Limited

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by InkFire_Scribe

Summary

Even with all the power under the Mountain, the king cannot do "whatever he wants," even when what he wants to do is the right thing.

This fic is an exploration of the dwarven legal system and what happens when forgiveness isn't as easy as a one-scene death redemption. Contains scenes of neglect, grief, and madness. Eventual Happy(ish) Ending.

Notes

I went digging through my archives and found a completed story from ages ago, but also didn't find it in my Ao3 gallery, so... yeah, I'm fixing that.

This was written back in 2014 with Lady Loki.
"You have no choice, my King." Dain's voice was devastatingly earnest in the stillness of the ruined chamber, echoing off the stone with the potency of a punch to the gut.

Thorin stared at his folded hands, wishing he could escape this moment, wishing he could be anywhere but here. He was still as the half-effaced statues of Thror flanking the doorway into the Mountain. Still as the carvings of his ancestors in relief along the walls, their stony gazes boring into him, affirming Dain's words.

Here in this cold, silent place, it was surprisingly easy to long for the road again. The warmth of his companions' voices, the calming rhythm of repetitive motion, the sky above with its endlessly changing moods. The voices around the fire, the honesty of sharpened steel, the stars above melding together into streams of white against the blackness. Little things. So many little things.

She was one of those things. The Burglar. The one whose fate he was even now deciding.

"Is the King in agreement, then?" Dain's voice pulled Thorin back to reality, and the dwarf king twitched slightly, as though he'd been doused with cold water.

"Why must I agree?" Thorin turned to regard the older dwarf, a faintly defiant look in his blue gaze. "If I have no choice, it follows I have no say."

Dain's features tightened in exasperation, and it occurred to Thorin they'd been here a long while. The conversation seemed as circular as the council chamber, repeating itself with only slight variations. "It must be known to the people that the deed is done with your consent, as I've said no less than seven times since we entered this discussion. As your first official act, it will set the tone for the rest of your reign. Traitors to the Throne of Erebor cannot be pardoned, no matter your particular," Dain's expression was halfway disgusted, "bonds with them."

"Pardoned, no. I understand that." Thorin twisted his ring fretfully, his breathing shallow. "She cannot be pardoned. I... I could banish her. I could send her back where she came from, never to return."

Dain's features tightened in exasperation, and it occurred to Thorin they'd been here a long while. The conversation seemed as circular as the council chamber, repeating itself with only slight variations. "It must be known to the people that the deed is done with your consent, as I've said no less than seven times since we entered this discussion. As your first official act, it will set the tone for the rest of your reign. Traitors to the Throne of Erebor cannot be pardoned, no matter your particular," Dain's expression was halfway disgusted, "bonds with them."

"Then you are the more deceived, my King." The older dwarf put a hand on Thorin's shoulder, sighing through his nose. A moment's pause, and he lowered his voice, taking on a soft, unhurried tone that was vaguely fatherly. "She's cleverer than you ever gave her credit for. She saw you were vulnerable. Like the fraud she is, she set out from the very beginning to be your undoing, delving at every opportunity for weakness and setting upon it like a ravening wolf at the scent of blood. She used you."

Thorin was silent and still for a handful of moments that passed to the faint beating of his heart. "I cannot believe that, Cousin."

Dain withdrew his hand, crossing his arms and turning away. "It matters not. With or without your
consent, then, the Throne of Erebor demands she must die."

Silence descended like stone between them. After a moment's pause Dain's posture relaxed slightly.

"This is for your good, Cousin. For your good, and the good of your kingdom. And believe me, if you don't give the order... I will." His tone, though surprisingly gentle, was deadly serious. "Rest well, Thorin."

Dain turned, the sound of his boots heavy and loud in the still room. The door squealed faintly on rusted hinges as it swung shut behind him.

Go to her. That was Thorin's first impulse. For reasons he couldn't comprehend, the notion that she was locked up and he was unable to protect her tore up his insides, drove him mad. And yet, why should he still be so keen on defending her after... what she'd done? She'd betrayed him. She'd known what the Arkenstone meant to him. She'd known better than anyone.

He'd confided in her. Trusted her. Loved her. Yes. Loved. Had she ever truly loved him in return, or had that all been an act? The thought twisted his stomach into a knot, tightened his throat. He'd never doubted she was genuine. Never had reason to. Not until she'd taken the Stone. Now doubts sliced into him, more painful than the spear he'd taken in the battle.

Could Dain be right about her? That he was even entertaining the thought was devastating enough.

It was almost involuntary, the way his feet dragged him, limping, heavy as lead, down to the dungeons. They were small. Cramped. Of little interest to Smaug during his occupation. Thus, they were nearly exactly as they'd been during the reign of Thror, as dark and dismal and solid as Thorin remembered.

The two guards posted at the entrance straightened, gripping their spears more tightly when he came into view, and Thorin wondered if Dain had warned them he might come. Hardly a threat, he thought dismally, alone and scarcely able to walk.

"I would see the prisoner," he managed, his voice sounding somewhat strangled. "I must find..." He fumbled for words, swaying slightly, looking vaguely ill. "I must know the truth... of her guilt."

"Thorin?"

Billa's voice drifted from behind the guards, hoarse and just a bit slurred. Exchanging a glance, the two dwarves shifted with a slight rattle of armor.

"I'm not sure that's wise, my lord." The guard that spoke looked and sounded young. "She's very... wily."

"It is not yours to counsel me, but to obey." Thorin's voice and bearing emboldened noticeably, and the cause wasn't immediately clear. "Let me pass."

The guards looked very uncomfortable, but their orders had obviously not been to defy their king altogether. With one last, reluctant exchange of glances, they withdrew their spears, and the one who had spoken fished at his belt for the keys. The dense metal clanked noisily in the echoing stillness, and it seemed a painfully long time before the heavy door was whimpering on its oxidized hinges.

Thorin showed himself in, and the door shut behind him. The halfling's tiny form darkened the gap between the bars in one of the furthest cells from the main door. Even in the dim light, her familiar profile was still easily recognizable, and Thorin felt his heart leap in his chest the same way it had when she'd spoken a minute before. Seeing her in here - deserved or not - deeply grieved him.
He was silent a long moment, staring contemplatively at the brass toe caps of his boots. "Tell me why," he said, finally, his voice low enough he hoped the guards couldn't make out his words. "You owe me that much, Billa. I trusted you with everything. Why did you betray that trust?"

Somewhere, further down the hall in shadows too deep for even dwarven eyes to penetrate, water dripped slowly. Each tiny splash echoed from stone to stone, second by second until that single, regular noise was all there was in the world. Inside her dank, unadorned cell, the halfling stood quietly by the door, her hands wrapped around the thick metal bars.

Despite the unwashed smell, the smeared, dried blood at her temple, the ragged state of her clothes, Billa's presence seemed more or less unchanged from his last glimpse of her at the gate. Small. Frightened. Vulnerable. After a long pause, she leaned against the bars, her gaze skipping nervously over his face.

"It was drivin' y'mad," she mumbled, her words sliding together, blending at the edges, as though she'd had too much to drink. "I had t'do somethin'."

There was something very wrong with the generally well-spoken hobbit, and Thorin didn't think it was terribly likely she'd been making merry in the dungeons. "I know it was driving me mad," he said, ignoring her slurred speech for the present. "I knew it then, too." He worked hard to keep the offense out of his voice.

"But stealing it from me during the night wasn't the answer. Taking advantage of my trust to get close to me, speaking love, then waiting until I was asleep to take it.... It was my burden to bear, and mine to cast away." An edge crept into his delivery at the last, and he took a moment to collect himself. He was angry with her. Of course he was.

"I didn't care about the humiliation. That was nothing to me. But you... that day... that day at the gate..." He gestured helplessly, as though he was having trouble remembering details, and frowned. "I trusted you, Billa. Why didn't you trust me?"

Large, hazel eyes, dilated and bloodshot, searched his face vaguely, unfocused with confusion and hurt. "Y'wouldn' listen." Her hands slipped a little, and Billa swayed. "He needed our help. But y'wouldn' listen. I was scared. I thought... I's afraid I'd lose you." The more she spoke, the thicker her voice became, until she choked on the words, coughed and sobbed. It was a truly pathetic sound. The halfling sank unsteadily to her knees.

"I was tryin'a help. 'Fisticatin' dwarves. Treasure. Dragon. Still there, hoverin' over it. Y'all wanted it s'bad... countin' an' sortin'... never saw. Never saw." Billa seemed to be rambling now, and it was questionable whether or not she was even aware of his presence anymore. Her words came thick and fast between shuddering sobs. This wasn't the halfling he knew. In the weeks since the Battle, his long recovery, she seemed to have broken.

Thorin desperately wanted to continue being angry with her. Some small part of him insisted she'd brought this upon herself. She hadn't trusted him enough to work through the Arkenstone's hold over him on his own. She had to take things into her own hands, and look where it'd gotten them all?

Perhaps she was just doing this to garner his sympathies. (The voice in his head now sounded remarkably like Dain's.) She knew his weakness for her, and guessing the fate that awaited, would stoop as low as was necessary to save her own life.

These thoughts no sooner darkened a corner of his mind than he dismissed them. He couldn't handle that possibility at the moment, because if she was lying to him now, then everything that had passed
between them was also called into question. Everything Dain had said might be true.

Thorin found himself on his haunches before the bars, found his fingers reaching through a gap to console her. His hand came to rest on her left shoulder. "Shhhhh, Billa. It's alright. Listen to me. It's alright."

Her audible sobs died away, but she continued to shudder noiselessly, and Thorin held her shoulder bracingly. "It's alright, Billa. I believe you." He swallowed. The words came with great effort, and whether it was the truth or not, he knew now... it was a step he needed to take. Choosing to trust was a little different than trusting absolutely. The former took far more effort than the latter.

"I believe you were trying to help me." Thorin leaned into the bars a little, lowering his already soft voice to a whisper. "I'm willing to trust you... on that."

Small hands fumbled for his, shaking just as badly as the rest of her. When Billa lifted her face to his, there was an expression of wild disbelief, mixed with almost hysterical relief in her eyes.

"Thorin." Her voice broke, cracking as her fingers tightened spasmodically around his. She couldn't seem to do anything steadily. "Thorin. Oh gods... Thorin." His name turned into a sob, but this time, she seemed to catch herself. Billa's gaze bored into his, searching his face hungrily, relief eating away at the pain.

"But y're dead. I saw... I saw th'spear. Y'er dead."

Even as she voiced the terror that had robbed her of peace, her shaking hands left his, slipping through the bars to touch his chest, searching for his heartbeat. Thorin could feel the cold, roughened hands fumbling at his collar, and wondered for a crazy second if he was willing to die at her hands. A moment later, though, her palms were flat against his chest, and Billa's body shook with renewed weeping.

Her hand was like ice against his skin, and Thorin covered it completely with his own larger, warmer one. "You thought I was dead?"

Hadn't anyone... told her? She'd been tormented in here all this time without even the simple courtesy of knowing the truth. If there was any source of this malady that seemed to have claimed her, he knew that believing she was dead would have been enough to do the same to him.

"I was wounded, yes. Here." He guided her hand to the swathe of bandages wound about his ribs. "It took me out of the battle, and but for the Skin-Changer, I'd have.... But it wasn't fatal. I'm alright. Not whole, but well enough. I didn't realize..."

