his head slowly. I may be young, but I wasn't born yesterday. Billa was definitely up to something, and he had a faint notion of what that "something" might be. Nestling against Tauriel, he intentionally calmed himself. He'd be no good to anyone if he didn't have a wink of sleep. Thankfully, these rooms were untroubled by daylight, or the others would doubtless have been up already. He wasn't prepared to face what this new day might bring. Of that, he was painfully certain.

It didn't seem like much time at all had passed for Kili when someone was gently shaking him awake. Beside him, his brother was sitting up, looking groggy and wincing as he felt his battered face. Breathing didn't seem to come easily to him, either. Balin stood over them both, and with a cautious glance at Thorin, who was soundly (and peacefully) asleep with the burglar nestled against him, signaled for the brothers to follow him. Tauriel and Ori traded a worried glance, but seemed to understand this didn't involve them.

Balin led Fili and Kili into a vacant room; the same one wherein they had spoken with Thorin the previous evening. When the white-haired dwarf turned to face them, it was with a very grave expression. "Unless something happened between you two, and I don't think anything has, that story about your fight last night was a load of dragon dung. Would you mind sharing the truth?"

Fili stared at the floor and said nothing. Perhaps he was ashamed. Maybe he was too proud to admit his uncle was going mad. It was hard to tell, with one eye almost swollen shut and his jaw rigidly set.

Kili swallowed, studying a crack in the stone floor. When he finally looked up again, Balin was still glancing expectantly between the two of them, but his frown had deepened. Well, there was no getting around it. Balin had a right to know. "It's... it was Uncle," Kili choked out, gaze returning to the web of cracks near his toe. By the pain in his voice, one might have assumed he was speaking under torture. "He tried to... kill Fili."

There was a tense silence between them for a long moment. "If he'd meant to kill Fili, then Fili would be dead." Despite the assurance, Balin's tone was grave. "Tell me what happened, lads."
Fili shifted. "I... we asked Uncle to let us give some of our portion to Bard. I pushed him a little too hard, I guess. He got angry... and attacked me." The blond's tone was dull and pained, as though he hated the confession.

"It was like he'd changed," Kili added. "Like he wasn't... Thorin anymore. The Uncle we know might've been angry, might've argued, maybe even yelled at us. But he never would've... physically harmed us. I think he's gone mad." It hurt more than anything he'd experienced, more than any physical injury could have. That the person he admired most in the world--the man who was like a father to him--could be insane, could be capable of hurting his own nephews.... It was something he couldn't bear to accept.

Balin's face grew troubled, old memories lurking in his eyes. He remembered Thror, the night he had tried to persuade him to set the Stone permanently into the throne. His wild expression, the threat of violence in his hands. "Dragon sickness," he whispered, and the dread of the thought descended, somehow concentrated by the closeness of the stone walls. "Lads, this may get worse before it gets better. Try not to do anything rash for now, and... keep hoping. Thorin is strong. He may conquer it yet." The white-haired dwarf laid a hand on each lads' shoulder, giving them a bracing shake. Fili winced again.

"What's wrong with him, Balin? Why is this happening?" Kili wanted to be comforted by the old one's words, but the terror of what he'd seen the night before still had him in its icy grip. "He hurt my brother, Balin! Do people ever really conquer madness? Don't they just get worse and worse?" The young dwarf was trembling now, on the verge of tears. He couldn't handle this. It was incomprehensible to him.

Balin hesitated. "It hasn't been done before," he admitted, "but the line of Durin is hardy. And if nothing out of the ordinary happened, nothing would ever happen." He nodded, his beard twitching slightly, masking his expression. "I have confidence that if anyone can beat this madness, Thorin can. We just need to make sure that he remembers he has a reason to."

Thorin stirred, the familiar warmth at his side, the slow rise and fall of easy breath. Had he dreamed it? Had any of it happened at all? Hopeful, he sat up slowly, careful not to disturb the tiny, snoring figure beside him. Seeing the majority of the Company was still asleep, he moved toward the door, thinking he would get some sorting done before he woke Billa. He felt different this morning. Calmer. Much of that calm quickly rippled away when he caught sight of Fili in the doorway opposite their chambers. One look at the young dwarf's face was enough. It hadn't been a dream, then.

A nod followed his momentary hesitation, and he turned down the hallway. He needed some time to think, now that he'd had sleep. Now that his mind was clearer. At this stage, all bets were off. Many slow steps led him to the throne room, and the seat from which his grandfather had ruled. It lay cracked and shattered, its finely hewn stone marred by the teeth and claws of the dragon, and still he managed to find the carved indent in which Thror had kept his stone while he held court. He traced the design, eyes distant.

"And he went for the stone at the last. That's what he saved. All that mattered to him."
Thorin's mood, though melancholic, didn't seem as volatile as it had been. The Company entertained a bit more hope as their leader seemed to recover somewhat from his manic temper. Of their number, it was Fili who tried the hardest to stay near his uncle, working with a sort of determined productivity and showing as much respect to his elder as if Thorin hadn't been related to him at all.

Still, things improved. Billa seemed deeply relieved that night when Thorin greeted her with a tired smile. She showed him, almost self-consciously, that under her coat and vest, she wore the mithril shirt he'd given her. She wanted him to know she valued his gift, and was rewarded with a slightly brighter smile. He seemed to reach inside his mantle more often, though, and commented that he must have left the Arkenstone in the treasure hall.

The following day, hope faded early on. Thorin searched the treasure hall for the stone as the rest sorted, casually at first, then with increasing urgency. He was nearly frantic by midday, and Billa watched anxiously, trying to calm him. He seemed to ignore her unless to tell her to look for his missing treasure. The dwarf dug through barrels and chests, almost overturning one in his haste. Balin made an attempt at soothing his king, but Thorin rounded on him with a wild expression, grasping the front of his old friend’s tunic and shaking him roughly.

“Where’s it gone? The Arkenstone, you old fool, where is it?” Billa saw Thorin’s eyes land on Fili, and felt her blood run cold. The young dwarf's bruises still hadn't healed, and though his black eye was open today, it was still the approximate color of good blackberry jam. Fili and Thorin both froze, and one thought crystallized between the two of them. Obviously, Thorin thought Fili knew where it was. Billa opened her mouth to warn Fili not to do anything stupid, but already the dwarf was turning, fleeing, bolting through the door and out of sight.
Kili and Balin traded a horrified glance, and then the young dwarf dropped the handful of gems he'd been sorting and took off after Thorin and Fili. He was stopped in the doorway by Tauriel, but what she asked barely registered with him. "No time, no time!" he panted, pulling away from the elleth. "Thorin's gone off again." But the delay was enough that, despite his terrified speed, he wasn't able to catch up with them until they'd reached the gate.

"Thorin!" he screamed, practically vaulting over the barrier. Fili's eyes were wide as he pleaded with his uncle. Thorin had him by the wrist, a grip so tight the blond couldn't free himself no matter how he tried.

"The Arkenstone, Fili," the dwarf king demanded, that same look of unadulterated rage the two had seen before etched into his features, flaming in the depths of his blue eyes. "What have you done with it?" Thorin's other hand was grooping at his nephew's tunic, patting the likely places the stone might be lurking in his inner pockets.

"He doesn't have it!" Kili practically came unhinged, leaping off the rubble, reaching for Thorin's shoulder. The moment his fingers connected, though, Thorin lashed out with his free arm, a solid hit with his metal-inlaid bracer that caught Kili squarely beneath the chin.

Thud. The young dwarf was on the ground in an instant, and didn't move.

Kili's unconscious form nearly collided with Billa, who was scrambling down the barrier, closely followed by the others. The halfling fell, barking her shins on the stone before regaining her feet.

"THORIN!" She could see Fili's eyes on Kili, the terror and rage, his fist swing back--"NO, FILI!" She knew what was going to happen an instant before it did, and there was nothing she could do. She was too far away. Not fast enough. Not strong enough.

Fili's fist caught Thorin's jaw hard. He must have thrown everything he had into the blow because Thorin, though heavier and stronger than his nephew, staggered back a step. A moment later he was lunging forward again, and his large, hard fists began to rise and fall. Billa threw herself on his back, grabbing his arms, trying to restrain him.

"THORIN, STOP! Please, please stop, you're hurting him--YOU'RE HURTING HIM!" There were other hands now, trying to restrain him, but the king was seemingly blind and deaf with rage.

As Thorin's fist rose again, his elbow slammed into Billa's face, right over her left eye. She fell back, stars exploding before her eyes.

When her vision cleared again, Bifur was helping Kili to his feet and Bombur and Balin had Thorin off of Fili, but the blond dwarf wasn't moving.

Kili staggered, coughing, over to his brother, eyes darting side to side with terrible comprehension. He couldn't speak. He could barely breathe as he sank beside Fili's unmoving form, taking his brother's hand, shooting an appalled look at Thorin.

The dwarf king had ceased struggling against the arms restraining him. The fire had died from his eyes, the strength had fled his body. He was hollow with horror, face pale as his knees gave way beneath him. "I... I... don't understand..." His voice was shaky and faint. "I thought..."

"How could you?" Kili finally found his tongue. "How could you?!" His words were raspy, but full of conviction. "Do you know what you've done?!"

The halfling didn't know what to do. She wanted to check on Fili, but her legs wouldn't carry her any further than Thorin's shoulder. "Thorin... why'd you do it? He didn't do anything."
Kili was pulling his brother into his lap now, cradling the broken, bloody form against his chest, moaning. Fili wasn't moving. The halfling grasped blindly for Thorin's hand.

"Tell me he's not dead. Oh, Eru, please tell me he's not dead."

"I thought...." Thorin still seemed to be in some amount of shock. "But he ran... Why? Why would he run from me?"

"Because of what happened before!" Kili's voice was rent with grief, so hoarse it was hard to understand him. "Because the last time you flew into a rage, you tried to kill him!" He stroked his brother's hair gently, the blonde now streaked with red, and a sob wracked his chest. "Uncle, he didn't have the stone. He would never have betrayed your trust like that. He was loyal to the core. He believed in you!"

Kili shook with fury. "You want to know who did take your precious rock? Do you? Well, take a wild guess." His dark gaze landed on Billa. "Will you do to her what you've done to my brother?"

Thorin's expression altered, less shock and more incredulity. "Are you saying that...?" He turned to look at the halfling at his side, and he shook his head forcefully. "I don't believe it. She wouldn't." His eyes pleaded with her, begging her to tell him it wasn't true. "Billa?"

She wanted more than anything to deny it. She wanted to tell him she had no part in it. Billa could see the beginnings of grief, of betrayal, in that precious blue gaze. But she knew it was her fault. What could a halfling do but tell the truth?

"I took it. I stole the Arkenstone." Her voice was weak, thick with tears. "It was driving you mad. I couldn't let that happen. But..." The large, teary hazel eyes shifted back to Fili and she started to shake. "No one else was supposed to get hurt. I thought you would punish me. It's my fault."

Oin, puffing and blowing, had just come down off the barricade and, bless his honest old heart, didn't miss a beat in asking what happened. He crossed straight to Fili's prone, bloodied form and knelt beside him on creaking knees.

As Kili watched the old healer begin his work, his gaze was drawn to movement at Bard's camp. A group had assembled near the tents and was moving hastily up the hill toward the gateway. It was easy to see, even at a distance, that all was not well in Thorin's company, and Billa knew Bard would have more than an inkling as to what that something might be.

Thorin had been on his knees when the conversation started, and at this admission from the halfling, he collapsed heavily back onto his seat. By his face, one might've thought he was puzzling out some terrible riddle. Mingled confusion, betrayal, anguish. "But I... But you... " He frowned, seemingly unable to process the information he'd just been given. "You took it? I thought..."

Whatever he might've said was cut off when Bard arrived, followed closely by the Elvenking and a mixed Human-Elven entourage.

"Oakenshield!" Bard's face was approximately the color of cold porridge, his eyes wide with shock and disbelief. "What have you done? Is your anger so great you would turn it on your own?" The new Lord of Esgaroth glanced at the Elves in their shared retinue. "Healers, forward!"

"It's not--he's not himself." Billa was still clutching Thorin's hand, staring pleadingly up at Bard and Thranduil. "Please, it's that stone! It's changing him."

Bard's gaze lighted on the halfling, and for a moment, he looked sympathetic, rather than horrified. "If this is the effect of the accursed thing, I'm tempted to throw it in the lake, and gold be damned."
Oin lifted his head to look at the elven healer who had joined him, concern on his face. "I left me bag in the Mountain, an' he's not breathin'." The only part of Fili's face that didn't look like raw steak were his lips, which were turning blue. The elf ripped the blond's coat and vest open, placing strong, slender hands on Fili's chest.

"If you want your brother to live," said the elf seriously, looking up at Kili, "we'll need your help. Breathe for him. Push air into his lungs." He instructed Kili in what to do, knowing time was of the essence.

Billa looked on, but glanced up when she heard a strangled cry. Ori was standing near the base of the barricade, and it looked as though her heart had failed within her at the sight of her beloved's battered form.

Thorin met Bard's gaze, and if the Lake Man's complexion was the color of cold porridge, the dwarf's more closely resembled snow. "You... gave the Arkenstone to Bard?" It was a pointless question. Billa's face conveyed the affirmative as clearly as if she'd replied.

Taking the stone from him was one thing. Taking it and giving it to those besieging the Mountain... that was quite another. The devastation in the dwarf's gaze as it moved between Billa and Bard was unlike anything the halfling had ever seen, not even on the day Thorin had thought the trek to the Mountain had been in vain and hope was lost. This was closer to his heart. Closer than the Quest had ever been, even if he would have been ashamed to admit it.

The dwarf pulled his hand free of Billa's, forcing himself to his feet. His eyes bore into Bard's, shining with unshed tears. "Take her, then." The hurt in his voice was palpable. "Take your burglar and go. I trusted her... with everything. Everything."

He exhaled slowly, and with the outgo of breath, so went all trace of emotion. His gaze was empty now, eviscerated. Destroyed. There was no frown, no lines of expression at all--for once in as long as any of them could remember, Thorin's face was completely blank. "Take her." The words issued in a constricted half-whisper.

He turned slowly about and trudged away, climbing the barrier as though it were some arduous peak, and leaving the others behind to make sense of what had just happened.

Billa let out a strangled cry and lunged after him. Someone stopped her. She wasn't sure who. "Thorin, no. Please. Please--Thorin! THORIN! Please, Thorin, I was only trying to help! I was trying to help!"

Bard struggled to restrain the halfling, one arm around her shoulders and the other around her waist, lifting her off the ground in an effort to keep her from doing something stupid. "Don't-"

"Thranduil!" Bard staggered back a step, then two. The halfling, despite her small size, was remarkably strong. Her frantic struggles no doubt fueled by grief and panic. "Keep things under control." How in the world the elf was going to do that in a situation like this was completely beyond him, but Bard knew that if anyone could, it would be the Elvenking. The dwarves seemed to be in too much shock to react just yet, and as the Bowman made his way through the startled group of soldiers that had escorted him here, he barked a series of orders he hoped made at least some sort of sense.

"Get healers and supplies up here NOW. Someone make sure the Elves have what they need. And for the love of all things good, someone help me with this hobbit!"
By the time they reached Bard's tent, Billa had fought herself into a senseless stupor. She wasn't even crying. She just stared vacantly into the distance. Thorin's words burned in her pointed ears.

"Take your burglar and go."

He didn't mean that, did he? He couldn't. Bard was watching her warily, and she vaguely recognized his presence. She'd hurt Thorin so badly, he thought she was no longer loyal to him. And Fili was dead. She'd ruined absolutely everything, and had no idea how to fix it this time.

I can't be anyone else's burglar. I'm his. I can't be anyone else's.

Roughly twenty minutes later, Thranduil entered the tent, looking uncharacteristically frazzled. Glancing at the hobbit with what could have only been the deepest of sympathy, he approached Bard.

"Balin, the one who accompanied the halfling to seek my help. He seems to be Oakenshield's second-in-command for the time being." Taking a few futile swipes at the coating of dust on his robes, he seated himself in the chair opposite Bard with a small sigh. "He said if it were up to him, he would have given you your share when it was first requested. As it is still Thorin's decision, unfortunately, he cannot release it himself. However..."

The Elvenking paused, crossing his arms and leaning against the back of the chair. "He believes the king will not resist as ardently now. As we have the stone that will ensure his throne, he has little choice, and," he glanced at Billa again, lowering his voice, "even if he did... he thinks he may be too broken now to care."

Bard followed the elf's gaze. Billa looked absolutely stricken, but that was no change from how she'd looked before. It was as though Thranduil's words only confirmed what she'd already known.

"Honestly, my friend," the Lake Man began softly, "I don't know what's to be done. While I need to trade for food and shelter for the people of Esgaroth, I also feel... this is a problem I'm partially responsible for. Billa." He turned his eyes on the hobbit once more, and she acknowledged him with the barest hint of a glance. "Please. Talk to me. If I know what's going on, maybe I can help."

The little female, who had accepted neither food nor drink since her arrival, now let out a harsh, scoffing laugh. Her hazel eyes, dry and red-rimmed, flicked up to his face.

"What's going on? I've finally ruined our last chance. This entire quest has been one mistake after another." As though the first word had opened an invisible gate, Billa kept speaking, her voice growing higher and more broken. "First I run off without my handkerchief, then I nearly get them all eaten my trolls, I get lost in goblin tunnels and get my leg broken and get lost in Mirkwood and get sick in Laketown. There was one night--just one--when I thought things would be alright. He said... he said he loved me. Spirits, if I'd only listened to him, if I'd let him walk away from the Mountain when we had the chance. But... I wanted to give him his home back."

Now she was beginning to cry again, but she didn't stop talking. "I've been alone for so long, but I always had a home. A big home, filled with nice things and memories of happy times. He didn't have that, and I wanted... I wanted to help him. And now it's just like the dragon said. I can't save him. Not even from a stupid rock."

"Billa Baggins."

A deep voice came from the cot in the corner of the tent, and all three present jumped and reached for their weapons. The old man in his tattered grey robes stood up, gesturing to them to sit back
down, grasping his staff in one hand, and looking unusually grave.

"Gandalf!" Billa gaped at him for a beat or two, then crossed the tent in a handful of furious strides. If Bard hadn't stopped her again, it would have been even odds between her hugging him around the middle and running him through with her sword. "Where have you been? You said you would be here before Durin's Day, you said you would be here before we faced the dragon!"

Thranduil looked like a startled deer. When he finally moved again, it was to glance accusingly at Bard, as though the man might have known something about this and hadn't told him. Bard shrugged innocently, so the Elvenking was left with the only possible conclusion: the Wizard had turned up uninvited, as usual. "Ever try announcing yourself, Mithrandir, or is that too difficult a concept?"

Gandalf gave Thranduil a "you know better" look, and knelt before Billa. He seemed to be doing his level best to x-ray her with his eyes alone, while the halfling became more and more agitated, fighting against Bard's hands with increasing vigor.

"If you'd been here," she screamed desperately, "none of this would have happened!"

"Be easy, little friend. Not all is yet lost." The Wizard was in the process of straightening when her pained cry staggered him.

"He's dead, Gandalf! He's dead and it's my fault!" She stopped fighting, much to Bard's relief. Billa looked up into Gandalf's startled, horrified face, her own contorted with grief. "It should have been me."

The Wizard shot a glance at Thranduil for confirmation. Was she talking about Thorin? If so, he was indeed late, and a graver error he had never made.

"The young, fair-haired one." Thranduil caught Gandalf's gaze, his previous scorn stripped away by the anguish of the halfling. To see any creature so distraught troubled him, and he'd developed a keen admiration for the little female. She had more pluck than many twice her size. "My people are doing what they can for him, but... no one has high hopes."

Then, a certain understanding pervaded his sapphire gaze, something that filled him with dismay. "You were behind all this, then? You encouraged Thorin Oakenshield to come here? To reclaim Erebor?" His tone wasn't nearly as accusatory as it might have been. What had been done was done and over--assigning blame would change none of it. All the same, it did explain a few things.

Gandalf's bushy eyebrows drew together until they formed one wild grey line. "Yes," he conceded softly, "I counseled Thorin to use stealth, and this... worthy hobbit." His gaze fell briefly on Billa as he turned toward the tent flap. "See that she is taken care of. I will return." And without so much as a hint of what was to come, or where he was going, the Wizard disappeared into the cloudy grey daylight beyond the canvas.

Billa watched him go, neither protesting nor noticing as Bard set her gently on the cot Gandalf had occupied before he'd seen fit to reveal his presence. The man wrapped her in a blanket and tried to persuade her to drink some water, but she refused, shaking her head silently. Bard returned to the table and sank into his seat across from Thranduil, looking more careworn than ever.

"I don't know what to do, my friend. I'm very much out of my depth."

"That makes two of us." Thranduil shook his head, resting his chin in his palm. "I say give the Wizard a day to sort this out. For all his eccentricities, he is good-hearted and wise, as few else in this world are. I do not think he will allow Thorin to withhold your share, if such is still the mind of the
Mountain King. He has a maddening habit of never taking no for an answer.

"In the meantime, I've left my son in charge of the operation at the gate. When I left, the blond dwarf had not... come through, even under the ministrations of some of my best healers. They will stay with him through the night." He glanced at Billa and proceeded cautiously. "Or as long as is... necessary."

"Fili." Billa's voice cracked, and she turned her gaze on them but briefly. "His name... is Fili."

Gandalf strode through the halls of Erebor, his robes billowing about him in true Wizardly form. Staff in hand, he determinedly looked through every nook and cranny of the decimated kingdom, until finally, when even Balin had given up on following him, he found the crumpled, weeping king. Thorin sat on what was little more than a heap of rubble, though it might have once been a very fine statue or a set of bunks or a table. No telling now. The only company he had were a couple moldering skeletons in the corner, watching him with hollow eyes, full of shadow, cobwebs, and memory.

"Thorin."

No response.

"Thorin, I've come to speak with you about what happened at the gate."

Thorin lifted his head at last, but his gaze was vacant at best. "Leave me be."

Gandalf was startled by how flat the dwarf's tone was. "I will not leave you be. Thorin, whatever happened is not going to be the end of everything. And I want to know why your burglar is out there with the Lake Men, and not in here where she belongs."

Thorin's eyes closed, but he otherwise made no reaction to the old man's words.

No manner of cajoling, coaxing, or threatening seemed to move the dwarf king. As though he were made of stone, he sat with his head in his hands. If he answered at all, it was with the phrase "leave me be." He answered no questions, offered no defense, spoke no protest. Gandalf was beginning to become quite frustrated with him, and unsettled, if truth be told. He hadn't planned, or even suspected that Thorin would have sunk so far in so short a time.

Thorin could feel the dried blood on his hands, making his fingers feel stiff and heavy. Perhaps if you'd come sooner, Wizard, none of this would've happened. Oh, how easy it was to revert to blaming all his problems on others. It didn't change anything. Never had, never would. He was the one who had gone mad. The one who had killed his own nephew in a fit of rage, an innocent dwarf who had done no more than try to protect himself.

Finally, Thorin did turn to Gandalf, and even met his gaze. "I have no desire to discuss what happened. Question the others if you must, but leave me."

No one could have mistaken the familiar stubbornness in his voice, least of all Gandalf, and as odd as it seemed, this was progress.

"The others," said Gandalf testily, inwardly relieved at Thorin's reaction and the promise it held, "are short one king and one heir. They are frightened, and need a leader. Whatever it was that overcame you at the gate has obviously passed. Are you really going to waste your time down here, while your Company waits above for word on Fili?" At the dwarf's sudden tension, Gandalf smiled very slightly. "He's not dead yet. He may not die at all. The line of Durin his hardy and strong, and not even the young die so easily."

Thorin had scarcely opened his mouth to reply when there arose, out in the corridor, the mournful
tolling of a large bell. As if haunted by a long-forgotten nightmare, Thorin catapulted to his feet, looking suddenly very animated.

"Warning bells. Balin's sounded the alarm." It was true. The dwarves of Erebor had long maintained an ingenious network of bells at intervals throughout the kingdom, toggled by a mechanism in the two main guard rooms. It was, evidently, still largely intact. The last time it had rung was at the coming of the dragon.

"That will be Dain," Thorin murmured, moving with surprising speed out the door and down the passageway.

"Thorin, wait!" Gandalf followed him, and the dwarf didn't wait. The two emerged into the entrance hall while the hollow tones of the bells still hung, vibrating and melancholy, in the air. The dwarves of the Iron Hills, led by Dwalin and Dain in full armor, were jogging toward the Mountain, and the leaders had only just reached the base of the causeway. Within a couple minutes, five hundred heavily armed and armored dwarves trotted through the ruined gates, blowing and sweating. Clearly, they'd traveled with all speed. Dwalin made straight for Thorin, and Dain was right behind him. Both looked grim.

"Orcs. We saw 'em as we crested the last rise. They're not too far behind us. And why is there an army of Elves on the front step?"

Thorin dismissed the question. "Send word to Bard in the elven camp. He leads the Lake Men now. Whether they fight or not isn't my concern, but he must be warned." He turned to Dain as Dwalin bowed and left quickly. "How many orcs?"

Dain pulled his helmet off and mopped his brow, looking winded. He was Thorin's age, but there were a few grey hairs sprinkled in his thick beard now. "Two, three thousand?" The heavy-set dwarf shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's hard to say. About half were mounted, but they were staying together. It's an army, and someone's controlling them. Don't know who, though."

"I have a fairly good idea." Thorin supposed he looked a mess, covered in grey dust, blood still caking his hands, his hair matted and askew. Certainly not the makings of any King Under the Mountain. Not that this concerned him much. Very soon, it would no longer matter.

He excused himself from Dain, returning to the guest rooms to fetch the armor and weaponry he'd stored there. Gandalf evidently had bigger fish to fry, as he'd disappeared somewhere in the chaos of the arriving army, and for that Thorin was grateful. The last thing he needed was to be harangued by the Wizard for what could not be undone.

In the hall he met Nori, Bifur, and Bombur, clearly very confused. Thorin wasn't comforted when they gave him a wide berth, looking to a dwarf as though they thought he might stab them as he passed by. "Turn around," he said firmly. "The orcs have come for us, and unless you'd prefer to fight them with your bare hands, I suggest you follow me."

Somewhat taken aback, the three dwarves complied, murmuring worriedly. Thorin moved swiftly, focused. There seemed to be a new purposefulness to the way he walked, eyes set directly ahead, hands balled into fists. After a moment, he turned to glance back over his shoulder. "And the others? Where are they?"

Bifur and Bombur traded glances, and Bombur answered after a beat of silence. "I left them with Fili. They were waiting for word on what... what was going on." After looking at the others, then at Thorin again, Bombur nodded and moved away, murmuring that he would deliver the news.
Soon, they would all be armed and armored as richly as any dwarves ever could be. Until then, however, they would be busy exchanging nervous looks and trying to figure out what was going to happen to them in the next few hours. Of the twelve of them, three would be kept back. Four, if Kili would be restrained. Five, if Ori (as Nori suspected) refused to leave Fili. That left Thorin with a bare seven loyal to him.

Oin was kneeling beside Fili when Bombur delivered the news, having found him in an unoccupied guest room with two elven healers, Kili, Ori, and Tauriel. The old healer hesitated visibly, glancing at Kili before standing with a sigh. "His life is in your hands," he said gravely to the elves, brushing the dust from his tunic. "If we live through this, I hope to tend him again. If not, I leave him in your care." If it had been in Khuzdul, it would have been more binding, but he doubted these elves would have been able to understand it either way. Not the real weight of it.

Kili met Tauriel's gaze briefly before shifting his eyes back to his brother, watching the stuttering rise and fall of his chest. By the way he'd been hovering over the blond, one might have thought he was trying to wake him with sheer willpower. The dark-haired dwarf shifted slightly. "I suppose... I've no excuse. My being here will make no difference for Fee. He's either going to wake, or... he isn't." He let out a truncated sigh and stood, seeming resigned.

Tauriel met Kili's gaze and rose as well, wincing only very slightly. "I'm coming with you." Injured or no, she was a warrior, and would not be left behind when she could be of use. "Whether your uncle likes it or not, he's one bodyguard short today. I'll fill in until Fili recovers." She spoke with such conviction that Oin shot her a surprised look, and Bombur grinned. Optimism had ever inspired admiration in the fat dwarf.

"Tauriel," Kili started, then shut his mouth. This clearly wasn't negotiable. Instead, he turned to Ori. The female looked about as numb and still as the stone walls around her as she kept vigil over Fili, holding his hand on the opposite side of the bedroll upon which the blond was resting.

"You'll keep him company until we get back?" Kili managed to catch Ori's gaze, even if he only held it for a split second. "He needs at least one person he loves beside him."

Ori nodded mutely, gently stroking Fili's limp hand, staring at the knitted bracelet still softly encircling his wrist.

Kili stretched his legs slightly. They were stiff from kneeling in one position for so long, but he didn't begrudge Fili the mild discomfort. "Take good care of my brother. If he wakes... tell him I'll be back soon."

Tauriel huffed faintly and put a hand on Kili's shoulder. "I'll make sure you come back, don't worry." Giving his shoulder a gentle squeeze, she steered him into the hall. The world might have been falling apart around them, but at least they knew what was coming.
dragon sickness and OH GOD WHY DO I DO THIS TO MYSELF?! Because it's worth it, dangit.
When they reached the stash of armor and weapons they'd set aside, Nori was sitting sulkily in the corner. He was, as Thorin had ruthlessly pointed out, absolutely useless in a fight when he still couldn't move any faster than an awkward limp. As Öin had explained on more than one occasion, the tendons in his leg had been strained, and he needed to stay off of it for a few days in order for it to heal properly, and if he insisted on continuing to limp around as though nothing was wrong, he'd never heal.

"And it would suit you right, too."

Bifur was also looking somewhat disgruntled, but helped his brother fasten leather padding about his chest, an extra layer of protection under his armor.

Tauriel quietly collected a set of elvish armor, clearly made for some noble or princess, and slipped into it with little trouble. It was lightweight and seemed to have retained its mirror-like shine in spite of its years of disuse.

While the dwarves helped each other prepare for battle, she stepped out into the hall, adjusting her new quiver. The quiet helped settle her mind. She knew as well as the others that against such odds, they were unlikely to come out of it unscathed, if indeed they came out of it at all.

*But at least we die in worthy service. I hope*. In service to a mad king? She wasn't sure.

As she approached the entrance hall, she saw a familiar blond figure, watching the gate impassively. The elleth paused. She and Legolas hadn't spoken since Laketown. This moment before the storm, the calm before battle, might be their last chance to reconcile. But even as she made up her mind to say something, she noticed a gleam of white, like bone, at his belt. She recognized that hilt. She recognized that sword. All in a moment, her plan changed.

"Legolas."

The blond turned to regard her, a faint apathy in his manner that her voice only slightly disturbed. "Tauriel." He produced a cordial, though empty half-smile. "The young dwarf. Has he come around?" The business-like fashion with which he spoke was almost worse than overt sadness or
"No," Tauriel tried not to let the prince's obvious lack of enthusiasm (or life) bother her, with limited success. "No, he hasn't. I wanted... to ask a favor of you." The red-haired female pointed to the sword at his side. "The blade. Oakenshield carried it into the Wood. I thought... could you give it back to him?" Now that the words were out, it seemed a heartless thing to ask.

Legolas looked a bit startled. He frowned at her slightly. "Why? Doesn't he have a thousand dwarf-forged blades for his perusal now? Why deprive me of an elven one? It was forged by elves. I see no reason it should be wielded by dwarven hands." Truth be told, he was immensely fond of the weapon. He'd not taken to a blade so readily in all his long years, and parting with it for Oakenshield's sake didn't sit well with him.

In the pregnant silence that followed, Tauriel shifted slightly, her gaze falling away from the sharp blue eyes of the elf who had once been her friend. "It's... well, it's his. We took it from him." The argument was weak, and she knew it. Tauriel sighed. "I just... I thought it might give them a little more confidence to see it in his hand again. I have no right to ask it of you," her gaze flicked up to meet his again, green eyes bright and earnest, "but I do ask."

Legolas released a thoughtful breath before answering. "For your sake, then, Tauriel. Not his."

Resignedly unstrapping the scabbard from his belt, he took the heavy sword in both hands and presented it to her with the hint of a bow. "You would wield it better than him, you know."

Tauriel took it, and for a moment, simply held the weapon, feeling its weight and balance in her hands. Her eyes drifted closed, and it was as though she were letting go of a dream.

"Perhaps I would," she agreed after a beat or two of silence, "but I'm not the one that needs it."

Pulling the blade against her body, she bowed deeply to him. "Thank you, Legolas. And... if this battle should prove...." The words seemed to choke her. She tried twice more before she looked away again. "You will always be my friend, Legolas. Always." She turned to go, feeling oddly torn. As though she had just been posed a choice.

Legolas started to reply but hesitated. Always a friend, never more. And yet, he missed her dearly. Without her presence in his life, he was finding more and more often he drank himself to sleep at night, when he was alone and had time to think. He'd not wanted to give her that much credit, but... it was true. "You have always been my friend, Tauriel. That hasn't changed just because my father is no longer your king. Doesn't mean I'm not angry with you, though."

When she looked back at him over her shoulder, he smiled again. This time, there was less cold courtesy and more genuine warmth. Maybe it had taken her reminder, or perhaps he'd just been somewhat overpowered by the words of Thranduil, who considered Tauriel no less than the most repulsive of traitors. But he knew now if it came to it in the battle, he would protect her with his life. She would doubtless do the same.

Tauriel hesitated. It looked like the elleth was suffering some massive internal struggle. She seemed to give in at length, turning back, closing the distance between them. For the first time in her long memory, she embraced her friend, clasping him tight. "Please stay safe. I might not be there to protect you this time." She pulled away swiftly, eyes swimming with tears. "Stay safe." She couldn't have said what language she was speaking in anymore. Turning away, she fled back down the passage, hoping she could dry her eyes before she found Thorin.

Legolas watched her go, his throat strangely tight. What was she saying? That she wouldn't be in the battle at all? Or that she'd be keeping close to the dwarves she'd sworn allegiance to? So it wouldn't be like old times--not like their days in the Guard, where they worked as a team, killing as easy as
breath itself. No, he'd never have that again. Those years had come to an end. "Valar protect you," he whispered, and turned slowly away.

Tauriel's green eyes were still shamefully wet when she caught Thorin, sorting through weapons, grim-faced and silent. "My lord." She bowed, and offered him Orcrist with open hands. Thorin shifted slightly on his haunches, glancing between the sword and the elf as though she were presenting him with a riddle and not a weapon.

"You took this from the elf prince," he stated gruffly. "Why?" He had very little cause to imagine Legolas would have given it up willingly. Unless it was some kind of trick, some sort of bribe.

"It's yours... you should have it." Tauriel didn't look into his face, keeping her head bowed to hide her tears from the dwarf. "It would give the others hope, I think, to see it in your hands again."

"Hope?" Thorin scoffed with a shake of the head. "We need more than hope." When her earnestness held, he seemed to reconsider. "All the same, I thank you. I will be glad of it." He accepted it from her, hefting it with one hand on the ivory grip, the other beneath the scabbard. It was good to have it back again, for however short a time. It felt somehow... right.

With a nod, he stood, turning away. He was wearing his full armor again, finely knit mail bordered with rings of gold, layered pauldrons bearing the ravens of Erebor, steel bracers. He would march forth looking the king he was, and fight just as proudly. A noble death. It was the most he could hope for. _More than I deserve._ This was it. All that remained.

When he rejoined the others, all of whom were now also outfitted with suitable armor and weaponry they'd selected from the hoard, he avoided making eye contact with any of them--especially Kili. "We've little time," he said gravely. "I could not have asked for finer companions, my friends. I fear I have... failed you. I have betrayed the trust you placed in me. Yet, I don't ask you to forgive me."

He raised his chin a little, jaw resolutely set. "I ask only that you defend the home that is ours once more. That you follow me... to whatever end Mahal wills."

Balin stepped forward, armor rattling faintly as he lifted a hand to clasp Thorin's shoulder. "I've followed you this far, my friend. I'll not turn back now."

"Nor I," growled Dwalin, jamming a helmet onto his head. "You have my axe, and whatever else I have to offer."

The others murmured their agreement. Mad or not, Thorin was their king, and not a one of them would turn against him now. Tauriel stood in the doorway, her eyes on Kili.

A mournful horn called from the entrance hall, clear as a bell and sad as the final sunset. The elleth lifted her head. That was Legolas's horn.

"They're here."

Billa was bleeding. Not badly, but enough that she was aware of it. Though invisible, she wasn't safe, and the thick forest of legs and boots and heavy, swinging swords was every bit as dangerous as it looked. Once already she'd been knocked to the ground, twice she'd been struck. With Sting in one hand, she slashed at orc-legs as they got in the way, moving as fast as she could toward the gates of Erebor. As fast as she could, however, wasn't nearly fast enough.

She knew, with the absolute certainty that came of guilt and dread, that Thorin would be trying to do something stupid. Something stupid like redeeming his honor by dying in battle.
By the Valar, Thorin, if you die, I'll never forgive you! Billa should have kept her mind on the battle. Her quick, furry feet carried her into the midst of a group of orcs who weren't fighting. They were unhooking huge, heavy chains from the collar of a truly massive, ugly beast. The thing roared, rearing up onto stubby hind legs and swinging its long arms around, sending two orcs flying. The hobbit turned, intent on running as fast as she could in the opposite direction. She didn't see the thing pick up a spiked club the size of a man, surge forward at the urging of the orcs, and start to swing. She didn't see the club as it approached, nor even as it hit her. All Billa saw was the ground flying away from her as she became suddenly and painfully airborne. Landing would be the last thing she knew for a long time.

The battle was madness. A veritable soup of bodies, blood, and metal, the ground slick beneath Thorin's feet as he pressed on through the seemingly endless ranks of orcs. If the others were behind him, he didn't notice. This fight was his now. His and his alone.

That's why he was here, in the thickest and most brutal front of the battle, Orcrist singing its familiar song of death as black blood slid down to cover his fingers, made the grip as slick as if he'd coated it with butter. He had to keep wiping his hands on his surcoat, but hardly noticed. It was all as natural now as some long-practiced dance; parry, slash, evade, stab, withdraw, move on. This foe was all rage and no skill. Very little honor in defeating such opponents, if he'd cared at all.

One thing only was on his mind now. Billa. Arkenstone be damned, he wished he could have taken back what he said at the gate. He didn't care now that she'd betrayed him. She was all he had, the only ray of sunlight in a world dark with hatred and empty vengeance. All for naught now. The dragon was dead, but his malice lived on. It could never be, this dream that it might turn out differently if he just gave himself another chance.

No. He'd done enough harm. She was safe where she was. He would've sooner died than seen her come to grief--hence, this noble death he'd chosen. He had no choice. He couldn't... wouldn't lose control of himself again. Those he loved would be safe. Billa would be safe.

At last, he turned his mind to the task at hand. He'd made it far longer than he'd thought he would, for all his distractedness and the decided lack of friendly forces at his back. Casting his gaze over the dark ranks of orcs charging down from the hills, he shook blood from his sword, caught his breath, and prepared to drive himself into the very thickest of the fresh enemy forces. But all of that changed in an instant.

"Oakenshield."

The Pale Orc stood behind him, a wicked, fanged grin curving his lipless mouth. It was clear he had no intention of allowing his vengeance to escape him again. The battle seemed to slow around them as dwarf and orc eyed one another, and certainly not a one of Azog's foot soldiers would have touched Thorin now, not if he valued his wretched skin. Azog had made it known he alone would slay the dwarf king.

"It seems fate has brought us together one last time," the Orc rumbled, icy blue eyes gleaming with pleasure. "Your little rat isn't here to save you now."

Thorin's face tensed, his shoulders going rigid. Unfinished business. "That 'little rat' sent you howling away like a whipped dog. Save your empty taunts. I'm ready."

