Comes Around Again

by scarletjedi

Summary

Gimli closes his eyes, an old Dwarf on the brink of death in the home he had built with his husband in the Undying Lands, and opens them again as a young Dwarf in his childhood home in Ered Luin. He's returned to the tumultuous week before The Company set out to recruit their Burglar from his cosy hobbit hole. Gimli, once again a impetuous teen in the eyes of his family, must get into that Company--the lives of his loved ones, and the very fate of Middle Earth--depends on it.

Notes

Wow, so this story has been rattling in my head for a VERY long time, and because that's my life, has taken a LONG time to get into words as well. This will continue to post until the story is finished, but I can make no guarantees about frequency.

I, like many in this fandom, am heavily influenced in my headcanons by Sansukh by the lovely determanfidd. Any similarity of this story to that is either accidental, or intended with the utmost respect and love.

NOW WITH BONUS ART! All images are embedded, and curtesy of kooricocolada! Check out her art here!

You want more of me? Want to see my ramblings, fan works, and sneak peaks? Or is a
story you love not updated when you expect it to be? Check out my tumblr for status updates and more!
Concerning Gimli

Chapter Notes

I have art! jagervega drew this wonderful piece of art! I've included a link in the first scene, for those of you who don't want to be spoiled. Click Here

and look! A cover by the wonderful Miss Pop!

*UPDATE 8/12/15* Chapter 1 has been edited to match the rest of the fic in style.

See the end of the chapter for more notes
Gimli had told him not to weep; they would find each other in the second song. Legolas had smiled at him, but it was a weak and paltry thing. When Gimli could no longer keep his eyes open, Legolas could no longer keep his tears and wept openly. So passed Gimli, son of Glóin, lulled by the waves of the shores of Aman, drifting away with the gulls’ cry and the near-silent tears of his One.

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The knock hammered on the door, BAM BAM BAM, and Gimli jolted awake.

“Come on, slug-a-bed,” his mother called. “Time to rise.”

Gimli blinked at the ceiling. Was he in the Halls of Mahal? He didn’t expect them to look quite so much like his room in Ered Luin. He pushed himself up to look.

The room was exactly as he remembered: dark, lit by lamps shining blue-green with the glowing plants that lived in the deep, dark places, and with grime caked in corners that he could never scrub clean. There was the crack in his wall, more an eyesore than a danger. The tapestry he had hung to hide it, his first and last attempt at loom-work, had fallen again. The stone face was too brittle. His chest of drawers, also a product of his hands, stood straight and even, if modestly decorated. His mirror, tinted green with age and spotted black, had been a relic found when they had come to these mountains when he was a lad. Between his drawers and his trunk lay his things: his training axe, his ‘prentice tools, a pile of clothing that would quickly become far too small for his growing frame.

Growing frame. Gimli looked down at his hands. They were strong, broad still, but unscarred by years of battle and toil. He had grown used to seeing gnarled knuckles and thick calluses, and instead his fingers were straight and his skin smooth. These were hands of youth.

The door opened and his mother stuck in her head—still dark and fair, elaborately beaded and
braided, wrapped with silver wire as was her custom—and clucked her tongue at the sight of him. “That'll teach you to go drinking with your rascal cousins when you have places to be the next morning,” she said. Her voice was rich and lovely, full of the same Thorobad accent of his father and himself, though hers was tinged with the strange vowels and clicking consonants of her parents, Blacklacks from the south. “Now get dressed! It’s quarter past already, and your father will be back soon.” She ducked back out and Gimli blinked after her.

“Mum,” he mouthed, and then said aloud, “Quarter past?” He froze. His voice hadn’t been that high in centuries, not since before... He raised his hand to his throat—

—and stumbled from bed to stand before his mirror.

“No,” he whispered, eyes wide and feeling faint.

His hair had returned to its early brilliance, true, but there was so much less of it. Unbraided, it tumbled and curled and stopped just below his shoulders, and his beard—his full, thick, long beard—was nothing more than copper fuzz hovering around his cheekbones. His chin and lip were as bald as an elf’s; he felt like crying.

Surely no Maker would be so cruel to make him live out eternity thus—there had to be another explanation.

Oh, how he wished Legolas was here. Gandalf, or The Lady, would know more, yes, but over the years, his husband had grown quite adept at talking Gimli through problems and it was his voice that Gimli missed now.