He trailed off, his breathing shallow in his chest. He looked away sharply, as though reminded suddenly of something he'd forgotten. There was more she hadn't been told. It seemed Dain had kept her in the dark about everything. "You're not a traitor, Billa. Of that, I'm sure now. But Dain will never be persuaded otherwise. It's just..."

He held her hand tightly, clinging to her as surely as if she might be snatched away from him at any moment. "It's just hopeless."

Billa withdrew a hand to wipe away her tears, seemingly unaware of the futility in the gesture. She continued to weep, though now she laughed as well. She sounded quite mad.

"Never 'opeless. Never... never 'opeless. Never 'opeless." One hand clutched at his, the other continued to smear tears across her face. "Y'er back. Y'er alive. I didn' kill you. I didn'."
"I'm alright, Billa." Thorin urged softly. "Don't worry about me. Please. You're in far more danger than I am. They want to-

"My King." The voice that rang through the stale air was Dain's. Thorin tensed, releasing Billa's hand to stand, wincing. If there was to be any hope of saving the halfling, he knew he couldn't be seen as having his judgment compromised. Love was, no doubt, a compromising force in Dain's mind.

"I'm here." Thorin's reply was quiet. He took one last lingering look at Billa before turning away.

Dain waited until he was outside the main door once more to speak, but it was clear, even in his silence, that he disapproved. "I'm surprised you would risk falling prey to her charms once more, after everything that's happened."

Thorin hesitated, staring pensively at the wall. "A just king seeks the truth before passing judgment, does he not?"

That wasn't a statement Dain could disagree with openly. Indeed, he didn't seem to disagree at all, nodding seriously as he put a hand on Thorin's shoulder and steered him away from the door.

"Aye, and a just king you are, Cousin. I admire your perseverance." He paused, almost delicately. "I worry, though, that truth is not what you'll find. Not in that one. After the creature showed such deceit, how can we trust her to speak truth now?"

Thorin avoided Dain's gaze. He was being evasive now, and that had never been his strong suit. "I need time, Cousin. Give me a day, at least, to consider." He didn't know if it would make any difference, but he could think of no better plan for the present.

He'd lost a dear friend and mentor in the accursed battle, and now it seemed there was a gaping hole where there had once been a solid wall. Old Balin's wisdom was no longer among his resources, and the deficiency was sorely felt.

"A day, Cousin, and you will have my answer."

The dwarf didn't seem to resent the delay, but neither was he thrilled about it. "A reasonable request, my king. Only beware of delaying too long. The wait will not make your decision any easier." Dain supported him up the stairs, then allowed Thorin to shake him off. His expression was one of deep concern as he walked beside his king, though he said nothing.
The halls were long, sparsely lit and mostly empty. The memories of a more prosperous time echoed in the injured dwarf's mind, another grief in a tottering load. At Thorin's request, Dain bowed and left him to think in his quarters. He didn't spend much time alone, though.

"Uncle?" Kili entered cautiously, but without knocking, holding on to the door as though it were a lifeline. He wore a patch over one eye, though Oin had assured Thorin that he wouldn't lose it. It just might not actually work again.

Thorin was slouching in a gilded wooden chair by the hearth, evidently watching the fire go out. He regarded Kili, then turned his attention again to the dying flames. "Nephew."

There was a moment's pause, in which neither said anything, and then Thorin straightened in the chair with a rather forlorn-sounding sigh. "Any news?"

The young dwarf shifted and looked down. "Bombur's gotten worse. The infection's not going down. Oin said you might want to see him before he goes to sleep... you know. In case." The note of misery in Kili's voice was unmistakable.

Thorin nodded somberly. "Aye." Another beat of silence, and then Thorin straightened in the chair with a rather forlorn-sounding sigh. "Any news?"

The young dwarf shifted and looked down. "Bombur's gotten worse. The infection's not going down. Oin said you might want to see him before he goes to sleep... you know. In case." The note of misery in Kili's voice was unmistakable.

Thorin nodded somberly. "Aye." Another beat of silence, and the dwarf king eased himself out of the chair. "I'll go to him now." It was something to do, anyway. On his way out the door, he addressed Kili again.

"If you see Dwalin, tell him I need him. It's important."

In the scraped and scarred healers' hall, which had since been cleared of rubble and meticulously cleaned, Thorin found Oin at Bombur's side. The portly dwarf's cheeks were thinner in his sallow face, his beard unbraided and tucked away in practical little bunches beneath his chin. He looked older, sadder, drained of life and the desire for it.

Thorin nodded somberly. "Aye." Another beat of silence, and the dwarf king eased himself out of the chair. "I'll go to him now." It was something to do, anyway. On his way out the door, he addressed Kili again.

"If you see Dwalin, tell him I need him. It's important."

A strained smile flitted across Bombur's face, and it looked unnatural there, mixing with the pain. "'s alright," he murmured. "Did my duty." His once-plummy voice seemed as drained as the rest of him. "Make sure... my wife..." Bombur didn't need to say more. Thorin felt something tighten in his chest as he nodded. To promise protection and care for the dwarf's family was the least he could do, but it dug sharp edges into his own loss.

The heavy tread of boots, too loud for the healers' hall, announced Dwalin's approach. Kili must have found him quickly. The hulking warrior glanced briefly at Bombur and spared him a nod before turning his attention to his king. Dwalin, too, was changed. His pallor seemed unhealthily pale, though he betrayed no indication of injury or weakness. Whether it was simply the dwarf's iron-clad
will that held him steady or an absence of injuries to weaken him was almost impossible to tell, and Thorin couldn't immediately recall which was the truth.

"Oin, a favor." The king turned back to the old healer. "I understand your dedication to those in your care, but right now I need you somewhere else. Dwalin and I will do what we can here while you're gone, but there's a prisoner in the dungeons who is hurt - I don't know how badly."

Thorin twisted the heavy signet ring from his finger and handed it to Oin. "Tell the guards you are there on my orders, and do not allow them to argue."

Oin took Thorin's ring warily, as though uncertain what to think of it. Still, he nodded his grey head and pointed to a cot near the wall, where a young Iron Hills warrior was stirring fitfully.

"Give 'im some water when he wakes, n' don't let 'im up." That said, the old healer gathered his bag and shuffled out the door, tugging on one frazzled braid, muttering to himself.

Dwalin watched him go with a slight frown, then looked at Bombur, then at Thorin. There was an expression on his haggard face, unfamiliar to the dark eyes and thick jaw. Something like apprehension. Thorin hadn't seen Dwalin look so for many a long year.

"Kili said ye'd want my help wit' somethin'," he said cautiously.

"I do. We need to look after the wounded." Not here. Too many ears. Thorin's Iglishmek was subtle, but plain to anyone well versed in it who happened to be paying attention.

Secrecy was best for now, even among other members of the Company. Dwalin alone would be his confidante until he had a better idea of what his options were. Or whether he had any options at all.

It was quite a sight, the two brawny warriors tending to their injured comrades. Thorin gave out sips of water while Dwalin mopped up a puddle of sick. At some point, Bofur wandered into the hall, looking shell-shocked as he sat down beside his brother. Thorin briefly considered trying to say something comforting, but came to the conclusion that if there was anything comforting that could be said, it'd not be by him. He settled for clasping Bofur's shoulder.

Untold ages passed in that sad hall before Oin's return. The quiet murmurs of the hall's occupants, the expressions of pain and contemplation - there was a strange peace in this place. Thorin hadn't but thought the words when it shattered. The door burst open violently, admitting a furious, grey-haired healer. Oin marched up to Thorin, making no secret of his purpose.

"Who did this? Who ordered that hobbit - who put her down there?! I understand she betrayed us, but Durin's beard, lad, who gave the order for that? In my day, even prisoners of war were given better treatment! After all she's done for us-!"

Thorin winced slightly at Oin's outburst. He'd not wanted to familiarize more people than were necessary with the particulars of Billa's situation, at least not yet. That he might be considering anything other than the fate Dain was so adamant she deserved could not be shared. Not even with Oin.

The dwarf king cleared his throat. "Give your report, and do not question." Again, Thorin signaled quietly. Tell you later.

Dwalin grunted softly, but otherwise gave no indication of the message that had passed between them. If Oin had seen Thorin's fingers moving, he didn't let on. Gruffly, even angrily, he delivered his report, glowering up at his king.
"The prisoner is fevered. Hasn't been treated at all for the injuries received during the Battle. I suspect there's something wrong with her head, but it's hard to tell. Been fed and watered - barely - but not washed. Given the conditions, I'd not expect her to last longer than two, maybe three weeks."
The last words were delivered with such venom, it was a marvel to hear them from the normally gentle old healer.

Thorin caught a glimpse of Oin's thick fingers, half-concealed in the crook of his folded arms.

Hope you know what you do.

The dwarf was nearly deaf, but that didn't mean that he wasn't still very sharp. Thorin shuddered at the thought of what Gloin would be like when he reached his brother's age.

Bofur looked up, frowning. It seemed like he'd only just realized other people were in the room, and now disapproved of their loud conversation.

"He's not talking about Billa, is he?"

Thorin brushed past Oin to get to Bofur. "No more!" he whispered harshly.

Insensitive, maybe, in light of what Bofur was going through, but Thorin had had just about all he could take. All this righteous indignation on the others' part when he was supposed to be the one to defend her, to keep her safe.

If he'd thought it might do an ounce of good, he'd have charged down to the dungeons himself, killed the guards if that's what it took, and gotten her out of there. He'd have protected her with his life. But that wasn't a real option now. That was folly.

Thorin sighed, his face softening a little towards the hatted dwarf. "Bofur, I will explain later. Let that be the end of it."

Bofur looked away, down at his brother's face, then sighed. "Yes, sir." It was uncharacteristic for the dwarf to be so subdued, but then, this wasn't an easy time for any of them.

After getting a full report on Billa's injuries from Oin, the king nodded to Dwalin and took his leave. Their progress back to his quarters was slow, but once they arrived and the door was firmly shut and locked, Thorin wasted absolutely no time in throwing himself into a chair with a groan.

Dwalin stood by the wall, arms folded, and waited for Thorin to collect his thoughts. They'd been comrades for too long for the warrior not to know it was useless to push for an answer until Thorin was good and ready to give it.

"Powerful, and yet so utterly powerless." Thorin gripped the carved armrests of the chair tightly as the tension he'd been holding in check began to break free. "She made a mistake. I know what she did was wrong, but she didn't do it out of spite, or for personal gain. That's the part that Dain will never understand, let alone believe."

He swallowed heavily, frowning into the fire. "They're going to kill her, Dwal. They're going to kill Billa , and there's nothing I can do to stop it."

The dwarf's jaw worked under his beard, but he remained silent for a few moments longer.

"Maybe there's nothing you can do." Dwalin's voice was surprisingly calm, despite its rough quality, and his eyes were hard. "Tell me the whole story. We might think of something yet."
But there was something in his tone, in the way he stood - Thorin had seen it in the healers' hall, when Oin announced to all his outrage concerning Billa's treatment. The thought of her under such conditions had so wounded him, he'd barely noticed it then, so it was with a chill that he now recognized the lack of sympathy in his old friend's face.