Azog didn't need much more of an invitation. He lunged forward with a swing of his ugly mace, snarling with rage. The orcs at the edges of the fray withdrew, forming something of a wide circle. None of them had had better entertainment than this fight in recent memory.
It was long and fierce, unrelenting, brutal. Stroke after stroke, dodge, lunge, evade. Thorin began to tire. He hadn't eaten in several days now, and as dogged as he was, he knew well he couldn't go on forever. There would have to be a breakthrough soon. Any well-trained swordsman knows his opponent must falter at some point in a combat, and is always watching for it.

Thorin was no exception, and when Azog's mistake came, he was ready. With a grunt of tremendous force, he swung his blade through the opening in the Pale Orc's defense, cutting him deeply across the thigh. Black blood spouted from the wound, and the beast roared, less with pain and more with outrage.

Thorin had very little time to recover from the successful stroke. An instant later, the full, concentrated force of a debilitating punch below his left shoulder blade battered him to the ground. It hurt a few seconds later, bit into him like claws piercing his back through the mail. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think. Every movement was stabbing pain jolting through him like lightning.

Desperate, he was forcing himself up, pushing himself to his knees. As he did so, something shifted at the source of the pain, pressing upward, and his vision swam, the rocky ground rushing up at him. At the edges of his consciousness, the guttural voice of Azog was raging.

"He was mine! I needed no help from you!"

Despite his overwhelming failure the first time, Thorin, shuddering, his face locked in a grimace, tried to force himself up again. He was met with equal success. With a dull splash, he landed in a puddle of warm blood. His own, he realized with some amount of dismay.

Speared through the back. This was what he'd wanted, wasn't it? Azog would have his vengeance--spoiled, somewhat, by the fact that he hadn't struck the killing blow--and Thorin would have noble death. His mind began to fade, filling in at the edges, black and fuzzy like the slow closing of a door in a dark room.

He could almost imagine his burglar scolding him, telling him he'd been a fool, begging him to come back. Begging him not to throw his life away. Pleading with him like she had when he'd walked away from her, desperately trying to ignore her cries.

*Goodbye, Billa, my love. I never deserved you.*

Azog the Defiler stooped over his prey, a dissatisfied snarl on his pale face. The spear had gone clean through the dwarf's chest. He hooked his iron claws about the haft of the weapon and jerked it mercilessly free of Thorin's ruined body.

This was the moment, if ever there'd been one, when Billa ought to have appeared from nowhere and taken a stab at the orc's pale backside. But no hobbit miraculously blinked into being. Instead, a black-fletched arrow sprouted from Azog's chest, followed by a longer, thicker arrow, fletched in white. Another of each kind pierced Azog's body as the beast staggered back with howls of pain and rage.

Kili sprang over his uncle's body while Tauriel scooped up the fallen spear and, with a grimace, rammed it back into the gaping, bleeding hole in Thorin's back, snapping the haft near the entry point with inhuman strength.

In a trice she was on her feet again, and not a moment too soon. A warg sprang at them, its bloody jaws wide and ready to kill. For lack of a better course of action, the elleth thrust her bow point-first down the warg's throat, spinning agilely out of the way as she drew her sword.
Azog, in spite of the arrows protruding from his bleeding body, let out a bellow of fury, swinging his mace recklessly, ignoring the pain of his wounds. Kili dodged and struck and dodged again, his face a mask of grief and anger. It had cost them dearly to reach his uncle, however, and though his opponent was fatally wounded, he wasn't yet slowing. The mace changed direction with unexpected ferocity, catching the young dwarf under the arm and flinging him into the air.

Tauriel let out a scream, though she didn't recall intending to make the noise. She threw herself at the orc, heedless of the danger. Her sword flashed and withdrew, black with the blood of her foe. He roared and struck out, missed, struck out--Tauriel fell hard on something sharp, rolled off of it. Thorin's sword. She took up Orcrist and in her rage, rolled to her feet, swinging the blade with all her might. Azog's one whole arm left a trail of blood arcing through the air as it fell away. The elleth struck again, and this time the sword was buried between his ribs. Azog fell back, and the weapon was wrenched from her hands. She spun away to acquire another, and a huge bear was crouched over Thorin's body. She prepared to lunged at it, to fight it, to kill it. The bear met her gaze, blinked once, and scooped up Thorin's bleeding body from the ground in one massive paw before lumbering away.

The orcs fell back before him in terror, not a one daring to hinder his passage. The main press of Dain's army had nearly reached the former dueling circle. Kili lurched to his feet, gasping, clutching at his side. Blood oozed from in between his fingers, and he swayed, looking vaguely like he might be sick. It took a good handful of seconds for him to adjust to the elevation change, though he nearly fell over bending down to snatch up his bow. Kili turned to assess what danger remained, and caught sight of the Pale Orc.

Azog was kneeling, Thorin's sword still wedged firmly between his ribs. Tauriel had indeed wielded Orcrist with tremendous skill, just as Legolas had said.

"At least," the orc wheezed, tugging weakly at the elven sword with his claw, "your precious Oakenshield... dies with me."

Kili, panting, pushed sweat-damp hair out of his face and fitted another arrow to the string. "A lot of good that'll do you." Whatever Azog's reply might've been was cut off by a well-placed shot to the forehead, and the monster's massive body hit the ground with a dull thud.

With a heavy sigh, Kili turned and nodded to the red-haired elleth. They had work to do yet.

Tauriel was more relieved than words could say to see that the dwarf had not only survived Azog's attack, but seemed to be more or less unhurt. He favored his left arm a little, but still wielded his bow with uncommon skill for a dwarf. She might have paused to consider that thought if a cave troll hadn't come charging through the ranks of orcs, inflicting heavy damage to its own side. She lifted another discarded blade, this one dwarvish, and called out as loudly as she could, dancing out of the troll's range.

"Fall back! Fall back and regroup!"
Billa came slowly to herself, realizing as she did so that she must be alive. She knew she had to be alive because absolutely everything hurt, particularly a point behind her left shoulder. Slowly, the halfling pushed herself up. The sounds of the battle told her it still raged below. Below?

Prying her eyes properly open, she realized that the strike that should have killed her had, in fact, deposited her on a shelf of rock jutting from the mountainside, a little above head-height for the Men and Elves. Below her, in the limited slice of the valley that she could see, anyway, things seemed to be going well for them. Dain's forces were pressing ever further into the thickest part of the orc army, cutting an enormous swath through the fight. The Elves primarily used their bows from the slopes, while the Men fought tooth and nail, swords flashing as they cut down one enemy after another.

Then a huge black bear waded into the view, swatting at the orcs with massive paws and scattering them every which way.

But Billa noticed also that, despite the promising first look, there were as many orcs as ever. Bodies layered two-deep beneath the combatants, and yet the number of orcs never seemed to diminish. She could see Thranduil fighting back to back with Gandalf, and Bard leading another charge with his weary men stumbling after him, yelling hoarsely. She saw Balin's white head for just a moment, then watched him disappear beneath a wave of foes. Where were Thorin, and Kili, and the others?

Thus perched and watching the fight, it was Billa that first saw the great winged shapes swooping down on them. What was this? Some new horror the orcs had in store for them? But no--the first of the magnificent birds picked up a huge warg in its talons and broke its spine before dropping it onto a cave troll. They weren't just birds, they were Eagles. And they were on their side.

If the tide of battle hadn't already been turned, this new surprise decisively did. The giant eagles were remarkably organized, and descended in groups to target the trolls, wargs, and other larger creatures of the enemy, digging their claws into sensitive flesh with shrieks of triumph, or picking the beasts up altogether, only to send them tumbling to the jagged rocks below, or onto their fellows' heads.

The advance of the enemy was stemmed. Their hearts quailed within them, their hatred usurped by their desire to live. In what seemed a singular moment, one disorderly regiment of the enemy turned, threw down their weapons, and fled. Mass panic ensued as the control the Orc forces had maintained fell away, dissolving into chaos. The three armies--Elves, Dwarves, and Men--pursued them with renewed strength, hewing them down even as they ran. Few escaped.

Gandalf turned to Thranduil wearily, his sword arm limp and bleeding at his side. It seemed the old Wizard wasn't as indestructible as many had assumed. "Fortunate the Eagles came when they did. This may have gone ill otherwise."
'Fortunate, indeed,' the Elvenking agreed, looking, for once, like he needed a hot bath and a large bottle of dorwinion. His previously flawless armor was dented and grimed, his underrobes saturated with black blood, his long, blond hair mussed and dirty. Despite the victory, his face was pale and grim as his eyes surveyed the carnage left behind with a searching quality.

A cry went up some ways off, and Thranduil turned quickly, frowning. "What is it, Tarion? Speak."

A brown-haired elf approached at a weary, limping jog, bowing before he'd even reached his king. "My Lord... your son." Tarion hesitated, unable to look up. "We... found him."

"Legolas." The pain in Tauriel's voice was apparent, even in the general clamor of folk calling to one another, rattling armor and clattering weapons. She might have carried Kili the remainder of the distance, but found herself hard-pressed just to support him. Her back burned, her head ached, her arm felt like it was made of lead. The elven prince was on the muddy, bloody ground on the western side of the causeway, and seemed to have a long, black arrow stuck through his abdomen. The red-haired elleth let out a despairing cry, falling to her knees by his side and completely ignoring the disgruntled looks of the elves around him, who seemed to be putting together a stretcher to bear him away.

"Legolas, no... no. I told you to be careful, you idiot. I told you I wouldn't be there to protect you."

She took his hand and pressed it to her forehead, whispering something in Elvish that seemed to make the nearest elf extremely uncomfortable. In any case, he moved swiftly away and let someone else take his place.

In short order, the stretcher was ready, and they began the laborious process of lifting the injured elf onto it. By then, an unfamiliar dwarf had found Kili and informed him, in grim and suspicious Khuzdul, that his uncle was being held in the Elves' tents, and they claimed to be tending his injuries.

Kili appeared to be in some amount of shock. He nodded, but his gaze seemed uncomprehending. The puncture wound beneath his arm was still bleeding sluggishly, leaving an ugly, rust-colored trail wending down his surcoat. His heart was as empty as his quiver, his spirit as broken as his bowstring. As he turned from the unfamiliar dwarf to look upon Tauriel's grief, he nodded again, as though something had been confirmed.

"As neither my uncle nor my older brother is able to at the moment, I'll speak for Erebor." He wasn't sure where the confidence came from. It wasn't what he felt at all. Was this the way leaders were born? Through taking solace in the requirements of duty when all else has failed?

The dwarf grunted at this, but obviously wasn't about to argue. "I will... inform Lord Dain."

"Good." Kili turned away, wincing at the pain in his side. "And tell the Elves I will come to my uncle as soon as I can."

Bowing slightly, new respect in his eyes, the dwarf moved off the way he'd come. Kili slipped his bow into its sheath and watched as Tauriel helped the elven healers ease Legolas onto the stretcher, her face a mask of regret.

A moment later, Kili felt nothing so much as the entire ambiance shifting, and turned his head with a slight shiver. Thranduil. The Elvenking looked simultaneously stricken and focused, moving with purpose toward the stretcher bearers. "Take him straight to my tent, and have my personal supplies brought from the storage pavilion."

Thranduil seemed to have only just noticed Tauriel, and a new tension pervaded his features. For the
present, though, he ignored her. "One of you find Thaniel and Sulion. Be quick about it! We have little time."

When one of the group had bowed and hurried away to do as he was bid, Tauriel's devastated gaze flicked to her former king. If there was anything to be said, anything to be done, she didn't know what. A tiny, stubbornly practical voice in the back of her mind told her that Legolas would have the best possible care, and her presence or absence would make no difference. There were, however, dwarves, her friends, that needed help. She let her gaze linger on the still form of the blond elf a moment longer before turning back to Kili. The action reminded her of her own injuries, and the elleth winced.

"You need treatment. Where can I convince you to sit still so I can patch you up?" Tauriel's tone was hollow, as though the emotion had been ripped from her.

Kili shook his head. "A little cloth to stop the bleeding and I'll be fine. Uncle needs me. There's something... off about what he did. Not the madness. It's different." His voice sank to a tight whisper. "I think he was trying to kill himself."

At his insistence, Tauriel helped him bind his wound, nothing more, and they made their way to the elven camp. As they approached one of the larger healing pavilions, full to bursting with the wounded and dying, and harried healers who probably wished they were, Kili's ears caught what sounded like a commotion.

"Dain's orders, pointy ear. Don't like 'em, not my problem. You can take it up with him later."

"Listen, you fool! If you move him now, he'll die and it won't matter who he's sharing company with."

"Like I said, just following ord-"

Kili and Tauriel rounded the corner, and it became clear one of Dain's orderlies was trying to secure Thorin's immediate removal to the medical tent in the newly set up dwarven camp. The elf he was arguing with turned a helpless, frustrated glance on Kili, looking as though he might begin tearing his own hair out if this kept up much longer.

Kili glowered at the unsuspecting dwarf, and to his surprise, the orderly actually flinched. "Dain has no right to claim my uncle, you jumped-up idiot. These elves know what they're doing, and if they say he's in no condition to be moved right now, than that's how it is. Shove off and tell Dain he can take it up with me if he has a problem with that."

The orderly grew rather flustered, and might've tried to protest further if he'd had any inclination it would avail him. As it was, there was a distinct air of command about Kili now, and as an underling, he decided to err on the side of caution. "May I... tell him who has sent him this message?"

"Prince Kili, sister-son of Thorin, Heir of Durin. For the time being, I speak for the Kingdom of Erebor."

The elven healer made a gesture as though to praise higher powers for this dwarf who actually made sense, and turned his back on them swiftly, making his way into the tent, where someone seemed to be calling for him. Tauriel looked down at Kili, surprised and impressed with his new manner. His suspicions about Thorin's intentions haunted her still. She'd seen the way he forged off into the thickest of the battle, targeting large, dangerous opponents. Secretly, she was inclined to agree with Kili, though she wasn't entirely sure why the dwarf would choose suicide now, when he'd finally achieved his lifelong goal.
Inside the tent, there were dividers set up, for whatever good it did, so Thorin had clear space around his cot. Clear space that was occupied with two harried forms. One was an elven healer, whose front was spattered with blood. She seemed to be barely controlling fear as she cleaned the wound, prying tiny, twisted fragments of metal and slivers of wood loose from his torn flesh. The other was Gandalf, who looked on with an unreadably grim expression. Neither seemed to notice the elf and dwarf approaching.

"Gandalf." Kili's façade finally wavered, and his dark eyes seemed to gloss over as he moved to his uncle's side. Thorin was deathly pale and still, and for a moment, Kili thanked Mahal he wasn't conscious to feel the pain of this horrific wound.

The Wizard twitched a little at the young dwarf's voice, looking as though he'd been pulled from intense concentration. He regarded Kili grimly, shaking his head. "This hurt is beyond me. He's lost too much blood, and we can't seem to staunch the flow. That spear only just missed his heart."

Gandalf barely caught Kili's quiet reply. "His heart's already been pierced. Didn't take a spear to do that. This," the young dwarf gestured at Thorin, "is what he wanted."

The Wizard gave Kili a sharp look, and there wasn't a doubt between them that the words were true. "Where's Billa? Where is the burglar, Kili?"

Tauriel traded a look with Kili. "You think... that Billa can help?" The idea was somewhat foreign to her. What could the hobbit do to help when she clearly wasn't a healer of any sort? Gandalf sighed, pursing his lips for a moment before answering.

"He needs a reason to live before we can save him."

The healer glanced up from her work, a startled expression on her face. "You think he can be saved, Mithrandir?"

The Wizard turned his eyes on Thorin. "We can hope," he murmured. "Nothing more."

"I'll find her," Kili said, stepping back from the cot. "Where was the last place anyone saw her?" He glanced between Gandalf and the healer expectantly.

The Wizard sighed. "She was with Bard and Thranduil. That's where I left her when I went to seek out Thorin, some time before Dain's arrival."

"Then I'll ask them." Kili turned away, hoping Tauriel would follow.

"Don't go to Thranduil now, young one!" the healer said, looking somewhat alarmed. "Not fifteen minutes ago, they took away two of our best healers--elves who'd been tending your uncle. The prince is badly hurt, and no one must disturb the king while he is healing his son."

"Fine. Then I'll find Bard," Kili said, jogging quickly out of the tent.

Tauriel suppressed a shudder, nodded to the healer, and turned to follow Kili.

"Find the hobbit, bring her back here as soon as you can." Gandalf's words drifted after her, and she acknowledged them with a wave of her hand. She couldn't help but wonder if the love of a dwarf was really that strong, that it might bring him back from the brink of death, to be nearer to the object of his affections. Now, however, didn't seem an appropriate time to ask.

Bard was still on the battlefield, working with a team of warriors to find the wounded and take them back to camp. He looked both surprised and relieved when he saw Kili and Tauriel.
"Thank heavens you're safe. What news?"

Kili's brief summation was enough to drain what little remained of hope and relief from Bard's hard features. The new lord of Esgaroth shook his head grimly. When Kili asked about Billa, the man shifted guiltily. "She was with us until we received news of the orcs. It couldn't have been more than five minutes before they were on us... I don't think she would have had the time to reach the Mountain, but that's where she was headed."

Bard didn't understand the word Kili uttered in reply, and assumed--quite correctly--that it was a dwarven oath. A rather strong one, by the sound of it, though Bard didn't think about it long. An instant later, Kili shot away toward the Mountain, jogging, gritting his teeth against the pain, his eyes searching the gruesome aftermath of the battle for any sign of the missing halfling.

"Billa!" he called, voice harsh with exhaustion. His mouth was dry as dust, and his legs trembled weakly. He ignored his limitations and pressed on, zigzagging, overturning bodies as he went to make sure she hadn't fallen beneath them. No sign of her. Considering the scale of the carnage, if she was here somewhere, his odds of finding her quickly were slim to none.

Still, he wouldn't allow himself to give up. His uncle had but once chance, and he wasn't going to waste it. He tried not to think about the possibility that she might be dead, in which case bringing her to Thorin would do far more harm than good. No. She wasn't dead. She couldn't be dead.

He paused to catch his breath, turning to look behind him. Tauriel had been searching the places he'd missed. She looked equally exhausted, and equally determined.

"Nothing?" Kili confirmed, though he thought after the fact the question was somewhat pointless. As if she wouldn't have told him had she found something.

In the silence that followed, Tauriel started to shake her head, then paused. The sharp points of her ears twitched slightly under loose wisps of red hair that had escaped from her helmet, green eyes scanning the area to their left.

"Did you hear?" She stopped again, disbelief on her face. Without another word, she broke into an exhausted parody of a run, her head swinging back and forth as she followed the sound. After a minute or two, it became clearer; a small female voice, calling Kili's name.

"Billa? Where are you?" Tauriel paused, breathing hard, to listen.

"Up here. On the shelf."

"I can't see you."

"I'm invisible."

Kili's heart leapt. "Take off your ring, Billa, and we'll help you down."

"I can't." Billa's voice sounded pained, but at the same time, relieved. "My finger's all swollen and bleeding. I can't get it off."

"Alright. Billa, try... try twisting the ring. Just... try harder. Please." Kili was quite as desperate as he sounded. "It's Thorin. He's dying, Billa. He won't last much longer. We have to get you to him before... before it's too late." He searched the shelf for any sign of her, but in vain. "Please."

There was a slight pause. "Tauriel, I'm right here." The note of desperation in the halfling's voice was almost lost in the scuffling of her movements, which raised a little dust on the rocky ledge, only
a couple inches above the elf's head. "Just reach up here and I'll-

She cut off with a squeak as the elf reached for her, and Tauriel stumbled as though something had struck her, arms folding around an invisible bundle. Blood appeared in fresh, wet smears on Tauriel's front and arms, and Billa's voice issued in hurried, frightened spurts.

"I can't do it. It hurts. Just pull it off."

Tauriel set the hobbit down awkwardly, wrapped her hand around an invisible finger, and pulled. Billa yelped and popped into view, clutching her bleeding hand to her chest. Her gaze found Kili, alight with desperation.

"Where is he?"

"In the elven camp." Kili didn't want to seem unmindful of the fact that Billa had clearly just battered and bruised herself, but he found panic overwhelmed that sensitivity rather quickly. "Come on."

Tauriel insisted on bandaging the halfling's bleeding finger on the go, and when Kili made a faint protest ("She'll be fine until we get there; it's not far.") Tauriel silenced him by reminding him it would be no good to have poor Billa dripping blood and on the verge of fainting when they arrived.

At last, leaving a dark, sticky trail, the hobbit, dwarf, and elf entered the healers' pavilion, puffing and out of breath, but hopeful. The elven healer had finished binding Thorin's chest and moved on to tend some of the other gravely wounded, but Gandalf remained where he was when they'd left.

His eyebrows lifted suddenly when he caught sight of Billa, and the closest thing to a smile Kili had seen all day flickered across the Wizard's aged visage. Thorin, however, remained as before, if not worse, ashen beneath his dark beard, and still as death.

Billa's pallor had been alternating between "white as a sheet" and "flushed." The sight of Thorin seemed to settle the debate somewhat, and her face took on a greyish tinge and stayed there as she approached the bed. Placing her unbandaged hand on the injured dwarf's chest, she blinked hard, still panting.

"If you weren't trying to die on me, I'd hit you," she told the unconscious king in a faintly hysterical, scolding tone. "How could you do this to me--to Kili? Mahal's beard, Thorin, I know you were upset, but did you have to be stupid?"

Gandalf looked mildly surprised, and perhaps a touch amused, as he listened to Billa rail against the unconscious dwarf. The hobbit seemed to be trying very hard to cry, but though her eyes were red and her breath coming in sobs, no tears were shed. At length, her limited energy was spent and she rested her forehead against Thorin's shoulder. The Wizard nodded slightly.

"Let us leave them be. There's nothing more to do but wait." His gaze fell on Kili, and Gandalf nodded slightly to him. "You should have your wounds seen to as soon as you can."

Tauriel reappeared (when she'd gone was anyone's guess) with a small pouch in one hand and bandages in the other. Behind her, the sound of a commotion in front of the tent was all but drowned out by a loud groan from the other side of the divider. "I can treat that hole in your side before we do anything else." There was a stubborn set to her face, and Gandalf lifted a bushy eyebrow at her. The elf snorted. "Let him throw a fit if he will. I have higher priorities."

"Who?"

"'Lord Dain.'"
Kili very nearly cringed. "Just when we thought things couldn't get any worse. You sure it's a good idea to make him wait? The way he's carrying on out there, I wouldn't be surprised if he came charging in here with an ax and relieved me of my head."

Gandalf chuckled faintly. "Oh, I wouldn't worry about it. He knows his place. Dain has no say in the matter, and quite frankly, the more impatient people are... the more I enjoy making them wait."

"You would." Kili sighed and glanced between Tauriel and the door. "Go ahead. I'm sure you're making a fuss over nothing. We Durins are harder than you give us credit for."

Dain's blustering at the door to the tent was making him anxious, but he did his best to ignore it. Unfortunately, the more he tried to ignore it, the more he heard of it. Someone was out there arguing with Dain, someone who sounded remarkably like... Balin. Relief washed over the young dwarf like cold water over a burn. Now he wouldn't have to face the old curmudgeon alone.

Tauriel eased his armor, tunic, and shirt off, ignoring his protests with that same stubborn look on her face. Without the least hint of embarrassment, she ran a gentle hand over his hairy chest and back, checking for other injuries before she settled to cleaning and treating the puncture under his arm. "It's deep," she muttered, frowning in concern. "You're lucky this hit a rib. Might have pierced a lung, otherwise." He'd have some trouble breathing for a while, but it was better than the alternative.

After she'd finished with all his wounds (and apparently deaf to his grumbling) the elleth sat back on her haunches with a sigh. "Go on, then. Seems I can't stop you."

Kili shrugged back into his soiled and ripped tunic, briskly cinching the ties at the front. He spared a small, but genuine smile for the elleth. "Thank you, Tauriel. I know I seem... tense. Just a little overwhelmed."

Kili waited for him to stop sputtering before offering an explanation. "She's our burglar.

Billa had seized Tauriel's knife and was standing between Dain and Thorin, scowling fiercely. She didn't need to make any threats aloud for her point to be excruciatingly clear. Tauriel, who'd made no effort to stop the halfling taking her knife, pulled her helmet off, fighting a smile. Balin entered a moment later, seeming annoyed. A good sign, considering the way his head and arm were bandaged.

"Cousin, please, control yourself. This is a place of healing, not-" The white-haired dwarf spotted Billa, and started to laugh. It was a strained sound, a release of tension more than an expression of mirth, but much-needed, in any case.

Dain glowered at Balin. "Well, what, may I ask, is she?"
"She's a hobbit, Master Dain." Gandalf seemed amused by Dain's bewilderment. "One of the Shirefolk from the kindly West. Surely you've heard of them?"

Dain looked immensely perturbed. "Of course I have! Now tell her to get out of my way. And to put down the knife. She might hurt herself."

"I can understand you just fine." In her defense, Billa was making a decent effort at sounding polite. Not to say she wasn't failing. "You're not coming one step closer until your blood's had time to cool, or so help me, that beard of yours will be a lot shorter when I'm done."

It was only then that Tauriel, still kneeling on the tent floor, put a hand on the hobbit's quaking shoulder. "Billa, he's just worried."

"Worried? Like hell he's worried! We're all worried! He's dying, for Yavanna's sake! And there's nothing I can do about it!" Billa shook off the elf's hand, waving the knife angrily. Tauriel was not so easily dissuaded. She took Billa's hand and pulled her closer, glancing at Kili.

Balin gripped Dain's arm firmly. "That halfling is our burglar, and Thorin's chosen. You would do well to treat her with respect." The bit where she'd stolen the Arkenstone could be sorted out later, and Dain wouldn't need to know about it.

"Thorin's... chosen?" Dain looked positively scandalized, glancing between Billa and Balin, eyes wide. "You mean to tell me the King Under the Mountain has... pursued a mate not of our race?! It's an abomination! No one will stand for it! I certainly won't." For all his blustering earlier, he was still keeping a safe distance from Billa. "Diluting Durin's blood, making a mockery of our people... I will not tolerate this." Dain turned from the hobbit and jabbed a finger startlingly close to Balin's nose. "If you have any respect for our race," he growled, "you'll send the ferocious little creature off now and hope that when Thorin wakes (if, indeed, he does)... he's come to his senses." With that, the furious dwarf stalked out of the pavilion, leaving stunned silence in his wake. Tauriel cradled the distraught halfling against her body and Billa seemed to give in, dissolving into hiccuping sobs interspersed with the words "Thorin," "dead," and "confusticating."

Balin looked as though he might have been holding his temper in check, but when he spoke his voice was as calm as ever. "I'll go check on the others. Shall I report to you here, or in the Mountain?"

"I..." Kili thought a moment, clearly having a hard time processing Balin's sudden deference to him. It felt strange, like having the wisest person you know ask you for advice. "I need to check on Fili," he said finally. "And if you wouldn't mind organizing a group to clean out one of the royal suites and get some fresh bedding and supplies, I think Uncle should be moved there as soon as he's fit. Dain was right about one thing--this is no place for the King Under the Mountain."

The screams of amputees and those undergoing procedures seemed to punctuate these words. This was not a place of rest--it was one of pain and sorrow and horror. He glanced at Tauriel and swallowed uneasily. Giving orders was coming more easily than he'd thought, but all the same, it was still new and frightening. "I think it would be best if you stayed here for now. You're exhausted, and Billa shouldn't be left here alone." Alone. Was he already counting Thorin among the dead?

The red-haired elleth met his gaze and nodded. "We'll follow when we can." A glance at Thorin ensured that the unconscious king was included in that "we," just in case Kili had any doubts. She hesitated a moment, watching the young dwarf with something like concern. "Stay safe," she murmured.
Warning: I may be taking a short hiatus. I need to edit more chapters so I can post them. Supposed to do that today, but one can never tell with days like these. I will be swamped in the near future, but I'll do my very best to keep updating regularly as much as possible. With luck, I'll be posting the next chapter on the evening of 8/12/14, but please don't be angry if it doesn't happen.

Love you all, beautiful readers. See you again soon!
"I know you can hear me, Fili. Whenever you're ready to come back to me, I'll be waiting." The elven healers had gone shortly after the start of the battle, explaining there would be many more wounded who needed them now. Ori had nodded sadly and watched them go. Now she and Fili were truly alone. Now, at least, she could express her heart. She caressed his hand gently, stroked his rust-stained hair, looked down into the pale face, bandaged on one side and looking so very different than it usually did.

An hour passed, then two, then three. Still, no one returned, and Fili did not wake. At long last, Ori lay down beside her beloved, nestling against him and positioning his arm around her waist. "Just rest, Fili. As long as you need. When you wake, I don't care what my brothers do. I'm not going to hide how I feel about you." She stretched up a little so she could kiss him gently on the cheek and sighed weakly, her hope beginning to fade. "Just hold on for me, love. Hold on. I'm not letting you go."

It wasn't clear how long she'd been lying there when Fili first began to stir. His head turned fitfully from side to side, his fingers twitching slightly. At length, the dwarf's blue-grey eyes flickered open. He winced and groaned, feeling much heat and pain radiating in muted pulses from various points of his bruised body. "Kili? Mahal... what happened?"

The head tucked under his chin, however, was russet, not black. Fili felt a rush of relief, though he wasn't exactly sure why. "Ori."

The closeness of Fili's voice to Ori's ear startled her, mostly because she hadn't meant to fall asleep at all. The shock passed quickly, eclipsed by tearful relief as she turned over, shifted her arm across his chest and pressed her lips to his cheek. "Oh, Fili. I was so worried... but it's alright now. You came back to me. I knew you would."

"I didn't go anywhere. Ow!" Fili had tried to twist so he could put his other arm around her, comfort
her, but the resulting pain seared up his shoulder and into his brain. The blond subsided with a grunt, eyes closed. Growling a breathless curse in Khuzdul, he waited for the pain to fade. "What happened?"

"You were... injured." Ori's chest tightened as she remembered the horrible incident, and how she'd thought Fili was dead. The pained noises he made now clawed at her insides, and she wished there were something she could do. If only Oin hadn't gone. "Your Uncle. You ran from him when he was looking for the Stone. He thought you took it. When he caught you, he..." She trailed off. "You don't remember any of this?"

Fili stared at her, stunned disbelief on his bruised face as he slowly shook his head. Even that hurt. The dwarf lifted a hand to his face and found painful swellings, at which he winced. "I remember waking up this morning... that's about it." A thought struck him and the blond shivered slightly. "How long was I out? Where's Kili?"

She looked so frightened and helpless--something terrible must have happened. Or maybe this was just her reaction to his hurts? But then, where were Kili and Oin and Thorin and Billa? Surely they would be here if nothing else had happened. Wouldn't they? Actually...

"Where am I?"

"In the guest chambers. Kili asked me to stay. He..." Ori knew this wasn't going to be easy for him to take. For all she knew, the battle was still raging outside. What if he leapt up, determined to go out there and fight? Determined to find his brother? "If I tell you where everyone is, you have to promise me you won't do anything stupid, Fili. Promise."

Her expression was earnest as she peered into his face. Earnest and frightened. He could see faint redness around her eyes from tears shed before he'd woken. A chill raced down his spine, and Fili tried to sit up. The muscles in his chest and abdomen were sore, and sitting up made breathing harder, but at least he wasn't floored by the pain. His shoulders seemed to be in pretty bad shape, though, and he could feel dried blood on his skin and in his hair.

"I promise I'll hear what you have to say before I make a decision." If she was so reluctant to tell him what was going on--what if Thorin and Kili were dueling right now? What if Dain had arrived and thrown Thorin out of the Mountain? What if, what if? He tried to focus on her, pushing his imaginary fears aside.

Ori nodded slowly. She supposed that was the most she could hope for. "Dain and the dwarves of the Iron Hills arrived a few hours after your fight with Thorin." She spoke softly, gravely, monitoring his reaction carefully. "They said they'd seen an army of Orcs coming this way. Thorin saw that those who were well enough to fight were armed and dressed for battle, and... they left. I haven't heard anything from them since."

By the look of horror on his face, she half expected him to jump up and stagger out the door. "I'm sure they're alright," she added quickly, putting a hand on his wrist, trying not to seem like she was preventing him from leaving. She didn't know what she'd do if he did--he was stronger than her, even wounded and in pain, and she almost certainly couldn't hold him back. She'd have to race to find Nori or one of the others who had been left behind. That was her plan anyway, as best she could form it in the handful of seconds that followed.

The silence of the room pressed on them like a physical thing, a thing that stopped breath, that muffled sound and light. Fili stared blindly at her, through her.

"Kili." His head turned toward the door. "Uncle." The words "army of Orcs" echoed in his mind
again and again. Mechanically, he tried to stand, grunted in pain and sat again. A moment later, he made a second attempt, which was met with more success. One arm clutching his ribs, he pushed Ori out of the way with the other, shuffling across the room, but paused briefly in the door.

Footsteps. Running footsteps.

The blond swayed slightly, fighting a headache that made him nauseous. The figure that rounded the corner wasn't running at all--he was jogging. A figure with black hair. He couldn't force his eyes to work properly, and it wasn't until his brother pulled up a few feet from him that Fili could finally make out his features.

"Kili." His knees felt weak with relief. So weak, in fact that, they deposited him directly on the floor, which raised the level of pain in his body just enough to empty his stomach onto the stone.

Kili wasn't sure how it was possible to feel both alarmed and relieved at the same time, but he didn't really give it much thought. He was kneeling beside his brother, steadying him with both hands, not sure whether he should laugh or cry or both at once. "You're alright, Fee. I can't believe it. I thought for sure you'd been done in."

Ori was standing in the doorway, her mouth slightly open. She looked rather drained. Or was it dazed? "I'll get a rag," she offered softly and disappeared back inside for a moment.

"Missed out on a pretty great fight," Kili went on, apparently not noticing his brother wore an intense expression of pain. "Glad you're alright, though. I could never be king, Fee. I'm just not cut out for it."

"Not cut out?" Fili seemed to grasp the implications of these words with remarkable clarity, considering the fact that his head felt like it was trying to split in two. "No. Don't tell me... Uncle?"

He felt Ori dabbing at his front, and wished she hadn't heard his fear.

Kili's relief was quickly tempered. It was hard news to deliver, but deliver it he did, telling Fili of the duel with Azog and how the great bear--Beorn--had gotten Thorin to the elven healers in time to save him from dying then and there. "But Gandalf says he doesn't have much hope. That he doesn't have a reason to come back." Kili sighed, helping his brother back to the bedroll.

Ori brought a cup of water, offering it to Fili with a tight half-smile. "At least it'll wash the taste out of your mouth."

Kili crouched beside the bedroll, continuing his report. "The worst of it, Fee, is that... I think Uncle was trying to get himself killed. He'd never try a charge like that alone--he deliberately split off from the rest of us and by the time Tauriel and I caught up with him, he'd already...." Kili trailed off, unable to go on.

Fili watched his brother, forcing himself to drink from the cup in his hand. A noble death in battle--he could see how the thought would appeal, but the reality was something entirely different. He couldn't imagine Thorin actually giving up.

"Just like that? He'd just... leave us?" Thorin, suiciding? The thought did nothing to alleviate the nausea eating into the pit of his stomach. He wanted to get up, to go to his uncle, to beg him to come back, but the first move he made in that direction was immediately blocked by Ori's worried face, which looked very wet. Was she crying?

Fili gave in ungracefully and let the two of them bully him into lying down when the room started to swim before his eyes. He tried to give his brother a confident smile. "I just need a bit of rest... then I'll
go see Uncle, make sure he knows I'm not dead." One of his hands clutched Ori's, as though it might stop him from falling.

"I'll tell Thorin you're alive. He's not awake, but Gandalf thinks he can still hear us." Kili squeezed his brother's shoulder. "I'll take care of things until you're back on your feet. Just don't take too long. I have the feeling Dain's getting... frisky." With one final, reassuring smile at Fili and a nod at Ori, Kili stood.

"Kee, if Dain gives you trouble, send him in here. I'll knock some sense into him." The brothers shared a brief, almost amused glance before Kili disappeared through the door.

Ori was caressing Fili's hand again, and when he turned to look at her, still with the intense concentration of someone warring with nausea and pain, she tried to smile through her tears and found she could manage only a tense twitch of the mouth. "What can I do, love? Should I try to find Oin? He could give you something to... dull the pain."

Fili swallowed hard and slowly shook his head. "I... don't want you to go." If he was alone, who would stop him tipping over the edge and into the abyss that waited for him? His grip on her hand tightened, and the blond closed his eyes, trying to regain some control over the situation. "Ori... where's... where's your brother?"

"I don't know. He was wounded, so I can't imagine Thorin would've let him fight. He must be here somewhere." She was thinking about what Kili had said. Imagining Thorin, of all people, not wishing to live on, Thorin abandoning his nephews, his newly reclaimed kingdom... it made her heart sink. None of this was turning out the way she'd thought it would.

"Fili," she said softly, leaning a little closer to him. "I think... I understand. Thorin. What he did... not wanting to live, I mean. When I first ran out and saw you lying there, covered in blood, not moving... I thought you were dead. Everything just... stopped. Nothing mattered. I couldn't go on, Fili." She willfully suppressed a sob, squeezing his hand with both of hers. "I would rather have been dead... than lose you and have to go on living the way I did before." The fountain of tears began anew, but she refused to release Fili's hand so she could wipe them away.

Fili opened his eyes to watch her, feeling as though his heart were twice the size it should be. "Ori..." Lifting his arm was too painful at the moment, so he tugged at her hands, pulling her down toward him. "When the dragon flew to Laketown... I couldn't not go to you. I couldn't believe you were gone. Maybe I'm a fool, but I love you too much to let go now."

"Thank Mahal that this time," she whispered, closing the gap between them, "you won't have to." And she kissed him. It was gentle and slow. Heady. And for one beautiful moment, Ori forgot all that was wrong in the world. When she finally broke the kiss, leaning back enough to see his face, much of the pain had been erased, replaced by peace.

He brought her hand to his face and held her fingers against his lips for a long, quiet moment. "I need to talk to your brothers. As soon as I can." His blue-grey eyes shone as he looked up at her. "I don't want to ever do without that, ever again."

Kili's tread had slowed significantly now that he was sure Fili wasn't going to die. As heartless as it seemed now, he knew that even if Uncle Thorin died, as long as he had his brother, he would survive. The affections of a certain red-haired former captain would certainly help... if he had them at all. The young dwarf tried not to think about it too much. As he stepped around the canvas barrier that blocked Thorin's bed off from the rest of the tent, he paused.
Billa knelt beside Thorin, holding his limp hand tightly between her own. This posture reminded him so powerfully of Ori and Fili that at first, he didn't hear what the hobbit was saying. She was speaking very quietly, her voice rough with overuse.

"...can probably have children, too. If the Big Folk can with us, I don't see why I can't do that for you. Thorin, we have so much ahead. Just please... don't leave me. I've got no reason to stay if you're gone. I'll just... I don't want to go back now."

Kili swallowed, moved by her affection for his uncle. Thorin's breathing was very faint, so much so that it could easily be missed. He'd forgotten just how lifeless he looked, and was reminded how slim a hope they truly had. For Thorin to come back now would take nothing short of a miracle.

Kili hated to intrude upon Billa like this, but he had little choice. He cleared his throat lightly. "I'm back. Fili's doing alright. You... might want to let Thorin know." He paused, scanning the dim, isolated area a little more closely. "Where'd Tauriel go? Needed sleep?"

Billa twitched a little when he first spoke, but relaxed upon recognizing Kili. "Tauriel? She went to see Legolas. They said he was hurt pretty bad." She paused, inspecting his face with a worried look in her eyes. "Did Balin find you? He left here not long ago."

Kili's features tightened a little, but he didn't comment on Tauriel's whereabouts. Of course she'd want to check up on her good friend, but... all the same, it bothered him. Made him feel that same sense of inferiority he had before. After all, he could never compete with the perfection that was the Woodland Realm's prince.