Gimli could still feel Legolas through their bond, forged on their wedding night, and knew in his bones that Legolas was alive and well—as much as he ever felt (the resonance always was stronger for Legolas), but no more information was forthcoming.

“Gimli!” his mother cried, exasperated, and Gimli reacted as he always had: he hopped to. He grabbed what he hoped were clean clothes and tried to tame his sleep-crazed hair as quickly as possible.

“Coming,” he called back as he hopped into his trousers (too loose at the waist, too long in the leg: recent hand-me-downs from Kíli), and grabbed his boots (old, nearly too small, hole growing near the left heel), ready to sit and pull them on, when something shining in the bedclothes gave him pause. It was a familiar shine, and his breath caught.

Not losing his grip on his boots, Gimli stepped forward and picked up the shining thing: it was Lady Galadriel’s gift, set in crystal. Its perfect facets caught the eerie light of the glowrounds and danced.

“Gimli! Don’t make me call again!” Suhni snapped. Gimli startled, nearly dropping the stone. He put it carefully into his breast pocket, patting the fabric that hid the shine from prying eyes, and trotted out to his mother, boots still in hand.

Suhni was washing dishes when Gimli stepped cautiously into the kitchen. A bowl of her porridge, sweetened with honey and a preserve of the tart red berries that grew on the sides of the mountain and thickened with cream, sat next to a steaming mug of káf. The scene was so achingly familiar, a relic of a childhood left behind for an age, that Gimli had to blink back sudden tears.

Suhni spared him a glance over her shoulder. “Well, don’t just stand there,” she chided with gentle
humor. “Your father’s only gone ’round to Cousin Balin’s, and he’ll want you ready.”

“‘Amad…” Gimli said, trailing off.

Suhni hummed, turning and wiping her hands on a towel. “What is it, dea—oh!” Gimli hugged her tightly, suddenly, and she stopped short. “Inúdoy,” she breathèd, hugging him back until his ribs ached.

After a moment, she pulled back to look at him. “Not that I mind, I’ll always have a hug for my strong lad, but what brought this on?”

Gimli shrugged to encompass everything he couldn’t say, smiling tiredly had just how ineffective the gesture really was. “I had a strange dream,” he said at last, and that was as good a way as any to explain that he had a whole lifetime of memories that hadn’t happened yet.

Suhni eyed him for a moment longer. There was a thread of true-dreaming that ran through their particular branch of the Durin line. Óin had the knack, and while Glóin hadn’t shown it himself, his belief was solid and his prospecting was certainly uncanny. As such, any mention of dreams was taken very seriously. At length, Suhni nodded and shooed him to the table.

“Eat,” she said. “I’ll get your comb. Your hair’s a fright.”

Gimli almost protested—she wouldn’t know how to braid his bonding braid—before he remembered that he wouldn’t be able to wear it proudly, as he had for the past two hundred years. That, and he hadn’t forgotten his mother’s tendency to tug his hair as she worked. Suhni’s own hair was much different from Gimli’s—true Blacklock hair: stiffer, thicker, and had a tendency to halo around her head when she was younger. Now, she kept it is a multitude of tiny braids, woven tightly enough that they flowed when she moved. While Gimli had inherited her darker skin, he had instead gained his father’s Firebeard hair, and as such needed a looser touch to his braids, something his mother occasionally forgot when the rhythm of the work took over. ‘To hell with it,’ he thought, and picked up his spoon. It would be pleasant to have his mother’s braids in his hair again, perhaps moreso if it hurt.

Finally, with a hunger unmatched save by three weary hunters after a three-day chase across the plains of Rohan, he ate his breakfast.

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Glóin had yet to arrive when Gimli finished his food, his mother laughing and tweaking his hair when she caught him lifting the bowl to lick it clean. He nursed his kafé as his mother finished up his braids, letting his thoughts drift while she couldn’t see his expression.

As his hair was pulled back away from his face, his face felt more and more bare. Exposed. Naked. It would be nearly two years before he grew what could reasonably be called a beard. He hadn’t even the hint of fuzz that Kíli’s had been—Gimli felt his breath stutter. It would be is now: Kíli was still alive. So were Fíli and Thorin, Balin, Ori, and Uncle Óin…

Why was he here? Gimli frowned. Something had sent him back here to now—something that saw fit to send him with the Lady’s Gift. He was here for a purpose, and the timing was…suggestive. His presence here had to be tied to the quest for Erebor, perhaps because of his own quest? Or simply his ties to Thorin’s Company? There was something he had to do, to change.