"Do you agree with them?" He couldn't. But he might. Thorin's insides knotted themselves so tightly he felt nauseous. Dwalin was his closest friend. Couldn't he see-?

"Maybe death would be a fittin' punishment if she were a dwarf," admitted the warrior. "But she's not. I know what she means to ye, and how many times over she saved yer life, not to mention the rest of us. Puts a sour taste in my mouth to think Dain would have ye deny that debt."

It took Thorin a moment to process these words, and their implications. She wasn't a dwarf. It wasn't as if he'd forgotten that fact. She was, however, a member of his Company, contractually bound, and while that didn't make her one of his subjects, it did make her more liable for actions that put him - and the wellbeing of Erebor - at risk.

There had to be some kind of loophole. Had to be. When he had a chance, he intended to go through the remaining law books with a fine-toothed comb. Dwalin's words reminded him of his life-debt to the halfling, no small matter among dwarves. But he had a feeling Dain would find a way to dismiss such a debt, argue her crime outweighed it, or claim that since she was not a dwarf, she was excluded from the custom.

He filled Dwalin in on the events concerning Billa, providing the contents of the discussion with Dain in particular detail. "She did what she thought was right, Dwalin. She doesn't deserve to die for that. I would sooner abdicate than give the order, if that would do any good."

He was too restless now to sit, and took up pacing, steadily, from one side of the room to the other. "Dain's made it clear she will die whether I give the order or not. He just wants my consent so the rumors that I've sullied Durin's line are expunged, the repute of Erebor's leadership upheld. He wants an example to be made."

He paused in his pacing, turning to face Dwalin. "What am I to do? My hands are tied. There aren't enough here more loyal to me than they are to Dain, and by the time there are, it'll be too late."

Dwalin remained silent for a little longer, his eyes tracking Thorin as the dwarf resumed his pacing. The tension rolling off Erebor's king was thick enough one might cut it with a knife if one tried hard enough.

"Let me take care of it. You can't do anything - they'll be on you like wargs on a fresh carcass. I'll... make her disappear. She might not be able to come back, but at least she'll be alive." Dwalin sighed, a serious, contemplative look crossing his face. "You can trust me to make sure it happens."

"If we were working against anyone other than Dain, I'd almost certainly take you up on that offer." Thorin leaned against the post of his bed, looking quite as though he'd somehow transcended exhaustion and entered a category beyond. "He's too stubborn. Too determined. Even if you took her to one of the elf havens... even there, I don't know if she'd be safe."

"Then I'll take her beyond the edge of the map." Dwalin scowled, his posture tightening as the concept of Thorin doubting him drifted through the room. "Look, I know the chance is slim, but would you rather I died of old age or died tryin' to keep her safe? I'll follow orders, but only if yer orders ain't stupid."

"Dwalin." Thorin's tired gaze grew surprisingly keen as it flashed upon the hulking dwarf. "I would
seek other means of saving her before I risked you, my friend, in such a hopeless venture." His gaze fell away again, coming to rest on a geometric diamond in the intricately-woven rug. A pause.

"Give me time to think on it, and seek the counsel of the ancient books of law. Your brother knew far more of such things than I ever cared to learn."

Discontentment flitted across Dwalin's face, followed by a spasm of grief. It was gone as soon as it had come, but its effects remained. A muscle in his cheek twitched a little, his fists rested, hard as rocks, against arms tense as steel cords. "Let me know what I can do. I'll... try to think of other options." Another short pause passed between them. "I'm not my brother. I'll never be. But I know someone who might be able to help." When Thorin glanced at him expectantly, the warrior even managed a faint smile.

"Gloin's wife is one of the Record Keepers in Ered Luin. He knows more than he lets on."

Thorin's brows knit thoughtfully, and he crossed his arms, unconsciously mirroring Dwalin's posture. "I hesitate, as to involve him is to endanger him. If anything were to happen, I would desire that the consequences fell upon me alone. Not any of the rest of the Company. I cannot have that on my conscience, Dwalin."

Another gap in the conversation, as Thorin seemed to reconsider. "But I've already involved them, haven't I? They're loyal to me, and that's more than enough for Dain." His grip tightened around the bedpost, and then he pushed away from it, moving to pace again. "Send for Gloin, then. We will see what might come of it."

It wasn't long before Gloin stood nervously before his king. The way his expression eased upon seeing Thorin's quarters, it was clear he'd suspected yet another death. The dwarf's large hands and ginger beard were both ink-stained. He, like the others, had been enlisted where he was useful.

"Ya called? I hope it's not for scribe-work. I've had quite enough o' that already." Gloin rolled his shoulders back and spread his feet a little, as though silently reminding his audience that he was a fighter, not a scribbler.

"When you hear the whole story, you may think otherwise." Thorin crossed his hands behind him, taking a step toward the bushy-bearded dwarf.

He related the situation with Billa succinctly, in the space of about a minute, and his posture tensed when he spoke of the fate that awaited the Burglar as early as the morrow if he did not intervene in some way. "I've called you here, then," Thorin said by way of coming to the point, "at Dwalin's recommendation. He indicated... you have insights that may help me in pursuing a different sort of justice than Dain's. I would abide by the laws to the best of my ability, if it were possible. Dain has little use for sentiment, but he does respect our laws."

He moved away from the door once more, resting against the bedpost. It was clear standing for such lengthy periods of time was doing nothing for his recovery. "If I defy the laws upon which Erebor was founded - even if I do not think them fair - I am not fit to rule." Ever more, he was beginning to think such might be the case.

The quiet that settled in the room after Thorin finished speaking was full of tension and tiny shifts as each of the three dwarves looked at the others. At length, Gloin cleared his throat.

"If she's been charged with high treason and judged guilty, there's not really much to be done." His tone was discomfited, and he ran a hand through his beard, fiddling with one of the long ginger braids therein. "The punishment is death, and the law gives no allowance for outsiders. But the only
ones who have the authority to judge a traitor are the king and the kingdom's resident nobles, by a margin of two to one, at very least." Gloin paused. "But I'm a banker, not a record keeper. Himlis would know better than I."

"I can't imagine she would fare very well in a formal hearing, either." Thorin shifted his weight uneasily. "Dain's influence is too great. He'd convince the nobles easily enough. Besides, she's not a dwarf. I doubt Dain would grant her such a courtesy as a trial."

Gloin winced. Thorin spoke only the truth. "Then... the only alternative is the Right of Substitution. Not unheard of for a traitor to be spared that way, but the punishment falls like a hammer, regardless of whose hand is on the anvil."

Dwalin stiffened, his gaze snapping to Thorin's face. "No. Absolutely not. I didn't keep ye alive all this time to have ye throw your life away now."

"So there is an alternative." Thorin seemed not to have heard Dwalin, his eyes distant, his tone soft. "I knew there had to be. There always is."

"No!" Dwalin crossed the room in three swift strides, as though the danger of Thorin's death were imminent. "I'll not have you throw your life away like this! Let me, or one of the others take her place. Erebor needs a king."

"Erebor will have a king." Thorin's face was resolute when he turned to regard Dwalin, his voice calm. "I would not willingly leave my kingdom leaderless, in any event. Or do you misjudge me, Dwalin?"

"And you would ask me to take your place for those boys?" Dwalin's voice became harsh as he spoke. "You would leave me to tell your sister what became of you, for the sake of a halfling?"

"Dwalin!" Gloin's hand rested heavily on the hulking warrior's arm, and Dwalin jerked away with a scowl.

"I owe that halfling a life debt!" Thorin shot back. "Does that mean nothing to you? When my fate was all but certain at the burning cliffs, did she leave me to die? Now that the tables are turned, you expect me to forget the debt I owe? Without her, we'd all still be locked in Thranduil's dungeons. Have you given a thought to that, Dwalin?"

"I never said I'd not take the Right myself," snarled the dwarf, cracking his forehead against Thorin's. They were like two angry rams. Except one of them was still recovering from a near-fatal injury.

Thorin staggered back, struggling to regain his balance. Gloin looked appalled, and rushed to steady his king, but Thorin threw him off, glowering at Dwalin.

"It's not your place to take the Right. The debt is mine, not yours."

"She saved our lives, too!" Dwalin was beginning to sound somewhat desperate. "Please, Thorin, don't do this to us!"

It was so strange, so completely uncharacteristic, that the fact the warrior was actually pleading didn't immediately penetrate. When it did, though, some of the fire seemed to die out of Thorin's eyes. He began to look very tired. "Dwalin, you need to understand. I would rather die than watch you - or anyone else - do so on my behalf. That doesn't mean I want to die. I know the gravity of the decision I face."

He placed a hand on the hulking dwarf's shoulder, tilting his head a little to one side as their gazes
met once more. "If you still serve me, Dwalin, do not try to dissuade me. I need your support, now more than ever." Thorin lowered his voice, looking away sadly. "If not that, then your acceptance will suffice."

Thorin's words fell into silence thick enough to taste, and Dwalin's expression of bitter grief was the only description it needed. He nodded wordlessly and clasped his king's shoulder in return. He wouldn't defy his friend, his comrade.

"I'll second your right," he said at length. *If only the cost weren't so great.*
Never Enough Time

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

How brief the life of true silence. With Gloin and Dwalin gone, Thorin was left in relative peace to contemplate what lay ahead. If he had slept, it seemed but an interlude between one confrontation and another. A soft knock heralded the arrival of another visitor, but it was Dain's voice that broke the silence.

"Cousin. Things have escalated. Rumors are spreading concerning the halfling traitor. I regret the necessity, but I must press you for swift action." He clasped his hands, his expression grim.

Thorin looked stricken, but found himself nodding mutely. Inside, he was numbly resolved, but at least that was better than feeling completely helpless. He turned from Dain, pacing slowly toward the cold hearth.

"So be it." Thorin's voice was composed and quiet. "Tomorrow, then. Is that soon enough?"

Dain relaxed significantly. "Yes, my lord, I believe that will do nicely. I am..." he hesitated a moment, rubbing his hands together in an almost anxious manner, "I'm sorry to have forced this on you. I know it's not easy. But it'll all be over soon."

Thorin ran a hand over the granite mantelpiece. He seemed distant now, as though he were somehow disconnected from the reality that surrounded him. His hand came away dusty and he brushed it off on his tunic. "You're right. It will."

The dwarf king sighed into the empty space. He'd given the death sentence now. It was done. All that remained was to ensure it became his.

If Dain caught the double meaning in his cousin's words, he dismissed it quickly. With a bow, he backed toward the door. "I'll see that things are ready for tomorrow." He paused slightly and glanced around the room, noting the lack of fire and food. "And I'll see that food is sent up immediately. You'll do no one any good if you're faint with hunger."

When the food was brought, Thorin received the servant wordlessly, and didn't protest when his fire was rebuilt. Understandably, ordinary comforts were far from his mind.

To write the letter, or not? If he wrote it, there was always the chance it would be found prematurely, and his designs put to an end. And yet, to force upon the already devastated Dwalin yet another emotionally trying task didn't seem fair. And so, he quietly mixed up a batch of ink and got to work. An hour later, he folded the parchment twice, and stamped his signet ring into the hardening wax seal. "To my beloved sister, Dís" A bit more sentimental than she'd have approved of, perhaps, but it felt somehow... right.