Kili certainly wasn't her first choice. Not that she'd given any indication she had chosen--or ever would choose--him. He blinked away these thoughts furiously, hoping Billa didn't notice.

"Why was Balin looking for me? Not about Dain, was it?" Kili found the irascible dwarf to be rather terrifying, and hoped he wouldn't have to deal with him again.

If the halfling had noticed his reaction to the news of Tauriel's whereabouts, she was very good at hiding it. "No, not Dain, I think. And if that pompous fool shows up here, I can take care of him myself. No, Balin was looking for you because he had news about the others. I don't think it was all good... but all he would tell me is that Bombur and Dori were alive and helping Bofur toward the Mountain." She wasn't quite so good at hiding her feelings about that. It clearly bothered her that Balin wouldn't tell her more, and scared her quite a bit. The thought 'who else has died' was lurking in her eyes.

"Bofur? Bofur's hurt?" Kili's heart sank. "I'll find Balin. If there's something he wouldn't tell you, it's probably not good that all." He turned to leave. "Oh, and Billa? Make sure to tell Thorin Fili's alright. It might... make a difference."

Billa nodded slightly. She turned her attention back to Thorin, and as Kili made to leave, she spoke quietly to the unconscious king.

"Did you hear that, Thorin? Fili's alright. Everyone's going to be okay."
Waking up to intense, stabbing pain in your midsection is never a pleasant affair. However, it can be somewhat improved by the face of a beloved friend hovering over your own, a friend you had thought, upon losing consciousness, no longer cared about you. This was the situation in which Legolas found himself, staring shakily up into the stricken face of Tauriel, her familiar green eyes soft for him. Soft as he'd never before seen them.

He strove for speech, but it didn't come easily. For that matter, neither did breathing. In the close air between the canvas walls, he seemed to be suffocating, and to draw anything more than the shallowest of breaths agitated his diaphragm such that he felt paralyzed with pain. He panted quietly through clenched teeth, gripping the stiff edges of the cot, trying to suppress his panicked instincts.

"Tauriel," he managed. "You're... here."

"I've given her leave to see you--for the time being." The voice was Thranduil's, tense with concern, but reassuring in its strength and steadiness. "You were calling for her."

Tauriel's eyes closed briefly, and gentle fingers tightened slightly around Legolas's forearm. "Thank the Valar." The words were barely a constricted whisper. When he tried to lift his head, she moved closer, stroking his damp blond hair soothingly. In a moment, she had a cool rag, and was wiping away the sticky sweat from his brow. What would have been uncharacteristic tenderness for the Guard Captain now seemed nothing if not natural.

"Be easy, my friend. You're past the worst of it." The prince's pallor was incredibly pale, and his usually sharp blue eyes drifted vaguely from point to point. He didn't look like he was "over the worst of it," but he was awake, and that, as Tauriel knew, was half the battle.

"You," Legolas fought for words, each an arduous mountain to climb, "saved me?" He didn't remember her being anywhere near him when he went down. The shot was well-placed, the arrow filthy and no doubt kept intentionally so to cause infection. He hadn't felt anything but the impact, at first. The force of a punch to his abdomen. He'd fought on. Then the searing, throbbing pain had begun, and it seemed to radiate throughout his entire body--breathtaking, hot as if a flame had been lodged inside him. A moment later, he was on the ground and he didn't know how he'd gotten there.
The last thing he remembered was a sense of surprise. Surprise that she hadn’t been there. She had always been there when he needed her. And now he was going to die alone, leaving his father without an heir. It was with intense sadness that his mind had faded, and he remembered nothing else from that point until now.

Grief twisted across Tauriel’s expression, and she glanced guiltily at Thranduil as she answered very softly. "No. I... didn't find you until afterward." Why must he suffer? My dearest and oldest friend... but I have been cast out. And to have stayed would have been to betray myself. Perhaps it would have been preferable to live in shadow. "Please forgive me."

Legolas could see she was deeply sorry for what had happened, but still couldn't help but feel a little disappointed. "I was... a fool," he whispered. "Wasn't your fault. Shouldn't have... gone off on my own." A wave of nausea washed over him, and he turned his face away from hers, focusing very hard. "Might... be sick," he mumbled apologetically, shutting his eyes.

Tauriel reacted swiftly. Rather than turning away, however, she grabbed a basin and held it where Legolas could make use of it if necessary. This posture, however, leaning over and holding the heavy basin, put a good amount of strain on parts of her she'd forgotten were hurt, and the elleth's complexion paled. It wasn't until after Legolas had emptied his stomach into the basin that she sat down, and her expression relaxed somewhat.

Legolas turned away, disgusted. It had been quite some time since he'd fallen to such a physical ailment as vomiting. He moaned unhappily, reaching for the rag. Tauriel handed it to him. He'd only just managed to wipe his mouth before another wave of nausea hit him, and he turned again to the basin Tauriel had set beside him. There wasn't much in his stomach at all--just acidic fluid that burned his throat and tasted vile in his mouth.

Thranduil watched his son's misery with what was rapidly becoming agitation. To see his son in such a state, overcome by pain, barely able to move... nothing had troubled him more deeply since the fall of his own father in battle thousands of years before, in much the same manner, pierced by Orc arrows and uttering his last words through a mouthful of blood.

Thranduil had felt so powerless in that moment, a feeling he never wanted to relive. Where were his son's protectors? Those who were supposed to ensure their prince didn't come to grief? That's right. The one who had always stood by his son, the one he'd depended on, had betrayed her prince and sworn fealty to another king.

"This would not have happened if you had known your place and stayed there," he said, his words a keen edge in the stillness. "You brought this upon him, Tauriel."

Tauriel flinched, her gaze flicking to Thranduil's face, then to Legolas's. An unreadable expression, seemingly comprised of too many emotions to identify, stole across her face as her large green eyes filled rapidly with tears. After a moment of silence, in which she shook her head, the elleth covered her face with her hands.

"I told him... I told him to stay safe. I can't... protect everyone. I can't even protect the people I swore to. Why do they all have to die?" There was a despairing note in her voice as she lifted her tear-streaked face imploringly to Thranduil. "Why is there so much death? I tried so hard to stop it, and... I couldn't. I was so scared. I failed in my task, I've failed every time. And I can't... I can't..." Her voice quieted until it became little more than a whisper. "I can't do this alone. Everything I've ever loved, I failed to keep. Now I'll lose him too, and it's all my fault."

Tauriel couldn't have hidden her tears, even if she'd had a mind to. Slender shoulders shaking, she bowed her head until it touched the cot Legolas lay on, her entire body bent under the weight of grief.
and guilt. It was as though she alone were responsible for the slaughter of hundreds.

Legolas, having finished another bout of heaving, wiped his mouth again, sighed exhaustedly, and turned back to the elleth. "Said it wasn't... your fault, Tauriel." He pressed his head firmly into the canvas, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to focus. "I... made assumptions... I had no business... making. I put you... in a bad position." He opened his eyes, still trembling faintly. "Torn between your duty... and your heart."

Legolas's words seemed to do absolutely nothing to stem the flood of tears. The female let out a quiet sob. "I never knew. I never even dreamed. You were my best friend. I just... we could have... but you deserve so much better." Even if she had the strength to love him as he deserved, had she the strength to love and serve? The strength to succeed where before she'd failed? Failed. Innocent girls who'd done no harm. A dwarf king, grief-mad and frightened of himself. These she had allowed to fall while it had been her duty to protect them. And now Legolas.

"I'm sorry." Her lungs didn't seem to be working right. The world reeled around her as she gasped between wracking sobs. "Legolas." What did it matter what Thranduil thought? She'd already been branded a traitor, most likely banished. Her home was lost to her already. "Kili." She would never belong among the dwarves, no matter how many of them befriended her. Her clan, dead. Her home, lost. Her friends, dying. Perhaps this had always been what was meant for her.

"Kili?" Thranduil's perplexed voice echoed Tauriel's. "The dwarf prince?" His eyes narrowed slightly, giving him the appearance of a cat about to pounce. "So that's the answer, then. You have fallen in love with one of the dwarves. You, who had a prince of your own race who would've done anything for your affections--an elf you had known and called friend most of your life--and the first chance you get, you run off with a dwarf."

His words dripped with incredulity, mockery. "Oh, but perhaps they're more your sort?"

"Father, stop it." Legolas ground the words through his teeth, unable to bear the distress in Tauriel's face, shame and sorrow like a mother that had let her children come to grief. "She doesn't need your vitriol. Especially now. Can't you see? She's hurt. She's been injured, and no one's," he coughed a little, grimacing, "taken care of her."

"Perhaps she should return to her precious dwarves, then. If they love her so well, they'll take care of her."

Thranduil's bitterness was leaving a worse taste in Legolas's mouth than the one he already had. He shook his head sadly. "How you hurt those you love, my king."

Tauriel put a trembling hand on Legolas's chest. If she'd had any energy to spare, any magic of her own, she would have gladly given it to him, without reserve. But she had nothing left to give. "Peace," she choked, sounding as though she was desperate for him to find what she couldn't have. "I... will go. He... speaks truth. Always has." A note of defeat crept into her voice. "Always. I am meant only to serve. Just a Silvan Elf. If I can't do my duty... what use am I?" Offering the injured blond a tearful and thoroughly unhappy smile, she pushed herself unsteadily to her feet. She felt weak and dizzy, and the world's reeling didn't improve at all once she was standing. Blinking rapidly, trying to remember to breathe in spite of her tears, she turned to go, and saw Kili outside the tent's entrance, his expression half worried, half exasperated as he spoke quietly to the guard.

Kili caught sight of Tauriel, and frowned with concern. He didn't think he'd ever seen her looking so upset, not even in the days after the dragon burned Laketown. It was clear whatever was going on with the Woodland Realm's prince was very distressing. He wondered--with mixed emotions--if Legolas had succumbed to his wounds. Since the matter he'd been discussing with the guard was no
longer relevant, he moved off, waiting for Tauriel.

"Anything I can do?" he asked her when she'd joined him. "You look..." He tried to be tactful and failed. "...awful."

When she merely shook her head, he sighed. This was even worse than he'd thought. "Is it the prince? Is he...?"

Tauriel shook her head again, then frowned and closed her eyes, as though trying very hard to focus.

"Not dead," she answered at length, and it sounded like she was struggling to speak in Westron, her Elvish accent more pronounced than usual. "I just... failed him." She opened her eyes, and the look of devastation she turned on him all but dripped with the unspoken words.

*I failed you, too.*

Kili took her hand firmly in his own. He couldn't stand to see her sunk so low into despair. She'd been supporting and caring for everyone else around her for so long, she hadn't taken any consideration for herself--her own needs. She was injured, and obviously needed rest and treatment.

"No, Tauriel. You made a choice. To stand by your king in his time of need. You saved Thorin. From Azog, at least, if not from death. You couldn't be in two places at once. Why are you so hard on yourself?"

The elf didn't resist as he pulled her along, though her gait was unsteady. "I was always... I told him I might not be able to... but I was always the one that saved him. And now he says I left Legolas for a dwarf...." *And what if he's right?*

Tauriel stumbled slightly and came to a stop, staring at Kili and looking a bit like she might be sick.

Kili's face paled a little. "A dwarf? *He* said...? Who said? The Elvenking?" When she continued to sway and look very faint, he braced her with both hands. She looked as though a gust of wind could blow her over, and her face had taken on a slightly greenish cast. "You alright? Tauriel?"

"Why must I? Loving hurts so much." The elleth seemed to be looking *through* him now, beginning to shake and breathe more heavily. Slowly, Tauriel sank to her knees, leaning against him weakly, burying her face in his shoulder. "No. I can't. I can't watch them all die again, Kili, I can't."

"Watch *who* die?" Now Kili was truly alarmed. "*Loving?" Who does she mean? Legolas? There was something seriously wrong with the red-haired elf. Something--or someone--had gotten to her. "Was it the Elvenking, Tauriel? Did he do this to you?"

When she failed to answer, still staring off into the distance as though she were leaning against a stone and not a sentient being, he knew she needed help. This ran far deeper than her physical ailments, and there was only one person he knew who might be able to get her what she needed right now.

Swallowing heavily, or at least trying to, since his throat seemed to have practically sealed itself shut, he looked into her half-vacant gaze and spoke resolutely. "Tauriel, I'm going to get you to Gandalf. Or at least, get you to the healers until I can find Gandalf. Can you walk?"

Clearly, she couldn't. Maybe she hadn't heard him at all. Was she even conscious? Could elves be unconscious with their eyes open? "Alright, then. You leave me little choice."

This was going to hurt. He knew it before he began, but was undeterred. He wasn't even sure how
he did it, but a handful of seconds later, the limp form of the elf was over his shoulder and he was staggering toward the edge of the camp, gritting his teeth with each step as the extra weight jarred his injured side, his still-healing leg.

He supposed if he were perfectly well and whole, he wouldn't have much trouble carrying her--she wasn't more than seven inches taller than him, and her build was slight. With his injuries as they were, though, this journey was requiring every ounce of his strength and will.

Still, roughly five minutes later, the elleth had been tucked into a cot whose previous owner had only recently passed on, and Kili entrusted her into the care of the healers for however long it would take him to find the Wizard.

He hadn't spoken with Balin yet, as he'd wanted to tell Tauriel where he was going first and make sure she was alright, but he wagered it could wait until he'd taken care of Tauriel.

It was only after he saw the look on the white haired dwarf's face that he realized it couldn't.

At the camp's edge, closest to the gates, they'd finally found each other, and now Balin gave Kili the full update.

"Bofur, Gloin, and Dwalin are badly hurt. Oin is in the Mountain with them. Bombur and Dori are alright. But... we lost Bifur." The dwarf bowed his head somberly. "And word is that the Great Bear has fallen."

Balin let the information sink in for a moment before he continued. "We shall set Bifur in stone once we have the tools to do so. Within a day or two, I think. By then, your brother should have recovered some. And we'll know whether or not Thorin will live. Neither of them dared say that last out loud, though.

Kili nodded slowly, unable to look at the old dwarf. "Bifur. I'll admit I didn't know him well, but he was... a good warrior, and a fine companion. I wish..." He looked deflated and weak, swaying slightly. "I wish he'd had a chance to see everything put right. Not a good way to die, the world around him in chaos like it was."

The news about Beorn, though, genuinely surprised him, and he found he was having a hard time believing that the great skin-changer had fallen. "And Beorn? I'd have thought he would've outlasted us all. And the last of his kind, too. It's a real shame."

Kili explained he was looking for Gandalf, but Balin hadn't seen the old Wizard. "I wonder where he's gone. Flighty as a sparrow. If he's not in the Mountain, and he's not in the elven camp... I think it's a fair assumption he's gone off again. And just when we need him, too."

The young dwarf sighed helplessly. "How's my brother? Please tell me he's alright, Balin. I can't handle being responsible for," he gestured searchingly, as though he couldn't find the right word, "all this."

"Your brother is just fine. Sleeping, when I looked in on him last, and Ori was talking about getting him to eat something when he wakes." Balin's tone seemed to indicate that, while he was hopeful, he thought that Ori's plan was probably a little too optimistic. Still, it was nice that someone was. "By your leave, I'll move Dain and his folk into the Mountain, so we can start repairs. Goodness only knows how long this peace will last. Mahal willing, years." With a faint smile, the old dwarf reached out to steady Kili, who was swaying slightly. "I'll ask around after the Wizard. Why don't you go rest for a while?"
"Thanks, Balin." He clapped a hand over the old dwarf's shoulder. "But please... do your best to find Gandalf. Tauriel's... ill. It's not just exhaustion—I know the difference." He gazed earnestly into Balin's sympathetic face, silently thanking Mahal at least one of the people he looked to for wisdom would make it through this disaster.

"I think it's.... Well, she's just... empty. Like she's given up. I don't know what I'd do if... well." He wouldn't finish that thought.

Balin agreed to do what he could, and Kili turned away. He needed the rest. With both his brother and Thorin gravely injured, it seemed that much more would be required of him before the end.

The elf's clothes were blood-stained and torn, her armor in a pile under the cot on which she lay. Kili wasn't at all surprised to see that, though she was on her side with her knees drawn up to her chest, her eyes were open and glazed, staring sightlessly into the distance. The young dwarf took a seat beside her cot and sighed, touching her hand gently. He remembered the night he'd found her in the common room in Laketown, asleep before the fire. How quickly she'd reacted, ready to fight. To defend. Now she barely recognized his presence at all. His heart ached for this sad shell of the elf with a spirit as fiery as her hair. What had broken her?

"Don't worry, Tauri. We'll pull through." Because 'everything is going to be alright' weren't words he could believe in anymore.

Sleeping in the healing tent wasn't at all easy. One might say it was impossible without some sort of drug, but exhaustion is as powerful as any opiate. In spurts, anyway. Kili found himself jerked awake by the screams of warriors in pain, by the broken sobs of women coming to collect dead loved ones, and (most frustratingly) by the tired bickering of the healers, speaking in rapid Elvish as they passed Tauriel's cot. At some point, he assumed the red-haired elf must have fallen asleep, because when he checked her after the umpteenth time he'd been wakened, her eyes were closed, and her breathing was even. That, at least, was a relief.

When Kili was jolted awake yet again (he judged from the disorientation and grogginess that he must have slept for at least ten minutes) by the pained whimpers of some poor victim of the Elves' healing, he didn't at first recognize what it was. Then Tauriel's wrist smacked him in the face, and the dwarf toppled with a startled cry. As if his reaction were a trigger, someone started to scream.

"No! NO! Don't!"

Kili sat up, looking about wildly. When his gaze landed on Tauriel, he thought he felt his heart stop.

"TILDA! No, please, PLEASE!" The elleth was sitting up on her bed, terror stamped across her face, grasping blindly for something beyond her reach.

Kili would've thought she was dreaming if her eyes hadn't been wide open. As it was, he was truly alarmed. "Tauriel," he tried, and scrambling up clumsily, he took hold of her hand, hoping touch might stir her out of whatever fit she was in.

But she might have been deaf and numb for all she reacted. It was clear she wasn't here. She wasn't with him, in the healers' tent. She was back in Laketown, when Smaug had attacked. It was as real to her now as it had been when it actually happened. That startled Kili even more—she might hurt herself, might hurt someone else, not realizing what she was doing.

"I need help," he called across the space. A few of the exhausted healers had already noticed what was going on, since few enough of the periodic screams shredding the night air were female. "She's
going to hurt herself. Help me!"

Two of the healers, one female and one harassed-looking male, approached the bed swiftly. The female looked from Kili to Tauriel while the male grabbed the elf's shoulders and forced her back down onto the bed. The elleth, trapped in her dream, thrashed and fought, screaming at the top of her lungs.

"TILDA!!! No, no, let me go!!!" Tauriel's green eyes were huge in her pale face, bright with tears that refused to spill properly. "Let go, LET ME GO! I have to... I have to save them. Please. I have to save them." Now the tears overflowed and her eyes started to focus. She spotted Kili, and surged forward, throwing off the male's hands as the female healer moved forward and smacked her soundly right across the face.

"Dwarf, forward," she snapped. "Where she can see you."

Tauriel was gasping, sobbing, and blinking hard and fast. As Kili was shoved all but in her lap, the red-haired elf ran her shaking hands over his face, through his beard, down his chest. "Kili. Kili. You're alive. Stars save us, you're alive." Her voice broke and she held him tightly, then she kissed him, her tears soaking his face as well as hers.

"I'm alright. I'm just fine, Tauriel." Stunned as he was by her affection, Kili didn't bother contradicting her, telling her they weren't in Laketown, that none of them were in danger. He sensed it wouldn't help. She needed comfort right now, to be reassured. "Don't worry about me, Tauriel. We're both alright. And Tilda... Tilda's gone, but you saved Ori. You saved Addie. You did the best you could. You did more than I ever could've."

He held both of her hands in his own. Caressed them. Kissed them. He needed to calm her if he could. Whatever these visions were, they could be sorted out when Gandalf came. For now, he just needed to make sure she didn't hurt herself. Needed to ease her distress any way he could. "Rest now, Tauriel," he whispered. "Rest. There's nothing more we can do right now. We'll figure out what to do in the morning. Please. For me."

Tauriel shuddered, weeping still as she held him. "Stars, Kili... you were dead. I watched you die. I watched..."

"Her mind is scarred by grief, Dwarf. Don't let her fall to it." The female healer was looking at Kili very seriously. She clearly didn't approve, but would work with what she had, and what this poor elf needed was simply... "Love her. And don't let her go."

Tauriel didn't hear the healers, didn't see them leave. They might as well have not been there at all for all the attention she paid them. She only had eyes for Kili, and even then, it didn't seem like she was always looking at him. She was still babbling, now slipping into Elvish as she forgot that she was speaking to Kili.

"But I'm not dead, Tauriel. I'm here. It's me. It's alright." The earnestness with which she spoke was unnerving. She was sure she'd seen him die. Like being in the throes of the most vivid of nightmares, except she was caught somewhere in between the nightmare and the moment of waking.

She was still lying on the cot--more accurately, sprawled out over it, her legs askew, and Kili gently pressed her head down, still caressing one of her hands. "Sleep, Tauriel. I'm just fine. I promise you I'll still be here when you wake." He leaned down and kissed her, softly, on the forehead, his voice sinking to a whisper. "Will you trust me on that, Tauri? I'll be right here."

At last, the elf's eyes focused on him, and though her expression still held fear, she seemed to relax a
little. After a moment, she nodded, taking deep, shuddering breaths as her fingers tightened around his.

"I trust you." The words themselves wrought a change on her, and Tauriel's entire aspect seemed more peaceful. "I trust you, Kili." There might have been magic in the phrase. Her eyelids became heavy, and her breathing slowed. After a moment's concentration, she shifted to the side, making space as she tugged at Kili's hands.

"With me," she whispered. "Please."

Kili nodded, and crawled into the space Tauriel had provided for him, nestling close to her body as he had that cold night they'd returned to Erebor. Only a few days ago, and somehow it seemed a lifetime.

Her hands were soft and warm in his own, her fingers slightly longer, but not awkwardly so. This moment of peace was surreal, overwhelming in its simplicity. He found himself wishing he could stay here forever, in the quiet embrace of the elleth.

The world around him was unrecognizable. It was good to have something familiar, something he could cling to in the hard days ahead. "Sleep, my love," he whispered. "Sleep. I'm here as long as you want me."

"Never leave," she whispered, her breath warm on his ear. After that, she was still and steady. Her body curled around his, just enough taller than him that her knees fit precisely behind his, yet not so much taller that her cheek couldn't press comfortably into his hair. Here, he was safe. Here, she could protect him. Here, if anyone wanted to burn him, they would have to burn both of them. She protected his most vulnerable point with her very own self, and that, more than anything, soothed her. If she had dreams after that, they were quiet, and didn't disturb her rest further.
Farewell

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

*facepalm* Thanks to fogisbeautiful for telling me about my majestically amazing blunder. *sheepish grin* I accidentally posted the same chapter twice. I feel a proper fool. Here's the actual chapter 64. *nods* I just... someone shoot me, please. *hides under a rock... a majestic rock*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Billa gripped Kili's shirt and and shook him hard, already shouting in his ear. "They're taking Thorin! Kili! KILI! They're taking him away!" Before her friend had properly understood the magnitude of the situation, the hobbit was on the floor. Tauriel was crouching over the dwarf with a very blank expression on her face, and one of her many small knives was lodged in the Billa's shirt, right over her heart.

The elf's face registered horror, then panic, as the halfling lay on her back. Her round face was set in a grimace of pain and she slowly curled in on herself, wheezing.

Kili, suddenly wide awake and on his feet, glanced between Tauriel and the hobbit with open-mouthed shock. The healers had already come running, as no one could have possibly missed the incident. Surprisingly, Tauriel didn't fight this time as she was restrained and forced back onto the cot.

"Search her for other weapons," one said, while two of the others knelt beside the injured halfling. It was like something from a nightmare. Kili couldn't believe this had just... happened. He felt responsible. After all, Tauriel had been in his care. At a loss for anything else to do, he took the elleth's hand and seated himself beside her on the cot while the healers saw to Billa.

On closer inspection, they found that the blood seeping through her shirt wasn't from the knife at all. At least, it hadn't caused the initial injury. Peeling the cloth back gently, they were dazzled by a vest of silver so bright, it was almost white, delicately woven links like metal fabric. Yet even this fantastic garment was discolored and stained by blood, both dried and fresh.

"Mithril," one of the elves whispered, awestruck. "Where did you...? How did you...?"

"It was a gift from my uncle," Kili said. Then it registered. Billa had been screaming at him. She'd told him they were taking Thorin away. Reluctantly leaving Tauriel in the hands of the healers, he jumped up and rushed across the tent and around the partition. This had to be Dain's doing, and Kili was quite prepared to give him more than a piece of his mind.
By the time Kili arrived, however, Thorin was already gone. There was an empty cot, a lack of blankets, and a shattered mug. Dashing outside, he caught the tail end of a decently-sized group of dwarves, about fifteen in all, some carrying the injured king on a sturdy stretcher, and the rest circled around and glaring at the Elves roundabout as though daring them to come closer. Behind him, Billa was insisting she was "fine," even though she sounded like she was in tremendous amounts of pain. A dwarf at the back of the group turned to frown at Kili and grunted a challenge in Khuzdul, actively barring him from reaching Thorin’s still form.

Kili shoved the dwarf aside. "What do you think you're doing?" he yelled at no one in particular, as Dain didn't appear to be present. "What's in your heads? Who told you you could carry him off?!"

When no one seemed to be listening, let alone stopping, Kili actually grabbed onto the stretcher, tried to pull one of the dwarves off. "He can't be moved right now! He's not... he's too weak. Don't you understand, you lunkheads? You have rocks for brains? I said you're not going anywhere with my uncle!"

Dain seemed to materialize at his elbow, and it was immediately apparent why he'd not been recognizable among his men. Where before his crown-like helmet and fine armor had set him apart from the others, the chief of the Iron Hills had now changed into a soft blue tunic and leathers.

"Do you want us to drop him, boy?" he growled. "I checked with your precious Elves," here he paused to spit on the ground, "and they said we could take him to the Mountain, where he belongs."

Kili would learn later that the actual words had been “Moving him now won’t immediately kill him.” It sounded very much like the dwarf thought the necessity of asking elves for permission to do anything was the lowest indignity he’d ever suffered. That theory was quickly debunked, however, when Billa staggered out of the tent behind them, her mithril shirt covered once more, still holding herself as though she might fall apart otherwise, and followed by one very irate healer.

"Miss Baggins, if you would just hold still..."

"I don't have time to hold still, Calphanar." As the halfling hobbled closer, Dain scowled.

"What's the meaning of this?" Dain raged, red-faced, gesturing at Billa. "I thought I'd made it clear-"

"She's my uncle's only chance," Kili cut in, glaring at the older dwarf. "If Thorin goes to the Mountain... so does Billa. I'd think a caring, concerned kinsman like yourself wouldn't want to take from the king what little chance he has of recovering. I hope I'm not wrong about that, Dain."

"She's an embarrassment!" Dain barked. "I can't imagine what my cousin must have been thinking. It's clearly a mistake." Having convinced himself thus, he nodded. "If Thorin wakes, I've no doubt the matter will be sorted. He knows such a bond would only result in disaster. No dwarf will follow a king who mingles his blood with that of a halfling peasant!"

A tiny hand shot out, grabbed a handful of Dain's beard and yanked him downward. It must have taken all of Billa's weight to make Dain bow low enough to look her in the eye, but she managed it, teeth bared.

"You call me a 'halfling peasant' or an 'embarrassment' one more time, Ironbottom, and I'll be teaching you how to wear your tongue as a bowtie." Where she was getting this reserve of violent threats was an absolute mystery, but she wasn't done. "Now I suggest you calm down and remember you're speaking to the Heir of Durin, not some trumped up, attention-seeking cousin."

Billa released him, staggered back a step, and collapsed into Calphanar's arms. The elf looked almost frightened as the halfling lost color rapidly, breathing hard.
"Alright, alright," she mumbled. "Just... a bit of a rest... then I'll follow them. I'll stay with Tauriel, Kee. You go ahead." She flapped a hand weakly at him, seeming about ready to pass out.

Kili looked conflicted, and more than a little stunned. Under other circumstances, he might have been snickering into his sleeve. The courage of the halfling, seemingly unimpressed by Dain's rank and gruff, no-nonsense demeanor, was so startlingly wonderful.

Dain, evidently appalled to the point that words failed him, took a brief moment to collect himself before turning away with a dismissive snort, surreptitiously smoothing his beard. He didn't need to deal with this. This was a circus, and he wasn't going to perform for them. Grunting at the stretcher-bearers, he shot a look at Kili that meant he--and his ilk--would pay for this further indignity, and moved on.

"I told Tauriel I wouldn't leave her, Billa." Kili glanced back at the stretcher as it went on its way, a lump forming in his throat. "But I have to make sure Uncle is safe. I don't trust Dain any further than I can kick him. Old codger's getting on my nerves." He sighed unhappily and turned to follow the procession. "Tell Tauri I'll be back. Soon as I can."

The trek up to the Mountain was a long one, as the stretcher-bearers took every care not to jostle the King Under the Mountain. Even if Dain was a pompous fool, he did seem to care about his cousin, and it showed in the way he hovered and barked nervous orders. Balin was waiting for them in the entrance hall, looking less than pleased, and--so was Fili. The blond leaned heavily on Ori as though she were a crutch, and although he still had the sickly pallor of one who was fighting a lot of pain, he seemed more alert than he had before.

"Balin will show you to the suite," he told Dain, who seemed startled to see him. Fili paid him no more mind as he turned his blue gaze on his brother. "Kee, what news? Any developments?"

Kili's dark brow furrowed. "Had to leave Tauriel behind with Billa. Other than that? Not much." He glanced at Dain, then took a step closer to Fili. "So... you wanted Uncle brought here, then. Are you sure that was a good idea? The Elven healers kept saying he shouldn't be moved."

Fili's face took on a grim cast as he glanced at the still form of their uncle, being borne past them and into the Mountain. "I'm not sure of anything anymore, Kee. I'm just... trying to keep us all together at this point. Uncle and Dain will be furious, but I intend to formally request whatever healers Thranduil can spare to watch over Thorin while he recovers." There was a pause, filled only with the distant tramp of boots. "Have you seen Nori, by any chance?" There was an anxious look on the blond's face now, and he glanced at the gates again.

"Nori?" A chill like icy fingers traced up Kili's spine. He knew he oughtn't have worried, especially over someone as self-reliant as Nori, but all the same... nothing was certain at this point. "Haven't seen him since we left the Mountain. Before the battle. Think he might be exploring Erebor? I mean, I wouldn't put it past him to be combing the ruins for shinies." Kili forced a light chuckle, but it sounded hollow. Why would Nori be anywhere but where his brother and sister were in a time like this? Didn't make much sense. Fili's smile looked decidedly unconvincing on his bruised face as he glanced at the female that still supported him.

"Ori doesn't think so. I'm afraid he might have gotten himself mixed up in the Battle, to be honest."

Another dwarf with a ginger beard and a scarred face (Dain's second-in-command) alerted Fili that Thorin had been installed into the royal suite and was being seen to by Dain's best healers.

"I think you should send for the elven healers. Now." Kili's eyes darted between the ginger dwarf and his brother. "We may not have much time." Dain's second-in-command looked on sourly, as
though deciding whether or not to comment, then turned away. Kili frowned slightly at his back, then turned again to the blond. "Oh! Fee, I just remembered. Gandalf's gone missing again. No one's seen him since..." He blinked thoughtfully. "I don't know. He's just... gone. Maybe," he suggested hopefully, "Nori's with him?"

Fili winced. The news of Gandalf's disappearance could be nothing but ill tidings at this point. They needed the Wizard, and of course, he had decided to slip off, like he always did.

"We can hope, Kee. If you have the energy maybe you can deliver this to Thranduil's folk and check on the girls while you're at it." The blond offered his brother a scrap of parchment and a strained smile. Kili looked at the parchment a long moment, then nodded slowly, accepting the paper. He forced his exhaustion aside yet again in favor of duty, wondering if this was what Thorin felt like all the time. He turned, and found himself face to face with another dwarf. It had been so sudden and unexpected that Kili actually jumped.

Dori's face was white as a sheet beneath his uncharacteristically messy grey hair. "Damned fool," he whispered at last, as if to himself. "Didn't I tell him? Didn't I?" There was clearly no satisfaction in whatever Dori had been right about, and he sighed, unable to meet his sister's gaze.

There was deep concern etched on Fili's bruised and bandaged face. "What happened? What's wrong?"

The disheveled dwarf hesitated for so long that at first, the blond thought he might not answer. Then, finally, "He's returned to stone." And there was no doubt of whom he spoke.

Ori's normally rosy complexion drained of color, and Kili half-stumbled to grab his brother's elbow as the female collapsed forward into Dori's arms.

"Oh, Nori," she choked out, burying her face in the rough linen of her brother's shoulder. "Why? I don't..." Her already strained voice dissolved into sobs.

With Kili's help, Fili moved a step closer to them and then hesitated. As willing as he was to invade Ori's space and hold her, Dori was another matter entirely. After a moment, he grasped Ori's shoulder. Her need for support was greater than his sense of masculine pride. No matter how he tried, though, he couldn't think of anything to say.

Ori felt the firm pressure of Fili's hand, but didn't look at him. This couldn't be real. It couldn't be. All there was to it. "You're sure?" she sobbed into Dori's already tear-damp tunic. "You're completely sure? You... checked?"

Dori nodded slowly, valiantly managing to maintain his composure. "No doubt, sister. He's gone. And now we must look after him. Come." The greying dwarf's bristly-looking braids were in his eyes, and he brushed them aside, looking at Fili. "We need to bear our brother from the battlefield," he said, tone flat, controlled. "Is there anyone who can help us?"

Fili hesitated. "I can help," he said firmly. "Most of the others are hurt, and Bombur is with Oin..." there was a short pause, "and to be honest, I'd rather keep this in the Company."

"I'll go," Kili offered. "Fee, you're in no condition to be doing anything that might strain you. Not right now."

"I'll be fine," the blond countered, pulling away from his brother to underscore his claim. "I need you to get the message to the elves."

Kili opened his mouth to protest, but quickly deduced from the stubborn set of Fili's jaw that his
brother's mind was made up. He threw up his hands in apparently surrender. "Fine." He spoke in an earnest undertone. "Just please--please--don't overdo it."

Fili watched him go, suddenly aware of Dori's eyes on him. The older dwarf studied him intently, then nodded slightly. The two of them, plus Ori, would be able to get Nori into the Mountain. His proper rest could be arranged from there. The very thought of burying his brother was enough to nearly break him. Nori, no matter how unruly he'd been, had always taken care of them.

Ori managed to compose herself, but her eyes were distant, her wan, tear-streaked face expressionless. Dori helped her up, and together with Fili, proceeded silently out the front gates. Most of the honored dead had already been collected, through the twisted corpses of the orcs and wargs and goblins still lay where they'd fallen. It was a sight Ori would never forget, and thinking of Nori lying among this carnage, forgotten, was a grief she'd never imagined she'd know.

Dori saw the mute horror in her eyes, and placed an arm around her. "Be strong, sister. We're nearly there." He pulled up at a pile of boulders in the midst of the rocky, sloping plain. "By the looks of things, he... it was quick." He led the others around the pile, and had to steady Ori, as he could feel her knees giving way. He eased her to the ground, where she sat a long moment, shaking, unable to look upon the hastily composed form lying in the dust before her.

She couldn't believe it. Couldn't be true. Didn't even look like Nori. His armor was rent and bloody, jagged edges sticking out at odd angles around gaping wounds that couldn't be covered or hidden. Dori was right, though. The angle of Nori's bloodied head spoke plainly of a broken neck. It was unlikely their brother had been alive for the majority of his other, would-be fatal wounds.

Fili stood behind Ori, supporting her as he gazed around at the space his companion had occupied before his death. Silently, he counted. "Seven. Seven orcs dead before he fell." One still had an ax buried in its chest.

"There's worse ways a dwarf can go," Dori murmured, kneeling beside his brother's stiff form. "Still, when I get to the Halls of Waiting, the first thing I'll do is wring his neck and ask him what in Mahal's name he was thinking, rushing out like that, wounded as he was." A fleeting smile quirked up the corners of his lips, though his eyes were a bit watery. He turned to Fili. "Best let's get this over with. Not right to leave him lying among the carrion longer than we have to."

Ori, sniffling, glanced between Fili and Dori, and seemed to draw some strength from their composure. With Fili's help, she pushed herself to her feet, still a bit wobbly, and moved to Nori's side. Dori sounded very tired as he arranged for the practical task ahead, and within a handful of minutes, the three had Nori on a tightly woven wool blanket (scavenged from an abandoned pack) and were bearing him slowly, reverently, back toward the gates.

"They'd be proud of him," Ori said softly as they went. "Mother and Father. He was very brave."

Fili glanced at her. Nori's body was heavier than he'd expected, but none of them complained about the weight. His unsteady, limping gait slowed them, but the others didn’t seem to mind. Her comment about their parents, however, reminded him that he knew very little about her family.

"I'm proud of him, even if I'd have stopped him. If I'd known..."

"You were unconscious." Dori's reply was short and sharp. It was clear that the grey-haired dwarf felt Fili had no right intruding on this, their time of grieving.

"Dori." Ori's tone was equally sharp. "Don't. He couldn't help what happened. Don't take it out on him." She was surprisingly composed now, owing, perhaps, to the solace she was able to find in the
manner of Nori's passing. There was no higher honor for a dwarf than to fall in battle. What dignity he might have lacked in life was made up for tenfold. It wouldn't bring her brother back, but all the same... it was no small matter. Like Bifur's, Nori's sacrifice would long be remembered by the renewed kingdom of Erebor. As would Thorin's, should the King Under the Mountain never waken.

They carried the fallen dwarf to one of the cold rooms, where Bifur's body was being kept, a place meant in times of yore for housing bodies until such a time as they could be properly interred. The room remained remarkably cool through a series of processes fueled by the water channels that flowed in stone channels through the Mountain. Such preparations as were necessary would begin now, traditionally carried out only by immediate family. When Dori began to hint that Fili should leave, Ori fixed him with a look verging on defiance and shook her head.

"No. I... I'd like him to stay." She took Fili's hand, plaintively meeting his gaze. "Please. Stay with me. With us."

Fili held Ori's hand tightly, both startled and pleased by her sudden show of determination. Dori's eyes flicked to the bead in his sister's hair and he gave in with a soft, displeased sigh. He knew he could deny his sister nothing. Not now that Nori wasn't here to make up for it.

"Very well. Come. Help me remove his armor."

While they cleaned Nori up and replaced his torn armor with new, the grey-haired dwarf was more or less content to pretend Fili didn't exist. It wasn't until they were gently removing Nori's tunic that a bloody scrap of parchment slid over one cold, hairy shoulder and onto the table. Fili picked it up and unfolded it carefully.

_Tell Ori she made a good choice._

It looked like there might have been more to the note, but it was torn and blood-soaked, and not easily read.

Ori was startled by these words from beyond the grave. "When would he have...?" She lowered the tattered paper, swallowing heavily. "He knew. He knew he was going to...."

Dori put a dirty hand on her arm, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I don't think he planned on it, sister. He was just... taking precautions."

"Sounds like Nori," she admitted with a weak nod, placing a hand over Dori's. She stole a glance at Fili, her heart thudding in her chest. Did it change anything, having Nori's blessing? Yes, she decided. Yes, it did.

Fili gave her a shaky smile. To be honest, Nori's approval seemed somehow vastly more intimidating than his disapproval. Dori nodded slightly and went on with preparing their brother for burial.

If Nori thought Fili was the right choice, then Dori would trust his brother. But that didn't mean he had to accept the blond immediately.

When at last Nori was ready, the dwarves left him to rest beside Bifur. Fili paused to look back at them. Composed and cold, scrubbed and silent. Cleanly and nobly, they waited for their stone graves. Fili felt his heart seize in his chest, aching with grief and pride. These two had been his companions, his allies, his friends, regardless of blood ties or disagreements.