Smaug had to be defeated. Erebor had to be reclaimed to once again become the watchtower of the north. The quest had to be successful…and it had been, or Gimli would never have gone on his
own quest. Something had changed, something that called the very success of the quest for Erebor into question. Gimli’s presence must be the key.

Gimli closed his eyes. That was it—it had to be. *Gimli* was the variable; he had to go on the quest, as only then could he influence events. What influence he was to have, he wasn’t sure, but he had faith that it would reveal itself when he was in the right position.

Still—how was he to travel? He remembered all too well the way his father had responded to his pleas the first time. He was too young, too inexperienced, had too much training left to complete for his father to take that risk.

But Gimli was no longer the simple youth he had been. While he had not yet grown into his full breadth, he had reached his full height. He wasn’t yet at his strongest either, though since he had inherited the prodigious Durin strength he was stronger than most; at this point, he was behind only Dori and Dwalin. He would match Dori at his strongest. He was at the top of his training class, but had yet to best Dwalin in combat (however close to it he had come, and he would before much longer). He was not, actually, ready, but hopefully a life as a warrior had gained him a little wisdom. He wouldn’t know until he had a chance to swing his axe if he had kept any of his skill.

He smiled wryly to himself. *An impossible task at impossible odds. Sounds about right.*

Voices sounded in the hall, and Suhni tied off his last braid. “That’ll be them,” she said, and patted the top of his head as she moved off to open the door, not noticing the way Gimli’s breath caught. Cousin Balin. A marble tomb flashed before his eyes, the long-dark of *Khazad-dûm*. Oh, Ori. Óin. He drew a shuddering breath and blinked damp eyes.

This would be more difficult than he had imagined.

The door burst open. “Gimli, my lad!” Glóin boomed. “Inúdoy—where are you?”

“Here,” he said, standing. His father stood in the doorway, leonine and strong, beard braided proudly. There were others behind him, but Gimli couldn’t see who.

“There’s my boy,” Glóin crowed, clasping Gimli’s shoulders and knocking their heads together.

“Adad,” Gimli said, grinning, and turned to look at the dwarves still coming into the room.

Óin thumped Gimli’s shoulder as he passed to pour himself a mug of *kafé*. Balin stood by the door with Suhni.

“Uncle Óin, Cousin Balin. I didn’t know you were coming,” Gimli said.

“We wouldn’t miss it, laddie,” Óin said, sitting at the table with a quiet groan.

Balin nodded. “Aye,” he said. “It’s not often that Thorin addresses the court.” He walked past Óin, waving Glóin off when he offered the *kafé* pot, and lit his pipe.

Gimli considered what he remembered. There was only one address that Gimli remembered. “So Gandalf’s convinced the king to try for Erebor?”

The room stopped. Óin and Glóin looked at Gimli with near-identical dumbfounded expressions, while Balin narrowed his eyes.

“And how do you know about that, exactly?” Balin asked, and only then did Gimli remember the surprise that had come with Thorin’s resolution. “Those meetings were private.”
“I…” Gimli said, but was at a loss to explain. Legolas had always called him mithril-tongued, but even his was unused to lies. He was saved by his mother.

“Gimli had a dream last night,” Suhni said.

“A dream!” Óin said, dropping his mug to the table with a thunk. “What did you see, lad?”

Suddenly, Gimli knew exactly how he was going to join the Company.

“Many things,” he said, clearing his throat and dropping his voice just a little to resonate through the rooms. He felt like a fair-time act, a charlatan who played at magic for coin. It was a wonder they didn’t all notice immediately. “Not all of it clearly. I didn’t even know that I had dreamed of it until you said, and I knew what would happen. I saw a single mountain, purple against the autumn sky, a city on a lake in flames, and images that made little sense.” He raised an eyebrow. “Gandalf was a frequent sight. As was Thorin looking quite…peev’d.”

They were quiet for a moment before Balin snorted. “Well, you saw him clearly, at least,” he muttered.

Óin stood, and gripped Gimli’s arms tightly. “You saw Erebor—tell me lad, did you see her reclaimed?”

“I saw a mountain under siege,” Gimli said, “beset by foes on all sides, and from a dragon within.” He met Óin’s eyes. “I saw myself, full-bearded and starting to grey, walking her corridors, a Dwarf-Lord of Erebor.”