Fili was ready. He doubted himself, of course, as anyone who truly understood the cost of ruling would, but he would gain confidence with time and the benefit of sound guidance. Dwalin would provide the latter, naturally stepping into the role Thorin had assumed at the passing of Dís's husband.

What Thorin planned to do next was risky. It would certainly raise Dain's suspicions if he learned of it, but the dwarf king knew it was necessary. Then again, perhaps Dain already suspected something and wasn't letting on.
When Thorin approached the dungeon gates once more, no less than eight guards stood before the doors, fully armed and armored, their eyes fixed expectantly on him. Dain had definitely been alerted to the possibility of a rescue.

"Open the gate." Thorin stood tall and confident before them. It was amazing the courage lent by foreknowledge of impending death. Suddenly, everything else in life mattered less. Everything but this chance to see her once more before the end. "I will have words with the prisoner."

The guards shifted and exchanged a series of looks. After a moment, they parted and the gates swung open ponderously.

"Lord Dain will be informed," said one of the guards firmly, "and one of our number will escort you in." We're not taking any risks. The unspoken warning wasn't hard to catch. Already, one of the guards was trundling away toward the stairs to alert Dain. Thorin wouldn't have long for his goodbyes.

"Does Lord Dain rule my comings and goings now?" Thorin managed a detached, slightly peeved air. "You may report to him what you wish, but when last I looked, his grandsire was not Thror, King Under the Mountain. He is my subject, not I his, and I am not required to defer to his will."

He allowed this a moment to sink in before continuing. "I will see the prisoner alone, and if Dain is alarmed, he may come here himself and speak his piece."

The guard had clearly not expected this sort of response. He took a quick step backward. "We're only following orders, Your Majesty. The prisoner is dangerous." Another sharp look from Thorin had the guard looking away, shamefaced. "I didn't mean to suggest - of course you can - I mean... yes, sir."

Thorin proceeded through the gate, unhampered and unfollowed. In the dim light of the single lantern afforded the hall, Billa's cell seemed at first to be vacant. The barest hint of movement attracted his attention to the corner farthest from the door.

"Billa?" Even now, his voice was surprisingly steady.

"Thorin... that's right. You're alive." The halfling's words fell faintly upon his ear. She sat up with a rustle like old snakeskin. Her face, in the dim light, was ghastly pale, but she smiled faintly.

Thorin reached through the bars and took her hand with something verging on desperation, his previous composure falling away. "I'm here, Billa. I'm here."

That was all he could think of to say, his impressive vocabulary reduced to the simplest of words. The more he considered it, though, the more he realized it was enough. He couldn't tell her anything. Couldn't even tell her "goodbye" without raising her suspicions. Knowing beforehand was his burden. It didn't need to become hers, as well.

He was kneeling now, his forehead pressed against the bars, scarcely able to look at the pathetic state she'd fallen into - at his hands. "Billa... forgive me. I wish now that I'd trusted you. You never failed me, and how did I repay you? By casting you out when the Heart of the Mountain had made me its thrall. As ever, you wished only to save me from my own folly, and I couldn't see it. Not until now."

He sighed, trying to rub some life back into her cold-stiffened fingers. He'd been so angry with her before, had wanted to continue feeling justified, even partially so. Now that had gone. All he wanted now was her forgiveness.

Her fingers seemed so tiny as they curled around his, bringing stillness to anxious hands. Though her
condition had improved a little since Oin's visit, she seemed more frail, more fragile than ever, as though he might break her with the very hands he now tried to warm her with. And there was that smile. Crooked. Understanding. The precursor to a laugh.

"You're alive. Nothin' else matters. That's... all I ever wanted." She sank slowly to the floor and pressed his hand to her cheek. Very warm. Still feverish?

When Thorin replied, his voice was quiet, rough with emotion. "You gave me a reason to live, Billa, long after I thought I'd lost it. You've saved far more than my life."

Billa let out a weak laugh. "What else could I 'uv done? I love you." She laughed again, and this time it sounded like she was trying not to cry. "Should'a realized b'fore all this. Guess Hobbits really just... don't know much."

"You know enough. You know what truly matters." Thorin glanced back toward the gate, then drew her hand up gently and kissed it.

"Time is short," he whispered. "I must leave you, Billa. Please don't think me unkind. I have no choice. But I will get you out of here. Very soon. You have my word on that."

Perhaps it was something in his tone or face, or maybe a sixth sense females just had. Billa's grip on his fingers became suddenly shaky as she held on as tightly as she could, and fear crossed her features.

"Don' send me away. I'd live in y'er dungeon b'fore I went back... please don'. I'll wait. I won' try t’ escape. I promise."

If she heard the approach of another dwarf, she ignored it, focused so intently on Thorin that he might have been all there was in the world.

Thorin gave Billa's hand a final squeeze, pulling away quickly as the shriek of the iron gate shredded the stillness. He smiled weakly at her, unable even to give voice to his goodbye, and turned away. Perhaps it was for the best. It was becoming too much to conceal. Too much to bear.

Dain was moving hurriedly past the rows of cells, concern and displeasure etched into every line of his face. Thorin met him a few cells down from Billa's, schooling his features to appear more neutral.

"Something wrong, Cousin?" the dwarf king asked, struggling to keep his tone even.

Dain seemed to hesitate, unease crossing his already unsettled expression. "My lord," he began, clearing his throat, "I feel it my duty to warn you against such rash actions. We already know the prisoner is-"

"What the prisoner is," interrupted Thorin, moving swiftly away from Billa's cell, "won't change anything. The matter has been settled."

The older dwarf ended up trotting along in Thorin's wake, frowning. "I was merely concerned about your... seeming attachment. I don't see any need for you to make this more difficult than it has to be."

"She was a member of my Company. Whatever else she might have been to me no longer matters." Thorin shoved the gate open and kept going. "I sought only to inform her of my decision, since no one else here has been decent enough to tell her anything."

"And did you?" Dain asked.
Thorin stopped, finally turning to regard the older dwarf. They were at the base of the wide steps leading to the upper level. "No," Thorin admitted, his veneer weakening. "I... couldn't."

For a moment, something like surprise seemed to pass over Dain's grim features. It passed, however, to be replaced with a look of sympathy.

"It has seemed, on the occasions I've had to speak with her, that her crime was one of passion - that she regrets it daily. But we cannot let it stand. It is... regretful that such a choice should fall to you so soon after your ascent." Dain paused for a breath, choosing his next words carefully. "I believe... you are a strong dwarf. Stronger than I, to be sure. And you will make a good king."

Thorin nodded, his features hardening. "Of course the halfling regrets it. So do all who languish in a cell, awaiting punishment." Pretense had never been a strength of Thorin's, though the words issued with surprising conviction. "But as you say, justice must stand. A king must lead by example in all things - no matter how difficult."

With a slight bow to Dain, Thorin moved swiftly up the steps, possessed now of an unidentifiable source of energy. With only a matter of hours to live, it seemed there wasn't time for exhaustion. There was business yet to be done.

Chapter End Notes

My apologies for not posting this sooner! I was in Hawaii with my amazing boyfriend and his mom. <3 Love them both, and love you for sticking with us this long!
And the Ax Falls

Time, thought the dwarf with a sigh, is a fickle thing. As limited as his remaining hours had been, they’d seemed enough, if only just, to accomplish the last few tasks of this life. Now that his allotted time was all but gone, his grandfather’s heavy crown descending on his brow under Dain's careful hand, there still seemed much to do.

Only a moment seemed to have passed when Dain announced his entrance, and Thorin strode into the room. The hall was enormous, its once-grand walls deeply scarred by the dragon's long habitation. The eye of every dwarf present turned on him. It was a small, but austere assembly. And there, at the foot of the restored throne, knelt Billa. Thorin's heart twisted. In the bright light of the hall, he could see every bruise, the gaunt outline of every bone. Had she been fed at all?

His measured stride hadn't faltered. Already, he stood at the throne. His heavy velvet robe seemed about to throttle him with the weight of the words he hadn't yet said. He turned and sat. The stone was like ice.

Billa looked up at him, and relief swept away the fearful confusion that had seemed to fill her only a moment before.

Thorin tried to swallow and failed. His mouth felt dry as dust. Could he even speak? He couldn't look at her now. She didn't know what was happening. She thought he was in control here, that he wasn't a puppet on the strings of Justice.

Thorin worked hard to focus, fixing his gaze over the heads of the assembly on the carven statue of Durin the Deathless, broken and defaced, that filled the opposite wall. Every eye was on him, watching expectantly. The silence of the place seemed somehow deafening. Thorin managed to swallow.

"The halfling adjudged guilty before our throne, Billa Baggins, of the Shire, was a contractually bound member of our royal Company, and as such, has been held accountable under Dwarven law for the acts of high treason she did commit against our royal person, to be enumerated in full by Lord Dain."

Thorin's voice was constricted, his expression betraying hints of physical pain. When he turned to look at Dain, somehow, his gaze was steady, though his fingers gripped the stone armrests of the throne to minimize their trembling.

The feeling was crushing, like the White Warg's jaws at the Burning Cliffs. This was worse than the death that awaited. He could feel the wave of shock radiating from the hobbit kneeling before him, feel her hurt and betrayal as surely as if they were his own.

Dain gave him a slight nod, then turned to the assembly. "The crimes of high treason against the crown of Erebor, committed by the halfling, are as follows: collaboration with Elves against His Royal Highness, Thorin, son of Thrain, King Under the Mountain; theft of the Arkenstone, also called the King's Jewel, from his royal person; and delivery of said stolen artifact into the hands of the aforementioned Elves. Involvement of one Bard of Esgaroth has been acquitted, he being judged ignorant of dwarven law or the value of the stolen artifact."

Billa let out a soft whimper. "Thorin, what-"

"Silence," grunted a guard, dealing the halfling a blow between the shoulderblades with the butt of
his ax.

Billa pitched forward with a cry of pain, and Thorin stiffened, features twitching with the effort it took not to spring up from the throne and deal a few blows of his own. No. He had to maintain control. Had to play the part perfectly until the appointed time.

Thorin leveled his gaze on the guard, forcibly unclenching his jaw. "Punishment will be meted out in due time, and not a moment before."

The guard mumbled an apology and bowed his head submissively. Billa shuddered.

"Why? Why're you...? I was tryin' t' help!" Her voice cracked, her wasted frame shaking as unseen tears started to flow down her face.

Dain frowned slightly, but continued without looking at the crying halfling. "The punishment for such a crime as this is death, to be executed at the time and in the manner of the King's choosing."

Once again, all eyes turned on Thorin. The silence was torn by Billa's tortured whimpers, but no one else made any noise, waiting with baited breath for Thorin's sentence to fall.

The king didn't speak for what seemed to many an uncomfortably long time, still and quiet as the stone upon which he was seated. Some feared he might be ill. Finally, Thorin drew himself up a little, his gaze rising from the floor to the miserable halfling.

"Billa Baggins, your death will be swift so as to demonstrate the mercy of Erebor's throne. What form the punishment takes beyond that I leave to Lord Dain, so long as sentence is carried out forthwith."

Dain barely even missed a beat. It was rather as though he'd expected something like this to happen.