"Mahal keep you, brothers," he whispered into the cold darkness.
Okay, I owe you lot an apology and an explanation.
*deep breath*
Loki had to go in for surgery (nothing major, but it did make her kinda loopy for a few days) and then she was painting the house and clearing out her room and repapering the walls and creating awesomeness like she does sometimes.
Meanwhile, I was at the coast, helping to watch over Gran'ma's house and dog with my roommate, whose grandma is the one who owns the house. I was also applying for jobs and generally being useless.
*sigh*
In sum, we've been busy, and we beg your forgiveness for the delay. *deep bow*
Please don't murder our souls.
Kili picked his way through the carrion. Dark, twisted forms were scattered far as the eye could reach, sprouting arrows, swords, spears, and axes like some kind of iron forest was trying to grow up through them. The young dwarf tried not to look at their faces as he went. Evil or no, he had little desire to see the dead, cloudy eyes looking out at him, seeing nothing, and yet seeming to see all.

When he'd nearly reached the camp, he caught movement on the field off to his left and halted in his tracks. So it was true. The Great Bear had, indeed, fallen. There he lay, three stones' throws off, a massive clump of dark, garnet-soaked fur with a dozen spears jutting out of him at all angles. The movement that had caught Kili's eye was two towering forms standing near the fallen bear, gazing upon him with marked grief. Having seen Beorn in his man shape, the young dwarf realized at once these could only be more of the same sort. Skin-changers. How they had known of their kinsman's death, Kili couldn't guess, and he wasn't about to ask.

"They came from the north." The voice at Kili's shoulder was distinctly Elvish. He twitched and looked at the speaker, then twitched again. Legolas gazed out at the skin-changers with an expression of deepest sadness. "Word of the Bear's deeds in battle spread quickly through my kin, but I cannot guess how they came so quickly."

The blond prince sighed faintly and looked down at Kili. For a moment, he seemed to study the dwarf, as though judging his worth. "Tauriel waits for you. If you have the energy, you should go to her." There was that sadness again, darkening his piercing eyes as though he looked upon a devastating loss.

A fitting reply failed the young dwarf, so he settled for a nod. The skin-changers had begun wrenching the spears from the bear's body, and Kili decided he didn't prefer to stay and watch. He had no doubt that Beorn's kin would lay him to rest with honor, in the manner of their folk. Meeting Legolas's gaze tiredly, Kili turned away. He was struck, after the fact, by the exhausted, pained look the elf's face had carried. Considering his recent injuries, it was a wonder he'd been permitted to leave the care of his father so soon. Such was the way of the Elves, he guessed. Far hardier than they looked, and possessing a vigor unknown to mortal races.
Billa greeted Kili at Tauriel's bedside, still looking like there was a storm of emotions brewing inside her. The young dwarf forced a faint smile, but it was as hollow as the breeze whistling along the Withered Heath. Tauriel's eyes were closed, and Kili was pleased to see her features were a little less strained. More at ease.

"She's been... alright?" he asked. "Hasn't said anything else?"

The halfling shifted. "She got pretty upset earlier when... you weren't here." Billa's gaze flicked briefly to Legolas, who stood quietly at the foot of the cot. "They gave her something to make her sleep again, but she's been restless." Her eyes once again moved to the elven prince. It was strange to see Legolas leaning on the leg of Tauriel's bed, clearly still somewhat weak. Injured Elves in general were discomfiting. Legolas, like Tauriel, was one Billa fancied she knew, and seeing him looking so mortal was frightening. She turned to look in the direction of the Mountain, as though she might somehow see through the thick canvas.

"I... I should go." Her voice was faint, almost scared, a touch angry--it was hard to tell what she was feeling through the maelstrom that continued to twist her insides.

Kili nodded, brushing a strand of hair behind the elleth's pointed ear. The red seemed somehow dimmer, as though the life had been drained out of it. "Alright, but..." He hesitated, exchanging a glance with Legolas, then decided he couldn't bring himself to tell the hobbit of Nori. She already looked frail enough, tottering on the brink of being overcome by her grief. He couldn't be the one to make it worse for her.

"Just... just keep your eyes on the Mountain, Billa. You've seen more death and pain these past few days than anyone should have to." He knew he had seen enough. It was all like a great, crushing weight on his soul. A mantle of darkness smothering him, under which he knew he would never be the same.

Billa took a shaking breath and nodded. After a moment, she stood and limped toward the tent entrance. "Spent most of this Quest limping," she grumbled softly, though there was no vice in her tone. "Now here I am, making for the Mountain, and my legs feel like mashed potatoes." The halfling's words faded as she moved out of sight.

Under Kili's lingering hand, Tauriel shifted, swatting his fingers weakly away from her ear. She wasn't conscious, but she certainly wasn't asleep. Legolas's blue eyes landed searchingly on his old friend's visage. The elf prince was deeply troubled, and despite his father's expert healing, winced slightly with the sigh that escaped his lips.

"You saved her life."

Kili's gaze shifted to Legolas. He looked mildly taken aback. "What? No. No, I... I mean, I didn't do anything more than... than anyone else would've." It was rather awkward, Kili decided. This. Both had feelings for her. That made them rivals, didn't it? And yet, the young dwarf felt nothing but pity for the elf at the moment. And a kind of bizarre kinship borne of their shared affection for Tauriel.

The elf prince let out a snort of self-deprecating laughter and met Kili's gaze squarely. "Grief can kill as surely as any arrow. You saved her when no one else could. Not even me. Especially not me."

A beat of weighty silence, then Kili's eyes returned to the elleth lying on the cot. He nodded, his throat tightening a little as he remembered Thorin's apparent determinations to get himself killed in the battle. "You're right. Even among my kind... we're far more vulnerable to it than we'd ever admit."

He ventured a glance at the prince's face. "Do you think she'll come out of it? I don't know anything about this type of... illness."
The elf hesitated visibly, and if he'd ever looked more uncertain, it hadn't been in Kili's presence. After a moment of internal debate, Legolas's expression firmed into one of determination. "She'll pull through. She always does."

Tauriel stirred, trying to throw off the effects of the drug that kept her subdued. Mumbling something incoherent in Elvish, she fought to open her eyes, batting away imaginary foes with limp hands. Kili caught both of her hands gently but firmly, tenderly caressing the delicate skin with his thumbs.

"It's alright, Tauri," he whispered close to her ear, kneeling beside the cot. "You're safe. We're all just fine." He didn't know whether she could hear him, but he wanted to believe she could. Kili's chocolate eyes met the prince's blue ones evaluatively, and the young dwarf sighed. "Pardon my saying so, but you look like you could use some rest. I'll stay with her now; I won't leave her side. You have my word."

"I hate to admit it, but you're probably right." Legolas made a face, but didn’t seem to resent the dwarf's advice. "I'll be sure to tell my father you were the one that insisted I rest." With an attempt at a friendly smile, the elf prince turned unsteadily to go.

Kili suddenly remembered the missive from the Mountain, and yanked it from his belt. "Wait--take this with you. It's from the Mountain, formally requesting healers to look after Thorin."

The elf took the message, lifting his eyebrows in surprise. "I hadn't thought your king would submit to such treatment. I'll see my father gets it."

"Mellon," whispered Tauriel, green eyes half open and unseeing. Kili turned sharply back to the elleth, and noticed Legolas did as well. He'd been around her long enough to pick up that common word in the elven tongue, and wondered which "mellon" she'd had in mind when she spoke.

"Your friends are with you," he said at last, moving to her side and taking her hands once more. "We're both here. Everything's alright. You just need to come back to us, Tauri." He squeezed her hands. "Come on. I know you can do it."

Tauri blinked, the action sluggish, her gaze unfocused. "Meleth nin," she murmured, seeming to relax slightly.

"I'm here." Kili glanced at Legolas, whispering "What's that mean?" before he noticed the blond had gone rigid.

"It means... 'my love.'" The elf couldn't have looked more devastated if he'd just seen an order for his own execution written in his father's hand. "It means she's chosen."

Words failed Kili. My love. That's what she said. He lowered his head and nodded slowly, unable to bear the pain in the elf prince's eyes, and yet, overwhelmed with new hope. He could scarcely believe what had just happened, and didn't have any idea how to react. Finally, after a long, gravid silence, he gently ran a hand along Tauriel's pale cheek. "Stay with me, Tauri," he urged her softly. "Don't fall back into those dark dreams. Stay here. Please." Had Legolas not been present, he may well have dared to hold her, to kiss her. As it was, that would have been insensitive at best, and could wait.

The red-haired elleth sighed, blinked again, and slowly nodded. The effort seemed to disorient her, and she closed her eyes, holding his hand tightly.

"I'll deliver your message to the king." Legolas seemed somewhat desperate to excuse himself. If ever an elf had looked more heartbroken, Kili couldn't imagine it. It was probably just as well that
Tauriel wasn't fully conscious for this.

She murmured soft, slurred Elvish to him for what felt like a long time before she managed to focus on his face again, and when she did, she seemed just as relieved as she was confused. "Kili. You're... alive."

"Of course I'm alive, silly." Kili quickly blinked away some of the wetness blurring his vision, huffing a quiet laugh of relief. "And I plan to stay that way as long as I can. It'll take a lot more than what I've been through to snatch me away from you." He did, then, dare to lean in and brush his lips gently across her cheek, his dark brown hair mingling for a moment with her tangled auburn tresses.

"The world's gone mad," he whispered. "And everything I love... I've come too close to losing. Please, Tauri. Don't scare me like that again."

"You love too easily... too much." She lifted a hand and brushed her knuckles across his cheek, seeming wan and tired, but no longer lost in delirious fears and terrifying memories. "One more thing we share, I suppose." Tauriel gave him the faintest of smiles, and let her eyes close again.

"Everything is so... like it's all fading away, and I can't bring it back." Her free hand joined its sister and gripped his rough, calloused hands tightly.

"It won't fade, Tauri. As long as we're together." Kili leaned into the cot, gently resting his cheek next to hers on the pillow. "We'll go on hoping. We'll pull through this, and... and be the better for it. I promise."

Tauriel nodded slowly once more. "I know." It was an effort for her to scoot aside and make room for him, her movements uncoordinated and clumsy, but she managed. And once he was settled beside her, the elleth relaxed.

"We'll be better," she whispered, as though assuring herself. Lucidity was more a spectrum than a cycle, and as she slipped into more peaceful sleep, reality once again faded about her.
Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Chapter Notes

I know the last chapter was a little short, and this chapter is a little late, so I made it a little longer for you. :) Ta-da!
Also....^_^ BAGGINSHEILD!!!

Billa tottered to a stop in the mouth of the huge, ruined gates of Erebor, blinking at the guard that stood in her way. "I'm... to see Thorin."

The guard grunted something under his breath in Khuzdul before answering her properly. "State your name."

"Billa Baggins."

"You're the halfling?"

"No, I'm an elf." Billa frowned at the guard. "Let me in, please."

The guard's tense demeanor wasn't at all relieved by the hobbit's apparent attempt at levity. "I have orders that no one is to be granted entrance unless summoned." At Billa's insistence, however, the guard was persuaded to send one of his fellows to check with "Prince Fili." It must have been at least twenty minutes later that the dwarf returned, whispering in his comrade's ear. The dwarf barring the gate nodded, then turned again to Billa.

"Prince Fili was indisposed, so Imrikh consulted Dain. He said you were not to be let in." He waved his impressive axe in the general direction of Bard's camp. "Off with you, then." There was a moment of quiet tension, in which the wind whipped around them hollowly.

"No." The halfling's voice was quiet, but distinct. "You have a choice. Either let me in now, or I'll get in another way, and Fili will hear you and Imrikh kept me out." Billa swiped her curls out of her face and frowned seriously up at the dwarves. Neither of them were as tall as Thorin, and she found herself silently labeling them "short."

The dwarves seemed mildly puzzled by just how determined this little female was to get in. They conferred in hushed tones a moment, then turned back to Billa. "It simply... can't be done. Orders." Imrikh nodded forcefully, as though it were quite settled. "If we were to let you in, Dain would have our hides."

"Fortunately, Dain isn't in charge here." A distinguished voice with a fine, gentle brogue. "And if
he's going to start pretending he is, well... that's another thing altogether." The speaker came into view with a chuckle. The two guards had already turned, and were doffing their helms respectfully.

"Lord Balin," Imrikh said, his voice sounding rather strained. "We're just... Dain said-

"If His Highness the Prince weren't taking his rest, I know he would be mightily troubled to learn you were keeping his Royal Uncle's designated burglar waiting outside the gates." The snowy-haired dwarf winked at Billa, stepping past the guards. "Come on in, lass. These two know their place. And so will Dain, if I have my way."

"Balin!" Billa threw herself forward and hugged the elderly dwarf tightly, as much because she needed it as to show up those stuffy guards. It took less than a moment for her to lift her head, however, and peer fearfully into Balin's face.

"How is he? He's not... I mean, he's alright isn't he? They moved him too soon." The little female was trying very hard not to sound frantic, and only partially succeeding.

Balin eyes visibly dimmed, the corners of his mouth lowering soberly above his thick beard. He directed Billa away from the guards and in the direction of Thorin's suite, sighing and shaking his head. "Dain's healers say, if nothing changes... he won't last the night. I fear the shock of moving him may be the last straw. I'll take you to him, lass." He patted her shoulder consolingly, and they proceeded down the echoing, torchlit corridor.

The room where the King Under the Mountain lay was dark and solemn, as silent as if there were none living within at all. Billa stumbled across the space between door and bed, and all but collapsed into the chair the healer hastily vacated for her.

"No... No, please. Thorin." There didn't seem to be any tears left for her to shed. The little halfling was too tired, too worn out, too spent. Grasping Thorin's cold, motionless hand, she held it tightly. "You can't leave me, Thorin. You can't. Please, Thorin, I need you."

The healer sidled over to Balin and shook his head sadly, but took a moment to indicate the corner where Dain stood, watching somberly. "Been there for the past hour. Hasn't moved."

Balin gave a nod of acknowledgement and moved toward Dain, clasping his hands behind him nonthreateningly. The dour dwarf in the corner was glaring daggers at him, obviously none too pleased to see his orders had been defied.

Balin's voice was quiet, but edged with conviction. "If this is to be the night of his passing, would you deny him the company of his One?"

Dain's arms were crossed, his bearded chin lowered, and he stared up at Balin from beneath heavy brows. "She is not his One," he growled. "That's not possible. Either my cousin was not in possession of his full faculties, or... he's been bewitched somehow. It's shameful, and when he is gone, I will see this... mistake is omitted from all records. The name of Thorin will be remembered with honor, and Durin's line will remain... unsullied."

"You can't do that!" Billa's voice was shrill with fear, and her hazel eyes, large and bloodshot in her pale face, fixed first on Dain, then on Balin. "He can't, Balin, don't let him. Why are you trying to take him away from me? Why? He's... he's all I have." She sounded as though she were trying very hard to cry, but her eyes were stubbornly dry. As dry as her tongue. "I was going to stay, I was going to... Balin, I can't go back to the Shire now, please don't make me. I can't go back and be alone again." The halfling's grief came in sobs as her voice cracked. She buried her face in Thorin's tunic and her words drifted through the fabric in muffled wails. "I can't. I can't do this alone. Please..."
Thorin. Don't leave me alone."

The healer, his bearded face twisted with appalled distress, closed his eyes. Dwarves were neither so open nor so raw in their emotive displays as hobbits, and the sight of her grief so disturbed and embarrassed him that he turned his back on her and pretended not to see or hear any of it.

Balin, on the other hand, sought to comfort the hobbit rather than be offended by her outpouring of grief. Moving quickly around the bed and to her side, he placed a steadying hand on her heaving shoulder. "There there, lass. No one's going to send you back to the Shire. You're welcome to stay in Erebor as long as you wish."

Dain was suddenly standing at the bedside opposite, glowering at them both with apparent outrage. "No. She is not staying. Don't you understand, you old fool? She is a blight on my cousin's legacy. To have her here would only prolong his shame!" He moved toward the door. "Since you presume to meddle, Fundin's son, I'll do a little of the same. I'll get to the bottom of this. Just because you have the wounded princeling wrapped around your finger doesn't mean you'll have your way." With that, the dwarf stalked from the room, slamming the heavy door behind him.

Dain’s outraged display made little impression on the grieving hobbit, and even as the door slammed shut on them, she only reacted to assure Thorin, in near unintelligible words, that she wouldn’t leave him. In all that time, Balin didn’t move from her side, and the quiet composure of her friend was comfort beyond anything words could express. At length, she crawled up onto Thorin's bed and tucked herself under his limp arm, looking quite as ragged as one might expect.

"I never meant to hurt you," she whispered to the unconscious dwarf. "I was only trying to help. Please... please forgive me."

"The situation is grave indeed."

"'Grave' hardly covers this situation, old friend." Gandalf's low voice was all but lost to the evening wind as he and the grim elf lord rode swiftly up the causeway, their horses' hooves clattering against the stone.

"Tharkûn!" The dwarven guard held his ground, looking nervous. "We're not to let anyone-"

"Out of my way," growled the Wizard. "We ride to the aid of the king."

"But Tharkûn--the elf!" The dwarf and his fellows hastily got out of the way, seeing neither of the horses were slowing at all.

"This way." In a trice, the old man was leading Elrond through the halls, their steeds leaping piles of rubble carrying them swiftly into the Mountain. They entered Thorin's room with all haste, nearly knocking Fili clean off his feet. The young dwarf had been woken and brought to his uncle's bedside, where a harried elven healer was peering at the open wound on Thorin's chest. Billa looked nothing if not faint at the sight of her mate’s injury.

When the elven healer realized who had just entered the room, he murmured something in Elvish that sounded deferential, bowed, and backed away to allow Elrond access to Thorin. The elf lord had dismounted, and already had an ornately tooled leather satchel in hand. Elrond’s stern brow was creased beneath his silver circlet, his piercing eyes troubled as he surveyed the pale, motionless dwarf on the bed.

"Gandalf, I will do what I can, but I fear we may have come too late. He is... very close."
"We have been keeping him sedated," the elven healer offered timidly. "But he simply isn't responding the way we'd hoped. He is strong, but not as strong as one of our kind."

Elrond nodded soberly. "If he does not wake soon, he never will." Catching Billa's eye, he spoke gently. "Miss Baggins, you may not wish to be present for this portion of the healing. When he wakes... his pain will be great. I will send for you after he has been stabilized, if you so desire. Or," he hesitated with a sigh, "when it becomes clear he cannot be... brought back." The weight of the words threatened to break her.

Billa swallowed hard, shaking her head slowly. "I can't leave him. I can't." Her words were barely a whisper, her face filled with grief.

Gandalf's sober visage was nothing if not sympathetic. "Billa... come with me." The dwarven healer, looking irate and intimidated, was shooing the horses back out into the hall, and Gandalf brushed by him as he slid out of the saddle and moved to stand beside Balin.

"Don't make me leave him again. Please." The halfling's plea issued from a broken heart, and it was clear her hope for Thorin's recovery was all but gone. If she walked through the door this time, she was sure she'd never hear his heart beating again. Never feel his arm around her. Never get glared at disapprovingly with those bright eyes.

The Wizard didn't have the heart to insist, so he sent for bread and water, and joined Elrond to assist in any way he could.

Elrond glanced at the two healers in turn. "I'll need boiling water. Quickly." He strode to the ewer on the table by the door, pouring some water into its accompanying basin and removing his riding gloves to carefully wash his hands. He shed his tattered cloak near the wall, but left his armor be. There was no time to remove it now. When the dwarven healer had returned with a cast iron pail of boiling water, Elrond nodded gratefully, crumbling what seemed to be dried green leaves into it. Instantly, a pungent scent filled the room.

The elf lord poured a measure of the water into a tin cup and began wafting its thick vapor directly into Thorin's nose. The reaction wasn't immediate, but when it came, there was no denying it. Thorin's ashen face contorted in a frown, and he turned his head away. It had been so long since the dwarf king had moved at all, the dwarven healer looked markedly astonished.

"Speak to him, Miss Baggins," Elrond urged quietly. "Call him back."

There was no self-consciousness, no hesitation. The words came easily to her, and Billa spoke in a hoarse, pleading voice, still curled on the bed beside him and holding his hand between her own.

"Thorin. Please, come back to me. Don't leave me alone. I can't do this alone, Thorin. I need you. Please don't leave me."

Balin looked on silently, and Fili leaned on his shoulder, his eyes riveted on Thorin's face. Despite the pain, the damage done, the madness, the blond couldn't for an instant wish his uncle dead. Listening to the halfling's stream of pleading words, he found himself echoing her in a whisper.

"Come on, Uncle Thorin. I'm not ready to be king. I don't want to do this without you. Come back."

Elrond nodded and raised a hand. Thorin's brow was still creased, his eyes squeezed tightly shut, as if in intense concentration. Or pain. The elf lord wafted the vapor beneath his nose again, and Thorin twitched away from it once more, grimacing.

"This should have been enough to rouse him," Elrond murmured, looking very serious. He stretched
out his long fingers, placing them on Thorin's forehead, and closed his eyes. The elf lord's voice issued in his own tongue, commanding, forceful, and something like a strong gust of wind swept through the room, buffeting hair and cloth alike, as a pale light seemed to filter through Elrond's fingers. A moment later, he withdrew his hand, and his piercing gaze fell again upon Billa with what could only be wonder. New understanding.

"You are bound to him, then," he whispered. "I would see your future unfold as it should, Billa Baggins. But my powers are limited. He wanders far from us now. Beyond the reach of my hand to lead him back."

Billa's shoulders sagged, as though the last of her strength had finally left her. She rested her head against Thorin's arm and closed her eyes. "He's... not coming back... is he?" There was a note of grief and defeat in her tone. Thorin was dying, and there was nothing she could do. Nothing Elrond could do, and he was the greatest healer in all of Middle Earth.

Elrond pressed his lips into a thin line, looking somewhat torn. His gaze drifted from Balin to Fili to Billa, and finally, to Gandalf. What he saw in their faces would have left no heart untroubled, least of all his. "While he yet breathes, there is hope," he said at last, turning his eyes upon the stricken halfling again. "Faint hope, but hope nonetheless. Leave me with him now. Say your goodbyes, and then do not return until I've come to you." There was a new resolve in the elf lord's words. It was clear he had not yet given up.

Billa nodded slowly before lifting herself onto her elbows. The motion seemed to hurt, but she ignored it and kissed Thorin's jaw very gently. "Goodbye, my love. I'll see you again. I promise. This isn't the end." With a soft sniff, she slid off the bed and released his hand, joining Balin. Fili stepped forward and, once he had Elrond's permission, bowed over his uncle's still form and kissed his hand reverently.

"I'll do as you wished, Uncle. The Mountain will have her king." Balin shook his head slightly when he was given his turn, and instead moved to guide Billa out into the hall, where two tired, curious horses were nosing through a grumpy-looking dwarf's beard for edibles. The door whined shut behind them, and then there was silence. Gandalf put a hand on Billa's shoulder, and he and Balin led her to a stone bench on the opposite side of the hall, there to sit and wait until Elrond emerged.

Quiet reigned for a handful of long, heavy minutes, and then finally, the Wizard spoke. "I've no doubt he would have come back to you if he could have, Billa. You mustn't blame yourself for any of this. It's simply ill luck, and bad timing."

Balin pursed his lips, shaking his head slowly. "A pity, sure, that no one could talk any sense into him when it would've made a difference. I've known him since he was a lad, and I'd have never thought he would come to this. I always believed that he'd..." The old dwarf's voice died away amidst a noise like a constricted sigh, and he lowered his head to dab furtively at his eyes.

After that, attempts at conversation simply died away. Gandalf watched the little halfling with concern. There was very little resemblance between this grieving, defeated creature and the plump, happy one he'd found outside Bag End on a sunny Sunday afternoon so many weeks ago. Their mad flight across the world had altered her considerably, and this... she would never be the same, and his own words would come back to haunt him.

"The king did not stir on his cold bed of stone."

Billa's voice was just the barest thread, but her song echoed eerily from the walls.

"Scarred and unhappy, betrayed and alone.
What should have been many years
Became a battle, one day to atone.
The king would not stir, his hands so cold,
Like a figure of stone carved of old.
Scarred by time, and marred by love,
Led astray by the tales we told.
The king cannot come, he has wandered too far,
Beyond the reach of my hand and arm...."

The hobbit had run out of words. Her song trailed off into silence and her shoulders shook as she curled in on herself, hugging her knees.

Fili sat on Balin's other side, staring numbly at the stone floor. He wondered vaguely if anyone had sent for his brother. Kili desperately needed rest, and Tauriel was still out there. In the end, the blond simply didn't have the heart to call him back to be tortured by the silence and Billa's grief.

Gandalf swallowed, his eyes glinting thoughtfully in the torchlit gloom. "My dear Billa, had I known just what form the changes I foresaw awaited you would take, I must say I would have thought twice before approaching you that morning at Bag End. And yet, I wonder if, having known, I wouldn't have approached you all the same. You have become a remarkable hobbit, Billa Baggins." The only sounds in the hall were the breathing of the horses, and the occasional whisk of their long tails.

At length, Billa shook her head. "Had I known... I wouldn't have come. And I would have regretted it for the rest of my life." She sighed, then seemed to shrink a little further, folding herself into a little ball with her curly head tucked under Balin's arm. It honestly looked for all the world as though she were trying to hide inside herself.

The four forlorn figures and two weary horses waited an hour, then two. As the third hour was well underway, Gandalf stiffened suddenly at the sound of rapidly approaching footsteps. To his obvious dismay, Dain rounded the corner, cold fury in his eyes, the deeply contrite-looking dwarven healer at his heels. "What is the meaning of this?!

"Lord Elrond is the best healer in Middle Earth, Cousin. If you think Thorin's life could be in better hands, then speak your piece." Fili's air of weary authority draped about him like a heavy cloak, many sizes too big.

Dain opened his mouth to reply. The words never came, for just then, the door to the King's suite creaked outward. Framed in bright white light, a tall figure stood in the gap, hands against the doorframe. All eyes turned expectantly upon him, and for a moment, he didn't move. Then the light faded slowly, as though veiled behind heavy curtains, and Lord Elrond took a half step forward. More of a stagger. He seemed to crumple, and his knees met the hard stone with only minimal control. As Gandalf rushed to his aid, Elrond waved a hand wearily.

"No. Don't... trouble about me, friends. Go to him." His voice was rough and weak, constricted with what could only have been pain. Billa was on her feet. She didn't remember deciding to stand, or
walk, or run, but she was. A brief stab of guilt pierced her as she tripped over Elrond's surcoat, her bare feet just managing to catch her as desperation carried her forward. Elrond, Fili, Gandalf, all were forgotten as she reached the bed, gasping.

"Thorin! Please, oh spirits, please be alive."

Thorin's eyelids fluttered, but remained closed as he turned his head toward the sound of her voice. He winced, his fingers gripping the bloodstained blankets with new vigor. Even in the faint light, it was clear some of the color had returned to his face. "Billa." The word was so weak as to almost be missed, but to the desperate ears of the halfling, as clear as any he'd ever spoken.

"Thorin." His name was nearly lost in the sob that carried it. Billa gripped his hand as hard as she could, fully aware she was nowhere near strong enough to damage his work-calloused hands. "You're alive. Thank Eru, you're alive. I thought you were... I thought I'd never see you again." The piercing blue eyes struggled open, took a moment to focus. A faint, tremulous smile, barely more than a twitch at the corners of his chapped lips, and Thorin lifted a hand--hers still clinging to it fiercely--up to the side of her face. "My burglar." The words weren't audible this time, but Billa knew them all the same.

Gandalf had entered the room now, as had Fili and Balin, though they hung back so as not to overwhelm the weak but miraculously conscious dwarf king. Elrond remained where he'd fallen, head and shoulders drooping wearily. He must have been alright, however, as Gandalf certainly wouldn't have left him otherwise. Dain lingered outside the door, either unwilling to come in, or awaiting clarity before doing so. There was a certain shock in his face as he looked on, still and silent as stone.

Thorin was alive. Not only was he alive, but he was awake. And it could only be assumed that he was so because of the efforts of an elf lord, who bore no debt and held no responsibility to either Thorin or his kingdom. Dain didn't understand it, and wasn't sure he ever would. He glanced surreptitiously at Elrond. The elf lord was on the floor, not three paces from where he stood, head lowered in apparently overwhelming exhaustion. What magic did the Elves possess that made such a feat possible? What effects would it have on Thorin's mind hereafter?

Inside the room, the halfling was saying something almost completely incomprehensible between relieved sobs. He was sure that once she calmed, Fili would approach his uncle and express his appropriate pleasure at his apparent recovery, then all would return more or less to normal. Except for the Wizard. And the elf.

Dain pursed his lips and sighed. With any luck, Thorin would have regained his senses, as well as his consciousness, and would be able to tell the hobbit to go back to her own land before this got any more complicated than it already was.

"My lord?"

"Yes, what is it?" Dain ushered the dwarf away from the door, not wishing to be overheard.

"Prince Kili has been found, sir. He's down in the elf camp."

"What? What in Durin's name is he doing there?"

"He's... well, he's with an elf-maid, my lord."

Dain thought he heard the world's axis crack as everything that had once made sense began to completely fall apart. "An elf maid?" he spluttered.
"Aye, sir."

"And he's... he's with her? You're sure?"

"Yes, sir."

"The line of Durin has gone mad. The whole lot of them." Dain turned swiftly. He would need to correct this himself. "Bring me my ax."

Elrond's failing voice carried through the open door. "He will need... sustenance. Water first. He's very weak."

Gandalf caught Fili's eye. "Help your uncle, my lad." Using the tin cup Elrond had previously infused with herbs, Fili refilled it from the ewer and assisted Thorin in taking a few sips of water. That was the most he could manage.

That, and holding his little burglar, which seemed to be where most of Thorin's attention rested at present anyway. He seemed remarkably peaceful, as though he'd wandered for an age and more, and somehow found his way home again. Or had been led there.

After a long silence, Thorin tried to speak again. "You... came back." His voice was, of course, raspy and faint, but the water seemed to have helped. There was marked surprise in his face, as though he'd only just recalled the incident at the gates. "After... after what I did. Why?"

The halfling shuddered and pushed herself a little closer to his body, eyes shut tight. "Because I love you," she whispered. "I couldn't... I can't be alone again, Thorin. I just... I can't."

Fili turned toward the door, frowning, as someone bellowed at the guard to get out of his way.

"...or by Durin's ax, I swear I'll take yer head off with my bare hands!" Dwalin pushed his way past the guard and Elrond, leaning heavily on a crutch that was apparently made of some twisted metal bars. He stopped near the foot of the bed, panting, red in the face, but looking more relieved than perhaps he ever had. "Yer alive. Valar love ya, lad, I thought we'd lost our king." It was only as he stumped around the corner of the bed that Fili realized the brawny dwarf was actually missing part of his leg. It was severed and bandaged only a couple inches below his knee. Dwalin didn't give him much time to think about it, though.

"You look terrible," he informed the blond, frowning. "In fact, all of you look terrible. Someone get some food and wine in here before the lot of you waste away."

Thorin managed a faint smile for his old friend, but hadn't the strength for any more speech. As Dwalin hobbled about, barking orders to guard and healer alike, Thorin seemed to lose himself in the familiar rumble of the hulking dwarf's voice. His eyes closed, and he drifted off into natural sleep.

Gandalf had gone back out to Elrond, and Balin noticed the two of them seated on the stone bench across the corridor. The elf lord was leaning forward heavily, his elbows resting on his knees, as the Wizard looked on with deep concern written between the lines of his seamed visage.

"Why're ya standing around, brother?" Dwalin's voice pulled the old dwarf's focus back into the room, and Balin blinked.

"Well, what else should I be doing? Galumphing about like an oliphaunt, maybe? Sit down." He waved a hand at his brother. "They're going to be just fine." Dwalin hesitated and looked at the bed. Billa was tucked under Thorin's arm, where she belonged, and was finishing a small glass of wine, having apparently managed to keep down whatever paltry offerings they had by way of food. She
looked about to drift off as well, and with the both of them settled, there was little more to do.

"Food and drink for the elf and Wizard," growled Dwalin, hobbling over to Balin's side. A guard hurried to obey. With a grunt, he sat down beside his brother on the low seat by the door. It had probably been carved for servants, but a seat was a seat.

Fili remained standing near the bed, looking a bit lost as he gazed at his sleeping uncle. This made things infinitely better, and infinitely more complicated. For now, all he could do was continue to act in the capacity of heir and temporary leader. The idea of continuing was an exhausting one. It was slowly dawning on the blond that this might be his life one day--leading and guiding and not having a moment for himself. Fili closed his eyes. He didn't envy his uncle. Not anymore.

"He's going to be fine, lad," Balin said softly, offering a weary but reassuring smile. "We'll stay with him now. You go on and get some rest." Reluctant, but grateful, Fili nodded and trudged away. At Dwalin's insistence, a tarnished brass plate had been filled with sliced traveling cram and cheese for Gandalf and Elrond, but neither had touched it.

A few minutes after Fili had gone, Gandalf leaned in the doorway and caught Balin's eye. "A word." The old dwarf eased himself up as quickly as his age allowed and left the room. The Wizard drew him aside. "Lord Elrond needs rest." His voice was hushed, but urgent. "A quiet room where he can be alone. Nothing elaborate."

The dwarf glanced at the elf lord where he sat slumped on the bench. "Is he going to be alright?"

Gandalf nodded slowly, though his eyes were less certain. "He expended the greater portion of his powers in drawing Thorin back to us, but they will rejuvenate, given time."

"I'll make the preparations, then," said Balin, and turned away to speak quietly with one of the guards.

After Balin had arranged things, Gandalf supported his friend down the hall to what had once been the queen's chambers. At one point, the Wizard might have found this immensely amusing, but at the moment, his whole focus was on the weakened elf lord.

"I'd say you were a fool if it were at all true," he murmured, assisting Elrond onto the luxuriantly appointed bed. "What can I do for you, my friend?"

But the exhausted elf merely shook his head, sinking gratefully onto the pillow. Elrond's noble face wore deep lines now, making him seem almost... mortal. What pain was he suffering, all for the sake of a brave little halfling and her dying lover?

"It seems a great price to pay," said the Wizard at length, sitting carefully on the bed's soft edge, "for one who neither asked for, nor wanted your help not many months past."

Elrond didn't move. His eyes were closed, his long, dark hair aberrantly askew on the straw-stuffed pillow. "If I were to deny aid to spare my own pride, Gandalf, I could hardly call myself noble. Or wise." His voice was quiet and measured, but still resonant between the relatively close walls of the chamber. He hesitated a moment, as though considering, then went on. "And I know what it is to love. It is something not even the most skilled of poets could capture in his words, nor the most gifted tongue convey. I know, too, the pain of loss. Of grief. Of despair.

"When first I searched Thorin's mind, his fate seemed all but certain. But when I delved more deeply--when I followed him on the paths of night where he wandered, moving ever closer to the halls of his fathers--I resolved within myself that I would not let him go. His heart remained with her,
Gandalf. The halfling. For all his faults, Thorin Oakenshield loves her.... fiercely. He would have passed long ago had he not been holding on. For her."

Gandalf nodded, and felt a touch of triumph, tinged with grief. A curious mixture, but he knew the source. "I suspected, when I first persuaded Thorin to take her along, that something of this nature might happen. Though, I did not think it would be him." A measure of wonder entered the old man's tone. Of all the Company, he would have said Thorin was the least likely to be susceptible to a hobbit lass's charms. "She has changed him, I believe, and for the better. With luck and a little persuasion, perhaps your actions today will have changed his opinion of Elves, as well. Middle Earth could only be better for it."

The Necromancer had been dealt with and Smaug had been slain, Thorin was recovering and Erebor was reclaimed. Things were, for the moment, well in Middle Earth. Something troubled the Wizard, however. Something was missing from this narrative, and he needed to know what it was.

Elrond sighed. "Whether the King Under the Mountain's opinions have changed or not, I could never rue my service to him. And to she he loves." He was silent again for a long moment. "A shadow rests upon her," he whispered at length, shifting uneasily. "I see it, but its nature is not for me to know. Not yet. He who her love has returned from the brink of madness and death will one day return the favor. It is well they were not parted from each other."

Gandalf shot the elf a startled glance. These words, so soft and earnest, troubled him deeply. It was, however, only one among many dark matters weighing on his mind, and the Wizard disliked the necessity of, for the moment, letting it slip into the background.

The silence stretched between them as they contemplated the state of things in the Mountain. Thorin's survival, Billa's love and devotion, the shadow that lay over them both--these were things that the old Wizard wished he could devote his whole attention to. Unfortunately, there were more pressing matters at hand. Elrond's welfare. The remains of Dol Goldur. The goblins and orcs from so far away, rallying and coming here, now. It all smacked of ill tidings that hadn't yet been delivered.

"I fear, my friend, I must leave you for now. I'll see you're not disturbed." Gandalf rose, a troubled frown on his lined face. "Rest well."
Messy dark hair. Scruffy cheek. A hard, warm body. Bandages. Tauriel was vaguely aware of the world around her. It was much easier to focus on what was immediately in front of her. In her arms, actually. She didn't have to search very long before the answer came to her, awash in comfort and safe feelings.

Kili.

It made her pause, though. There was definitely a feeling of deepest affection about the thought, but she wasn't entirely sure why. And until now, she hadn't had the time to think about it. The elleth tensed when someone nearby whimpered. Whether it was pain or fear, she wasn't sure. The sound transported her back through what felt like Ages, to a dim wooden room, filled with Dwarves. Kili, on the table. Kili, bleeding and unconscious. Her arrow in his leg, infection already setting in. Swearing her fealty to another king. Betrayal and hurt in Legolas's face.

Tauriel jerked herself out of the memories, shaking. She knew what was coming next and didn't want to think about it. Smaug. Cold water. Fire and blood and red mist. Addie's despairing cries.

Kili.

Kili, appearing from nowhere, saving her. Kili, mending her back. Kili, keeping her alive.

The shivers subsided slightly.

Kili, who welcomed her into his heart, even when they were enemies, even when she had nearly ended his life, even when she failed to save innocent lives. Kili, who hadn't let go when it looked as though she'd killed the burglar.

Tauriel's heart tightened with guilt and wonder. This dwarf had done more believing in her than she could even now bring herself to believe. Legolas had been her friend, her comrade, her brother-in-arms. She loved him dearly, and always would. But. Tauriel shifted, pressing her cheek against the rim of Kili's ear, listening to his rhythmic snoring. Comforting. Like feeling a cat purr.

Perhaps she would always, in some ways, be torn between the two worlds. And while she owed her
life to both, only one could hold her heart. She felt it beating in her breast, and it ached with the choice she still hadn't made. Not really.

Or had she? Had she decided, when Kili was there outside Thranduil's pavilion? Had she made her choice when he had brought her back from grief-madness?

_Is my heart already claimed? Is the choice even mine anymore?_

When someone new entered the tent, she didn't take any more notice than to see it was a dwarf. Indeed, it wasn't until the dwarf addressed her Kili in a hard, rough voice that she realized the bearded figure was within striking distance. In that instant, she knew only fear. Orcs and wargs and dragons and sickness—they would not take Kili from her, neither would this dwarf. She rolled her weight on top of her companion until she was crouching over him and reached fluidly for her belt-knife, but it was gone. With a twinge of panic, she realized that all of her knives were gone. She was unarmed. And as skilled as she was, there was little chance of her besting a dwarf in unarmed combat.

"Stay back," she hissed softly, though whether in Westron or Elvish, she couldn't have rightly said.

Kili shook his fringe out of his eyes, and while his groggy mind attempted to work out just what was going on, seemed to resolve that something was amiss. Which was quite enough to start with.

"Tauriel?" he mumbled, tensing a little beneath the weight of her crouched body. "What's the matter?" Was she hallucinating again?

Kili's voice pierced the confusion in the elleth's mind, and she glanced down at him, feeling her limbs shake slightly. Her back hurt, her sides burned, her head swam unsteadily.