"It has been decreed, and so it shall be. The halfling, Billa Baggins, is hereby sentenced to death by beheading, to be carried out immediately." Dare he say Dain's voice sounded almost approving? As though such a thing could be approved of.

One of the guards stooped to grasp Billa's arm, pulling her upright. She didn't resist. Didn't look up at him. At anyone. Defeat personified. It hurt to see her like this. Soon, it would be done. Soon, she would be free.

A flat piece of rubble was brought and set before the throne some eight feet distant, and the scraping of the rough stone as it was moved into position was accompanied by the distinct sounds of an ax being sharpened.

Thorin looked about as defeated as Billa now, only vaguely aware of the proceedings, head drooping, eyes glassy. Couldn't it all just be over already? The minutes were slow torture, and he was breaking beneath them.

Finally, all was ready, and Dain gave a nod to the guards. Billa was moved sharply forward, and though she didn't resist, the guards were perhaps unnecessarily rough. One shoved her down onto the flat stone and pinned her there with his heavy boot on her back, turning to look at Dain for confirmation.

Dain took a deep breath, glanced at Thorin, and nodded. The second guard lifted his ax, positioning it carefully above Billa's neck.

For an instant, Thorin considered his options, his words. But he couldn't delay. Not now. Unfamiliar
strength surged through him and without meaning to, he stood.

"STOP!" His voice echoed powerfully around the hall, and it was as though time itself had obeyed him. Then Dain turned, brow furrowed in confusion. Thorin didn't let him speak. "I invoke the Right of Substitution." Turning to Fili, who stood on his right, the dwarf removed his crown. "As my heir and eldest male kin, I charge you, Fili, son of Dis, daughter of Thrain, with the rule of Erebor in my place."

The blond dwarf’s eyes were wide in his young face. So like Frerin. Thorin felt a twinge, but gestured for his nephew to kneel, and placed the crown on his head.

"Wait, you can’t - Thorin, this isn't-" Dain was blustering, clearly at a loss.

But it was as though Thorin hadn't heard him. "Rise, King Under the Mountain. You are Erebor's heart and soul. May she flourish under your reign. Take guidance from the wise, and do not let the trappings of kingship occlude your vision. Remember."

He gripped Fili's arms bracingly, then released him, unfastening the heavy cloak from his own shoulders and transferring it to his nephew's in one fluid motion.

Then Thorin turned to the assembly. "The mantle has been passed, and I am no longer king, but a citizen of Erebor. My invocation stands. I will die in the place of the one adjudged a traitor, and she will be free to go her way in peace. So states the law."

Having finished his words, Thorin moved purposefully to the improvised chopping block, pushed the guard and his ax aside, and pulled the stunned-looking Billa into his arms. "Forgive me, my love," he whispered close to her ear. "I had no choice." Please don't make this harder than it already is.

Billa's eyes were huge and wet. The shock had apparently struck her dumb. Not for long, though.

"No." The word was a constricted whisper in the stillness. Then again, louder. "No! You can't... you can't do this." The halfling's gaze flitted away from Thorin, frantically searching the faces of those around them. "He can't do this. Tell him he can't."

Not even Dain spoke now. It was too solemn a moment it seemed, and only Billa's voice broke the heavy silence.

"Thorin, you can't! Don't do this to me - don't leave me alone."

Thorin shook his head. His voice was steady and quiet. "Billa, there is no way we can be together in this life. You have to understand. You're stronger than I am, my love. I couldn't bear it. Losing you."

He brushed his fingers gently along the curve of her chin, and leaned in to kiss her.

His trembling had ceased, and he looked as peaceful as he had in anyone's memory. "I'll imagine you in the life that's ahead of you, the happiness you will yet have. Live for the both of us, Billa."

Meanwhile, Dwalin seemed to have materialized from the assembly. Thorin acknowledged him, and they exchanged a meaningful look. Take her away from here. Don't let her see.

Tears spilled freely down the halfling's cheeks, and she resisted as Dwalin took her by the shoulders, pulling her away. But she was weak, too weak to fight off the warrior's hands.

"No - NO! Don't let him do this! Don't! NO! LET ME GO!" She thrashed against Dwalin's hands, her words becoming a desperate scream, madness and grief bringing her voice to the breaking point.
"THORIN! Don't leave me, dammit, DON'T LEAVE ME!"

Dain looked from the guards to Thorin, his expression torn. "You're... sure, then?"

"Uncle." Fili was tense as a drawn bow, his features haunted with the echoes of Billa's tortured screams. "Please."

"I have never been more sure." Thorin's reply was barely audible over the assembly's murmurs and Billa's cries, but then, it needn't have been. It was clear from his face his mind was made up. He turned back to the struggling hobbit, managing a fond half-smile. "Farewell, my dear burglar. My heart belongs forever to you, and death will not change that. Don't forget."

Kili moved to stand beside Fili, putting a consoling arm around him. They both looked devastated, but neither of them spoke. Perhaps one day they would learn to understand his choice.

When Billa's agonized voice was no longer heard in the hall, Thorin sighed, turning to Fili with a slight bow. "At your word... my king." He knelt before the block, sweeping his dark hair aside and resting his cheek on the cold stone. He crossed his arms behind him and exhaled slowly. His eyes closed.

He'd faced death many times, but this was the first time he'd welcomed it. This was the first time he'd truly felt peace in its presence. The assembled dwarves' voices fell away one by one until there was again absolute silence.

The cool blade of the ax rested against the back of his neck lightly, almost gently. The weapon was as steady as he could wish, and he heard a shaky sigh from overhead.

"Goodbye... my king."

Not the guard's voice. Dain. Thorin's respect and affection for his cousin soared.

With the faintest of metallic rapports, the ax lifted away from his neck.

*Take care of them. They will look to you now.* The thought was directed at Fili and Dwalin, and even Dain. Billa and Kili and Dis, the rest of the Company. They would live on. They would understand. They had to.

Air parted with a soft hiss as the ax fell.
For a moment, there was silence. The moment became several, stretching uncomfortably. The peace that had come of knowing his death was imminent was waning now that tension was on the rise, and Thorin persuaded himself at length to open his eyes, if only to learn what was taking them so long.

Dain stood over him with an ax in hand, but the weapon hung loosely at his side, and his gaze was on Fili, who still stood beside the throne. The blond dwarf was shaking his head very slowly.

"Do it." Thorin's voice was steady, but he could feel tremors beginning to crawl up his spine. Fili's gaze shifted to his. They were precisely the same shade of blue-grey as his mother's.

"No." The fear had at some point disappeared from the young dwarf's face, leaving him grim and regal under the heavy gold crown. "I will take your throne and lead our people, but I'll not order your death. Dain, bind him and take him to the dungeons. I'll decide on a fitting punishment on the morrow."

The assembly's relief was palpable, though Thorin derived little comfort from it. His wrists were bound behind him with thick cords, and as he was led from the hall he kept his eyes on Fili.

"What you do is no courtesy," he murmured, grave displeasure in his face and voice.

Kili opened his mouth, but a look from his brother silenced him. Now was not the time. As the assembly dispersed with the quiet hum of shocked conversation, Dain approached the young king, pulling him aside.

"What's in your head, boy?" he whispered sharply. "You're just going to... play along with him? He's clearly mad, your uncle. She bewitched him, don't you see? She did this to him!"

Fili's gaze, when it fell on Dain, was as cold as frosted granite. "Do not presume, Cousin, that you know what you speak of," he said softly. "To my knowledge, there is no precedent for what my uncle tried to do today, and I intend to see that the judgement I pass is fair. I will do as he would have done, had he been able." From what hidden well he drew his strength was as much a mystery as the apparent transformation from boy into king. Fili's face was hard. Unforgiving.

"Kili, I want you to find Dwalin and explain what's happened. Have him take Billa somewhere safe - I'll see to her later. Right now, I need to consult with the others."

Kili nodded, looking somewhat shellshocked. "Good. Fine. I'll... do that." His voice was very shaky, but he managed an anxious smile before he moved off quickly.

Dain's expression shifted between rage and stupefaction as he watched the young dwarf go, but he held his peace until Kili was out of hearing range. "You'll let her leave, then? The halfling? You'll let her go free after what she's done to your uncle?" He spat on the stone near Fili's boots. "You lack the courage to do what is necessary. You may wear the crown, but you are no king."

With one final disdainful glare, Dain stormed away, the huge, broad-bladed ax swinging heavily at his side.

Fili waited until he was alone, standing quite still as the sound of Dain's boots faded into silence.

King. He was King Under the Mountain. Likely the youngest king ever crowned.
What was Thorin thinking? No, that was the wrong question. He knew what his uncle had been thinking. He was saving their burglar. But at his own expense? Why? They still needed him.

Anger welled up in his chest, and he slammed a damper on it, cutting the air that fed the flames. Thorin had reasons. He always did, even if he didn't explain them. Still, to leave him and Kili, and his own sister.... Fili shuddered. Losing Uncle Frerin and Father had nearly killed her. Losing Thorin would surely finish what their deaths had started.

Then he and Kili would be alone.

No. Thorin had his reasons.

Fili took a deep breath and lifted his chin slightly. He would be the king Thorin wanted him to be. And his first act would be to find out the truth of this tangled mess.
"You stopped it, lad. Why?" Dwalin's voice was uncertain inside the walls of Fili's sparsely furnished chamber. His tattooed arms were crossed, his features hard, and it was difficult to identify the particular mood into which he'd fallen.

Billa sat, staring at nothing, dried tears still visible on her reddened face. She was clearly in shock, and the news that Thorin hadn't been killed after all had seemed to ease her very little.

"Would you tell me that you wouldn't have, if it had been in your power?" Fili had replaced the heavy crown with a thin circlet of silver, and now fingered it tiredly, his gaze roving from Dwalin to his brother to the devastated halfling and back through the circle again. The grief was still razor-sharp though no one had, in fact, died.

The silence between them deepened, and Dwalin sighed, but gave no denial. It was to his credit that he neither looked away nor tried to defend himself.

"Dwalin, you served my uncle long and faithfully. Of the remaining Company, you best know his heart. So recently taken from the jaws of death, is he so eager to return? He professed love for the burglar," Fili paused to nod at the silent hobbit, "and I would believe it, but... I cannot believe he would leave the rest of us for the sake of that love. I need to know the truth. Was there really no alternative?"

"Believe me, lad. If there'd been, I'da not let 'im choose his own death over it. Was the only way he thought he could save 'er within the bounds of the law. Yer gonna have a hard time doin' that now, I'll warrant."

"But... why didn't he tell us?" Kili's voice was tight. "He was just going to die, like that? I don't get it. Doesn't he love us, too?"

"Of course he loves ye. Don't make this complicated, lad." Dwalin's tone was gruff, but understanding. Fili glanced at his brother and sighed. They weren't the only ones suffering right now.

"I would rather order his death myself, knowing the reasons behind it, than let him die without explaining himself. As of now, I can either deny his substitution and proceed with the original punishment," he nodded tactfully toward Billa, "or I can follow the new course and put my own uncle to death. Pardoning them both, I'm assured, would stir up a great deal of unrest, though that avenue is as legal as the others."