"Prince Kili, I hope you have a very good explanation for this." The dwarf was still standing beside the cot, seemingly unintimidated by the elf's attempts to shield her companion. Tauriel frowned.

"Stay back," she repeated, more clearly this time, and in the appropriate language. Everything about this dwarf screamed of unspoken threats. She didn't like him, and his proximity made it very hard for her brain to function properly.

The unmistakable intent in the voice startled Kili so that, as Tauriel had shifted off him somewhat, he actually rolled off the cot. He was up again in a trice, now fully awake. Dain had an ax in his hands, and was moving determinedly around to join him.

"Well?"

Kili cleared his throat, aware that drawing the knife at his belt would only make things worse at this point. "I don't know what you're talking about, Dain. Put the ax down, and we'll talk it over." He glanced at Tauriel warningly, hoping she wouldn't make any moves the older dwarf would misconstrue as an act of aggression.

"This is an outrage! An insult to the line of Durin! Have you gone mad, boy?" Dain stopped only when his beard was brushing the front of Kili's tunic. "She's an elf."

Tauriel sprang to her feet and moved swiftly between the two dwarves, shoving Kili backward onto the cot again, but her legs seemed somewhat uncooperative. She stumbled, falling awkwardly to one knee. It was then she realized she had Kili's knife in her hand. Angling the blade at Dain's chest and trying not to let him hear her panting, she set her jaw against the pain in her ribs.

"Keep your distance, Dwarf."
Dain looked fit to burst with barely-contained fury. "Give me a reason to relieve your shoulders of that pretty head and I'll gladly perform the task myself."

Kili's mind scrambled for a way to de-escalate the situation at hand. Ordinarily, he might have been hotheaded enough to answer threats with threats, but not now. Not when he knew where that path led.

"Dain," he said, managing to sound remarkably calm as he pushed the dagger aside to move between the two. "This is madness. It's not what you think. Female or no, this elf is a great warrior in her own right, and bears many scars from her service to our people."

His dark eyes pleaded with the enraged dwarf, and despite his untidy, bedraggled appearance, there was, indeed, a regality to his bearing. Hints of his nobility, and the maturity that would come with age. "She's one of us, Dain. She swore fealty to Thorin."

Tauriel was shaking, breathing hard, leaning against Kili's back. Her eyes closed as she tried to regain control of her jumbled thoughts. Present reality mixed freely with vivid memories. Battles, attacks, fights. Danger. It was her duty to protect. To serve. But Kili. Kili. He was trying to stop her. This dwarf... wasn't that kind of threat. Was he? He was armed. The elf's head ached fiercely and she gritted her teeth against it.

"Swore... fealty?" Dain barely managed to splutter the words, gripping the ax haft so tightly his knuckles turned white under their callouses. "And he accepted her service?"

Kili nodded. "He did. You have no idea what she's sacrificed to help us. I owe her a life-debt twice over, and so does Erebor's king. It isn't a small matter, Dain. You can't just dismiss it."

The young dwarf reached back and touched Tauriel's arm reassuringly, though he didn't take his eyes off Dain. "So please. Lower your ax, and we'll talk this over as kin should."

Dain bristled angrily, letting his ax drop a little with obvious reluctance. "I strongly suggest you come to your senses, and encourage your uncle to do likewise. We are Dwarves. We belong with Dwarves. Our loyalty lies with our own. Not with Hobbits and Elves." Obviously, life-debts didn't carry the same weight between races. The elf probably had no idea what a life-debt meant to a dwarf.

Tauriel put her hand over Kili's and held it there on her arm tightly. He was the only stable thing in her world at the moment. The mention of Hobbits made her think of Billa, and she remembered suddenly that the halfling had been here, with her, and now she wasn't.

Tauriel lifted her head, scanning the tent for the hobbit. "Where is she?"

There weren't many "she"s Tauriel could be referring to. "She went to the Mountain. She's with... Thorin." Kili winced a little as the flood of information came surging back. Thorin. His uncle. Held in the forgetful bosom of sleep, he had temporarily been released from the pain of knowing Uncle Thorin was near death. If not already passed.

He fixed Dain with a hard look. "You can do what you like with those beneath you, Dain, but don't think you can start controlling the royal family of Erebor. I strongly suggest you remember your place."

Dain twitched, lowering his eyes slightly. Being reminded of his lower status was akin to grinding gravel into an open wound. Thorin was insane, Fili was injured and easily swayed by his advisers, and Kili had obviously been following his uncle's example. Dain felt overwhelmed and helpless in the face of these dwarves who were obviously set on destroying the old ways. He took a step back,
his face hardening with anger and betrayal.

"When you're healed, you'll face me properly. I'll not be ignored." He dropped his ax at Kili's feet with a scowl. It wasn't a formal challenge, but it was highly traditional. Kili had the right to keep Dain's ax until Dain found the appropriate time to duel him and win it back.

Tauriel seemed to be struggling with the concepts fighting in her mind. "We... we should go. Check on the others." Her voice was faint, but she sounded more like herself. Herself. Was that what it was? It was hard not to lose herself. She needed something. Something stable. Something real. She felt like she was falling apart, and this dwarf with his harsh voice and heavy ax wasn't helping anything.

Kili narrowed his eyes at Dain's departing back, then turned to Tauriel. "Are you sure you're... alright? I mean, you weren't well to begin with, and then we woke to a dwarf hovering over us with an ax. Maybe we should talk to one of the healers first, have you looked over."

A few weeks ago, he might've laughed at the absurdity of the situation. Now there was little cause for mirth. Dain was determined, it seemed, to cause trouble, and whether Thorin lived or not... he'd have to be dealt with. A duel. Just what they all needed right now.

Tauriel was looking at him uncertainly, trying to gather the words to explain, when a deep voice scattered her thoughts, and she once again move instinctively to defend Kili, because that was all she could do.

"Dain Ironfoot." The dwarf retreated right back into the tent, and Gandalf entered after him, looking about as pleased as a thundercloud. "Your meddling and troublemaking will do no one any good, least of all you. So why, now of all times, are you sowing chaos among your kin?"

The other occupants of the medical tent were very politely pretending not to notice a thing that was going on. The Wizard was, undoubtedly, making sure the people who needed to hear were near enough to do so.

"It takes a meddler to know one," Dain sneered, though he wasn't nearly as bold as his manner suggested. "What business is it of yours how I counsel my own kin, Wizard? You aren't a dwarf. You come and go like a gale, bending to your will those you have a use for, then abandoning them once you no longer need them. Oh, I know all about you, Tharkûn."

Gandalf raised bushy eyebrows, clasping his staff before him. "You presume much, son of Nain. You think you know a Wizard's purposes, and you think you can command the sons of Durin to do as you wish." There was a dangerous tone to the old man's voice now as he towered over Dain, the height of a Man and a little more, thanks to his hat. "I suggest you think a little less and see to your own business a little more. Thorin and his kin make their own choices, with or without your permission, and if you insist on making trouble, I fear you'll find yourself in a good deal more than you intended."

Dain's bold façade seemed to crumble. None would have dared call him a coward, but few could have stood firm in the face of the Wizard's wrath. A long, tense silence ensued, during which Dain stole a hateful glance at Kili and Tauriel. Embarrassing as it was, the older dwarf had little choice but to concede defeat. For the moment, anyway.

"Have it your way, Wizard," he growled. "Now if you'll excuse me, I must ensure the welfare of my royal cousin."

"I hope 'ensuring his welfare' doesn't involve creeping up on him with an ax," Kili murmured
unhelpfully. He'd have probably been better off keeping his mouth shut, he realized after the fact.

Dain turned a dark scowl on him. "While you mingle Durin's blood with outsiders, Prince, I seek to preserve it for future generations," his voice was low, his words carefully calculated, "and for our scattered people, who look to the royal line for inspiration and leadership, I fully intend to take what measures are necessary in pursuit of that aim. Be careful." With that, he brushed past Gandalf and went his way.

Gandalf stood quietly for a long, tense moment. Then, with a sigh, he seemed to dispel the anger and outrage Dain had left in his wake. Behind Kili, Tauriel trembled slightly, her gaze fixed on the tent entrance. Beyond, in the dawn twilight of the Heath, the wind breathed faint melodies through dry scrub and wiry tree. In the distance, Long Lake glittered, icy and uninhabited.

"I'll be alright." Her whispered answer was so belated that it was hard to recall what it was she was responding to.

Gandalf shook his head slightly, a smile crinkling old blue eyes. "The resilience of Dwarves continues to amaze me. Thorin lives, and now sleeps, as I suggest you do. I shall see to it that Dain doesn't make any more trouble tonight."

"Uncle's alright?" The weariness seemed to fall from Kili like cold, damp clothes, and he sprang forward and enveloped the astonished Wizard in an embrace. "I... I can hardly believe it. The way he looked when they took him...."

Gandalf chuckled lightly, oddly moved by the young dwarf's open-hearted act. "Perhaps you can express your gratitude to Lord Elrond. It is thanks to his skill--and his deep compassion--that Thorin is with us now."

Kili nodded, looking a bit perplexed, but was too energized to waste more time with questions. Releasing the Wizard, he returned to Tauriel, took both her hands in his, and kissed them. Gently, one after the other. "If you're ready," he said, smiling up at her, "I think we should join the others."

Gandalf cleared his throat. "A fine plan. Just don't wake your uncle with your exuberance. He needs his rest."

Tauriel, more aware this time than the last, seemed taken aback by Kili's open affection, but neither resisted nor returned it. After a moment of startlement, she nodded her agreement, eyes fixed on him.

The Wizard, spirits and countenance lighter than when he'd come, turned to go. It was only as Gandalf departed that an elven healer approached, quietly looking over both elf and dwarf. He was quite expressionless, and Tauriel seemed disinclined to acknowledge him, more interested for the moment in studying her dwarven companion. The healer bade them both sit, and as he examined their various wounds, Tauriel finally spoke.

"Did I... say something that... changed things between us?" Her words were hesitant, as though she were both unsure of how to ask and trying very hard to remember.

Kili looked somewhat disappointed, though the rush of relief coursing through him ensured nothing could quite dampen his spirits altogether. Not just yet. So she didn't remember. But Legolas had been so sure of their meaning, her words. Meleth nin. He'd been so crushed by them.

Kili sighed softly. "It's just...." A little more of the wind seemed to go out of his sails as he strove for words, and he realized if he told her, he'd come across as presumptuous and quite possibly an idiot. "No. Nothing's changed," he said at last, eyes downcast. "I'm sorry for being forward, Tauriel."
The elleth gazed at him with a combination of concern and uncertainty, then sighed and looked away. "Things are... confused. It's hard to tell what's real." Her voice took on a soft, confessional quality. The healer pretended not to listen. "I don't want to wake up and find that... that..." Tauriel drifted into silence, either losing track of her thoughts or unable to summon the right words. After a moment, she let out a frustrated sigh and muttered something in Elvish that sounded a bit like an oath.

Kili smoothed his hair, adjusting the metal clasp that held the longer strands off his ears. "I understand. You don't have to feel guilty about it. In fact, you don't need to feel guilty about anything." He glanced sidelong at her, trying to gauge her reaction before continuing. "You've wallowed in regret for so long, it's a wonder this sort of... breakdown didn't come sooner." A beat of silence. "You need to let it go, Tauri. Give yourself a little mercy. Alright?"

He knew it wasn't quite that simple, but he felt it needed to be said. Whether they ever became anything more to each other than dear friends made no difference. It was his duty to ease her burden in any way he could.

Silence stretched between them like an ageless, bottomless chasm. After several false starts, Tauriel sighed, turning to let her forehead rest against Kili's shoulder. Rubbing her face against the coarse fabric of his tunic, she took a deep breath. "I can't change the past." But were they just words? Was she 'wallowing'? The faces of the dead she'd failed to save passed before her eyes, and she shuddered. The elleth became aware, suddenly, of the tears gathering in her eyes, and let out a second oath, wiping them away as she sat up, away from Kili. She had to overcome this weakness. It did no one any good.

I am strong. I am capable. I can handle this. Those deaths weren't my fault. I'm not perfect. Her back ached slightly. "This isn't my burden to bear."

The words surprised her--she hadn't meant to speak them aloud. But her tone was slightly desperate. It wasn't her burden. So why did she bear it so willingly?

Kili turned to regard her with surprise. Noting the wet sheen across her pale cheeks, he lowered his eyes, knowing she'd be ashamed to be seen crying. "It's alright," he said, reaching for her hand. "And that's exactly what I meant. It isn't your burden, Tauriel. The ones who're gone--nothing on this earth will change what happened, or bring them back. You taking the blame for circumstances outside your control... it doesn't make sense. You know it doesn't, Tauri."

"Of course it doesn't make sense. Nothing makes sense!" Her tone had become inexplicably harsh for a moment. The elleth turned and buried her face in the pillow, an action the healer deftly pretended not to notice.

"You may make the journey to the Mountain," he said. "Take it slowly, and drink this," he handed a Kili a small bottle and indicated Tauriel pointedly, "when you're ready to sleep." With that, he stood and departed.

There was a beat of silence before Tauriel scrubbed her face with the pillow and sat up again. Her cheeks were still damp and unnaturally pale, but at least her eyes were clear of that haunting, unyielding fear and grief that had been her constant companions since the Battle.

"Kili, I do not know or understand what is wrong with me. But if you will suffer my company... I'd like to stay with you." She grasped his wrist with one hand, and passed the other across her face. "I know I'm dangerous. I nearly killed... but I..." Dull red hair fell loosely into her eyes as she looked at him helplessly, words failing her utterly. She caught herself licking her lips, and realized with a wince that they were dreadfully chapped. She could taste blood. Of course. She had no oil, and had
used none in days.

Kili chuckled, reclaiming his knife from where she'd dropped it on the cot and sliding it back into his belt sheath. "We'll get you sorted out, Tauri. Don't worry. Lord Elrond is there. If there's anyone who can help you, it's him."

Sliding off the edge of the cot, he smiled up at her again, tucked the bottle the healer had given him into one of his inner pockets, and took the elleth's hand. As they moved from the dim interior of the tent out into the relatively bright sunlight, Kili put a hand on Taurei's arm, glancing up at her hesitantly.

"Oh. And if we happen to run into Dain again... don't... well, you know."

Tauriel's green eyes hardened as she met Kili's gaze squarely. "If he threatens your life again, I will not hesitate to fight him. Next time, I will be armed, and my mind will be clear." Her tone was steady, her voice quiet, but there was no misreading the fierce, unforgiving light in her face. Kili was hers to defend and serve. There was very little anyone could do to stop her in that respect.

Kili grinned. "Fair enough. I guess it'd save me the trouble of dueling him later." He winced slightly as he remembered. "And I forgot the ax." Ducking back beneath the canopy, he retrieved Dain's hefty weapons and came back. "Who carries a 50-pound ax?" the young dwarf groaned, hard-pressed to lift the double-bladed head. "It's like he's trying to prove something."

The light of the sun, though weak in the brisk, icy cold of the day, was bright. It was still very early in the morning as they passed the stiff carcasses of Warg, Orc, and Goblin. Tauriel considered offering to carry the ax for Kili, but decided she wouldn't be able to manage it, even if he allowed her to try, which was doubtful.

The guards at the gate regarded Tauriel warily as they approached. "Too many Elves in the Mountain as it is," muttered the one on the left.

"If you have a problem with it, you're welcome and encouraged to leave." Kili rested the ax handle on his shoulder and brushed past the guards. "Oh, also," he added, glancing back at them, "I'll have it known that this elf is my dearest friend. If you speak against her--or her kin--you'll have me to answer to."

The guards nodded, looking perplexed, but were wisely silent.

"Let's look in on Fee first," the young dwarf said as they proceeded through the first hall. "Probably be a good idea to tell him what Dain's been up to." When they entered the guest chambers, Fili was asleep, piled with blankets, and Ori was watching over him like a stone sentinel. She looked up when Kili and Tauriel entered, smiling a little in relief.

Kili thought she looked tired, but considering all she'd been through these past few weeks, and all she'd lost, she seemed remarkably stable. "We'll come back," he mouthed to her, and she nodded. One calloused hand could be seen protruding from under the folds of bedding, curled about Ori's wrist.

Tauriel looked on, briefly tempted to stay and spend some time with her young dwarven friend, but Ori's attention was captured, and the elf thought it best not to intrude. So she turned instead and followed Kili down another set of long halls.

Dwalin was seated outside Thorin's door now, having relieved Dain's guard when Balin explained the attitude of their cousin from the Iron Hills. The warrior appeared now to be contemplating the
stump of his severed leg, and only looked up when Kili was close enough to converse at a normal volume.

"Ya have a strange shadow," he grunted, nodding to Tauriel. Dwalin's gaze fell upon the ax Kili still toted, and his expression hardened. "That's Dain's ax. Tell me he didn't, lad."

"I wish I could," Kili answered, lowering the weapon from his shoulder and leaning it, handle up, against the wall by Dwalin. The heavy clunk it made elicited a wince from the young dwarf, and he directed an apologetic look at Thorin's door. He thought, in retrospect, that the gesture wasn't terribly helpful. "I hope that didn't wake him. How's he doing?"

"Sleeping like a log. Wouldn't worry about it." Dwalin was looking at the ax with an intense expression on his face. "Tell me what happened, lad."

Tauriel sighed. "He disapproves of our match." Her voice was quiet, but echoed oddly in the stone hall.

Dwalin's head jerked up, his face startled as he stared up at the elf. "Match?"

"Match?" Kili echoed, turning to Tauriel with something very near shock in his eyes. "Wait a minute. You mean... What do you mean? I thought you said...." He decided, then, to stop speaking, as he feared he was making a most unpardonable fool of himself.

The elleth pushed red hair out of her eyes and sighed again, a shiver passing through her slender frame. She avoided the riveted, expectant gazes of the two dwarves, choosing instead to inspect the smooth stone of the wall opposite the door.

"I made my choice." It was hardly an explanation, but what else was there to say?

Dwalin seemed to think there was much more to say. He tried to haul himself up on his one good leg, largely failing. "By Durin's beard, ya can't be serious! A dwarf and an elf--are ya both mad?"

His tone, however, was more incredulous than angry, a marked difference between him and his ambitious cousin from the Iron Hills.

Kili winced for what must have been the fifth time that day, backing up a step. He'd been afraid the rest of the Company might react like this. "Maybe a little," he said after his momentary hesitation, suppressing a nervous smile as his gaze flicked briefly to Tauriel, then back to Dwalin. "But I'd rather not have this discussion right now if it's all the same to you."

It was an answer that actually surprised him. Maybe some of the diplomacy he'd learned in his studies had stuck with him after all.

Before the appalled Dwalin could come up with a fitting reply, Kili raised a hand slightly. "Look, I need to know when my uncle wakes, so if you could send someone to find me when he does... I'd appreciate it. Until then, we'll leave you to guard him... and Dain's precious ax."

Dwalin looked slightly disgruntled, shooting an unsettled look at Tauriel. His gaze landed again on the ax and he sighed. Leaving the weapon in the care of another dwarf was the height of insult, but at the moment, the hulking warrior couldn't help but feel that Dain deserved it.

"As my prince wishes," Dwalin grumbled, crossing his arms unhappily.

Unsure that whatever she could express would be at all satisfactory to either dwarf, Tauriel put a hand on Kili's shoulder and steered him away, though she allowed him to guide her once they were moving. "I haven't yet learned the way of your Mountain. I would become lost on my own."
Kili made a dismissive sound. "Nah. We dwarves are pretty logical about building. It'll all make
sense once you've walked around for a while." He whistled a little as they passed beneath a massive
arch, partially collapsed in the center. "Going to have to get that fixed. Probably drop on someone's
head when they're least expecting it." He sighed, his gaze drifting over the ruin of Erebor's interior.

The main halls, which were actually passable by the dragon, were far worse than the smaller
chambers, which Smaug had mostly left intact, and it was taking a while to get used to the massive
gores in the floor, the piles of rent stone, the stench of dragon filth, and the myriad skeletal remains
that had yet to be respectfully interred.

Repairs would be made in time. The forges would burn once more, the mining operation resume, the
front gates be remade. The diaspora would return to their ancestral home. All those things Thorin had
planned from the beginning. Kili remembered them well, as his uncle had discussed them again and
again, even back when the reclaiming of the Mountain seemed little more than a passing fancy.

Kili was startled from his reverie by a surly voice. "Parading your elven conquest throughout Erebor,
I see." Dain. Apparently, there was no escaping the old codger. He was leaning against the wall, a
fresh, though slightly smaller and less ornate ax at his belt, his eyes narrowed beneath the rim of a
steel helm. "The Wizard won't be around to protect you forever. I told you I wouldn't stand for this
abomination, and as soon as Thorin wakens, I will see he knows about it."

"Good." Kili frowned at the old dwarf, not releasing the elf's hand. "I hope you do tell him. Tell him
anything you like. See how far it gets you."

Tauriel went tense in a subtle way that belied how fast an elf could attack. Her free hand drifted to
the empty frog at her belt, and her jaw worked against the urge to grind her teeth, when what she
truly desired was to grind her heel into Dain's pompous face.

"Kili," she asked in a soft, sweet tone that sounded completely unnatural to her, "may I borrow your
knife for a moment? I believe there is an unpleasant person making threats against us, and I would
like to show this person the extent to which I am willing to go in order to defend what is mine." Her
eyes gleamed like raw emeralds, hard and cold as the earth from whence they had been prized. "I
would also like to show this person that I am not a 'conquest' to be spoken of as though the common
tongue were beyond my understanding." With these words, the elleth's voice fell out of false
sweetness into a lower register that hinted at a slow-building fury taking root in her breast.

Kili's dark brows knit as his gaze shifted between Tauriel and Dain. "I think it would be better if-"

Dain let him get no further. "Do I take it aright? Now your whore dares to threaten me?" The ax
leapt out of his belt in a trice, and the older dwarf closed the gap between them with shocking
swiftness. "I protect what is mine, too, you impudent jade. The legacy of my people, the repute of
Durin's line." His eyes burned like twin coals beneath the shade of his helm, and after a tense 'stare-
up' with Tauriel, they turned on Kili. "You stroll about with this gangly wench at your elbow, caring
nothing for how your people will view this union. Have you given any thought at all to the shame
you bring upon us? Have you?"

Kili was generally quite even-tempered, but even his patience had its limits. He took a step forward
so he was a scant foot from the slightly shorter, but broader dwarf. "Dain... shut up." His tone was a
blade in the silence, his voice surprisingly deep and commanding. "If you refer to my One by any
such titles again... we'll have our duel here and now, and I'll not stop until you've recanted every last
one of your insults."

Beside him, Tauriel stood very still, every muscle tense and ready for the spring, her face as hard and
expressionless as if she looked on an orc, rather than a dwarf. He had insulted her honor, her people,
"Kili," she said, as soft and calm as if they had been hunting together in the forests that had been her
home, "please either provide me with a weapon, or give me leave to depart. I will not stand these
insults, and were I not injured and unarmed, this kinsman of yours would bear the mark of my wrath
until his dying day." And though the she-elf did not question her own decision, she wondered at the
wisdom of it, and whether it had been better to pass out of memory once the dragon was dead and
the hordes of their enemies were defeated, as her oath had been fulfilled, and her services no longer
required. If this was the reaction they were to expect, then it might have been kinder to let Kili live
alone than to inflict it upon him.

Kili nodded slowly, some of the fire leaving his dark eyes. Tauriel was right. They didn't have to put
up with Dain's absurdity, or tolerate being insulted by him. "Dain, we'll not speak of this again. I'd
recommend you don't belabor the point, or you may end up with a real one lodged in your vitals."
Smirking a little to himself, he turned away, saluting Dain with an affectedly cheery "good day."

Dain seemed too stunned for a comeback. His face reddened a little behind his impressive beard,
with anger or embarrassment, it was unclear. He watched them until they'd rounded a corner, and
then snorted to himself. With a shrug, he tucked the ax back into his belt and walked off in the
opposite direction.

The duel could wait. He wanted an audience. Fighting the prince in the hall, where the she-elf could
intervene as she pleased, didn't seem particularly advantageous, and what would be the use of putting
the arrogant young dwarf in his place if no one was there to see it?

Tauriel's stride was stiff and swift, and she had to stop periodically to allow Kili to catch up with her.
It was only when they were safely among the guest chambers occupied by the Company that she
slowed, rubbing her temples tensely. "If I were among my own," she informed her companion softly,
"I would have put an arrow through him. Those who incite hatred have no place among good
people."

She fell into a crouch, balanced deftly on her haunches in such a way that she seemed relaxed as she
looked up into Kili's face. "Tell me truthfully: is this... what we share... is it worth it? To you?"
Green eyes had once again softened to match soft spring leaves rather than hard gems, the anger
replaced by concern and uncertainty.

Kili seemed a bit wounded by the question, and he turned, tucking dark strands behind his ear. "How
can you ask that, Tauri? I'd rather... give all this up--leave Erebor and wander the wilds--than be
separated from you. That's the truth, and it's not going to change just because some stick in the mud
doesn't approve."

He reached out to stroke her cheek, his touch whisper-soft despite the relative roughness of his
fingers. His chocolate eyes met hers with no sign of hesitation. "You're all I want. You're all I'll ever
want."

Tauriel leaned her cheek against his hand, and the expression that crossed the elf's face was nothing
short of relieved. "I don't want to leave you. But I would have. If... if this wasn't... what you
wanted." She took a deep breath and turned her head just enough to press her lips against his fingers.

Out in the hall, there in the silence under the Mountain, a former captain of the Woodland Guard rose
and rested her forehead against that of her chosen mate, a dwarf only a head shorter than she. "Even
had my home been open to me, and the prince willing to renew his offer, I don't think I could have
returned." Tauriel's voice lowered to a whisper, as though she were still reluctant to speak aloud the
revelation that had been maturing within her since Dain's visit to the tent of the elven healers. "Kili, my heart belongs to you, and to you alone. I don't know how you came by it... but it is yours now."

Kili reached out, gently interlacing his fingers behind her head. "I don't know what I've done to deserve you. I'd fear I was dreaming if it weren't so... real. Tauri, I... you have no idea how much I've longed to..."

He trailed off, withdrawing a little so he was eye to eye with the elleth. "...how much I've longed to tell you. I love you. I've loved you since that day in the Elvenking's dungeon, when you came to me. When you told me your name. That's when I knew."

He smiled, his dark eyes gleaming in the faint light. "That's when the 'forest-daughter' secured her hold over my heart."

Tauriel smiled slightly, her expression soft as velvet as she studied his eyes. "You love too quickly, son of the earth," she whispered. "But I suppose as long as mine is the only hold."

A door just down the hall burst open with a bang, and Kili jumped. The mood was shattered as Fili staggered into the open, looking about wildly.

"Where is she? Where's Ori?"

Chapter End Notes

Because cliffhangers are too much fun to pass up. :D
Chapter Notes

A friend of mine brought it to my attention that it wasn't exactly clear how Tauriel got the Ring, and that it was terribly confusing to have the elleth pull it out when it hasn't been seen in five chapters.

Me, being the all-powerful, totally knowledgeable author that I am, hadn't imagined that remembering something that happened five chapters ago and was never mentioned again would be hard to follow. *facepalm*

I've edited it now, but for those of you that don't want to go hunting for it, here's the gist of the edit:

Tauriel took the Ring from Billa immediately after the Battle, when Billa begged her to take it off for her, because it hurt too much. Tauriel, after following Billa's wishes, put the Ring in her belt pouch. Since then, she's had a mental break-down and not a lot of time to think about it, and only just remembered about it when her attention was on Billa, and not on the chaotic inside of her own mind.

And no, this doesn't count as Tauriel "willingly giving up the Ring," because Billa took it from her by force. So she's really not a super-special snowflake that's just unaffected by the Ring's power--its power has been manifest in the deterioration of her mind, rather than in changing her personality or actions.

In my mind, this all makes perfect sense.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Another door opened more decorously, and Dori emerged, frowning. From behind him came a female voice.

"I told you he'd notice."

The tidy dwarf looked clean and freshly-braided, and turned his frown on Fili. "Your timing is most inconvenient, my prince."

"Fee! Durin's ax, I can't tell you how glad I am to see you up and about." Kili leaped across the hall and enveloped his brother in a tight embrace, muttering an apology when he very nearly knocked him off his feet.

Ori appeared at Dori's side, looking as though she'd bathed, put on fresh clothes, and rearranged her
"You're next, Fili," she said. "Brother's just heated more water. He'll... erm... help you. If you need help, that is," she added quickly, her cheeks reddening a little.

"If Kee lets go, I can bathe myself." Fili was determined, but when his brother let him go, he had to hold Kili's arm tightly to keep himself upright. His injuries from his most recent beating were nowhere near healed yet, and it seemed that one or more of the cuts on his face had reopened in all the excitement. At least, the bandages that covered most of the left side of his face were turning blotchily red. His headache had also returned with a vengeance, and he wondered if Thorin's blows might not have done damage to his skull.

A concerned hand on his free arm alerted him to Ori's presence, and he leaned against her a little, blinking to clear his head. "I'm fine," the blond muttered. "It's just a headache."

Kili's relief faded swiftly, and he shook his head. "No no no. That's not alright." He indicated Fili's bandages. "Really, you shouldn't be up at all in your state." Giving no ear to his brother's protests, he escorted him firmly toward the bathing room. "I'll help you, and then you're going straight back to bed."

The dark-haired dwarf sent an apologetic glance at Tauriel before shutting the door behind them. He pulled up a rickety wooden stool. "Sit down before you fall down. Mother would be in a frightful way if she could see you now, and when she comes to the Mountain, do you want her to find you bedridden? That's what I thought. You've gotta take better care of yourself, Fee. I mean, I don't even know if we should tell her that..." He cut himself off, sighing unhappily. His chocolate eyes were conflicted. "Fee, what are we gonna tell her?"

"That I got hurt in the Battle, like the rest." Fili winced as he sat down, and touched his bleeding face gingerly. He'd managed to fake being alright while giving orders, while helping Dori and Ori with their brother, but every time he stood it felt as though his head was trying to explode. "She'll be distracted anyway, what with Ori and Billa and your elven girlfriend." The blond flashed his brother a smile that didn't quite seem to fit his bruised face. "What's the story between you two, anyway? Any progress in figuring things out?"

Anything to change the subject. It was easy now to recall, of the myriad of things they'd talked about during the long walk to Bard's camp after Smaug's death, Kili's explanation of his feelings for the elf, and how concerned he was about how things might or might not turn out. Fili didn't exactly approve, but that was mostly because of his brother's age, not his taste in women.

"Story?" Kili seemed to be intensely focused on dumping the steaming water into the half-full iron washtub. "Well... she's chosen me, Fee." His eyes shone with happiness, betraying his attempts at neutrality. "She is my One."

He set the kettle aside and took a step nearer his brother. "I--it seems... sudden, but it's just... I know it's right. Hard to explain." He chuckled nervously. "Well, come on, then. Strip. Water's gonna be cold before you know it."

Fili obeyed without comment, looking at his brother contemplatively. He climbed into the tub and hissed softly in pain as the minerals in the water seeped into numerous unhealed cuts, but his gaze didn't leave his brother. After some half-hearted, obviously sore scrubbing, the blond gave up, his expression almost comically puzzled.
"You're sure?" He didn't really give his brother a chance to answer. "What are the odds that all three of us would bond on a single journey?"

Kili smiled, shaking his head. "If someone had told me before we set out that this is how it would end... I'd have asked him who dropped him on his head as a babe." He pulled the rag from his brother's hand. "Here. Let me." At Fili's vocal hesitation, Kili made a reassuring sound. "I'll be gentle." And he was. When Fili had been thoroughly scrubbed, his hair untangled, unbraided, and washed, Kili helped dry him off and dressed him in some of the spare clothes Dori and Ori had salvaged from sealed cabinets in the guest chambers.

"I don't suppose anyone's told you what Dain's been up to of late?" Kili asked, frowning slightly. "Woke up this morning with his ax practically at my throat."

Blue-grey eyes narrowed as Fili buckled the broad, leather belt about his waist. "I think you had better tell me what's going on." Despite his reluctance to take on the responsibility long-term, he knew his duty as Thorin's heir. The Mountain was under his command until his uncle recovered. "I know Dain's a royal pain, but I didn't think he'd try anything... radical."

"Frankly, I'm beginning to think he might be slightly... off." After what they'd been through with Thorin, the smirk the two might have shared in happier days over a line like this was replaced by utterly serious eye contact. Kili looked away, and decided to rephrase.

"Well, maybe not exactly off. He's just... unimaginative. Really unimaginative. Dangerously so." The younger dwarf did smile, then. Faintly. "You get the point. He's so adamant about 'preserving the purity of the line of Durin,' or however he put it, that he'd stake his life on the issue." A beat of silence. "He's given me his ax, Fee."

For a moment, the two young dwarves gazed at one another, absorbing the full meaning of that action. A duel to the death wasn't exactly what Fili had been imagining when he thought of trouble with their cousin.

"Thorin won't stand for it," he pointed out, shaking his head slowly so his long blond hair swung haphazardly about his face. "You know he won't. And even if he did, I'd bet my knives that Tauriel wouldn't." His expression hardened, and it was clear that even if all else failed, he wouldn't tolerate his threat on his brother's life. Any action Fili might have taken at that moment, however, was delayed by the arrival of Dori with a small wooden box. Tiny, really. Small enough to fix in a pocket and not be noticed, flat and the approximate length of a child's hand. This box he handed to Fili, who stared at it in confusion.

"Our mother's beads," said the grey-bearded dwarf, his tone stiff and serious. "Ori would have had them eventually, not having the skill to craft her own, but..." Dori made a curious grunt, his shoulders twitching slightly in what might have been a shrug.

Fili shot his brother a slightly panicked look. Dain and his blood-feud, he could handle. This? Marriage? Official ceremonies and who knew what else? The thought was enough to make him feel weak.

Kili grinned, jostling the blond's shoulder lightly. "Relax, Fee. You look like Dori just asked for your hand in marriage." The beads were silver, small and delicate, and bore an intricate design. "I think they're some of the finest I've seen," Kili said by way of mollifying the rather insulted-looking Dori. "Did your mother make them herself?"

Dori glanced at Kili, relaxing slightly. "Yes. She specialized in working silver."
Fili lifted one of the beads to the light, admiring the workmanship and trying not to let himself freak out. "I don't think Uncle Thorin could have done better." The blond could think of no higher praise, having spent his life admiring Thorin's craftsmanship. Dori's chest swelled slightly with pride, and he seemed to forgive the earlier, unintended insult.

"Speaking of Uncle Thorin... maybe we should look in on him. How about it, Fee?" Kili had been furious with Thorin but a few days before, and understandably so, but things had changed. It was as if that version of his uncle no longer existed. Never had existed except in some bizarre nightmare. That wasn't to say the young dwarf didn't have lurking fears of that beast returning. At the moment, though--with Gandalf here, and Lord Elrond--he was going to err on the side of hope.

Ori was peering in the doorway now, looking undeniably nervous. "You... like them?" she asked Fili softly, gesturing toward the beads.

"He loves 'em!" Kili replied before his brother could. "Hard to tell by his face, though. I think it's stuck."

Fili shivered, his loose, unbraided hair swinging as he turned to look at Ori. He seemed a little shell-shocked, but nodded. "They're beautiful. So are you." He smiled shyly, glancing at her sidelong. "Can I get my hair braided before we visit Thorin?" His gaze shifted to Kili, looking for confirmation.

Kili's mouth twitched a little at the corners, and his gaze met Ori's. "Well, come on, then," he said, chuckling, waving her over. "Don't be bashful." Ori smiled, moving quickly to Fili's side. She pulled an ornately carved ivory comb from one of her pockets (Kili recognized it as Dori's) and began gently working her way through Fili's damp locks, stretching up on tiptoe to reach the top of his head.

"Sit down, brother," Kili said, pulling up an old, wooden bench for the blond. "She can hardly reach." Fili, looking startled, yet pleased, sat down obediently. His beads, the ones he'd made just before this quest had begun, were in Kili's pocket, and he briefly wondered which beads they would use. Did it matter? In the end, he decided it didn't, and relaxed under the hands of his brother and beloved.

Skilled fingers wove braids into his hair, securing them with heavy silver beads. Ori's hands were just as quick as Kili's, her love of the familiar and beautiful all but palpable in her tender, meticulous work. It was done in a minute, and Fili shook his head a little, testing the weight of the beads.

"That's it. I'm never braiding my own hair again." The blond flashed a grin at Ori. "Kili says when I do it myself, I look like a lopsided cow."

"Cow, no. Pony, yes." Kili nodded seriously.

Ori was visibly pleased by Fili's praise. "I'd be happy to do it for you... often as you like." She stroked one of his braids gently, admiring the beads Kili had handed her to replace. Her mother's would be kept for the ceremony itself, though she didn't know when that might be.

Kili clapped his hands sharply. "Enough preening. We need to tell Uncle about Dain. Before he gets any friskier."

"And Billa will probably be needing a break," Ori added. Fili nodded and pushed himself to his feet. This action, as usual, made his head spin and throb. The dwarf stumbled against Ori and leaned on her, huffing in frustration. He disliked being weak.
Dori glanced at Kili, looking slightly concerned. He hadn't been present for the whole incident with Thorin at the gate, and hadn't asked what had happened to his sister's new-chosen lifemate.

Kili took his brother's other arm to spare Ori a little, frowning with concern. "Will you make it, Fee? Maybe you need to lie down again."

Ori nodded in hearty agreement, her silver bead swinging near her ear. "I think it'd be best," she said softly. She had his left arm with both hands and was doing her best to support him.

"Honestly, Fee," Kili insisted, taking on something of a pleading tone, "we can manage for now. It'd be no good to let Uncle see you like this, anyway. Might hinder his recovery."

"I just got a little dizzy." Fili frowned at the two of them, seeming both defensive and somewhat gratified. It was nice to have those he loved close enough to love him back. Still, he wasn't so helpless yet that he couldn't manage a bath and a leisurely visit. "I'm fine." He pushed himself a little more upright, and was pleased when his legs supported him without too much trouble. A glance at Dori was enough to show the older dwarf approved of this display of determination and strength.

A taller, more slender figure in the doorway, however, didn't. Tauriel was watching them with a slight frown on her pale face, as though trying to remember something.

"Tauriel, would you tell my blockhead of a brother he's only going to make himself worse if he pushes it like this?" Kili's concern was deep; he knew better than anyone Fili was determined not to seem weak in front of present company. "He's not alright."

Ori studied the blond's face more closely. She hoped one day she'd be able to read him as easily as his brother seemed to. "You look pale, love. Why don't we go back to the room and rest a bit? We can join the others later."

Fili glanced at Tauriel, then at Ori, and finally at his brother. The light of frustrated resentment flickered in his eyes, but seemed tempered by the knowledge that their insistence was inspired by love.

"He... is lucky to be alive." Tauriel's voice seemed vaguely uncertain as she watched them. The elleth sighed and shook her head to clear it. "You both ought to rest. You're injured."

"I'm alright for a while longer," said Kili, flapping a hand. "I don't think both of us ought to sleep at once. No telling what Dain might do."

Ori tugged gently at Fili's elbow. "Let's go, then. Your brother will need to rest soon."

Fili nodded and reluctantly allowed his betrothed to lead him away. "You'll be sure to wake me?"

“Yes, I'll wake you.” And though Ori’s answer was sincere, she'd neglected to specify when she would wake him.

When Kili and Tauriel reached Thorin's suite, they were greeted by Dwalin, who granted them entrance, though not without a wondering shake of the head. It was clear the bond between his prince and the Woodland Realm's former captain frustrated his senses of propriety, but he'd already made his opinion known. The hulking dwarf announced the visitors and withdrew, shutting the door behind him. A fire was crackling in the hearth, and a few lamps were lit to dispel the gloom. Balin was slouching on a bench against the wall, and Billa was up, evidently just finishing assisting Thorin with changing his bandages. Gandalf was notably absent.
Kili caught the hobbit's eye. "How's he doing?"