With a sigh, the blond sank onto a low stool and closed his eyes. At times, the world was simply too much to deal with. Now was one of them. His brother was still frowning, the expression seeming lopsided with one eye covered by a thick pad of bandages. Had it really been so long since the Battle that he'd ceased to see the impromptu eyepatch at all? Until just now, Kili had seemed as normal as any other dwarf... though admittedly, there were few in the Mountain that hadn't been hurt.

"You're not actually going to go through with it, are you?" Kili turned away from the halfling, worrying his shirt-front in tight, anxious fists.

"Kee, it might be the only way. I only hope we can solve this before Mam arrives."

"You'd kill Uncle?!" Kili looked horrified. At the time of the ceremony, he'd been too shocked to do more than watch the proceedings unfold. Now he'd had some time to process, and his brother's implication seemed mad, no matter how unavoidable.
"You can't, Fee. You just can't." The young dwarf's voice cracked. "Please, Fee. We have to figure out another way. We have to. I'd rather die than go through that again, watch Uncle with his head on the block, and the ax..." He shuddered. "No. It's not the only way. It can't be."

"Kili." The voice that issued from the seated dwarf was not that of a brother, but that of a king, far more stern than anything he'd ever used toward Kili before. He continued more gently, looking up into his little brother's face. "I know. Please, don't make this harder than it needs to be. I'll do my best. That's all I can do."

Heat pricked along his throat and behind his eyes. The idea was just as repellent to him as to his brother, but the burden of authority, of kingship, wouldn't allow him to turn away from this problem. There was a debt, a punishment, and a crime. All would be dealt with.

"I need to speak with Thorin. Kee, stay here and keep an eye on - where's Billa?" Fili stood a little too quickly and reeled, scanning the room. The hobbit was missing.

Kili looked startled. "She was just here. Less than a minute ago. Billa? Come on, don't do this."

He quickly determined there was nowhere in the chamber she could possibly be hiding, though he checked beneath the low bed frame for good measure. There was only one entrance to the room, and the door had been closed. Somehow, during the course of the search, it had become slightly ajar.

"Where do you think she might've-?" Kili realized the stupidity of the question before it had finished its escape from his mouth. "Mahal save her. We have to stop her. She's not thinking straight."

He barreled out of the room, not waiting to see if the others were following. To the dungeons, Billa...? Are you trying to get yourself killed?
Fighting Words

The answer to that question was a confused jumble, as was everything else in the hobbit's mind. She wandered in a daze, turning only when she encountered stairs that led downward. Though she knew there were dwarves about, it seemed difficult to hear or see them. Nothing was clear. Nothing made sense. Invisible and silent, Billa tottered down another set of stairs.

*Live for both of us, Billa.*

The tears wouldn't come, though her throat tightened. Thorin was gone, and he was never coming back. It wasn't like last time. Last time, it had been her fault, and a miracle had brought him back to her. This time, he'd chosen to leave her.

*Farewell, my dear burglar.*

Fewer voices. Fewer people. No one to find her if she crawled into a corner and waited for death. But she kept moving. The hall she was in was dim. Cool. A little damp. It felt familiar.

Ah. A smile ghosted over her invisible features. The dungeon. How fitting.

Perhaps she would see him one more time. He'd chosen to leave her. Who was she to stop him?

"Billa!" Kili's panicked whisper and the faltering tromp of his boots barely preceded his appearance. The hobbit stumbled out of his way with a hand's-breadth to spare. The young dwarf was moving haphazardly toward the guards outside an iron gate. A different set of cells than she'd been allotted.

The world was clearer now, as though her eyes and ears had suddenly been opened. She would see him, then she would quietly fade away.

She almost stepped right into Fili's path as he followed his brother at a slightly less reckless pace. "Open the gate," he called to the guards, who were eyeing Kili in surprise. "I will speak with the prisoner."

The guards, oddly enough, didn't hesitate this time. "Of course, Your Majesty." One saluted quickly with his spear while the other snapped to retrieving the keys.

The ponderous gate squealed open, and wasn't pulled to again when the brothers had entered. Again very curious.

Kili's hands were clenched again, bunching up the worn silk of his tunic. He was afraid of what he would find. Of what Thorin would say. Afraid his uncle would somehow persuade Fili to finish the plan he'd set into motion.

Thorin's cell was cold, cramped, and dark. A bed, a bucket, a threadbare blanket, folded, untouched. The former king sat hunched against the wall, unmoving, his dark hair draping over his face like a veil. He looked up only when the footsteps reached his cell, hair falling away in thick, cold-stiffened waves.

His eyes pierced through the dimness of the cell, bright as blue fire beneath his dark brows. Or perhaps that was just Kili's imagination. "Have you come to a decision, nephew?" The voice was hoarse, low and grating, like two heavy stones grinding past each other. "Or are you here to ask me to reconsider?"
There was a beat of quiet, in which Fili glanced at his brother and tipped his head slightly. His lips formed the words "Look for her," though he made no sound. When Kili reluctantly moved away, the new king turned his gaze on his uncle.

"I have come to hear the truth, Uncle. You can't expect me to make a just decision when I don't know what's going on."

Thorin sighed, his expression softening slightly. His nephew was very young to have had so much responsibility thrust upon him. It was regrettable that things had turned out the way they had.

"Fili, I do not think any words of mine will justify my actions in your eyes. You simply... cannot understand. You won't until you find she who is your One." He stood, rolling stiff shoulders, and moved to the bars. "Billa. How is she? You've kept her safe?"

Fili tried to consider this objectively. He tried very hard not to let himself feel he'd lost a contest for his uncle's love - and lost to a Hobbit. It was several moments before he could unclench his jaw enough to speak clearly.

"We're looking for her. She has a habit of disappearing." He searched Thorin's face and found regret, guilt, defeat... and condemnation. Fili's indignation leapt up like flames in his chest. His uncle had the gall to thrust him onto the throne and abandon him with a ruined kingdom, a scattered people, and yet held him responsible for the welfare of one halfling female?

The young dwarf immediately regretted the thought. He was genuinely fond of Billa. She was a blessing. But... "If you love her as much as you say, then why aren't you the one taking care of her?" As though prompted by someone else, the words issued in an angry torrent. "You are the greatest, bravest dwarf I've ever known, and yet you show cowardice when those you profess to love need you most. You take the escape of death and leave your burden for others to bear."

Thorin gripped the bars suddenly, a move that startled the younger dwarf. "Don't you think if I'd had the choice I would have opted to save her life without it costing me my own?! I don't want to die any more than you do. I have more than enough reasons to go on living, even without a kingdom."

His hold on the bars slackened, his fierce gaze flicking away. "It's not just because she's my One, Fili. If you had been in death's path and I saw a way to save you, no matter the cost to myself, I would have. Mahal knows, you and Kili are like my own sons."

"Then why didn't you tell us? Give us the chance to choose?" Fili's anger didn't fade as quickly as his uncle's. Indeed, now that he was giving vent to it, it burned hotter than ever. "We pledged our lives to you, some of us have died for your sake already. You think you're the only one who doesn't want to see others die? What about Dwalin? What about Bofur? What about me and Kili? Damnit, what about our mother? She's already lost everyone else - why does she have to lose you, too? And for the sake of a woman she doesn't even know!"

Silence simmered between them for only a moment before Kili yelped in surprise, and Billa appeared, seemingly out of thin air. She was on the floor, clearly having just fallen when Kili bumped into her. And there were fresh tears on her face again.

Kili muttered an apology, helping Billa up, though she didn't seem to take much notice of him or his assistance.

Thorin's mouth was partially agape. He clearly didn't have any idea what to say. How long had she been there listening? Long enough, it seemed. He cleared his throat, crouching down against the bars so his gaze was just beneath hers.
"If I had told you, it would have only made things more difficult," he said at length, his voice quiet, a ripple in the stillness. It wasn't clear whether he was addressing the hobbit or Fili. "I know it was hard. For all of you. But all the same, I can't bring myself to regret... what I tried to do."

He reached through the bars, gently taking Billa's hand. His fingers were so cold, for a moment he regretted it, but she didn't pull away, so neither did he. "If there had been any way to save us both, I would have pursued it. As it was, I had to make the choice between my life and yours. The matter was settled in my mind quickly enough."

At first, no one moved. Billa stared at Thorin, so vacantly that it was hard to tell whether she saw him at all.

"You ought to have given us the choice," said Fili, and his tone was icy. "Rest in peace, Oakenshield." He turned to leave with his cryptic goodbye still hanging in the air.

Billa's gaze twitched to the side, as though she were trying, but unable to watch him leave. When Kili tried to urge her to follow his brother, her fingers suddenly tightened convulsively around Thorin's benumbed hand.

"No," she whispered, an echo of her frantic protests in the hall above. "Don't make me."

Kili leaned down near her ear, tone insistent. "You're in danger, Billa. If Dain finds you here...."

Thorin nodded sadly. "Go with Kili. He will keep you safe. Perhaps... he will bring you back again later." He caressed her hand stiffly, barely able to feel the softness of her skin. "I'm sorry, Billa. I wish I could have spared you all this. I wish..."

He seemed to reconsider. "No, I could never wish I'd not taken you on as my burglar. Not for a moment. I am too selfish to wish away the only happiness I've ever known."

"If I leave... I'll never come back." Billa's eyes closed slowly, and her hand started to slip from Thorin's. "There's no point."

Kili's eyes widened slightly and he gripped her shoulders hard, as though trying to keep her from running away. Shooting a glance at his uncle, he cleared his throat before speaking, hoping his fear didn't show in his voice.

"Billa, there's no reason to do anything... drastic. Fili will take care of things. He's king now. He can make it better."

Thorin didn't seem to have comprehended Kili. His features tightened with alarm, and he took a firmer hold on Billa's hand, pulling her closer to the bars. "Don't talk like that. Please. You can't give up so easily. I- I won't let you."

He saw he'd have to let her in on what he'd been considering in his long hours of solitude. There was nothing left to lose except her, and he wasn't about to allow that.

"I have a plan," he whispered, leaning in. "The odds are against us, but that has never been much of a deterrent."

Kili crouched down beside Billa so he could hear better. "You're going to try to escape?"

Thorin nodded, shifting his weight on his haunches. He loosened his hold on Billa's hand a little. "You've gotten me out of a dungeon once already, my most estimable burglar. This time, though, you have more help, and less Elven wine to tempt you." A brief half-smile. "We would leave Erebor
together for my hall in the Blue Mountains, or perish in the attempt."

"But what about-"

"Kili! Our advisor awaits on your presence." Fili's voice took a hollow quality from the hall as it came to them, and certainly he had enough right to feel that way. A glance at the gate showed the distant, torch-lit figures of the golden-haired king and a stocky, bristly, grey-haired dwarf that could only be Dain.

And suddenly, Billa was gone, skittering across the hall and stooping to pick something up. Then she vanished. As surely as if the air itself had swallowed her up. Kili shook his head and hoped Dain's eyes couldn't penetrate the darkness as well as they once had.

"Don't get caught," he whispered, then trudged toward his brother, head bowed.

He was unable to completely mask the nervousness leaping out from every jittery movement, every angled glance. Dain didn't seem to take note, however, so engrossed was he in a stare-down with Fili.

"And so what is your plan, then? How do you intend to resolve what your uncle has done?" The helmed dwarf seemed equal parts furious and excited, and Kili couldn't figure out just how those two emotions were able to cohabit so comfortably within the older dwarf. "Do you even realize what this... insanity has started? You're not fit to rule. Surely you can see that."

Dain gestured at the blond as though that somehow proved his point. "Why not leave the responsibility to one who is fit? Someone who can undo the damage your uncle has wrought, before it's too late."

"Someone like yourself, you mean?" Kili asked, his tone mockingly pleasant.

Dain seemed ready to give a retort, but stalled when Fili put up a hand. He shot the young king a rebellious look. It was clear his previous sentiment already poisoned his views.

"Dain, you can make a choice, here and now. Either you can hold your peace and serve me as you would have served my uncle, or you can have out with it and challenge me properly. Know, however, that I have already declared Princess Dis my heir, and she will be arriving within the fortnight." There was a quality of tired authority to Fili's words, as though his anger against Thorin had drained away much of his energy.

Dain scoffed. "You forget, boy, who commands the garrison even now occupying your ruined 'kingdom.' Without my aid, you and all your pathetic Company would be weeks dead. If you can strut around, wearing the crown and playing at king, it's only because I am allowing it." Dain's rage seemed to have cooled a little, held in check by calculation. That made Kili even more nervous.

The young dwarf glanced furtively at his brother, and then wisely kept his mouth shut. Now wasn't the time to accuse Dain of treason. He was right. At the moment, they were all but at his mercy.

Fili's expression didn't change a jot from calm or tired, though his lips tightened slightly.

"If you wish to organize a military coup and usurp Erebor's throne, Cousin, might you do it quickly? My rule will be significantly weakened without your advice, and I'd rather not prolong the nobles' suffering."

The guards, still standing at the gate, shifted uncomfortably.

"Why would I want to usurp you?" Dain seemed almost amused by the thought. "As far as I'm
concerned, your uncle is still king. There has been no ceremony. The nobles did not approve of his abdication, or your succession. Placing the crown on your head and speaking a few choice phrases isn't enough.

"That being said," Dain continued quickly, bowling over whatever response Fili might have been trying to make, "I have not yet discovered your uncle's true state. If he has indeed gone mad, as I suspect may be the case, I will consider your bid for the throne, as will the elders."

Kili spoke up finally. "But Thorin chose him to be his successor. Closest male kin. It's his right."

Dain looked somewhat annoyed by the interruption, and waved it off. "Your brother is not the only contender. If Thorin was not in his right mind when he abdicated, his choice of successor means nothing. The people of Erebor have the right to be ruled by one judged to be competent, especially in circumstances like these."

"With all due respect," said Fili softly, "my uncle made his choice, and you will respect it, because unlike the Elves and the Men of this world, we respect the traditions of our forefathers."

Without waiting for Dain's response, the young king turned to leave, trudging slowly toward the stairs as though bearing a heavy burden on his shoulders.
For the King

Fili hadn't gone more than a half-dozen steps toward the stairs when Kili turned to join him. He moved too soon, turning his blind side to Dain.

"He speaks truth," whispered a female voice, though there were no females in evidence. When Dain scanned the hall, the guards were turning their heads to and fro, frowning into the shadows.

The interruption most definitely distracted Dain from the topic at hand. "It's the halfling," he hissed at the guards. "She's hiding in here. Don't let her escape. Two of you, block the entrance. The rest of you, find her." The guards leapt into action, practically tripping over each other in their haste to obey, and made a great show of combing the various alcoves and recesses.

"What are you doing?" Kili turned back, grabbing Dain's arm. "I thought Thorin said-"

Dain threw him off. "What he said is of no consequence. She's the one who started all this, and I intend to make her pay for what she's done."

"Dain!" Fili had turned at the base of the stairs, his expression once more livid. "Would you violate even this? It is his right, and by law, the halfling is absolved of guilt. Any Dwarf that lays a hand on her will be charged. Some of us still uphold the law, even if you think you're above it."

Though Fili's voice rolled down the hall, crystal clear and authoritative, the guards hesitated only very slightly. They were poking their spears into crevices and deep shadows, searching for the missing halfling.

Kili glanced at his brother, then at the still-open gate. How would Billa escape from this? It was all he could do not to react as two small hands grasped the back of his shirt. Billa - it could only be her - hauled herself up onto his back and clung there like a burr. She felt very light and shaky, and Kili feared that if he moved too fast, she would fall.

He crept slowly toward the stairs, desperately trying not to draw Dain's attention.

The older dwarf was frowning at his guards, and evidently paid no heed to Fili's words. He did, however, notice their slight hesitation. "Hurry up, you fools. She can't have gotten far."

He had a broad dagger in his hand now, and his gaze burned into the striated shadows between the cells, filled with murderous intent.

Kili slowly turned his back to the stairs, watching Dain carefully. Billa's fingernails were digging into his skin - not enough to hurt, but enough to be uncomfortable - and sweat began to collect on his face. As he edged backward a little more, he missed his guess and tripped against the lowest step, barely catching himself.

Dain whirled, his suspicions aroused, and moved swiftly toward the brothers. "Give her up. Now. I know you know where she is." His dagger was poised at his side, its rune-etched blade gleaming orange in the torchlight.

Quite suddenly, there was a dagger in both of Fili's hands. He was rigid with anger, teeth bared. "Put that knife away," he hissed quietly, "or I'll be putting mine in your gut. No one threatens my brother." The hall had gone very still, the guards all but holding their breath, waiting to see what
Dain would do. With his helmeted head bowed slightly, it was hard to read the older dwarf's expression. Kili's heart pounded in his ears.

"Fee, you don't -"

"No. Already he's insulted my intelligence, my competence, my skill and my kin. Now he dares accuse me of deceit. I'd not even give him the honor of a challenge. I'd kill him where he stands."

"Enough."

Dain's gaze snapped toward the cells with a surprised scowl, somewhat at a loss. "How...?"

Thorin stood in the gateway, his arms crossed, his eyes fierce beneath lowered brows. "You think it's beyond my abilities to escape from a cell? In my youth, I often made similar locks." He smirked over his shoulder. "Perhaps I made these."

Billa had fallen off when Kili had stumbled, and the younger of the brothers hadn't caught any sign of her after that. He hoped she'd gotten away. There were two guards at the top of the stairs, but it wouldn't be too hard for an invisible halfling to slip past them.

Dain's breath hissed through his teeth. "Guards. Seize him. Now!"

Thorin uncrossed his arms, revealing a dagger, small but very sharp. Kili remembered that he always kept a pair of them in hidden sheaths sewn into the lining of his boots.

The guards had moved to obey, but hesitated when they saw the knife, glancing at Dain uncertainly.

"Well, what are you waiting for?" Dain snapped. "Cowards! I said seize him!"

"Don't touch him!" The halfling's shrill cry seemed to come from the stairs, but the sound echoed sufficiently to confuse the ears of those who heard it.

"Stand down," snapped Fili, shooting a swift glance over his shoulder at the stairs. His authority was close to nothing here, he could see that. Three against nine, and a helpless, invisible halfling to boot. He had failed his uncle in so many ways, and now would do so once again. "Let them go, Dain. If you want the throne, then your quarrel is with me. Challenge me properly, coward, and release those who never threatened you."

"Coward?" That got Dain's attention, and he turned away from Thorin. "That's the best you can offer me? You wouldn't be worth the instant it would take to finish you, boy." He scoffed. "But still... such a challenge does tempt me. If only to end this madness, and restore order to the kingdom."

Kili's hand tightened around the haft of his short sword, and he turned to look at his brother, his uninjured eye pleading silently for permission.

Thorin glowered at the guards approaching him, his knife moving in a slow arc before him, as though deciding which of them it would like to taste first. These guards were battle-hardened as any of the rest of Dain's soldiers, but having recently survived one deadly conflict, none were particularly eager for another so soon.

They made a show of brandishing their weapons, but hung back.

"We will fight to first blood - to death if you insist, but I have no desire to have the death of a kinsman on my hands." Fili's voice was steady again, his hands flexing slowly around the leather-wrapped grips of his favorite knives. "Knives only, if you please."
This was a dangerous game he was playing, and he knew it. He could throw any of his knives (and he had fourteen of them on his person) with as much accuracy as Kili could fire an arrow from his bow, but Dain was wearing heavy leather armor. And if the guards chose, they could ignore the fight and attack his uncle, who was armed only with very small knives while they each held long spears.

"Kili, help Uncle. I've no need of your sword."

The guards exchanged a look, and while one looked back at Thorin, the other glanced at Dain. Neither were desirous of meeting the famed Oakenshield in close combat.

"Get back into your cell," growled one, making a short jab with his spear that came nowhere near Thorin's body.

"I said, don't touch him." Billa's voice was in the hall now. The spear wrenched suddenly to one side and the guard staggered, surprised. There were only two facing off with Thorin directly, but now the others came forward, scowling.

"Witchcraft," growled one. The others agreed with nods and grunts, all weapons swinging in loose arcs, much like Thorin's knife had done.

Recovering his balance and his spear, the guard who had been addressed snarled into the empty air where he suspected the invisible hobbit might be. "Show yourself, coward! Face me and fight like a Dwarf!"

Dain hesitated a space, then made a sound very much like a low growl. "Very well, boy. To the death, it is." As he lunged forward, Kili stepped out of the way, eye wide with horror. Two of the guards turned as he approached Thorin, their spears jutting out to block him.

Kili looked past them to Thorin. His brother was going to die. He knew it. Fili was going to get himself killed, and there was nothing he could do.

Dain may not have been as young and agile as he once was, but he had many, many years of hand-to-hand combat under his belt. His movements were confident and lightning-quick, his strikes calculated and alarmingly accurate as his blade swiped the air inches from his opponent's body, or glanced off Fili's knives with tinny scrapes that echoed off the close walls.

Neither fighter showed any fear as they tested one another. Dain advanced steadily while Fili darted in and out and around. The younger dwarf was accumulating cuts on his arms as once and again he barely dodged or deflected a blow that might have crippled him.

When the blond sprang back and nearly hit the wall, Dain laughed, but he was forced to swiftly block a whirling knife blade as Fili threw one of his weapons. The sharp report of the two blades colliding rang in the narrow space.

"You waste your weapons," snarled Dain, only just before the second knife only just missed his face, opening a long cut across his cheek. He was reasonably surprised, therefore, when he recovered and saw that Fili was holding two more knives, one long and one short.

The fight grew faster and more intense, but followed the same pattern again and again until finally, one of Fili's knives buried itself to the hilt in Dain's shoulder. Then a second in his knife-arm. A third in his other shoulder. Once the first had struck, the others followed swiftly. Fili's arms were covered in cuts, and of the two of them, he was losing more blood, but one can do things with cut arms that one can't with a knife lodged in one's shoulder.

It was as Dain ripped the first knife out of his shoulder that he felt the touch of another blade under

Dain trembled, his adrenaline struggling to overcome the pain, and though he had the will to offer a last show of resistance, it was clear now such a thing would do no more than ensure his death.

He swallowed, and the knives he'd been carrying dropped from his bloody fingers, clattering loudly to the floor. Despite the humiliation coursing through him in great waves, worse, perhaps, than the pain itself, he had to admire the young dwarf. Fili had acquitted himself well.