"'He' is doing fine," said Thorin. "Under the circumstances. Well, nephew..." Thorin's voice was somewhat languid, but his eyes were clear, and he seemed very peaceful, as though a great burden had been lifted from his shoulders. "By Dain's report, you and a certain elf have been... busy."

"Not nearly so busy as Dain," Kili said, face paling a little.

"According to your esteemed cousin," put in Billa as she dropped the bloodied bandages into a bin near the fireplace, "you've been--what was it said? 'Flaunting your disrespect for your royal heritage,' or something of the like?" It was hard to tell if the halfling was trying not to scowl or trying not to laugh. Possibly both. She seemed exhausted, but much recovered from her state in the healers' tent the previous day.

Standing as much in shadow as possible while staying near the door, Tauriel watched tensely, a strained expression appearing on her tired face. Green eyes flicked warily around the room, searching for threats that weren't there. It wasn't very hard for those familiar with the elleth's habits to know her mind wasn't entirely, or even remotely at ease. Billa studied her worriedly, moving protectively nearer to her injured lover. If Thorin sensed there was something off about the elf's manner, he said nothing, though he watched her curiously. Kili followed his gaze to Tauriel, standing behind him, and the young dwarf frowned slightly. Now wasn't the time, he decided after a moment's debate, to tell those present of her malady.

"Uncle," he said, tugging at one of his tattered sleeves, "I respect my heritage. I always have, and I always will. I don't see how this," he gestured nebulously, "changes anything. Would you deny your love for Billa simply because she's a halfling?"

Thorin smiled faintly, shaking his head. "I would not. Durin's blood has been sullied far more by madness and pride than any mingling with other races. But Dain, I fear, will never see it that way, and will persuade others to think as he does."

In the silence that followed, Billa shot Thorin an adoring look, touched by his honesty. A brush with death tended to rearrange things a little, but she'd not dared to hope for such complete support. Still, there were matters at hand that her gratitude didn't outweigh. Taking a seat beside the recovering king, the hobbit grasped Thorin's hand and turned her gaze on Kili.

"So I guess the real question is: what's your side of the story? We've heard Dain's blustering about you parading and flaunting. It's time we heard your end."

"Parading and flaunting?" Kili worked hard to keep his tone even. "I don't know where he got that idea. Yes, I slept at Tauriel's side. But she needed me there. There's been..." Kili hesitated, disliking bringing the subject up in the elleth's hearing. But if he was to explain himself--explain for both of them, rather--he had little choice. "Tauriel hasn't been well. After the battle..." He couldn't turn to look at the elf. He knew he was embarrassing her, and yet, he forced himself to go on. "The strain was too much. Under the healers' care, she recovered a lot, but while she was with them... she was terrified of being left alone. So I stayed beside her through the night. Dain found us this morning, and there was... an incident." He quickly related the exchange with Dain, including the ax he'd been given, and told also of Dain's threats in the hall outside.

Thorin's brow was creased, his lips pressed firmly together as he considered Kili's words. He turned to regard Balin. "What do you make of that? Would he act on such threats?" As all eyes turned on the exhausted old dwarf, Tauriel shot Kili a slightly mortified look. She was at least a little more aware of reality now. That was a positive sign.
Balin sighed heavily. "I'm afraid he would. Our esteemed cousin has ever chafed at authority, and no doubt he sees this as the final indignity in a long line of them." Privately, the white-haired dwarf thought Dain would take the Desolation as a personal insult if given sufficient opportunity.

"Wait... so Kili's obligated to fight him until he gives in?" The pallor of Billa's face as she spoke marked her acknowledgement of odds of Dain "giving in." The very idea of a fight to the death between kinsmen was absolutely appalling to her.

"Not if someone invokes the right of substitution." Balin nodded tiredly to Kili and smiled. "Any of his kin or superiors have the right to step in and fight in his stead."

"No." Kili's reply was firm. "I won't let anyone fight in my stead. The insult he's given my One forbids me to trust this to anyone but myself. I would defend her honor with my life." He waited for his words to sink in a little before continuing. "That being said, I'd really rather not die. I'm agile, and a decent fighter, having been brought up to it, but he's had a lifetime of experience. So if I'm to have any chance at all, I'll have to-"

"You may defend her honor to your last breath, Kili, but do you think she'd prefer that spared over your life?" Thorin winced slightly, easing himself back onto his pillows. "A fool rushes to a fight. A wiser dwarf would seek to prevent it altogether. Dain would not take such an insult well, of course, but we've upended ages of dwarven tradition already. Why stop now?"

"You could not stop me defending you." Tauriel sank slowly to the floor, balancing her weight on her haunches, her eyes on Kili. "The insult was to me and mine, meleth nin, and the right to avenge my honor is mine. I suggest you follow your uncle's advice."

A soft laugh escaped the halfling, and she was smiling at Tauriel when the elleth looked up. Billa looked fondly at the pair of them. "You two fit so well. This merits a party like Erebor's never seen." She flashed a grin at Thorin. "All three Durins on one journey. That must be a record of some sort."

Tauriel gazed at the halfling for a long few seconds before she spoke again, touching the pouch at her side. "Your ring."

As though a shadow had passed over the lanterns in the room, the atmosphere darkened noticeably as Billa stiffened. An expression of almost feral suspicion.

"What about it?" the halfling asked sharply, frowning. Tauriel frowned back, looking confused and cautious as Billa groped for her pocket convulsively. It seemed like so long ago now, that moment on the battlefield, searching desperately for the halfling, finding her invisible and injured, listening to her begging to have the ring pulled off for her. The cool metal against her fingers as she wrenched it from Billa’s bleeding finger. In the chaos afterward, she hadn't had the chance to give it back. And now… she felt strangely reluctant to do so.

"I wanted... to give it back." From her belt pouch, the elleth produced the shining gold ring. Despite her desire to keep it, which only grew as she looked at the precious thing, a very insistent part of her mind told her the ring wasn’t hers to keep. The room acquired an interesting chill, and Billa lunged across Thorin's injured body, snatching the ring savagely from Tauriel's outstretched hand. Thorin sucked in a ragged breath, grimacing against the pain of the halfling's full weight sprawled across him. Balin was up in a trice, pulling Billa off him and yelling something the dwarf king only vaguely perceived through the ringing in his ears.

Kili was at Tauriel's side a moment later, horror etched across his young features. "Billa! What's got into you?!"
Crouched by the wall where Balin had dropped her, Billa gripped her ring tightly in one fist, hugging it against her chest. The expression on her face became slowly more horrified as her gaze rested on Thorin, her ears twitching in time to his harsh, pained breathing. The color drained from her face as she glanced at Kili, then at Balin.

"I didn't mean to... it's mine." There was a plaintive note to her voice, as though she were begging for understanding.

Tauriel shuddered, falling back on her seat, face twisted with what seemed to be pain. "Kili," she whispered, gripping his arm as he braced her.

"We need Lord Elrond. Now." Kili's voice was half-frantic as he eased Tauriel against the wall. "Balin... do what you can for her. Please." He jumped up again, moving quickly toward the door. "I'll be back, Tauriel. Hold on."

Thorin was staring at Billa now, frowning, his head tilted to one side as though he didn't understand. In a way, he did understand. Perhaps better than anyone else ever could. She hadn't been herself. The Billa he knew would never have behaved like that.

"What's going on?" he whispered, a question that may or may not have been meant for the halfling. It was hard to follow precisely the sequence of events. Balin was kneeling beside Tauriel and trying to determine what was wrong with her when Dwalin burst through the door, demanding to know what was happening.

Billa fixed Thorin with a frightened look, still clutching the ring tightly to her chest. "I don't want to go mad."

Thorin waved Dwalin off, and the one-legged dwarf stepped back into the corner near the door, his burly arms crossed before him.

"You're not going to go mad," the dwarf king said, turning back to Billa, his voice comfortingly resolute in the silence. The fire crackled in the space that followed as the dwarf and hobbit gazed into one another's eyes with new understanding. Finally, Thorin extended a hand to the halfling. "Come here, Billa. Come. It's alright. You're going to be alright."

Billa let out a faint whimper and crawled onto the bed with him, one hand closed fast around the ring, the other reaching for him. They had seen what this sort of madness led to. She didn't want to hurt anyone, least of all Thorin.

"I'm fine," Tauriel was insisting, though she looked deathly pale, even in comparison to her former, unhealthy pallor. The sound of footsteps heralded the arrival of Kili and a haggard-looking elf lord, and as the door opened, Dwalin lurched forward, weapon in hand, only to scowl at the young dwarf.

"For the love of stone, lad, learn to knock."

"No time." Kili's words were far more worried than dismissive, and Dwalin snorted, but leaned back against the wall again, trying to be casual about reaching for his fallen crutch.

"I'm alright, Kili." Tauriel's strained voice lent no credibility to her words at all. In truth, her head felt like it was trying to split open, and a flood of memories plagued her mind until it was all she could do to remember where and who she was.

Lord Elrond, who had clearly just been woken from a sound sleep (one he desperately needed, at that), pushed lustrous black locks behind his ears and knelt beside the elleth. "Look at me." His tired eyes met hers searchingly, and he took her hands, fingers curled to touch her palms. He spoke to her
in Elvish, softly but earnestly, looking into her eyes all the while.

Finally, he turned to Kili, face grave. "She is in great peril, prince. Among elvenkind, there are maladies that transcend the body, and are far more difficult to cure."

Kili looked stricken. "Can you help her?" His voice was weak, but hopeful.

The elf lord released Tauriel's hands and eased himself up onto his haunches. "I will do what I can for her. I myself am still in a perilous state, and cannot give her what I lack. I will bear her away to a quiet chamber. See that we are not disturbed." He slipped his hands beneath her back and the bend of her knees, lifting her with apparent ease and moving toward the door.

Chapter End Notes

Wow, okay, where to start… *bows at your feet* PLEASE FORGIVE US! Things have been absolutely mad recently; Loki is in the process of selling her worldly possessions and moving across town, and I am in the process of trying to find a job. On top of that, our buffer is dwindling rapidly, and we’ve been trying very hard to build it back up again. All told, we’re begging forgiveness because this trend is likely to continue. Just call it an unforeseen semi-hiatus and we will update as able.

Note: To all you who want to slap Dain, please take a number. The wait will be 2-3 weeks. Thank you for your patience. :)

Trouble Brewing

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno

Chapter Notes

Continued apologies for our ongoing hiatus. We're nearing the end of FtF, and should have this part of the story wrapped up in the next few chapters. Between FtF and the next part of the series, there will be a significant break, but never fear! I'm not going to disappear entirely. Other collaborative works between Loki and I will be generated and posted, I have no doubt.

In the meantime, thank you so much for your continued support! You're all amazing as can be!

Kili watched them go, his throat tight, his eyes watery. Clasping the young dwarf's shoulder as he passed, Balin gave him a faint smile. "I haven't yet seen an elf die from anything short of a beheading, lad. I wouldn't worry too much." The old dwarf followed Elrond into the hall and directed him toward a room with a working lock on the door before moving off to fetch his bag, as requested.

The door drifted shut behind them, and silence fell over the room. Save for the crackle and pop of embers on the hearth, not a sound was made. Billa, seeming consumed by fear, huddled against Thorin's side. She stared at the door, which stood ajar, clearly wondering if this was somehow her fault. Thorin's arm was around her, his fingers soothingly stroking her messy curls. His eyes remained fixed on the opposite wall, though he clearly wasn't seeing it. The silence lingered another minute, and then the dwarf's gaze drifted to Billa.

"It's that ring. That's what's doing this to you, and you know it." He remembered, seemingly long ago and far away in Laketown, the first conversation they'd had on the subject, and the hostile way she'd reacted. He hoped she would be more receptive now, in this moment of clarity. In this moment when her guilt might overwhelm the influence of the cursed golden thing she carried.

Slowly, gradually, the hobbit relaxed under Thorin's steady hand, but his words brought on a violent shudder. Billa closed her eyes and nodded in agreement, as though not being able to see the pity and understanding in his eyes made the madness less real.

"Then what will you do about it?" It seemed the logical next question, though Thorin feared even something so seemingly inoffensive might set her off. He used the most dulcet of tones with her, the manner of a casual questioner, as opposed to one with specific intent. If he'd thought it would do an ounce of good, he might've dared to wrest the evil thing from her and order it destroyed. But such
things had to be given up willingly. Released. Muscles bunched and coiled in the halfling's neck, back, and legs, as though she were preparing to fight or flee. Her eyes closed even tighter, and Billa's entire body trembled slightly as she fought with herself.

"I don't know," she answered at length, voice strained. "I don't know anything. I'm just a hobbit."

"You give yourself very little credit, my love," said Thorin quietly, still gently stroking her hair. "If I have learned one thing about halflings these past few months, it's that they should never be underestimated. You're wiser than you think, daughter of the kindly West." His hand slid down to one of hers, and gave it a reassuring squeeze. "We should consult Gandalf when next it's convenient for him. Hopefully sooner than later."

With a meltingly grateful look, Billa nodded. "Gandalf will know what to do. And maybe I can convince him to make some fireworks for the party." If the halfling hadn't been desperate to distract herself, she might have thought the subject change tactless, even ridiculous. As it was, she didn't seem to notice. Dwalin did, though.

"Party? Please tell me you're joking." The warrior had only just succeeded in persuading Kili to sit down, and now looked at Billa with an expression somewhere between amusement and revulsion.

Thorin smiled faintly. "Somehow I doubt he will be overly concerned with parties when he hears about what's happened. There is much yet to be done, I fear." His gaze drifted to Dwalin. "I'd like to be alone with Billa now."

Kili didn't need much encouragement. He was up in an instant, and out the door before Dwalin had finished acknowledging Thorin's request. Dwalin, shaking his head and grumbling something about lovesick yearlings, stumped out of the room, leaning heavily on his crutch.

The bed seemed to vibrate as Billa began to tremble once more. He was going to take it from her, or force her to give it up. The ring was leaving a deep, painful impression on her palm, her nails digging into the flesh on either side of the cursed thing. She hated it, and yet couldn't bear to part with it. Loathed its influence, yet succumbed time and again. The more she thought about it, the more Billa's anger and hate burned higher and hotter.

"I don't want to talk about it," she growled, unaware the room had been silent for some time. "Just forget it. I'll... deal with it. It's none of your business."

Thorin remained surprisingly calm. This wasn't Billa speaking, and he knew it. "I won't take it from you." His voice was gentle as he withdrew his hand from her hair. "Keep it. Look at me," he urged. "Look at me, Billa." She did, and his gaze met hers. Not with the piercing, hawk-like keenness it often did, but with understanding and love. "Do you trust me?"

There was a beat of silence so gravid it was strained to the breaking point. Billa's hazel eyes were narrow and sharp, searching his face for a reason to say "no." Then a flicker of guilt, followed closely by self-loathing. The halfling dropped his gaze.

"Yes. Of course I trust you." The words came out unsteadily, her voice quivering.

Billa shoved the fist holding the ring into her pocket and, after a moment of apparently violent internal struggle, forced herself to let go and leave it there. Her palm was bleeding a little, but the imprint of the ring looked almost like a burn, which seemed to startle her.

"It was warm," she said wonderingly, staring as though fascinated by her injured hand.

Thorin nodded, and it was clear much of her suffering was also his. He slipped an arm around her
slowly, inviting her to lean into his side. "It's passed now, Billa. You'll be alright." He reached up
with his free hand to stroke her hair again. "I know you will. It may take time, and Mahal knows
what else, but you'll come through." It was with intense gratitude and a relieved sigh that Billa leaned
against his warm body. Thorin was alive and well and stable enough to help her with her own
creeping, growing madness.

"As long as I have you, Thorin, I think I'll be able to get through anything." Without him, as she'd
seen, the world simply crumbled around her like cold ashes. The hobbit's gaze wandered back to her
injured hand, tracing the shiny red circle stamped into her palm.

"You had faith in me long after I'd ceased deserving it, if indeed I'd ever deserved it at all. You never
gave up on me, Billa." The dwarf leaned down, gently kissing the top of her head, and his voice
sank to a whisper. "And I will never, ever give up on you." His eyes drifted to the movement of the
halfling's hands, and Thorin stiffened a little.

"You're hurt." Why hadn't she said something? Feeling guilty for not noticing sooner, he released
her, reaching for the tray of ointment and bandages on the table beside the bed. He took her burned
hand, and when she tensed at his touch, he met her eyes reassuringly. "Don't worry. I'll be gentle. I
am, in fact, capable of that." A half-smile appeared, and was quickly gone. He applied some
ointment, tenderly as he'd promised, and a pad of gauze, then wrapped her hand in the thin, cream-
colored bandages.

"I hope it won't leave a scar," he murmured, tugging her jacket sleeve back down a little. "It'd be a
pity to be marked so, to be constantly reminded...."

Scar. Billa's free hand strayed to his chest, and the bandages that covered the wound that had nearly
killed him. Another scar, another memory of pain. "It won't be the first."

Kili clasped his knees tightly, rocking back and forth on the hard stone bench. The hall was quiet and
still where he sat before the door--the door through which the elf lord and Tauriel had gone. Time
seemed to stretch on into infinity while he waited. Waited for anything, breathing shallowly of air
long staled within the cold confines of the mountain. His singular comfort was that Dain had yet to
accost him again. The way the dwarf lurked, Kili half expected him to pop out of a shadow any
moment, armed with an ax and a scowl.

It wasn't Dain who found him, though. The Wizard's step was surprisingly quiet as he approached,
betrayed only by the echoing taps of his staff. "Ah, there you are, my lad."

Kili sighed, glancing at the old man before directing his gaze at the floor once more. "Why're you
looking for me? Shouldn't you be in with Uncle and Billa?" He huffed, a sound of bitter amusement.
"I swear madness is contagious around here."

Leaning against his staff, Gandalf studied Kili through blue eyes that communicated both wisdom
and more energy spent than a normal person could afford. Still rocking to and fro on his bench, the
young dwarf seemed to have aged far beyond his 77 years. Not an ill change, perhaps, but certainly
not one that should have been wrought so early in his life. The Wizard sighed, but smiled faintly.

"And perhaps it is, my young friend, but I've little doubt that the line of Durin will endure. It always
has, after all." There was a slight pause as Gandalf glanced at the closed (and presumably locked)
door Kili had been fixated on.

Kili exhaled tensely. "I know, I know. Just... hard to trust when everything I've trusted in most of my
life has lately been anything _but_ trustworthy." He thought, after the fact, that this sentence was
rather awkward.

"Gandalf?" He turned to look at the Wizard now. "What's been done with that stone? They're going to get rid of it... aren't they?"

A heavy pause followed, as a feeling settled around them like the inevitable settling of earth and stone. "The ultimate fate of the Arkenstone lies with your uncle. In the meantime, however, it is being kept in the safest place we have access to at the moment." The old man shook his head slightly, as though discarding a useless thought. "Once Thorin is sufficiently recovered, I shall broach the subject, but not before."

"I just... can't stand the thought of him going off like that again. How do we know he w-"

Kili's question was cut off when the door opposite creaked slowly inward. It was dark within, though a faint light flickered on the walls beyond the figure shading the doorway. The young dwarf shot up off the bench, but a chastening look from Gandalf somewhat reined in his initial impulses.

"Gandalf." The voice was Lord Elrond's, and sounded incredibly weak and strained.

Gandalf moved forward swiftly, letting his staff fall in his haste to catch the tottering form of the elf lord. Elrond seemed utterly spent, everything about him drained of color and vitality.

"You went too far, my friend." The Wizard lifted his head, expression grim. "Kili, run as swiftly as you can to the elven camp and send for..." Erestor or Glorfindel would be ideal, and they ought to have been close by, but what with the White Council in action and the twins running Rivendell, it was just as likely that both were well out of reach. While it unsettled the Wizard, he had only one option. "Send for Thranduil. With luck, he shall have what we need. Hurry now. Go!"

"Wait..." For a moment, Kili looked nearly as pale as Elrond. "But... there's no way the guards will let Thranduil in. I'd practically have to have a written order from Uncle, and I don't think that'll happen anytime soon. Besides that, what are the odds he'd even... I mean, wouldn't it be better to try to get Lord Elrond back to the elven camp?"

Heavy grey eyebrows lowered over intense blue eyes as they focused on Kili. "He's too weak to be moved. Please, Kili, do what you must. I cannot let him...." Gandalf's words failed him for a moment. Elrond was perhaps his closest and most trusted friend. The idea of adding his sacrifice to an already ponderous list wasn't one he could readily deal with at the moment.

"But I..." Kili swallowed, unable to shake a series of painful images from the last time he'd tried to persuade his uncle to do something. Was it still so hard to trust that the changes in Thorin were here to stay? Slowly, the young dwarf nodded. This elf had done so much for them all. The least he could do in return was risk his uncle's wrath. "I'll try."

He limped away as quickly as he could, working to ignore the twinges of pain that greeted him at each step. He'd strained his leg in all the day's exertions, and his side still smarted at even the slightest bit of movement. Dwalin was still guarding Thorin's door when the young dwarf arrived outside.

"I need to see Uncle." Kili was slightly out of breath as he eyed the hulking warrior. "It's urgent. Gandalf sent me."

After a moment of hesitation, Dwalin heaved himself upright, balancing on his good leg as he lifted the latch to let Kili in. "If you were anyone else, I'd not allow it," the dwarf growled warningly.

Inside, Billa was fussing over the tired King Under the Mountain, scolding him for straining himself in reaching for the pot of ointment which now lay in pieces on the floor. No one seemed any more
hurt than when Kili had left, but the halfling seemed very serious about it.

"You're supposed to be resting. I'll be fine. You're the one with a hole in your chest!" She paused and glanced up at the door with a frown. "Kili. I thought you were... has something else happened?"

Kili thought the halfling looked quite normal now, which was marginally reassuring. Whatever had possessed her to behave like she had, she seemed to have escaped its grasp. He cleared his throat, only just managing to meet his uncle's gaze.

"Tauriel's... I don't know. He didn't say. All I know is that Lord Elrond's not doing well. He came staggering out of the room and... I could tell by the way Gandalf reacted... it's not good."

Thorin's face was disconcertingly unreadable, but Kili forced himself on. "Gandalf sent me to get official permission to..." He cleared his throat again, and it sounded contrived. "The thing is, Thranduil is the only one powerful enough to help him, but Elrond can't be moved out of the Mountain right now." He nearly winced when Thorin did, finally, react. The familiar brow crease, the dark eyebrows lowering to shade deep, blue eyes.

"Uncle, it's... it's the only way." Kili's voice began to sound strained, tinged with desperation. "He saved you... he practically killed himself for Tauriel's sake. We can't just... let him die. Please."

A long silence followed, and for a terrifying handful of moments, Kili swore he could actually hear three separate heartbeats in the close room.

Then Thorin sighed. "It seems I have little choice. I owe the elf lord a life-debt, and if there is any chance he can be saved... I will not take it from him."

After overwhelming his uncle with verbal gratitude, Kili managed to secure a hastily scrawled notice proclaiming that one "Thranduil, Elvenking" should be allowed safe conduct into the kingdom of Erebor. He limped out of the room, clutching the parchment tightly.

"I'll go right now. No time to lose," he murmured, but as he rounded the corner, he practically collided with another dwarf. Hissing through his teeth against the pain of the sudden jolt, Kili steadied himself against the wall.

"And just where might you be off to, princeling?" Of all the voices Kili didn't want to hear at that particular moment, Dain's was very high on the list.

"None of your business," Kili said, quickly tucking the parchment into his tunic.

"Oh, I think this is very much my business." The older dwarf straightened his shoulders a touch, his beard bristling. "Every time you go charging off like that, more outsiders end up inside the Mountain. As head of Erebor's guard, it's my duty to keep the kingdom safe." The subtext of "keep them out and keep you in" was written into every line on his stern face. He clearly took his self-appointed duty very seriously. Took himself very seriously. Neither was going to help Kili in his current mission.

"The orders I carry come directly from my uncle," Kili said wearily. "Let me pass." He moved to brush past the older dwarf, but Dain caught his arm. Kili made a cursory attempt to pull away, and failed. Dain's grip was very strong.

"I just told you I have orders from Thorin. Doesn't that mean anything to you?" Kili turned a fierce glare upon Dain, his dark eyes flicking between the restraining hand and the impassive features of Nain's son. "I'm not one of your lackeys that you can dictate to me."

Though the dwarf lifted one scraggly eyebrow, Dain didn't release Kili's arm. "I'd like to see these
orders," he growled softly. "You spend all too much time with Elves and things to be trusted on your own." The open distrust in Dain's voice was a dangerous threat, especially considering how many followers he had at his disposal. That alone was enough to make Kili nervous, but the young dwarf was simply too tired to let Dain intimidate him.

He hesitated a long moment, then slowly nodded. What choice did he have? The older dwarf released him to accept the parchment he'd been offered. Kili could only imagine how violently the dam would burst when Dain could no longer entertain his hopes that Thorin was simply temporarily misguided in his tolerance of outsiders. This would be but the first step in that process.

He preemptively backed away a step or two, eyes darting left and right as though seeking the quickest route of escape. If Dain began openly defying Thorin's orders... things could get ugly very, very quickly.

Dain's face, so often a ruddy hue that indicated suppressed temper, now turned all but purple with rage. "You're letting the Oathbreaker into the Mountain?" he hissed, words worn thin with disbelief. The poor note, so hastily written, was being crumpled in the outraged dwarf's shaking fist. It looked very much as though Dain might very well relieve Kili of his head. The space between them increased rapidly as Kili backed away a few more steps.

"I won't stand for it! Prince or no, you've no right to go parading Elves through our ancestral home! These are our lands, our tunnels, and if I find an elf in here, any elf, I'll personally reduce 'er to mortal bits!" With each statement increasing in volume as he went, Dain tore Thorin's orders into smaller and smaller pieces. "I won't have you taking advantage of your uncle before he's recovered, tricking him to agreeing to this... blasphemy."

Kili couldn't quite believe what he was hearing. His face visibly paled. "You've no right--no right at all. I'll kill you before you touch her, you understand me? You're not going to hurt her."

Shaking his head sharply, the young dwarf turned and moved quickly back around the corner, lurching painfully toward Dwalin, a stone's throw down the passage. The hulking dwarf was already up and looked disconcertingly troubled. It was clear he'd heard much of the exchange.

Kili might've had a dragon on his tail, judging by the terror in his eyes. "Dain's gone mad. I need to talk to Thorin. Quick!"

If you have never seen a one-legged dwarf trying to move quickly, then you must now imagine a very large bulldog with only three legs trying very hard to scratch on the side where he's missing a leg. Dwalin's frustration undercut every action as he abandoned his post, hopping forward and using his crutch to keep himself upright. The reason behind the warrior's frustration became apparent only after a large hand closed on Kili's injured shoulder.

"The one who's gone mad is you and your ilk," snarled Dain, now sounding quite unstable. "Elves and Hobbits. Next it'll be Men and Orcs. We support our own, boy."

Dwalin barked an order so harsh, it was hard to make out until he'd repeated himself. "Duck." As Kili obeyed, the twisted metal crutch swung over his head and connected with Dain's helmet with a solid metallic clunk. It wasn't near enough to knock him out, but the dwarf staggered, a grimace stamped across his bearded face.

"Inside. Now."

Kili didn't argue. Flinging the door open, he ducked behind it, gripping the edge as though it were a
"What's going on? Kili?" Thorin's voice rose with concern behind him, but the young dwarf didn't turn.

"Dain." Kili didn't have time to elaborate beyond that, and anyway, it wasn't necessary. Balin (who must have returned to sit with his king at some point after Kili departed) leapt up with surprising speed, brushing past Kili and out the door.

"Brother! Don't--" The older dwarf pulled up short behind Dwalin, looking mildly stunned. Dain, only momentarily halted by the hit to his helm, had Dwalin fixed with a death glare, his features now reddish-purple.

"You'd dare assault me, Fundinson?" He stepped to within spitting distance of the taller dwarf, and for a moment, it looked like he might hit Dwalin. But the stumpy fists remained clenched at his sides, his rage, amazingly, contained. "You will regret it. You'll all regret this."

"I'm afraid the only one who'll be regrettin' any of this is you, Cousin. Be on yer way now, b'fore I put a dent in more 'n just yer helmet." Dwalin had pulled his crutch back, steadied himself, and prepared to swing again. In all honesty, it was most likely the fact that the taller dwarf was injured that kept Dain from attacking, as that would be unforgivably uncivilized in the eyes of any witness. There were, unfortunately for Dain, all too many of those present at the moment.

The next pair of eyes to land on him happened to be Billa's. The halfling rounded the door, ignoring Kili's hissed warnings as she stalked toward Dain, apparently livid. "Give me one good reason, Iron-for-brains, not to have you chucked off the wall. You've shamed your kin, defied your king and his heirs, and made a phenomenal idiot of yourself. That I don't like you is just icing on the cake. Get out. Now." With her voice still ringing from stone to stone, Billa turned on one hairy heel to face a dumbfounded Balin.

"Balin, make sure this- this..." She apparently had no words for exactly what Dain was, because she gave up with a sigh. "Make sure he doesn't bother us again. I'm tired, and so is Thorin, and personally, I'd like to sleep sometime before Gandalf decides to come sweeping in with another of his absurd quests."

It was clear Billa's words and manner neither surprised Dain, nor appalled him anymore. The only shift was the slightest narrowing of his eyes. A beat of gravid silence, his dark gaze flicking between Dwalin's and Balin's, as if he half expected them to object to what she'd said, and then a slight nod, as though something had been confirmed.

His nose wrinkling with disgust, the dwarf turned sharply and stalked off down the corridor. Balin shook his head slightly at the halfling, waiting until Dain was out of hearing range to speak.

"That may not have been wise, Billa. I'd hoped to," he tugged nervously at one pointed tuft of his white beard, "diffuse the situation more deftly than, well, that. It's not right, I know, but he's dangerous. He may do something rash--of that I'm becoming more sure."

He turned an admonishing look on Dwalin. "Brother, you should've hit him harder, or not at all. He'll use it against us. Against Thorin. Sure as death."

Propped up on his slightly bent crutch, Dwalin lowered his head, mumbling something in Khuzdul that sounded like an apology. This physical failing was clearly a source of deepest shame for him and, it seemed, one of a long list that weighed heavily on him.
Struggling with her own failure to 'diffuse the situation,' Billa watched. What had he expected her to do? Kiss Dain on the cheek and send him off with flowers and good wishes? The thought made her scowl. She was protecting herself and her mate. Was that so bad?

Well, maybe it was. None of this was just about them. It never had been. Trying to treat it like the situation could be boiled down to something that simple... it wasn't going to lead to anything good.

"I'm... sorry, Balin." She looked up at him, and found that at some point, she must have sat down. She didn't remember when. "I don't know what I'm doing." Had she ever? She was just a hobbit.

Balin hesitated, still stroking his beard. It seemed this matter required a good deal more consideration than any of them had initially thought. Certainly, none had anticipated how much of a nuisance Dain would become.

"Ah, Lass," said the old dwarf presently, stooping down to place a reassuring hand on her curly head. "It's alright. All of us have felt that way more than we'd like to admit since undertaking this venture. We'll come through it, just as we always do. But it's going to take some work." He withdrew his hand, straightening to meet his brother's ashamed gaze.

"We'll need to speak with Thorin and see what is to be done. Now that he is awake and able to manage his own affairs, it isn't up to us to decide how Dain will be dealt with--only to carry out the wishes of the King Under the Mountain. Best we can, anyway." He produced a faint smile, and clapped Dwalin's shoulder gently. "The way it should be, eh, Dwali? Back to normal."

"Mostly," Kili commented from his station at the door, which was now mostly closed, but still a little ajar. "I won't feel like anything's back to normal until I know Tauriel isn't in danger."

Billa could hear Thorin announcing something that sounded rather dry and sarcastic, and pushed herself to her feet with a shake of her head. "Thank you, Balin. Kili, kindly explain things to Thorin so he doesn't try to get out of bed again?"

There was some shuffling as they moved back into the room, but the weight of Dain's threat hung over them like a boulder waiting to drop. Billa took a seat on the bed with a sigh while Kili explained, all in very fast, strained words.

"And Dain's gone mad--he threatened to kill Tauriel!" Kili finished with a pleading look. "I need to go check on her."

"You said you needed to fetch Thranduil, didn't you?" Balin gave the lad a concerned glance before looking at Thorin to determine what his reaction to all this was.

Thorin sat up a bit straighter against his pillows, brow furrowed. "If he's truly turned against me--if he plans to usurp my authority--there is not much we can do to stop him. He has the loyalty of the army he's led, and if he claims I'm no longer fit to lead, they will readily follow him instead."

Balin nodded slowly, arms crossed before him. "That they will. It's no help that Dain's been acting as though the king were already dead. Wouldn't be surprised if he's already made lengthy plans to that end. Not necessarily outright treason, but such strategizing can only serve to convince him _he's_ the one meant for the throne. Especially now that he knows how different your views are from his."

"I suppose I should have expected as much." His gaze shifted to Billa, and he smiled faintly. He knew she'd be blaming herself for this, in some small way, even if it was just as much his choice as hers. One he didn't, by any stretch of the imagination, regret.

Thorin reached for the halfling's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze, resting his head back against the
pillows with a tired sigh. "Dain's steadfastness has always walked hand in hand with stubbornness. These halls of stone might crumble before his resolve fails."

A chill swept through the room as each of them took in the implications of Thorin's words. Balin and Dwalin traded looks over Kili's head.

"We'll stand by ya, Thorin. No matter what Dain does." Dwalin's base growl was a comforting sound, and their younger company relaxed slightly. Kili glanced at Billa, who tried to smile.

"Ten dwarves... I'm not sure we'll make a terrible lot of difference if it comes down to it," Balin said soberly. "Many of our number are injured. We should be prepared for whatever comes."

"If it comes to that, there's little use in selling our lives for nothing. Dying for honor no longer holds the appeal it once did." Thorin's eyes were closed, his head sinking a little more deeply into the pillows. Billa had clearly assisted him in brushing through his hair earlier that day, as his thick, dark locks lay relatively tangle-free across the white cushions.

"Balin, is that... selfish of me? To give up my throne? To give it up for the chance I might not be parted from my burglar again?"

The old dwarf's bushy white beard couldn't quite hide the smile that crinkled the corners of his grey eyes. "No. Selfish isn't a word I've ever applied to you."

Billa gave Thorin a slightly tearful look before laying against his side once more. Balin shook his head slightly, but seemed satisfied to let them lie. He produced paper and a pen, wrote a quick message to the same effect as the first, which Dain had destroyed, and had Thorin sign it before he slept.

"I'll see this is delivered. Kili, go see to your elf maid."

Chapter End Notes

I noticed that I didn't get many comments on the last chapter: is school getting to you lot already? :) Hope things are going alright for you guys. I'd hate for something to have happened that made you all drop FtF all at once. (Or maybe you all suddenly stopped liking it? I know Dain's an insufferable buttface sometimes, but he's not THAT bad, is he?)
After the Storm

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

It's a Kiliel chapter! Didn't realize that until I went to edit it, actually. Then I realized that we actually stick with them for the entire chapter. So, folks, enjoy 4500 words of Kiliel cuteness! *confetti*

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

It seemed a bare instant later Kili was at Tauriel's side again, and already the vibrancy was returning, the unearthly glow possessed by all elvenkind. Life and light. Her hand was warmer in his own then he'd felt it in a long while, and he trembled a little, his heart thudding wildly in his chest, hardly daring to hope.

"Tauri?" he said quietly, fighting the lump in his throat. He felt better here, at her side, and silently swore he wouldn't leave her again if he could help it. Dain's words cycled through his head, sending an unwelcome chill down his spine. "If I find an elf in here, any elf, I'll reduce 'er to mortal bits!"

A short, interminable silence. At first, it appeared the elleth wouldn't react at all. She seemed deeply asleep. Then, slowly, her eyes opened. It was a smooth motion, not like the way she'd woken the past few times. Green eyes, clear as spring water, gazed up at the low stone ceiling for the span of several heartbeats. There was no fear in her face now, but she seemed somehow... older. Kili wasn't sure what to make of it. How could an elf look older? They didn't age. Was she ill? But no--she turned her head slightly, and her eyes found him.

"Kili." Warm, slender fingers tightened slightly around his.

Kili sank to his knees at the edge of the bed, covering their joined hands with his free one. Words failed him, so great was his relief, and after an unsuccessful attempt, he decided the moment was better served by silence. They were together, and she was going to be alright. He knew that now.

He rested his forehead against her shoulder a while, warding off conflicting, overwhelming emotions. Wasn't proper for a dwarf to shed tears. Everyone knew that. And since we're suddenly so concerned about dwarven rules, I suppose it's proper for a dwarf to be life-mated to an elf?

That thought struck him as rather amusing after the fact, and he huffed a soft laugh into the bedding. "Sorry," he apologized, and then giggled weakly. "It's not that funny. Really. I'm just so glad you're not...." He raised his head, finally, meeting her inquisitive gaze. He smiled, a strange bittersweetness in the expression that told of the torment he'd suffered throughout her ordeal.
"Tauri," he said finally, looking uncommonly earnest, "please. Don't ever do that to me again."

The faintest of smiles crossed her face. "I'll do my best," she whispered. A beat of quiet, in which their breathing mingled in space between them. "Kili?"

She had his attention immediately. Inquisition had turned to concern, and then to concentration. The silence stretched between them as she tried to summon the words, and at length, she murmured something in Elvish and dropped his gaze. Tauriel took a breath and tried again.

"I hope this... trouble... with your cousin... doesn't... delay anything." The elleth's voice wasn't strained, but words seemed to come slowly to her. "I know little of..." here she paused longer, and a slight pink flush touched her cheeks, "Dwarven marriage customs."

Kili actually twitched. "M-marriage?" It wasn't necessarily a shock, but this was the first time such a thing had been brought up, and it caught the young dwarf off guard. He cleared his throat a little, collecting himself.

"Dwarven marriage customs? Well, to be honest, I, erm.... I'm not too familiar with what actually goes on at marriages. Not the minor details, anyway. They're kind of... private." He had a few vague memories of his and Fili's rather immature speculation on the subject. He was definitely blushing now. "What are marriages like among the elves? Can't be all that different, can they?"

Tauriel's eyes met his measuringly, and for a moment, she seemed to be trying to determine how much to say. How much she ought to explain to him. He was rather young, after all. At length, she looked down somewhat demurely. "Marriage between Elves is... simple. We don't have ceremonies or vows as the Men do." Another pause, as though she were bracing herself for the explanation to come. "The physical union between those who have consented to the match is all that need occur."

Kili couldn't have looked more stunned. He shook his head slightly as though he didn't quite understand. "Wait... you're saying that...?" His eyes widened. "Oh. Oohhhhh." He frowned, tilting his head slightly to the side. "Really? I would've thought... I mean, that's... different."

The elleth glanced at him, a smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "You're showing your age, love." He was only 77 after all. Hardly more than a child, really. But... he was also very mature for how young he was. She'd seen that in how he'd handled the responsibilities of the Battle's aftermath, and in how he'd dealt with Dain. He had handled it all better than she had, at least.

Kili smiled again, absentmindedly winding a strand of her lustrous hair around his finger. "Fee and I, we're just coming of age. We were barely allowed to come on the quest at all. It's changed us both, though. Sometimes, I hardly remember the way I used to be. Back in Ered Luin, when everything was fun and games."

He loosed the strand of hair and moved on to another, closer to her face. "And you, Tauri? When did you 'grow up'?"

The elf looked away so sharply, one might think she'd seen something terrible in his question. "It was a long time ago," she whispered, and her entire demeanour changed. Tauriel had been soft and even cheerful a moment before. Now her hands gripped the blankets tightly, jaw set and eyes dark. This wasn't a subject she wished to discuss. Kili immediately regretted the question. She'd lost someone, maybe. Her parents? A brother or sister? A loss had claimed her youth, made her grow up too soon.