The guards withdrew their spears, looking both stunned and relieved. They respected the sacred nature of such duels, regardless of where their loyalties lay. Kili rejoined his brother, and from the looks of him, one might've thought he'd been the one in the fight. His hair was sweat-soaked and stuck to his face, his breathing quick and shallow.

"If you ever do anything stupid like that again, I'll... I'll tell Mam. She'll sort you out in a hurry."
There was a note of pride in his tone, though, and more than a hint of teasing.

Dain had collapsed to the floor, weakened by blood loss, his chin lowered to his chest, one hand covering his shoulder. "What's to become of me?" he mumbled into his beard as blood trickled in little streams through his fingers. "Defeated. Disgraced." He glanced at one of the knives still lodged in his shoulder, and shuddered a little. "No. No honor in such a death."

Thorin approached the two brothers quietly, his arm curled at his side in a manner the more observant might have noted looked awkward. His knife was tucked into his belt, but his eyes were a keen enough edge as they surveyed the miserable Dain. "Fili, the terms. You've spared his life in a duel to the death, and thus, he must forfeit all grievance against you, and offer you his lifelong service, if such is your will. Tell him what he is to do with that service."

"Dain." Fili sank unsteadily to his haunches, trembling slightly. "I am young, rash, and inexperienced. You are a more valuable asset than many, and without your help, my rule will be short-lived and unproductive. Serve as my advisor, Cousin. I desperately need a right hand."

One of the guards slipped away to fetch a healer as Dain nodded, seeming overwhelmed by the offer, as well as the pain and weakness. Indeed, the two of them were producing quite a significant puddle on the floor.

Billa longed to pull the ring from her finger, and there was equal allure in throwing her arms around Fili and scolding him as there was in lying down on the floor and going to sleep. She felt unsteady in her weakness, and she remembered now that she'd hardly slept for the past few days, and her meals had been spare.

"Thorin?" she whispered up into his ear. "Can we sleep now?"

Thorin made a soft acquiescent sound. "Soon."

The healer devoted most of his initial attentions to Dain, at Fili's insistence, carefully removing the daggers, cleansing the deep puncture wounds, and binding them securely. Kili assisted silently, mopping up blood, preparing ointment and bandages, and helping his brother tend to himself, since his wounds were less serious. Finally, all was finished.

When Dain had gone, supported, at Fili's command, by his guards and the healer, Thorin turned a tired smile upon his nephew. His right arm was still curled around the invisible halfling, and he suspected she might be asleep.
"I knew you were ready, Fili."

Fili let out a scoff that sounded like a grunt, but made no effort to regain his feet. "Ready? I'm not ready. I've never been less ready. I don't know what I'm doing." He lifted his head, and the look he fixed Thorin with was certainly less than pleased. "Even if I'd had a hundred years to prepare, I'd not be ready. Not to rule Erebor. Not to take your place. My home is Ered Luin. I miss my mother. I don't want to trust Dain - I don't even like him! He's a stubborn old goat with no respect for me or my family." Fili's jaw clenched, and his fists shook at his sides. "Nothing is the way it should be. At best, I'll have to banish you. Both of you. And then where will I be?" The growing anger in his tone was helpless, the struggling of a child against the constraints of new rules and responsibilities.

"I did not say you were ready because you knew everything there was to know about ruling." Thorin seemed fairly unperturbed by Fili's rant. "You are ready because you can acknowledge your own weaknesses, and find ways to overcome them. Just as you did here."

He looked away. "Yes, Billa and I must leave. At the least, until Erebor is more stable, and the rumors have had a chance to die down. What's been done has been done, and there is nothing you or I can do to change it."

He repositioned Billa under his arm, taking a step closer to his nephew, meeting his gaze again. "Always remember - you are not alone in this burden. There are many who will support you and guide you as they may. Your mother. Kili. Dwalin. Even Dain."

"But you must be willing to do what is necessary, and when you don't know how, you must find a way. That is the task I have placed upon you, Nephew, and I will willingly bear your hatred to my dying day if that is the price of leaving my kingdom in such capable hands. The price of protecting that which I hold most dear."

The blond held very still, and Kili could see his brother swaying slightly, as though trying to make a decision that weighed too heavily on him, swinging like a pendulum as he fought with himself. It wasn't hard for the young dwarf to imagine what debate raged in the new king's mind. He himself was suffering the same choice; hold on to the fear and pain, or trust Thorin to have done all he could for them.

"But... Uncle, he still can't pardon you, can he? Not without making the nobles mad." Kili was loath to speak out, but what choice did he have? The words needed to be spoken. Fili shot him a sharp glance, both grateful and angry.

Thorin shook his head. "Billa and I have no choice but to put Erebor behind us. Possibly forever. In volatile times like these, the law must be upheld at all costs."

"But Thorin..." Billa looked up at him, deep sadness in her tired eyes. She'd finally taken the Ring off, if only to be free of its unbearable strain. "You would leave your own people behind? All you've known? Where would we - how would we-?"

"We will find a way." The dwarf's deep voice was grief-stricken, but sure. "It is not where we go that matters; only that we are together. The choices I have made have consequences - to believe I can avoid them is not the way of a Son of Durin. Nor, I expect," he smiled faintly, "of a Baggins."

Billa sighed, and Kili could see she understood. That she knew he was right. He felt a dull ache in his throat and looked away, rubbing at the bandages over his injured eye.

"We'll see each other again. Someday." Billa was watching him, and Kili wondered if the sadness would ever leave her eyes. Such grief, such pain... how could she stand it?
"Don't delay, Uncle. You'll need to be gone by morning if this is to work." Fili's tone was soft now. Tired. Resigned. Kili reached out to touch his shoulder, and this time, his brother didn't shrug him off. With all the blood he'd lost, he couldn't have much energy left.
It was a matter of a few minutes, the return to Thorin's chambers. Thorin set Billa on the bed and buried her in blankets, pleased to hear her snoring softly almost before he'd finished tucking her in. She would need all the rest she could get if she was to be in any condition at all to travel.

Packing was fairly simple. Fili and Kili helped. The latter was sent to the kitchens after supplies while the former stayed to assist his uncle.

"What route will you take?" Fili glanced at Billa's sleeping form, brow furrowed. The hobbit wasn't going to make it far without a proper rest; that was easy to see.

"We'll go to Esgaroth first," Thorin answered quietly, stuffing a few tunics into a rucksack. "We will probably rest there for a few days, if we are welcomed. If not, we will seek shelter wherever we can. After that, the Shire makes the most sense, I suppose. Beyond that, my hall in Ered Luin. We are hardly without options."

Fili sighed. They weren't without options. They would be alright.

"Just... stay safe, Uncle. I know you and Billa will be alright. I'm just..." He paused and swallowed, looking away. "I should be going. I might be missed." And perhaps, though he wouldn't admit it, the goodbyes would remain unsaid.

Thorin acknowledged with a nod, setting the rucksack at the foot of the bed.

Fili moved to the door.

"Nephew." Thorin caught the blond by the forearm, and Fili turned back. The older dwarf's eyes were unmistakably misted, even in the dim light.

"I want you to know... you and your brother have been as sons to me. And you've made me proud. Very proud." Thorin smiled faintly. "Remember that."

Fili nodded, his throat tight. A moment of hesitation passed before he embraced his uncle, trying to communicate in one fierce hug what could never be said aloud. Then the blond released him, turning swiftly to leave before anyone could see the tears he refused to shed. He was a dwarf. He wouldn't let it show.

Kili returned shortly thereafter, and helped his uncle with the remainder of packing, bundling up blankets, food, a tinderbox, and other basic necessities in the mid-sized rucksack. Then, reluctantly, he made motions to leave, the same grief his brother had fought plain on his face.

"You'll... write to us if you can, won't you?"

Thorin nodded. "Of course, Kili. Your mother would kill me if I didn't."

"True enough," the young dwarf chuckled. "Perhaps... perhaps I'll be able to visit you again, when you're settled wherever it is you're going."

"Perhaps."
They were standing by the door, eye to eye, a sad finality in their gazes. Hopeful words were undercut by the reality of the separation. It would be long before they were reunited again, if indeed they ever were.

"Take care of your brother, Kili. He'll need you more than ever now."

"I will, Uncle. I promise."

The familiar forehead touch. The last, reassuring smile. Then the young dwarf was gone.

Thorin stood a moment, facing the door. It was a difficult thing, a difficult choice. There was no question about that. But the choice had been made, and as painful as its consequences were, he couldn't bring himself to regret it.

He turned with a sigh. Billa stirred slightly beneath her mountain of blankets, pushing them down slightly so she could see him. She was panting, wide-eyed, as though she'd woken with a start. "We're... leaving now?"

Thorin shook his head, pacing around to her side of the bed. "In a few hours, Billa. Rest now. I'll wake you when it's time."

The halfling sat up slightly, weighed down by the blankets, arms shaking, and patted the bed beside her. "You need sleep, too."

Thorin hesitated.

Billa pushed the blankets further down, trying to sit up all the way. She was a bit shaky, hints of haunting memories etched into her face. "Please, Thorin. Put out that lamp, love, and come here. I need to know you're beside me, or I might... might have that dream again."

Thorin didn't have to wonder what 'that dream' was. They'd been through enough, it could be any one of a number of memories, or all of them combined. The dwarf shuddered. His rest hadn't been peaceful of late, and he had little doubt Billa would benefit from his presence almost as much as he would from hers.

As he toed off his boots and joined her, Thorin felt her slot into the space between his arm and his side, filling the emptiness perfectly. She was so small, so frail. He worried that the coming journey would be too much for her. But how many times had she proved sturdier, hardier than he thought she would be? A moment passed in silence, save for the rustle of the blankets as they settled. Then he reached over her and extinguished the lamp, plunging the room into darkness.

"Thorin?" Billa's whisper seemed to come from the region of his shoulder, and the dwarf turned his head to look down at her as his eyes adjusted to the shadows. "I... I'm sorry. I know I messed up. I was... just trying to help." She took a shuddering breath, and her hands tangled themselves in his tunic.

Yes, she had made an absolutely monumental blunder. She had betrayed him in the worst way, all with the best intentions. Thorin sighed faintly. Yes, it still hurt to think about, but he had chosen, and now chose again, to forgive her. Perhaps he'd be forgiving her for the same offense many years from now. But he wanted to trust her. Needed to. He gave her a gentle squeeze.

"I know, little gem. It's alright." The feeling of tension leaving her tiny body confirmed that his choice had been the right one. A delicate kiss found his neck in the dark, and Thorin felt a foolish smile cross his face.
"Thank you," she whispered, and a moment later, her breathing was deep and even once more, the barest hint of a snore edging in at the tail end of each breath. And now that the darkness and quiet were complete, and he too was whole with his One against his side, Thorin could barely keep his eyes open.

For now, they were safe.

In a few hours, a new adventure would begin.

Chapter End Notes

Clearly, the moral of this story is... that I need to set an alarm on my phone to remind me to post a chapter per week, instead of remembering several weeks late and just posting them all at once. XP

In other news, I'm planning a couple new stories - a Divergent fix-it and probably something GoT related while the finale bonfire is still burning its way through the internet. If you have OPINIONS about my next story, post them in the comments below, and I'll take them into consideration as I plan. :)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!