"I'm sorry, Tauriel," the young dwarf said at last, putting a hand over hers, trying to soothe her vice-like grip on the blankets. "I didn't know. I didn't mean to... cause you more grief." Finally succeeding
in coaxing her hand free, he held it between both of his own. "We don't have to talk about it." There was a moment of tension, then she relaxed with a sigh. The effort was clear on her face, but she didn't begrudge him the question.

"I will tell you, someday. Today is too... raw. I want to remember today as the day I asked you to marry me." When Tauriel's gaze found him again, she made herself smile. If there was grief still in her eyes, it was only because she couldn't hide it.

Kili's tension eased slightly, and he gave her hand a gentle squeeze. "So we'll marry both ways, then. Both in the dwarven and elven fashion." He leaned in, judging her body language carefully, and planted a soft kiss beneath her ear. A smile curved his mouth when she shivered.

"I will love you all my life, Tauri," he whispered. "And I pray Mahal death won't part me from you forever. I couldn't bear it."

"As I will love you," the elleth whispered, closing her eyes and leaning her cheek against Kili's forehead, where her ears were away from his lips and his warm breath. No more needed to be said. In silence, they savored each other's presence until Tauriel drifted into a natural, healing sleep. It didn't matter that her skin was painfully dry, that her lips were cracked and bleeding, that her hair was so dry and frizzy it seemed more to resemble carded wool than silk. The world was right. For the moment.

It was an untold age later when the door opened to admit a frazzled, somewhat frustrated-looking dwarf. His braids and armor bespoke his allegiance to the Iron Hills, but he seemed relieved to have found Kili.

"My lord prince," he said with a bow, "there are two fair-haired Elves in the Mountain. They ask for you, and your... companion." The dwarf's eyes flicked nervously to Tauriel, who was watching him with equal wariness.

It took a handful of moments for Kili's hackles to return to normal. The guard's appearance and garb had so resembled Dain's, he had thought... but that wasn't the case. He'd been halfway expecting something like that--Dain popping out of the woodwork again to destroy their happiness. Thankfully, that wasn't what was happening.

Kili exhaled slowly, considering, and nodded. "They'll have to be brought here. I don't think my 'companion' is rested enough to go to them right now." He glanced at Tauriel semi-apologetically, aware how sensitive she was to her own weakness, then turned back to the guard. "Did the Elves... were they able to help Lord Elrond?"

"I... believe so." The dwarf looked uncertain. "They said he will sleep for several days, and should remain undisturbed." A moment's pause, then the guard glanced at Tauriel again. "Is it true, then, sir? That a prince of Erebor has Chosen an elf?" His tone wasn't hostile, which was surprising enough. This particular guard, at least, hadn't been poisoned by Dain's vitriol. Still, it worried Kili. It almost certainly meant Dain had spread the news, and had the benefit of giving his perspective first. If Kili confirmed what they'd been told, there was no telling what kind of reaction there might be.

The young dwarf hesitated visibly, looking vaguely like he might be sick. Whatever might come, Kili sensed that evasiveness would not suffice, not on an issue like this. He'd be better off being honest, and betraying no hint of shame. "It's true," he said simply, and squeezed Tauriel's hand. "She is my One, and I will not be parted from her."

The guard gave him a sympathetic smile, but seemed no angrier than he had before. "I'll go fetch your guests, then." With a bow, he backed out of the room.
Tauriel watched him, seeming vaguely baffled. "Do I dare ask what that was supposed to mean?"
She glanced at Kili, noting his unsettled expression. It had seemed to her, at least, that the guard
actually pitied Kili, as though it were no choice of his whom he loved.

"It's going around. The rumor's spreading." Kili stood, glancing toward the door. "I was hoping to
keep it a rumor, at least until after Uncle was crowned. He's pushing things enough already without
everyone knowing his nephew's One is an elf."

He reached for the blanket where she'd rumpled it earlier and smoothed it back up over her body,
beneath her arms so her hands were free. "And before you say anything, I'd far sooner leave Erebor
by your side, a prince in exile, than remain here alone. If it comes to it, anyway. We'll have to ask
Thorin what he thinks."

Tauriel was quiet for a long time, watching his hands as he fiddled with the blankets. He had large,
strong hands. Larger than hers. More muscular. Not that this was unusual. But she liked his hands.
She could see the callouses on his fingers from the bowstring, and smiled faintly, touching them. It
was easier, now, to let things slip from her mind. There was more that was present overall, but... not
all of it was hers. She wasn't ready to process all the new things yet, so the familiar would do for
now.

When the door opened again, it was to admit two tall, blond elves. Tauriel might have sat up if Kili's
hand weren't on her arm to stop her. Legolas spoke first, closing the gap between them just as though
he belonged here. Bending his knee, he braced himself against the bed beside Kili, his concerned
gaze on the elleth's face.

"Tauriel, mellon nin, are you alright?" It seemed that, whatever pain he suffered in knowing she had
chosen the dwarf over him, his concern for her as a friend was more important.

"Don't waste time with idle questions, my son. I will see for myself." That, of course, was Thranduil,
and he pushed Legolas gently aside, placing the impossibly long, slender fingers of his left hand over
Tauriel's forehead. The Elvenking looked more tired than Kili had yet seen him, sapped of energy
and vitality as surely as Elrond had seemed, but to a lesser degree.

Thranduil's eyelids closed, his dark brows, thick as moss, knitting in concentration. After a moment
of quiet, he withdrew his hand again. "She is no longer... in peril." The summation was delivered
coolly, in the somewhat detached manner the Elvenking's more seasoned subjects recognized as an
affectation. "Her spirit walks in Shadow no more. But she is weak, and will require at least another
few days' rest."

Kili studied Thranduil's face carefully, intrigued by the hints of memory lurking in the elf's ancient,
yet ageless gaze. "Very grateful to you, Your Highness," the dwarf said softly, and inclined his head
a little. "I know it wasn't easy... coming here."

Thranduil shrugged, turning away from the others. "I bear no ill will toward Lord Elrond, and it is on
his behalf I came. My work here is ended, and so, I expect, is my welcome. Come, Legolas."

"Wait."

It wasn't Kili that spoke this time, but Tauriel. Her gaze was fixed on Thranduil, and it couldn't have
been clearer what she was remembering if someone had narrated it. The strain in her face recalled the
day of their last parting.

"My lord, wait." Her hands gripped the blanket once again, bunching into fists. "You were right. I...
forgive me, my lord."
"You, who had a prince of your own race who would've done anything for your affections--an elf you had known and called friend most of your life--and the first chance you get, you run off with a dwarf."

Tauriel lowered her gaze, a troubled expression stealing across her face. She had betrayed her king and her closest friend, and this might very well be her last chance to make amends.

"Make use of me, my lord. To keep the new friendship between our races alive. A messenger, perhaps, or an emissary. I don't want... to be a burden." It was, as had ever been her habit, an offer in the form of a statement. She could only pray Thranduil would see her as worthy of continued use.

Thranduil turned halfway, the swish of his long, glimmering skirts audible in the silence that followed Tauriel's plaintive words. Now that the chance of hostility was passed, he'd changed once again into his kingly robes, and he cut a regal figure against the drab, dusty stone of the room around him.

The king's lips were pressed together, as though he were considering, his eyes on the wall beyond. "I will... think on the matter, Tauriel." That was the most anyone could have hoped for, Kili thought, and hoped it would be enough to comfort the elleth for the time being. He placed his hands over her balled fists once more, coaxing her to relax her hold on the blankets.

Thranduil beckoned to his son, then moved to the door with swift, long strides. As his fingers closed upon the handle, he looked at the others again, and sighed. "Perhaps we will speak on it once more when you are healed. For now, such considerations are... premature."

"Yes, my lord." Tauriel inclined her head respectfully. It was only after the door had closed behind the Elvenking that the elleth's death-grip on the blankets eased. Kili spent several moments smoothing the fabric again while Tauriel watched.

"I suppose," she whispered at length, "it was a foolish hope." Though she seemed resigned, she wasn't distraught.

Legolas traded a "who's going to say something first?" glance with Kili before clearing his throat gently. "Tauriel, I will speak to him. The king's anger is slow to cool, but I know, deep within him, lies still the fondness he once held for you. He will remember it, I think, as time goes on."

"An emissary?" Kili's voice carried some amount of concern. "Is that... is that really what you want?" It would take her away from him. Back among her kind. If she was reminded so often of what she'd left behind--her home, her people, a prince of her own race--might she begin to regret her decision to the point she wouldn't want to return to Erebor at all?

"I want to be useful." Tauriel glanced at Legolas, then at Kili, and sighed. They thought her a danger to herself. She didn't blame them. "I'm just... I don't want to be a burden." Repeating herself was doing no good. The elleth bit her lip, becoming more distressed as she tried to find a way to explain her desires properly. What else could she say?

"Kili, if there is another way I can serve, I would consider that. I am a warrior. A guard. A servant. I cannot remain... inactive."

The young dwarf nodded. "I think I've known you long enough to understand that." He smiled faintly, taking her hand gently. Legolas pretended not to notice.

"You've never been useless, mellon. Never." The blond glanced at the door, clearly wondering how long it would be before his father grew tired of waiting for him. "And when you've recovered, I
know you will find the role you seek. One way or another. It has never been your way to be content in idleness." He met Kili's gaze again, a measuring look. A look that said the elf prince would not tolerate anything less for the elleth who was still his dearest friend.

Tauriel relaxed slightly. Her present weakness made her future seem entirely uncertain, but she could see the truth in their words. "Thank you." Tightening her hold on Kili's hand, she looked up at Legolas. "Thank you." And this time, it wasn't for his words... but for his tacit acceptance of her choice. It was made, and she couldn't turn back now.

Legolas managed a half-smile, though it didn't touch his eyes. He glanced at the door. "I must leave you now. I am... very glad to see you looking well, Tauriel."

He took a side step away from the bed, and leveled his gaze on Kili. "Take care of her, Prince. She is... dear to my heart." A beat of silence. "I know my father hopes to establish good relations between the Kingdom of Erebor and the Woodland Realm in future. You'd do well to encourage your uncle toward that end."

Kili nodded. "I think Thorin wants the same. It's been a struggle for him, but... he's changing. I thought it was a lost cause getting him to welcome King Thranduil within these walls, but... he did."

Legolas's blue gaze shifted to Tauriel's. His throat was strangely tight. He'd said goodbye to the elleth too many times these past few weeks, and yet it never became any easier. "The Elven forces march homeward soon. I wish..." But he couldn't bring himself to finish the thought. Instead, he altered it. "I wish you well, mellon. Valar willing, our paths will cross again soon."

With one final meaningful look at Kili, the blond departed. The click of the door echoed softly into the stillness. Kili ran a hand through his hair, relaxing a little. "It must have been hard... watching him go. Difficult for me to fathom how long you've known him and... how long you've been at his side. I never want to take your sacrifice for granted."

Tauriel was still looking at the door when she sighed. "He has been my friend for over five hundred years. Before I was accepted as a servant of the Woodland King, he showed me kindness... and a place that could be my home." Her gaze drifted to Kili's face, and she gave him a faint smile. "It is a comfort to know he is still my friend." The elleth pulled his hand up to her cheek and closed her eyes, her shoulders relaxing.

"Thank you, meleth nin, for understanding." Her voice grew fainter as her energy waned. She had, after all, only recently returned from a distant, shadowy place in the depths of her own memories.

A soft knock heralded a new arrival. Dori's tidy braids came into view as the door opened and a heavenly, savory smell wafted inside. "Can I interest either of you in a bite to eat?" His eyes were on Kili, but there was a cautious air about him, as though he'd been warned of some hidden danger lurking in this room.

"Sounds wonderful," said Kili, nodding. If Tauriel could eat even a little, he was sure it would do her good. Dori bore a tray with two steaming brass bowls, each intricately etched with the familiar angular designs of Thror, and containing what appeared to be an impressive stew.

Kili scooted an end table to a more convenient position beside the bed, and Dori set the tray on it decorously, taking a moment to arrange the bowls and spoons so they were even and perfectly symmetrical.

Kili managed to keep a straight face with some difficulty, valiantly suppressing the urge to grin. "So how's my brother? Please tell me you haven't heard a peep out of him since we left. Can't tell you
how relieved I’d be to learn he’s been resting all this time."

The fastidious dwarf gave Kili an appraising look as he straightened. "He was eating his supper when last I saw him." Dori studied his companion's face closely a moment longer before he continued. "He wouldn't be pleased to hear of your state, my prince. You should rest."

It wasn't necessarily a threat, but it wasn't a promise of sunshine and roses, either. With a low bow, Dori turned to go. "Unless there is anything else you require, I'll tell the others not to disturb you."

Kili shared an inquisitive glance with Tauriel before turning back to Dori. "Thank you... I think."

Was the dwarf implying something? Kili waited until the door latched clicked, then cleared his throat slightly.

He was seated on the edge of the bed, grasping her hands firmly in his own. The strong, homey scent of the soup was heartening somehow, masking the cold, stale smell of the long-abandoned room.

Smoothing his fingers over her noticeably warmer hands, he released them and indicated the nearby bowls. "Can you sit up a little?" He eased her up, placing some straw pillows at her back to support her, then handed her one of the steaming bowls. "Don't make me force feed you." He winked. "If you're going to fit in among dwarves, you'll have to learn to eat like one."

Tauriel looked unconvinced, and gave the stew a little stir, her nostrils flaring as she took in the scent. She huffed as though to rid herself of the smell, pursing her lips.

"This, I think, will take some getting used to," she confessed, lifting the spoon cautiously. Her expression was almost neutral, but she didn't look like she was enjoying the concept of eating the stew very much.

Kili tilted his head a little, reaching for his own bowl. He stirred it thoughtfully, scooping out a tidbit of venison. Where they'd gotten the meat was anyone's guess, but Kili had an inkling Tauriel was taking issue with it.

He chuckled. "You Elves and your eating habits. I'd have thought at least the warriors among you would need meat to stay strong. I guess not." He took a bite, savoring the flavor. The venison had been perfectly seasoned with sage and thyme and some other potent spice he couldn't identify.

It reminded him powerfully of stew Dís used to make periodically back in Ered Luin. The kitchen was generally perceived to be the domain of servants, but she enjoyed the art so much, she couldn't be dissuaded from occasionally overseeing evening meals. Kili's long-empty stomach twinged with sudden anxiety. How was Dís going to react to the news that one of her sons was wedded to, of all things, an elf? He didn't give the fear much of a foothold. It was too early yet for such thoughts.

When he came back to himself, he noticed that Tauriel was frowning at him. "Meat? Of course I eat meat. Did you expect me to have fed myself by grazing while on patrol?" The elleth relaxed her shoulders intentionally, knowing he'd meant no offense. "I take no issue with the meat. Dwarves seem to enjoy... somewhat stronger spices than I'm accustomed to." After a moment's further contemplation of the stew, she took a bite, braced against the potent flavor.

"Stronger spices?" Kili frowned into his bowl. "But... it would be so bland without them."

He took another evaluating bite, chewed, and swallowed. "Now that I think about it, the food in the dungeons was a little weak for my liking." He chuckled. "Not that my mind lingered long on such things."

Tauriel lifted an eyebrow at him, but said nothing. The stew was hearty and flavorful, but not
offensively so. He seemed to be enjoying his meal, and if Kili liked it, then she would learn to like it. It might take time, but it was a worthwhile investment. He was hers, and she intended to keep him.

They finished their meal in the companionable quiet, and Kili set the bowls aside. The young dwarf appreciated that about Tauriel now—the fact that he could sit with her and feel comfortable not filling the gaps with idle chatter. Things had changed between them these past few days. There was no denying that now.

Kili's brown eyes studied the contours of Tauriel's slender hands, admiring their delicacy and grace in comparison to his own shorter, thicker ones. Both archers' hands, and yet so different. He imagined the elleth's were itching to curl around the familiar haft of her bow once more, to experience the liberation of the arrow's flight, the wind of its speed as the fletchings grazed past her nimble fingers.

Or had she had her fill of combat for awhile? His gaze lit on her red hair, the vibrancy now returned as surely as the color in her cheeks. Hours before she'd been at the brink of death; now she seemed at the peak of health. Was there any end to the mysterious, subtle magic of the Elves? He hoped not.

"I think the food did some good," he murmured presently, his voice low so as not to disturb the beautiful quiet. "You look much better, my love." He gestured toward the space beside her, and she scooted accordingly to make room.

She was warm now, and relaxed, so very different from the cold and tense elleth he'd comforted with his presence in the healers' tent. It gladdened him to no end, and as he curled beside her, one arm across her waist, the other beneath her shoulders, he quite forgot the whole matter with Dain and everything else that had theretofore been weighing on his mind.

The scent of her hair, fresh, woody, like the first whispers of autumn flitting through the trees, affected him strangely. He shut his eyes, breathing her in as though she were air and light. She was the force anchoring him to the earth, and at the same time walking hand in hand with him amongst the stars above. His One was in his arms, and she was his.

Chapter End Notes

Some of you may have noticed, and most of you probably didn't, that I created a second story—"Buried Coals." It's a tentative title at best, but there you have it.

**Buried Coals will be the sequel to Fiercer than Fire.** Nothing has been posted there yet, and won't be for some time, but if you like, you're free to subscribe early so that when I start posting chapters there, you can dive right in. :)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Juno and Loki.

Chapter Notes

We're nearing the end, folks. You'll find another story on my account under the title "Buried Coals" that claims to be a sequel to our beloved Fiercer than Fire. There's nothing there yet, but if you hop over there and subscribe, you'll be the first to know when we start posting more BagginShield amazingness!

On that note, it's unlikely we'll end our hiatus until early December or so. I know it's a long wait, but we need time to build up our buffer again, and I'm sure that in the meantime, we'll give you plenty to think about. *plans plans, wonderful plans*

Now, without further ado, chapter 71!

The days passed in relative, but uneasy peace. The injured walked a long road toward recovery, and the bodies of the slain were cared for by those fit enough to do so. The atmosphere inside the Mountain was somber. There was, however, an undercurrent of quiet excitement running through the Dwarves, the thrill of triumph mingled with hope for the future.

Amid the Dwarves of the Company, spirits ran especially high. The appearance of a bright, silver bead in Ori's hair, and then in Billa's, was the source of much grinning and nudging. Despite their rather serious injuries, none of them failed to brighten at the sight of one of "their girls" working among the wounded, which both females did often.

Gandalf's disappearance with the recovering Elrond, though troubling for Thorin, set the Iron Hills Dwarves more at ease. In all, things were running smoothly. Suspiciously so. Dain had been strangely silent, even holding his tongue in Kili's presence.

Kili knew it couldn't last for long. Especially with what he was about to say.

"It's not up for debate. We're married." His tone was perhaps a little sharper than he intended. Bofur was flabbergasted. Bandages still concealed most of his head, and his trademark hat sat a little to one side, making him look even more confused than he might have on his own.

"Married? When?"

Kili flushed. He hadn't meant to say it quite so bluntly. He'd meant to make the announcement to his uncle first. But when Bofur had stepped in to run off some angry, whispering Iron Hills guards, Kili
hadn't been able to keep his mouth shut. It was Bofur's fault for telling him he ought to choose his
friends more carefully.

He briefly toyed with the idea of withdrawing the statement. It was an awkward subject, to be sure,
and he didn't particularly want to explain the differences between Dwarven and Elven marriage just
now. He was fairly certain few in the Company--more especially those outside of it--were ready for
the truth. Still, if he couldn't trust Bofur to understand, who could he trust?

"We married in the elven fashion. Quietly. By ourselves." Kili crossed his arms and leaned in to
speak in confidence, his undertone sinking to a whisper. "We'll see everything is done properly in the
dwarven way, as well, but for all intents and purposes, it's done. Tauriel and I are One, and nothing
anyone else says or does will change that."

He put a firm hand on Bofur's arm, glancing over his shoulder, clearly troubled. "I know what you're
thinking, Bof. I know. And if Uncle says it's for the best, Tauri and I are willing to leave. I won't
cause him to lose his kingdom, not after all we've been through to reclaim it."

Kili's assurances didn't seem to pacify Bofur at all. His expression vacillated incongruously between
horror and amusement. Several times, as Kili's heart sank ever lower in his chest, Bofur opened his
mouth, then closed it again without saying anything. At length, words came to him.

"Well... well well. That's a s-su-su-s... surprise." Forcing his mouth to form the last word seemed to
take great effort. "If that's... it's your choice, lad." He didn't approve. For one reason or another, the
cheerful dwarf simply wasn't in support of the match.

Tauriel put a hand on Kili's shoulder. Despite Bofur's reaction, the faint smile that hovered around
her mouth hadn't changed. She was content, regardless of what others thought.

Kili covered Tauriel's hand with his own, glancing sideways at the elleth. "It's our choice." The
young dwarf couldn't help but be a little disappointed by Bofur's response, but supposed he'd been
naive to expect anything better.

"All the same, Bofur, if you wouldn't mind keeping this between us, at least until after the
Coronation, that'd probably be best. The King Under the Mountain has enough to worry about, what
with his own choice of life-mate."

He chuckled, but it sounded strangely forced. Evidently, the fact that Thorin would've been dead
many times over without his Burglar didn't matter. One fact alone was of importance. She was a
halfling commoner, and he was a dwarf king.

One of the favorite whisperings circulating amongst the Iron Hills garrison was that Billa was a
sorceress who had bewitched Thorin, quite as crafty and mysterious as Gandalf himself. It had
somehow come to light that the Wizard had been behind Billa's selection for the Company in the first
place, and the dwarves of the Iron Hills were reading all sorts of interesting schemes into their
connection. No doubt Dain had had a hand in this, despite the odious dwarf's seeming acceptance of
late.

Bofur seemed to know the way his young companion's mind wandered, and sighed faintly. It was
entirely un-Bofurish, that sigh, tired and somehow much more thoughtful than it might have been
before the Battle. He wasn't the same dwarf he had been. None of them were.

"Kili... I don't like it. Won't ly-li-lie to ye about that. But I respect ye. And I res-re-resp-respect
your... lady friend." Here the dwarf paused to give Tauriel an apologetic smile. "It's yer choice. I
won't stand in yer way."
Giving Kili's shoulder a gentle squeeze, Tauriel nodded slightly. The motion was almost a bow, but not quite. "Thank you, friend."

Bofur adjusted his hat self-consciously. "Better be on yer way b'fore more tro-troub-troub-trouble finds ye. King's awake, anyhow." Casting his gaze elsewhere, the miner moved on, seeming to think deeply on what had just passed between them.

Thorin was decidedly on the mend now, and almost certainly would have made nothing at all of his injuries if Billa and Balin hadn't insisted upon his continued rest. The dwarf king's irritation at this was plain, but he felt his own weakness when he overexerted himself during his brief walks, and was thus begrudgingly prevailed upon.

It was during today's walk that Kili and Tauriel approached Thorin, the dutiful Billa, as ever, at his side, and Dwalin hobbling watchfully after.

"Uncle, we need to talk." Kili's tone left no doubt that the subject was very serious, and Thorin nodded. He was dressed in his spare silk tunic, worn at the collar and threadbare at the hem. It would be several weeks at least before things became "civilized" enough under the Mountain for fine clothes to become a priority. A casual glance at the ruined hall outside Thorin's door attested to that fact. Still, steady progress was being made.

Kili waited until Thorin was safely back in bed, and Billa had finished squawking at him for overdoing it. The door was shut and locked.

"I don't think this is going to work." The young dwarf crossed his arms, leaning back against the adjacent wall. The old plaster cracked a little, and he lurched forward, startled. "Sorry."

Thorin blinked placidly at the young dwarf, glancing between him and the elleth. "You mean you expected your fellows would be more accepting of your match?"

Kili hesitated, frowning. "No... I mean... I guess there was always that hope. But not even Bofur approves. I don't understand." He huffed frustratedly. "Why do dwarves have to be so... stiff-necked about everything?"

Silence fell for a minute as the three of them each contemplated Kili's words. Thorin seemed amused and Tauriel lowered herself to sit gracefully on the floor beside her husband, looking as though she were purposefully not smiling. When Kili glanced at her and noticed her carefully neutral expression, the faintest hint of a frown flickered across his face. He was getting better at reading her, but it was frustrating at times when she kept her reactions so thoroughly to herself. The elleth caught his gaze and obliged to explain quietly.

"Aulë created Dwarves to be sturdy and strong, carving them of deepest stone. Naturally, such strength is slow to change. It is the reason your kin never fell to the Darkness spread by Sauron and his master." It was the same voice she used to tell stories, and Kili relaxed slightly. "Give them time. We will not perish from waiting." Her gaze turned on Thorin now, and the smile hiding in her eyes seemed to fade.

"My lord, Dain's followers have grown bolder in their challenges. I fear the shipment of provisions Bard pledged from his supplies may not be allowed to enter the city." It was a simple problem. Erebor had no food. The Woodland Realm had everything they needed in abundance. Bard, in an attempt to make amends for the Arkenstone debacle, had offered to send on some of the foodstuffs he received from the Elves, seeing as the Dwarves were unlikely to accept them peaceably from the hand of their benefactors. The door closed quietly, and all three of them looked toward the halfling as
she tucked a key into her pocket, balancing a tray very carefully on one hand.

"I'm sure things will work out." Billa bumped Kili comfortably out of the way. "Bofur and I are going to oversee that shipment. I'll let you know if anything goes wrong." The hobbit set the tray, with its flask and goblets, down on the table.

Thorin made a sound of displeasure. "Billa... I'd rather you didn't. There's no knowing what Dain might do if he sees the opportunity, and I wouldn't be there to protect you. I'll send Balin with Bofur instead." His expression and posture took on a bracing sort of quality, as though he were preparing for a retort.

The halfling stilled for a moment, bent over the tray, flask in hand. Straightening, she turned to face her mate, frowning slightly. "I'd like to be useful," she informed him, the slightest edge to her voice. "Do you expect me to hide behind injured dwarves until Dain goes back home?" The only reason, she'd gathered, that she was allowed to tend to their recovering friends, was that no Dwarf would dare attack her in the infirmary. A female, tending the wounded? There was no justification for such a thing. Of course, learning of the safeguard hadn't endeared Billa to the task. Only her love for the Company kept her at it.

"Yes, if that's what it would take to keep you safe." This was hard for Billa, but Thorin couldn't stand the thought of sending her into a dragon's lair again, watching her go where he couldn't follow. Dain was a dwarf of great conviction (misguided, of course) and in Thorin's mind, that made him more dangerous than any orc.

Still, he knew any concerns for her safety would never alone be enough to persuade her. "And... this is a delicate operation, and as much as I dislike the situation as it stands... you'd do more harm than good by being present." He shook his head slowly. "I can't allow you to go."

It was with much grumbling that Billa looked away, effectively giving in. It wasn't right, and she knew it, but she couldn't very well express her real fears in front of the others. Was she not good enough? Did he think her incapable? How was she to learn if... but this was a dangerous situation. Would Dain really kill her? Was it worth the risk?

Discontent and now restless, Billa handed out goblets and filled them, acting the hostess, as usual. Tauriel and Kili murmured their thanks and traded a look. This wasn't an argument they wanted to get in the middle of. Billa was the one that changed the subject, though.

"So, Tauriel, I have a question. You and Kili are a pair. Why don't you wear any of his beads?" She took a seat beside the bed, rather than on it, to show Thorin that she was displeased with him. The bead in her hair swung prominently into view as she tipped her head slightly. It hung by one of her pointed ears, secured to a braid Thorin had worked into her curls. It quite pleased her, being able to wear one of Thorin's beads, and she fiddled with it almost as often as Kili played with his.

Tauriel hesitated, glanced at Kili. She wasn't entirely sure how to answer. Dwarven customs, as she'd explained, were beyond her realm of expertise.

Kili looked slightly embarrassed. "It's not that I didn't want her to have beads..." He glanced at Tauriel for confirmation. He did recall there being a brief conversation with her on the subject, but couldn't for the life of him remember what he'd told her.

"I just... maybe I thought it was a little premature. We weren't trying to stir up more trouble than we already have. Being seen together is more than enough to infuriate Dain's people. I thought we'd wait until..." He trailed off, absentely twisting one of his beads. When he continued, his voice was quiet, slightly sad. "Oh, I don't know. It's not as if the Coronation is suddenly going to solve everything, is
"Actually, I think it might." Billa was wearing a determined expression as she turned her hazel eyes on Kili. "Once Thorin is officially crowned, then the authority is his, end of story. There's a lot less Dain can do against him then. So it might not solve everything, but it'll go a long way toward settling this problem with hard-headed, ambitious maniacs."

Kili might have found this reassuring if Thorin's expression hadn't completely undercut it. Whether it was simply his uncle's self-doubt resurfacing, or Thorin legitimately had an inkling Billa didn't, Kili couldn't tell. All he knew was that he didn't like it.

There was an uncomfortable pause. Thorin pulled at a loose thread in the bedcovers. Kili glanced between Tauriel and Billa, his untouched goblet forgotten on the floor. He cleared his throat to break up the silence, struggling to say what he knew he had to.

"I think it's time Tauri and I... went away." At Billa's look of distress, he raised a hand, quickly adding, "Not permanently. Just until things settle down a little. We'll go back to Ered Luin, maybe, or find somewhere else to stay in the meantime. We've discussed it and... we think it's for the best."

"But... you can't..." Clearly, Kili's words hadn't comforted Billa very much. "If you leave, what's to stop the others from doing the same?" That thought wasn't a pleasant one at all, and the halfling might have gone into tears if Tauriel hadn't laughed. Billa seemed at once affronted and somehow comforted by the elf's amusement.

"We depart to save you trouble," Tauriel said quietly, a smile lurking at the corners of her mouth. "I highly doubt any of the Company would tolerate being sent away, let alone leaving of their own accord. It would take a pack of wargs to drag your friends from this Mountain, little friend."

"And a legion of orcs to keep us from coming back again, when the time's right," Kili added with a wink. Somehow Tauriel's mirth dispelled the gloomy miasma that had settled over the chamber, and as dismal a prospect as being separated from kin and Company was, Kili knew he could abide it as long as she was at his side.

"And your brother?" Thorin asked, genuinely surprised. "You'd leave him? You've hardly been apart more than a month as long as you've lived. You used to cry when he was taken away weeks at a time for his advanced training." There was wistfulness in the dwarf king's eyes as he remembered his nephews as dwarrows, practically joined at the hip, all mischievous grins and bouncing brown and blond hair. "Are you certain this is the only way?"

Kili didn't answer immediately, but when he did, it was clear he'd given it ample thought. "Fee will be fine. He has someone else to watch his back and worry over him now. I'll miss him more than anything, but it's just... the way it has to be. I know he'll understand."

It wasn't an easy thing, leaving his brother behind, but he knew the alternatives wouldn't help anyone. Fili needed to be here, even after he finished healing (which was a frustratingly slow process for the restless blond). Kili knew it was the right thing to do, and as Tauriel's fingers wove through his, he felt a surge of confidence.

"Well... I guess... as long as you're back for all the important things..." Billa was floundering a bit, her expression that of a mother letting her son travel abroad for the first time. Though, to imagine the halfling protecting either Fili or Kili as a mother might was downright comical.

Tauriel smiled comfortingly at the little hobbit. "I'll bring him back. For the Coronation, if we can manage it."
Thorin looked away for a moment, clearly very torn. It was dangerous, being separated from kin, going out into the wilds. Especially now, when there were sure to be remnants of orcs and wargs and other fell creatures escaped from the battle and bearing a lust for vengeance. Allowing his young nephew to do this, even if he knew it was for the best... Dís wouldn't like it. Of that, he was certain.

And yet, Kili wasn't the same dwarf who'd kissed his mother and taken her leave some months ago, a runestone in his hand. Something assured the dwarf king his nephew would be alright. Even if Dís would probably try to kill him for agreeing to such a thing when she arrived for the Coronation.

Thorin's focus returned to the elleth who'd just spoken, and he nodded. "When will you be leaving?"

Tauriel's answer came promptly enough that it was obvious they'd already discussed it. "Tomorrow. We'll take our supplies from the caravan, and stop in Laketown for more if necessary." She intended to stop in Laketown, and again in Mirkwood. The prospect of taking supplies from those who needed them so desperately left a bad taste in her mouth.

With a huff, the hobbit frowned at the pair of them. "If you don't come back in one piece, either of you, I'll personally confine you to bed and force-feed you until you're healthy again. And don't think I won't enlist your mother's help." Her gaze landed on Kili, and she was rewarded with a twitch.

"I'll keep that in mind," Kili said, chuckling nervously. He had little doubt the halfling's threat was genuine, and silently thanked Mahal his uncle had someone so fiercely protective of those she loved.

The mirth in his eyes quieted to seriousness once more, and his gaze leveled with Thorin's. "We'll stay safe. You have my word and promise, Uncle. With any luck, Dain will have calmed down by then."

"With any luck." Thorin's voice was disconcertingly hesitant. Subtle movement caught Kili's attention. The dwarf king's left hand was forming barely noticeable signs, slow, natural enough that one might have thought he was absently stretching his fingers. And yet, Kili understood.

If trouble rise here... no return.

It was less than 24 hours before Tauriel and Kili were slipping through the front gates. They had met the caravan quietly, collected what they needed, and left while the rest of the wagons were still trundling in. It had been best, they decided, to leave when the fewest of Dain's men were likely to see them. It was a long while before either of them felt free to slow to a walk, though. Outside the Mountain, their safety was in their own hands, and Thorin's authority wouldn't be protecting them any longer.

Both were dressed for the cold, and carried more in the way of furs and blankets than food. A new bow had been provided for each of them, though Tauriel seemed dissatisfied with the strength of her new weapon. It was Dwarf-made, and that probably had something to do with it. Now, as the sounds of the wind blended with the crunch of Kili's boots and the soft rustle of Tauriel's thin shoes, the elleth finally spoke.

"You know something I don't." Her voice was quiet, green eyes glinting in the wintry sunlight as she glanced at him sidelong.

Kili didn't break stride. She'd seen right through him. Of course she had.

"It's nothing," he said, finally. "Just unspoken fears. You speak them, and they become a wolf snapping at your heels. Keep them silent, and they may vanish altogether." He didn't suppose such an answer would satisfy her, but he didn't want the issue to become her burden, too.
The wind whispered secrets of the dead, whose scent it swept into their noses. After a handful of minutes, Tauriel nodded slightly. "I will not fault you for keeping such fears to yourself, but I would ask you to alert me if they will affect our plans." In a way, it bothered her that he was keeping things from her. It was likely for her protection, or to ease the burden of travel, but Tauriel couldn't help a slight twinge of jealousy at the thought of someone else having his confidence where she did not.

But that was ridiculous. The elleth pushed the matter from her mind. There was no need to dwell on it, and doing so would only do them both harm.

"Will you teach me your language?" An inelegant subject change, but a welcome one.

Kili looked a bit puzzled. "Khuzdul? We don't use it as much as we used to. Mother often scolded us with it, when she was really upset, but for the most part, Fee and I spoke Westron growing up." The Common Tongue was far more useful, especially from a trading and political point of view. There were few dwarves that didn't speak both languages equally well, and even some that didn't speak Khuzdul at all.

When she didn't seem deterred, he shrugged. "I'll teach you if you want. Maybe a little here and there." A fleeting smile tugged at the corners of his mouth. "Honestly, it's hard for me to imagine you speaking Khuzdul, Tauri. It's a language rooted in the earth, much like we dwarves. It's heavy, guttural really. Nothing like your people. Nothing like you."

His smile was echoed in her eyes as she looked down at him. "I would teach you Elvish, if you like. We do not guard the secrets of our language the way your kin do." An even trade. It made things feel more settled between them. "Westron is not my first language. I didn't learn it until I was accepted into the service of the Woodland Realm." She hesitated, and the pause was heavy in the air until she spoke again. "I was almost ninety, by that time."

"Really?" Kili glanced at his wife curiously, intrigued by any hints she dropped concerning her youth. She'd kept such things hidden from him, speaking seldom of her childhood, or how she'd come to join the Guard in the first place. "So... who taught you Westron?"

There was something in the way she glanced at him that said the answer ought to have been obvious, but she gave it to him anyway. "Legolas. The king helped at times, but he was very busy, and my learning was slow."

Kili's gaze drifted to his boots, and he made a soft sound of acknowledgement. He was beginning to wonder if any of Tauriel's past didn't involve the blond elf prince, and the more he pondered, the more he came to the conclusion it was time for a second awkward subject change.

He gestured toward the bow she carried. "We can get a better one in Laketown, if you like. I mean, using a longbow for hundreds and hundreds of years... this must feel like a child's toy." Except that it was made of forged steel, and the draw weight was easily 90 pounds.

As though echoing his thoughts, she shook her head. "Not a toy. Simply not the style I'm accustomed to. I could grow used to it and eventually be as proficient with this weapon as with one of Elven make, but I would rather acquire one in the Woodland Realm." Here, she gifted him with a rare smile. "Bows of the sort used by Men are simply too weak. I have broken several in the past."

"True," said Kili, returning her smile. Of all the weapons he'd seen among the Lake Men, he would have trusted his life to Bard's longbow only, a remnant from Dale's glory days. Men's crafting prowess, of late, had greatly dwindled, and none now had mastery like the smiths among dwarves and elves.
The previous topic, though well-buried, still nagged at Kili. There was a question on his face, but he couldn't bring himself to voice it. It could wait for a better time.

Talk fell away after that, and the wind whistled across the heath, cold in their faces, rough and grating as sand. Kili's heart grew heavy as the Mountain's stony face became less and less prominent at his back, as the kingdom he'd helped reclaim, the Company he'd journeyed and fought alongside, the brother he'd scarcely been parted from, were swallowed up in distance. It was a sacrifice he didn't regret, and at the same time, he wondered if it would make any difference in the end.

Deep in the Mountain, Fili stared at Balin, who was still holding a cup of wine, seemingly forgotten in the tension between them.

"What do you mean, 'he's gone'? You can't honestly expect me to believe my own brother would leave without saying goodbye." He had a stubborn frown on his face, and shook off Ori's calming hands. The terrible truth was in Balin's eyes, though, and as he shook his head, Fili understood. "You mean... he planned this?"

The old dwarf's beard twitched, barely hiding the way his lips pressed together unhappily. "It was necessary, lad. They couldn't afford to draw the attention of Dain and his followers. Once they left the Mountain, they would have been beyond our ability to protect."

"But I'm his brother! He ought to have at least told me!" Panic rose in his chest and Fili shoved himself violently upright, beginning to pace erratically. "When did they leave?"

"I don't know. None of us do." That wasn't necessarily true. Thorin and Billa knew, but they were keeping their mouths shut, which was as wise a thing as they might have done, as far as Balin was concerned.

"He can't go out there alone!" Fili nearly collided with the wall as he swung around to stomp back the way he'd come. "He'll do something stupid and get himself killed--he'll go taunt an orc or decide to play with fire or..." The blood drained from his face. "He might go home and tell Mam about Tauriel." His baby brother was getting farther and farther away, and he wasn't there to protect him.

Fear clawed at his insides and he turned on Balin, a wild look in his eyes.

"What if he doesn't come back? How am I supposed to explain that to Uncle? To our mother? Balin, I'm still responsible for him!"

Ori took advantage of Fili's pause to catch hold of his arm. "I'm sure he'll be fine, love," she said softly, but with surprising conviction. "Your brother has grown up a lot since we left Ered Luin."

"That he has," said Balin with a nod. "You need to trust him to protect himself now. And," the old dwarf lowered his gaze, "you need to trust the one he's chosen to be his companion." It was a hard truth, Balin knew, that Fili's place as his brother's protector now belonged to the elf who was his One, but he felt it needed to be said.

The blond seemed to wilt, his expression full of confusion and fear. "But... he still needs me." Blue eyes turned on Ori, pleading for the answer he so desperately wanted to her. "Doesn't he?"

Ori hesitated a moment, trying to be as sensitive as possible. Dori had confided in her he'd been feeling much the same. It was hard to entrust anyone else with a responsibility that had for so long been one's own. It felt so sudden. So final. "He does need you," she said finally, very gently. "Just not in the same way anymore."

Fili slowly wrapped his arms around her, feeling a little lost as he held her close. It wasn't like he
didn't have enough to do already, what with being Thorin's heir and having Ori to look after. Somehow, he'd just thought that Kili would always be his baby brother, his to take care of and keep out of trouble.

"If she lets him get hurt," he mumbled, "I'll make her regret it."

It was a relief not to be whispered about at every turn. Perhaps the Dwarves had forgotten how keen an Elf's hearing can be, or perhaps they didn't care, but the comments had ceased when they were beyond the gates, and now, among the sons and daughters of Men, she blessed their discretion. Or blindness. Either way, there were no comments to ignore here.

The man who sold them rations was cheerful, as was the woman who refused payment for the oil-slicked canvas they would use for shelter when the need arose.

"We owe too much to the King Under the Mountain and the Elvenking not to take the opportunity to thank you." She gave them a bright, dimpled smile and Tauriel accepted the gift with grace. If a coin or two happened to fall out of her pocket onto the counter, the elleth was obviously unaware that she'd "unintentionally" paid the full value of their goods.

Their stay had been pleasant, but as the afternoon of their second day crept upon them, Tauriel couldn't bring herself to sit still, even to repair the knives the Dwarves had provided her with. It was difficult even to eat, and her restlessness drove her to pull the map out of Kili's bag.

"We should move on," she murmured, unsure if he was even listening.

Kili had been staring contemplatively over the shining waters, absorbed in his thoughts, but the wariness in her tone made him turn and look at her. "Something wrong?" They hadn't discussed how long they might be staying on in the rebuilt Laketown.

Kili had been amazed at just how quickly the citizens had pulled together to raise the new town from the rubble of the old. The newly planed wood which comprised the buildings was still yellow, and gave the place a much brighter, cheerier aspect than the Laketown he remembered, and the superior construction overseen by the Elven architects felt sturdier, straighter, and far less apt to collapse into the Lake.

It was a pleasant place now, though he knew that didn't erase the memories it held, ever present, but temporarily forgotten in the bustling joy of a new start and fresh paint. There was a certain sadness resting beneath the hope and optimism as surely as the graves of many of Laketown's people lay under the cold, dark depths of the Lake.

Yes, it was time to be moving on.

Tauriel's voice pulled him back to the present.

"No. Maybe." The elleth pursed her lips. "I don't know. It's just... a feeling." Maybe it was being in Laketown again that brought it on. She remembered the thrill of fear, the nervous anticipation, the certainty of coming danger.

Tilda's scream.

Tauriel shook her head, unbraided red hair cascading into her face. "I only know that we need to move on."

The town was tiny, a fraction of the size it had been during the rule of the Master. They were across
the boardwalk and back on dry land in less than two minutes. As they moved steadily around the Lake toward the river, Kili's eyes were drawn to the way the reflected sunlight skittered across the brightly polished stones on the shore. It seemed so peaceful now.

They'd been here not long ago, wounded and desperate, waiting for help to come. He remembered the steady lapping of the water against the reeds. The sickly crackling of the fire Ori had made. The sounds of Addie's grief, Tauriel's pain. The dull pulling of the needle. That made him shudder.

It felt like an eternity ago. Enough had happened in the intervening weeks to fill a lifetime, and he had to inwardly scoff at the naive young dwarf who had longed for battle and noble deeds upon setting out from Ered Luin. Now he longed only for peace and quiet, and the company of the elleth he loved more than life itself.

He reached for Tauriel's hand, his fingers curling gently around hers. "It must be hard for you, coming back here."

The elf huffed faintly, but held his hand tightly. "No harder than it is for you, I think." She adjusted her pack's straps a little and glanced at him. "You will not think it... unpleasant to visit the woodland?" She wanted to be absolutely sure before they went anywhere near her old home that he knew she wasn't going back because she missed it. She did miss it, of course, but Tauriel went now because the Elves had supplies they would need for their journey. (And perhaps there was a tiny, selfish part of her that wanted to have her oils again so her skin and hair didn't feel so very dry.)

"Nah." He winked at her. "It holds only good memories for me. It's where I met you." He ran his thumb softly over her fingers, and it was apparent in his tenderness that the language of touch was newly blossoming within him. He'd wakened things that had been there all along, sleeping, waiting for the right moment. It was like discovering a color he'd never known existed.

Thoughts of their wedding night still quickened his pulse. The connection they shared astounded him as nothing else in his life before had. She was the most beautiful creature he had ever known, and in that precious hour, he truly felt they'd become one, body and soul.

That connection lingered, unconsciously infusing every touch, every movement, every shared look. Even the look he traded with her now.

"Tauri," he said, feigning seriousness, "we're not going to get arrested again, are we? It's not that I don't like the Elvenking's accommodations, but... the bars really obstruct the view."

It wasn't as if Thranduil had any warning that they were coming. Kili hoped, at least, that their inevitable discovery by the Woodland Realm's patrols would involve a minimum of flying arrows.

Her eyebrows twitched upward slightly and green eyes softened with an internal smile. "We shouldn't. They are at peace with Erebor. Though," her voice quieted thoughtfully, "there could hardly be a safer place, if truth be told."

Tauriel caught his wary look and chuckled. "I trust the woodland and its children as ever I did. There is no reason to fear that I can see."

Kili threw a cautious glance toward the green smudge of the distant treeline. "Forgive me if I differ with you on that point. Last time I was in there, everybody went raving mad and we almost got eaten by giant spiders."

The mention of spiders was enough to make Tauriel go a little stiff. Her expression hardened unmistakably. "Those parasites do not belong in the Greenwood," she informed him woodenly, hard
lines appearing on her face where there had been none before. "I'll not tolerate them." A tense moment passed, and the elleth forced herself to relax. "We will not stay long."

Their pace was unhurried, and the hours passed quickly. The light shifted to golden orange as the sun hung low on the horizon, clinging to the mountain peaks in the west, and shimmering on the flat expanse of the Lake.

It made sense to travel along the river trail. It was the most direct path to the Woodland Realm, and Kíli hoped, the safest. It was clear it'd require at least the greater half of the next day to reach the palace, and the young dwarf saw no point in pressing on into the night.

Tauriel helped him construct a makeshift shelter over a low-hanging aspen branch, and the two shared a morsel on the bank of the roaring rush before retiring. The shelter was small, just barely able to accommodate the two of them, a fact Kili didn't overly lament.

As he lay beside Tauriel, his head resting on a blanket they'd sacrificed to use as a pillow, he caught a faint sigh from the elleth and turned slightly toward her. "You're probably not even tired."

There was a hint of teasing in the statement, and he wasn't sure whether he meant the words to issue that way or not. He'd wondered more than once if she sometimes feigned mortal weakness simply to spare his pride.

For a handful of seconds, the shush of the river filled the night around them. Tauriel's eyes glimmered faintly in the darkness, and he sensed her gaze on his face, though he wasn't sure whether or not she could see as well as he could. At length, she answered.

"It doesn't matter." One slender hand touched his chest, finding the steady beat of his heart. "I wouldn't trade this for the miles we could travel. Rest, melleth nin, and I will do the same."

Kili's hand moved to cover hers, and he made a soft sound of amusement. "I'm not tired, either."

The statement was fairly matter-a-fact, truth be told, though Tauriel may have been forgiven for wondering if he was trying to give her some kind of hint.

A moment of thought in the rushing darkness.

"Come."

Tauriel gave Kili's hand a tug a slid out of the tent as easily as though she hadn't had the full length of her body wedged slightly under his. Shortly, she was seated on a large, flat rock a couple lengths away, beckoning to him as she wrapped herself in the pillow blanket. When Kili joined her, their frosty breath mingling in the chill night, she opened the blanket to him.

He hadn't seen her take it, but her short, dwarven bow was at her side, strung and ready. Tauriel held an arrow in one hand, and with it, directed his attention upwards, to the spangled heavens stretching above them.

"It's time for your first lesson in starlight, my love. There's nothing in this world I love more. You cannot hear starsong any more than I can feel the voice of stone, but that doesn't mean we cannot understand it."

Kili nestled into her side, his eyes following the point of the arrow. "The voice of stone bids us to delve, to carve, to build. We dwarves like sturdy things, things we can hold and shape and use."

He gestured upwards at the bright sky. "What song do you hear in the stars?"
Tauriel closed her eyes, an expression of rapture crossing her face as she tilted her head back, exposing her soft throat to the cool night air.

"I hear the song of our Creator. I hear beauty and pure, unfiltered wisdom. I hear the whispers of those who walk Olórë Mallë, the Path of Dreams." Slowly, she lowered her chin to rest on his shoulder and opened her eyes again. "As you pull strength from the steadiness of the earth and the solidity of the stone that birthed you, I too draw strength from the stars, which greeted my forebears when they Awoke upon Middle-earth. Their light dwells ever in the hearts of the Eldar, Silvan and Sindarin alike."

The closeness of her voice soothed Kili, and he found himself lost in the sound, and the poetry of her words. The way her normally carefully modulated tone betrayed hints of excitement and wonder. She was to him what the stars were to her, giving him strength, and filling his heart with light more precious and pure than any gem under the Mountain.

"When you speak of the stars, Tauriel... you make me see them the way you do." He nuzzled her cheek softly. "They are beautiful."

The elleth hesitated for a long moment, then turned her head, catching him by surprise with a rare, soft kiss. She wasn't a sensual creature by nature, nor did she display passion as the mortal races tended to, but her inclination toward physical closeness made her more willing than most of her kin to express her love that way.

The night was filled with whispered promises of starlight and stone, and it was as though the two of them were alone in the world. Of course, it would be a fool who believed himself unwatched in the Woodland Realm. In the light of early morning, Tauriel woke her husband with a gentle nudge, and indicated the two guards standing over them, wearing identical expressions of veiled disapproval.

Chapter End Notes

Someone mentioned the issue of the difference between Tauriel and Kili's ages, and whether or not she could honestly be interested in a young, slightly immature person like Kili. This is my response, simply because I thought you lot would be interested. I am the one that wrote for Tauriel's character, and I can say, as a bit of a peek inside her mind, that she made the choice to love Kili rather than Legolas based on immediate need and horrendous guilt issues, rather than on any plans she had for the future. The thing is, once the choice was made, she was determined to stick with it, because in Elvish culture, love isn't something you take back. She could have, in theory, refused to marry him after the immediate need had passed, but she's really not cruel enough to do something like that. So in the end, she bound herself to him because she made the choice to do so. And while Tauriel realizes that a day may come where Kili dies, possibly of old age, she's never seen her own immortality as something that will actually carry her to the end. She's a warrior, and anticipates falling in battle at some point. Death is something she has accepted already. Just... not for Legolas. He's different. (So, in case you're wondering, yes, she would have chosen Legolas if BOFA hadn't ruined everything.)
Beginnings and Ends

Chapter by InkFire_Scribe, Lady_Juno (InkFire_Scribe)

Chapter Summary

Written and edited by the Ladies Loki and Juno.

Chapter Notes

I forgot to warn you folks last time, but this time I'll remember--extra long chapter today. About a chapter and a half worth. Not really enough to split into two chapters, but enough to qualify as a long one. :)

This, I'm afraid, is the end.
This. Is not. The end.
Hush up, Melodrama. No one asked you.
The Feels. They demand satisfaction.
I said HUSH!
Anyway, I wanted to remind you lot that this is, in fact, the last chapter of Fiercer than Fire. Loki and I are sincerely kind of shell-shocked. It's ridiculous, how amazingly epic this story turned out to be, and beyond that, how amazingly epic you guys are, how dedicated and absolutely stark raving you must be. It wouldn't have been possible without your encouragement. Hugs and brownies all around!

Kili sat up slowly, keeping his hands visible, gaze flicking between Tauriel and the guards towering above them. He could only imagine what they were thinking. "We mean no harm," he said, finally. "We're just seeking refuge in the Woodland Realm. Temporarily. A few days, at most."

Tauriel's shoulders twitched slightly. A swift glance at her face revealed only the echoes of what might have been a suppressed laugh. Fluidly, she slipped out of their shelter and stood. She, too, kept her hands visible.

"Do you expect us to attack you?" asked one of the guards dryly.

"If hospitality is all you seek, you may think again about whom you see it from." The second guard folded his arms, and Tauriel acknowledged his words with a slight nod.

"If we cannot claim asylum here, then we request supplies for the journey west."

The guards traded look, and though no one asked, the suspicion of the Mountain's welcome hung heavy in the air. Had their former captain been thrown out? Was this dwarf her beloved, or her captor?

"Gather your things and follow us." The first guard touched his companion's shoulder and nudged
him toward the river.

Red hair obscured her face a moment as Tauriel turned and bent to lift the canvas from its branch. Whatever she was thinking, she seemed unwilling to share it.

Kili fought in vain to suppress an embarrassed grin as he folded and rolled the blankets. "That went about as well as I expected." He certainly hadn't thought Erebor's stiffly cordial relationship with the Woodland Realm would warrant any sort of open-armed welcome.

They quickly finished and shouldered their packs, moving to join the two by the river, and Kili looked sideways at Tauriel. "They'll take us to the king?"

The guards were likely listening, but neither gave any indication that this was the case. Tauriel glanced at her husband and tipped her head slightly to one side, pursing her lips thoughtfully.

"It will depend primarily on how occupied the king is at the moment. He prefers to know who enters and leaves his kingdom, but there are times when he is simply too busy to perform such duties personally. If this is the case, then we'll be taken to the prince." She didn't seem bothered by the thought.

Kili was, however, and she pretended not to notice. Conversations about Legolas didn't seem to be a good device for making the dwarf more comfortable. She kept a hand on his shoulder, though. That seemed to help.

The hike up the river trail brought them to the back entrance by mid-afternoon, and it was only as they were shown into the lower guest wing that Tauriel paused, looking at one of the guards with a slight frown.

"Why have you brought us here, Emlinor?"

The guard's expression darkened only minimally. "His Majesty the Prince has given orders that you and your companion are to be received as guests."

Kili exchanged a look of surprise with the elleth. Did Legolas' graciousness know no bounds? Then again, Kili didn't fancy the prince had granted them such a courtesy for his sake. Well. Whatever the reason, he was grateful.

He nodded at the guard who had spoken. "Then please convey our thanks to your prince. His gesture of goodwill will be reported to my uncle the king."

Kili didn't have much else he could offer in return, and yet he felt it was something. Even the smallest acts of good faith between Erebor and the Woodland Realm would make a difference in the way their relations would evolve from here on out.

The guard nodded, seeming unhappy, but not distrustful. At a door marked with a curly Elven rune, the guards bowed and departed, one murmuring something in Elvish to Tauriel. She acknowledged his words with a nod, ushering Kili inside. The room was circular and airy, with a large bed and water feature in the corner that looked and sounded like a tiny waterfall.

"Are all the guest rooms like this?" Kili glanced curiously at his wife, both impressed and somewhat unnerved by the place. It reminded him of Rivendell, but only distantly. Tauriel shook her head.

"The upper halls are more lavish than this. As royalty, you ought to have been accorded a larger room... but I'm glad you weren't." She slipped the straps off her shoulders and set her bag on the floor by the wall, meeting his questioning look with a shrug. "Too many luxuries make me
uncomfortable."

They were left to their own devices for the rest of the day, though elves occasionally checked in with
them to confirm supplies and whatnot. Tauriel showed a complete disinterest in leaving the room
and, after some pressing, confessed that one of their guides had warned her of the Guard's continued
hostility toward her as the elleth who had betrayed their king's trust.

Thus, it wasn’t until the evening meal that the two of them emerged from their room. There was a
servant to guide them, though Tauriel knew the way very well.

The dining hall was a long, tall room, wide enough for two long tables and brightly lit, filled with the
sounds of laughter and music. It wasn't raucous, as the dining hall in Erebor was when full, but
somehow musical, the noise rebounding from the high ceiling in distractingly perfect Elvish pitch.
Tauriel guided Kili to the counter where they could collect their food, then moved toward the tables,
searching for a place to sit. Her gait was confident and unbothered until a particularly flushed,
grinning elf with dark brown hair called her name.

"Tauriel! Well, if it isn't our beautiful traitor captain."

Kili stiffened, his knuckles whitening around the edge of his tray, and the red-haired elleth touched
his shoulder, shaking her head slightly. Rising to this bait would do neither of them any good. She
made to move past their antagonist, the wall forcing her to pass very close to his smiling face.

"Are you afraid, Captain? Your heart beats very quickly." He glanced at the elf to his left, as if
for confirmation, and laughed. This motion brushed the tip of his pointed ear against Tauriel's hip, as
she'd stopped, now frowning slightly.

"Might I ask-" But her question suffered an early death at the hands of the elf's interruption. He sat
up a little straighter.

"Oh, wait!" The elf's face, already flushed with wine, now took on a half delighted, half embarrassed
shade of red. "My mistake, mistress. Yours isn't the only heartbeat I hear."

Someone farther along the bench paled noticeably and looked up at Tauriel with wide brown eyes.

"Tell me it's not true. You didn't... did you? With him?"

Tauriel stared at the female who'd addressed her and opened her mouth, but the words lost their way
between her mind and lips, and she said nothing. The female stood, her Guard uniform not
concealing the tension in her shoulders as she pointed accusingly at Tauriel.

"Is that why you betrayed us? Because you carry his child?"

The hall went suddenly, disastrously silent.

Kili froze where he stood, and he could've sworn his heart stopped. It wasn't possible. How could it
be? They'd only been married for a matter of days. So many conflicting emotions twisted inside him
that for an uncomfortable handful of seconds, he hadn't the faintest idea how to react.

Then, suddenly, he did know. Setting his tray down at some indiscriminate point on the nearby table,
he moved to stand beside and slightly in front of his wife, fixing the she-elf who'd accused Tauriel
with a dark look.

"If you knew anything of your former captain's heart, you would never say such things of her." In
the nearly absolute silence of the hall, the quiet steadfastness of his voice was clearly marked. "And
if she is carrying our child, I count it a great blessing upon our union. Lady Tauriel is my wife, and a Princess of Erebor."

The female Guard watched him a moment longer, then shifted her gaze to Tauriel. The contents of the red-haired elleth's tray rattled slightly as her hands began to shake. Her expression couldn't have been more shocked if Kili had turned and run her through with her own dagger. After a long moment, she remembered to breathe.

"We should... take our meal to our room," she whispered, and even at so low a volume, every elf in the hall could doubtless hear the way the words stumbled over one another. She didn't doubt the word of the guard, even as drunk as he was. None of the Eldar would tell a lie, even in jest.

But the improbability of the truth could be considered later. Right now, she needed to get away from all the staring eyes. Having quite lost her appetite, she strode swiftly from the hall, leaving the tray on the counter and barely noticing as Kili followed.

In the room, with the door safely shut, Kili watched as his wife seated herself on the edge of the bed, folding in on herself. What she'd been through was deeply humiliating, and he didn't suppose he could ever understand just how deep. These were her people, people she'd known and fought alongside hundreds of years before he'd even been born.

Somewhat surprised by the sinking opulence of the mattress as he sat beside his wife, he nearly fell back, and only righted himself by grabbing onto her shoulder. "Sorry."

With a sigh, he slipped his arm around her, holding her tightly. "Sorry about... everything. If I'd known coming here would be like that, I'd..." But she'd wanted to come here. He couldn't fault her for that. A long silence ensued, and then he spoke again, meeting her aberrantly hesitant gaze.

"Tauri... are you really...?" He made a nebulous motion toward her midsection, hoping the question didn't somehow make things worse.

She didn't answer, allowing the silence to settle again. Grasping his hand, she closed her eyes, color suffusing her cheeks as she frowned in concentration.

It took a moment for Kili to recognize the expression. She was listening. With a feeling of awe, he wondered if her hearing could possibly be that good. He received his answer quickly enough.

All the color drained from Tauriel's face, leaving her pasty white, a sheen of nervous sweat on her brow. "Valar help us." Her green eyes opened and fastened on his face, now full of what looked like... fear. "I'm pregnant."

Kili's stomach felt like cold lead, and his mouth was uncomfortably dry.

"Forgive me, Tauriel," he managed to choke out, lowering his forehead to rest against their joined hands. "I... did this to you. It's my fault." There was devastation in his chocolate eyes when he looked up at her again. This was never the way he'd imagined her reacting to such a thing.

He stroked her hands gently, trying to relax some of the tension in them. Beyond apologizing, what was there to say? No words could stop what had been set into motion inside her, reverse it, make it go away.

"No, it's-" Tauriel's voice cracked, and she paused to clear her throat, something she couldn't remember ever doing before. "It's not because of you, Kili." She was ashamed of how her words shook, how her hands shook. Her fingers tightened around his as she closed her eyes again, unconsciously curling in on herself once more.
It might have been a few minutes before she spoke again, or an hour, or several hours. The world might have stopped around them, save for the incongruously peaceful sound of water coming from the corner. Tauriel's shuddering eased as Kili ran a broad hand over her back. Perhaps he didn't know what to say, but his hands soothed her.

"Please... it's not your fault. I don't... I can't fail again." Her voice was steadier now. She let him help her sit up, and folded her legs under her body, trying to calm the rapid beating of her heart.

"Fail?" Kili shook his head, a number of things lining up now. She was afraid of failing the child. Failing the child like she'd perceived she had failed Tilda. "No, no. Tauri, listen to me."

His earnest tone drew her gaze again, and his hand paused against her back. "You haven't failed anyone. Look, if I held myself to the same standards you do, I wouldn't even be able to function. I wish you'd stop being so damned hard on yourself." There was unmistakable frustration in his tone now, and the elleth looked away.

Kili drew her face gently back toward him. "Tauri, please. Don't do this to yourself again. You haven't failed. You've always done the best you can possibly do, and that's all anyone can ask. This child will be just the same. I know I'm young, but you and I... together, we can care for this child. I promise you, we'll all be just fine."

It was a bit easier now that he knew why she'd reacted the way she had. For a terrible moment, he'd thought the problem had been with him. A fleeting fear that she'd been repulsed by the idea of carrying his child... As ever, his fear was unfounded, and he mentally scolded himself for thinking something so stupid could be true.

Tauriel's breathing settled as she looked into his eyes. She searched them, eyebrows drawn together, raised in the center. Uncertain. Frightened. Vulnerable. Slowly, her expression relaxed.

"You really believe that." Licking her lips, she let out a soft, breathless laugh. There was only the slightest edge of hysteria to it. She was regaining control. The elleth took a deeper breath and rolled her shoulders.

"Kili..." Tauriel paused, uncertain. "I hadn't yet come of age when my parents and sister were killed by orcs. I tried to defend them. When I woke up... I was in a room like this, here, in the Woodland Palace." She looked around, as though checking to see if it was the same room. "Legolas had nursed me back to health. He didn't even know my name. What was left of my clan... they left me behind. They were nomads. It was their way. I wasn't... strong enough." She sighed, and looked down at her flat, inconspicuous stomach.

"Every day, I've been trying to prove them wrong. It's been almost six centuries since then."

"It's been long enough," Kili murmured, still processing her words. This explained a few things. Why she was so hard on herself. Why she felt so indebted to Thranduil, and so strongly connected to Legolas. Why it was so hard for her to talk about her past.

"You did everything you could to save your family. It's not your fault, and I'll keep telling you that until you accept it. Nothing that you've been blaming yourself for is your fault, Tauri. You're the strongest person I know, but even you have limits. You can't expect more of yourself than you're capable of."

His words seemed to strike a chord. At least, Tauriel remained quiet for a very long time after that. She shifted a little and pressed her red-haired head against his shoulder.
"Thank you."

"You can't do this, Brother!" It had been a very long time since Balin had sounded quite so frightened. It was worse even than that, if only because Thorin and Fili were both listening. Dwalin stood firm, his jaw set, Dain's battle ax balanced easily on one shoulder.

"I've already done it," he growled calmly. "It's my job to protect them. I'll keep doing my job, long as I'm able." Even with a crutch tucked under his arm, the dwarf cut an intimidating figure. Dain, however, looked far from intimidated.

"And you expect me to accept this... substitution?" The iron-helmed dwarf made a show of staring Dwalin up and down, looking insulted. He turned to Thorin. "Your nephew does me great dishonor, Cousin. He flees my challenge like the coward he is, leaving a... cripple to fight in his stead."

Thorin managed to hold his first response in check, but there was immense displeasure in his eyes. "Dain, you have demanded this duel to satisfy your grievance, expecting that the ancient laws of the practice be followed. You know as well as I do, the Right of Substitution is as old as every other part of the tradition. Lord Dwalin honors your challenge to my nephew, and you do him this great offense?"

Dwalin made a show of hefting the ax, an easy gesture that made the muscles in his arm ripple impressively. "If ye wish to withdraw yer challenge, Cousin," the warrior said in a dangerously light tone, "none would fault ye. I've never lost a duel, and the loss of a leg won't change that."

Balin shot his brother a warning look. The taunts would serve only to raise Dain's ire. As much faith as he'd always had in the hulking warrior's prowess, the loss of a leg had made him slower, less steady. He feared his brother would lose.

Fili chewed on his tongue in order to remain silent. The right ought to have been his, but he could barely lift that ax, and Thorin had made no vague implications concerning what would have been done if he'd taken the challenge anyway. Personally, Fili didn't want to be responsible for a second Exile.

Dain glowered up at Dwalin from beneath the rim of his helm. "I won't fight a cripple. There is no honor in the defeat of one who can scarcely stand without aid."

By now, the older dwarf had worked himself into quite the rage, and he took a step or two in Thorin's direction, underscoring his words with stiff, violent gestures. "Hear me, Cousin. I will wait as long as it takes to receive proper satisfaction."

There was a faint hiss as a large, double-bladed battle ax cut through the air and halted centimeters from Dain's nose. As the dwarf stared at his own ax in outrage, Dwalin spoke, his tone casual.

"Ye've got two choices, son of Nain. Either ye can accept my right as Substitute for Prince Kili, or ye can withdraw yer challenge and live with it." The warrior's voice lowered to a soft growl for his next words. "Or, I suppose, ye can let yer cronies fight in yer place, but I doubt they would do yer biases proper credit."

Dain's rage boiled out through every pore, and as his narrowed eyes shifted between the finely honed
blade and Dwalin's face, one sturdy hand went to rest on the ax at his belt. "So that's to be the way of it, is it?" His voice was deadly, forced through clenched teeth. "You think you can cow me into submission?"

A glance at Thorin told him the dwarf king would not be intervening, which was quite as he expected. Perhaps slightly less expected was the sudden flash of polished steel from Dain's belt.

The clash of metal on metal was deafening, rebounding from one scarred wall to the other. This hall had, according to Thorin, once been a meeting place for small, unofficial councils. Now it was bare, and in desperate need of heavy repair, the stonework all but gutted by the dragon's claws.

This, unfortunately, meant that the floor was uneven, which put Dwalin at a distinct disadvantage. Further, Dain's battle ax was a two-handed weapon, and Dwalin couldn't use it properly. It was with a valiant effort that he wielded it one-handed until the older dwarf stumbled back, hand bleeding. Dropping the heavy weapon, Dwalin whipped a war ax from his belt. It was smaller than the weapon Dain held, but that was something he could work with.

Dain's ax swung in low and fast on Dwalin's injured side, and the warrior barely managed to deflect the blow with his crutch, which bent with a screech.

Fili supported his uncle as they watched, every nerve tense. Balin tugged anxiously on his beard, his eyes following every arc and clash of the combatant's weapons. It seemed that, though Dwalin was fighting both Dain and his missing leg, he had turned it into something of an advantage, using his crutch as a shield as often as he used it to steady himself.

The combatants were in constant motion. Dain drove his opponent back relentlessly, his anger only mounting as Dwalin continued to give way before him, rather than standing his ground. It wasn't the dwarven way. Yet, if he'd stood his ground, he would have lost. Dain's ax haft was slick with blood. Dwalin's shoulder on his injured side was torn open, raw and bloody under his tunic.

It was then, as Dain swung his ax in a mighty, two-handed arc, that Dwalin moved. The crutch clattered to the ground. The war ax fell from his grasp. Dwalin hurled his bulk forward and down, dropping under Dain's guard and bowling him over while the dwarf's ax continued on its path through the air, ultimately hitting the wall. It fell, blade broken.

Now they were both unarmed. For one or the other to draw a dagger would be a black mark against them, shame and dishonor for drawing on an unarmed opponent. It was also now an even fight. They rolled over and over one another, hands grasping at thick necks, fingers seeking weaknesses in heavy armor.

Fili tasted blood. Balin looked ready to tear his beard out. It had to be quick. It had to be, or Dwalin would lose.

Dain let out a strangled cry, half fury, half pain. Dwalin was underneath him, one hand on his opponent's throat, the other hovering near Dain's face. Blood on his fingernails betrayed the wound that hadn't yet shown across his cousin's eye. As Dain tried to force the clawing fingers away with both hands, Dwalin rolled, pinning his attacker to the floor, one hand still on his throat.

"Yield!"

"Never!"

"I said, yield."

Dain's only answer was a low gurgle as his face turned purple. A second passed. Then two. Purple
became unpleasantly blue. Dain wasn't breathing, his windpipe pinched nearly shut under his opponent's weight. He tapped Dwalin's arm weakly, and the warrior released him, immediately rolling off his body, leaving him to gasp and choke. For a moment, the tension seemed to ebb, and Dwalin moved away from the defeated dwarf.

"Finish it!" Dain snarled, voice hoarse. He sat up, face livid, one hand on his throat, as though to protect it.

"No."

Every eye was on Dwalin as he used the wall to haul himself upright.

"Give me an honorable death!" Dain's shout echoed into silence before Dwalin answered.

"No. I fight in Prince Kili's stead. The final blow is his, and he wouldn'a taken it."

"Prince Kili," Dain rasped, spitting the words as his chest heaved, "would never have been in a position to offer a final blow. You know it."

The dwarf's helmet had fallen off during the course of the fight, and his scraggly grey and white hair, sweat-soaked, stuck out at all angles. He was leaning against the wall, looking all but spent, his rage turned to exhaustion and humiliation. "So you won't grant me an honorable death, then. You defeat me, and then leave me to live with the shame."

Thorin's expression was unreadable as he approached, picking his way carefully around the gouges in the floor. Then he caught Dwalin's gaze, and his composure weakened a bit. The hulking dwarf had lost quite a bit of blood, and though he did his best to hide it, was obviously in pain. Balin had already gone for the healer on duty, but it would probably be a minute or two before he returned.

"Dain," Thorin said steadily, "we will consider the matter finished. No one will speak of your defeat beyond this room, if that is your wish, and you will consider your grievance settled. Is this agreeable?"

Dain's hands shook, though whether with anger or exhaustion was anyone's guess. "It... will be an honor to serve the throne of Erebor," he whispered at length, the words hissing slightly between clenched teeth.

A laugh escaped Fili, and he was as much surprised by it as anyone else. It was as though someone had untied a knot that had hung around his neck. Dain was a stubborn git, but once the dwarf was bound by honor and duty nothing could sway him.

"Let's see you taken care of, Cousin, and then we can celebrate over a flask of ale. What say you?"

The blond smiled at Dain, then at his uncle.

Dain's healer entered the hall at a jog, followed by Balin. He was younger than Oin by a fair stretch, his hair and beard both dark nut-brown. Pausing only briefly to examine his leader, he moved swiftly to Dwalin, who looked dangerously unsteady, even leaning against solid stone.

Balin hovered nearby, face still tense with worry, as the healer helped Dwalin sit and began his work. Thorin moved to Dain, his arms crossed at his chest, his brow creased with what could have been any number of pains or concerns.

"I admire your strength and determination. I always have." Thorin's voice was low, confidential. "I will need your cooperation in the days to come. I respect your opinions, but I also require you to respect mine, and defer to them if such is my will. That is the only way this kingdom can become
"With some effort, he crouched down beside the older dwarf. "Will you work with me to restore Erebor, Dain?"

Dain's gaze was on Thorin's face, sharp and clear in spite of his disheveled appearance. His answer, when it came, was slow and determined. "I pledge my service hereafter to the Kingdom of Erebor. The Iron Hills will thrive under my son." Once spoken, the words became binding, and their effect on Dain was visible. The tension eased out of his shoulders as he bowed his head submissively to the king.

Thorin nodded slowly, placing a hand on Dain's shoulder. His contemplative look lingered a moment longer, then faded away as he eased himself up again. "When you're able, come to me again. There is much to be done now, and your council is invaluable to me." Pacing back to Dwalin, he watched the healer finish suturing the wounded dwarf's shoulder before carefully bandaging it. When Balin sent him a questioning look, Thorin made a furtive motion. Settled.

"What's your plan for coronation?" It was Dwalin that spoke first, though Fili bounced anxiously in place, seeming unable to hold still anymore.

"There's a team working on carving a new throne," said Balin quietly. "And the forges had been lit. When he is well, Thorin may forge his crown."

"And Bofur's working with some of the Iron Hills folk on repairing the King's Hall." Fili lifted himself onto his toes, then dropped back down, seemingly just for something to do. "Everything should be ready by spring, which will give us time to send for those that'll take offense if we don't." He grinned, and for a moment, it looked like he was trying to make up for Kili's absence.

Dwalin's eyes shifted back to his king. "And in the meantime?"

"In the meantime, we work." Thorin's answer was swift and determined. "There is much rebuilding to be done, and we'll need more skilled crafters than we now have to do it right. Balin, I'll entrust you with sending out notices to the other dwarf settlements. Priority will be given to the living quarters and dining halls first, then to the Hall of Kings."

He shifted his weight, still looking rather weak. "Dwalin, you'll be responsible for munitions, and training, when the time comes. You'll need to assemble a team to forge new armor and weaponry for Erebor's army. No doubt soldiers from the Iron Hills will be... stationed here for a few months longer. Until we've built up a large enough standing force."

Finally, he turned to Fili. "You'll be in charge of writing formal invitations for the Coronation." A faint smile tugged at his lips. "I expect you'll take extra care with the one for your mother."

Each of the three nodded with varying degrees of confidence. While Dwalin looked wary and exhausted, Fili all but glowed.

"You can count on me, Uncle!" The young blond fetched Dwalin's battered crutch for him before returning to Dain, who was having his wrist bound. Sprained, according to the healer.

"Come along, Cousin." Fili extended a hand to the defeated warrior, still smiling. "I promised a celebration, didn't I? We're on the same side, after all, and there's much to celebrate."

On the one hand, Kili had been very clear about Dain's actions, and Fili didn't at all approve. On the other hand, Thorin had specifically requested a concerted effort on his part to befriend the dour old dwarf, and he hadn't actually seen anything but justified outrage from him. And after all, his words were true. They were all on the same side.
Billa lurked outside the hall, gnawing on her lip. For one thing, Thorin had been gone for far too long, and for another, a healer had been sent for. Somehow, in the past couple weeks, cowardice had crept into her heart. The hobbit couldn't bring herself to go in, frightened of what she might see. What if Thorin had fallen down a hole and hurt himself? Or what if a pillar had fallen on him? Or what if Dain had gone completely off his head and attacked-

The door opened and Thorin emerged, moving gingerly. He'd been standing for too long. Shuddering with relief, she quickly moved forward and inserted herself under his arm. She wasn't much in the way of support, but she could steady him, at least.

"What happened in there? I heard a healer was called for."

Thorin didn't reply immediately, waiting until they'd gone a ways down a vacant corridor branching off from the main one. He was once again reminded of just how perfectly she fit beneath his arm, her softness and warmth offsetting the cold hardness of the stone surrounding them. "The duel. It's over now."

Billa paused, directing a most displeased expression up at him.

"I... couldn't tell you beforehand," Thorin explained before she could speak her disapproval. "I knew how you'd react, and it was hard enough for me to allow it as it was. Dwalin claimed the Right of Substitution for Kili."

"Dwalin?" Billa looked horrified. "But he's--Thorin, that's madness!" Then she seemed to realize that he'd already said the duel was over, and stiffened. "Who won? Was he hurt? Oh spirits..." The healer. She looked back over her shoulder. "Please tell me no one died."

"Dwalin's fine, Billa. Dain, too. They're both alright." Thorin felt her body relax, and regretted the shock--however brief--he'd given her.

He quickly reported the way the fight had gone, how Dain had been spared, the earnestness with which he'd pledged his service and loyalty. "I believe the worst is over. All our thoughts turn now to the restoration of Erebor, and the Coronation. The glad days we've hoped for since... the Desolation."

Thorin looked slightly overcome, his previous weariness forgotten in the emotion of the moment. "I can't tell you how much this means to me, being able to call my people home again now. Giving them a future unlike any they've dared to dream of before."

Nudging the hobbit out from beneath his arm, he took both of her hands before him and leaned down until his face was nearly on a level with hers. "I am forever in your debt," he said softly. "And in paltry repayment, I offer my dear burglar half a kingdom... on the condition she accepts with it the heart of its king."

His eyes, sapphire-blue, studied her gently, taking careful note of her reactions. For a moment, he looked nervous, and then it passed. "Will you have me as your husband, Billa Baggins?"

It looked rather as though the hobbit had been frozen. She didn't answer, didn't move, didn't even breathe. With her mouth hanging open and her eyes fixed on his, Billa was the personification of stunned disbelief. Then her lungs started working again. Her mouth curved into a smile and a laugh escaped her in short bursts.

"What kind of a stupid question is that?" She threw her arms around his neck, temporarily forgetting his injuries. "Of course I'll have you!" Billa laughed again, giddy.
The question of whether his kingdom would have her was one her dazzled mind couldn't summon. Thorin wanted to marry her. Marry! The best she'd hoped for was to be his mistress—he was a king, after all, and had obligations. This, however, was a dream she'd cherished since Laketown. It felt like a century had passed. Thank goodness she was still young enough after all that!

"I'm glad, Billa. So very glad." Thorin held her tightly, nuzzling her curly mane. Her beads chimed softly as they swung against his. "Though I suspect the reason may be slightly selfish: I can't live without you."

"I would've stayed," she assured him, helpless laughter escaping between her words, "even if you hadn't. Even if it killed me." Her voice became fierce as she pressed a kiss to his neck, which was as high as she could reach without his help. "You can't get rid of me now, Thorin. You're stuck with me."

"Then I consider myself the happiest of dwarves." Thorin pulled her chin up for a proper kiss, and only broke it when he was forced to though lack of air. There were equal parts wonder and self-consciousness in his face.

"Best left for private," he said. "Shouldn't get carried away... here, in the open." He glanced down both ends of the corridor.

So the matter with Dain wasn't completely settled. At least not in his mind. Dwarves were fairly well scandalized by public affection, and the king was no exception. Now wasn't the time to be breaking any more rules.

The halfling's face was a fetching shade of pink, though her smile didn't falter. "I hardly think you're well enough to be thinking of that," she mumbled, nudging him gently. "Come on. You need to sit down."

As Thorin's face heated and understanding of her implication dawmed on him, the pair moved off. Perhaps they needed to talk about this. Billa's arm slipped around his waist and she steadied him, her body soft and sturdy as she wedged her side against his. Well... they would talk about it later. A selfish impulse, maybe, but... Thorin tightened his hold on her a little. Being selfish was acceptable, so long as it kept her near.

Dain leaned against a fractured pillar, lips pursed as he watched them amble down the grand hall. A Dwarf's love was fierce and strong. He wouldn't begrudge his cousin that. But the idea of a Hobbit on the queen's throne....

"My lord?" The healer had appeared behind him, supporting Dwalin. Balin was on his brother's other side.

"Cousin? Something wrong?" Fili emerged behind the others, toting the bloodied weapons that would need to be cleaned before returning to their masters.

"I believe the king desires rest. We should take ours as well." Dain nodded to the others and shuffled off at a slow limp, his helm in one hand. There would be time for plans later.
Remember to peek into my gallery and subscribe to *Buried Coals* for the next part of the story. Hopefully, we'll be ready to start updating in December. I'll be sure to let you guys know if something happens to change that plan.

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