Óin looked at Balin. “We must tell Thorin.” He looked back at Gimli. “How would you like to go on a quest, lad?”

Groin was on his feet in an instant. “Now wait just a moment!”

“Óin,” Balin said, reasonably, “I really don’t think—”

“He’s too damned young!” Glóin cried, slamming his hand on the table. Gimli sighed, but Óin just crossed his arms and stared down his younger brother.

“He’s better trained than you were when you faced a fight for the first time,” Óin said. “And he’s had a true-dream, Glóin! You asked me to read the portents, and Mahal-knows I do the best I can, but I can’t hold a candle to true-dreams! We will need his sight!”

“I will not—!”

“What makes either of you so sure there will be a call to arms?” Balin said. “We’ll need more than our forces here to fight a dragon.”

Óin looked to Gimli and Gimli wondered if it’d be better to feign ignorance. Before he could say anything, Balin packed his pipe away. “Either way, it’s time to hear what Thorin has to say. My dear,” he said with a little bow, offering his arm to Suhni. Suhni took one look at Glóin, still bristling at his brother, and took Balin’s arm. Óin ushered Gimli out with him with an arm around his shoulders. Glóin, grumbling under his breath, followed behind.

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There was an air of resignation to the halls of the Ered Luin—something Gimli hadn’t realized as a young dwarrow, not knowing anything different. Now, however, Gimli had seen the majesty of
Erebor reclaimed, the fallen splendor of *Khazad-dûm*, and the shining brilliance of *Aglarond*. In the light of the best his people could build, his childhood home seemed shabby in comparison. Faded. So obviously poor—

Gimli cut off that line of thought. His people leave these mountains. They get their home and their gold and their dignity. They get their glory. They just have to endure these next two years.

Óin tightened his arm around. “Alright, lad?”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Just a flash.” A flash of second-sight—the feeling that you’d seen something before. Óin squeezed nearly to the point of pain, and Gimli squeezed his eyes shut. These half-truths already grated. To think he’d have to do this for months—possibly years!

“There he is!”

“Gimmers!”

Fíli. Kíli.

“That is not my name,” Gimli growled reflexively, opening his eyes. Fíli—calm, golden, cocky Fíli—had flanked him, while Kíli, grinning like a loon, walked backwards in front of them.

“You’re going to trip,” Óin said.

“No, I’m not,” Kíli said, affronted, and promptly tripped over his own feet, pin wheeling. Fíli laughed, delighted.

Gimli snorted. “A regular picture of grace,” he intoned. Kíli stuck out his tongue, but turned around to walk forward, anyway. The princes had just returned from patrol, and Kíli started to tell the tale of The Stag, The Hornets, and The Incredibly Handsome Archer Prince and His Obviously Tealous Older Brother, while Fíli provided some much more truthful commentary.

When they reached the chamber, Óin gave Gimli a gentle shove towards his cousins. “Go,” he said, “but wait for me, after.” Gimli nodded, and jogged off, following Fíli’s blond head through the crowd.

Kíli must have spotted Ori, as they were headed straight for him despite the dark looks Dori was sending their way. Dori seemed to feel the princes were the worst sort of influence on his younger brother, but at the same time was reluctant to keep him from royal influence, aware that Ori’s connection to the princes afforded him some privilege that Dori himself was unable to provide. (The true lineage of the Brothers Ri had remained a secret until Erebor, and would explain much about Dori’s complicated feelings). Ori, however, brightened when he noticed their approach.

Fíli and Kíli, and by extension Gimli, had met Ori some few decades past when Ori first apprenticed to Balin. There were few enough dwarrows their age in the mountains that the brothers had immediately accepted him into their small circle of friends. Dori was aghast at what he considered Ori’s presumption, something that had confused Kíli, but made Fíli look old and sad, but conceded to the friendship with some prompting from Balin.

“Come on, Ori!” Kíli said, wrapping an arm around his shoulder and steering him off.

“Come where?” Ori asked, his normally shy voice tinged with a fair amount of wariness—Ori always was rather smart.

“Nothing bad, I promise!” Kíli said, and the flat look Ori gave him looked so much like Dori that
Gimli couldn’t help but laugh.

“A better view, that’s all,” Fíli assured him, settling into step with Gimli. It happened often enough that it took Gimli a few moments to notice the assessing look on Fíli’s face.

“What?” Gimli asked.

Fíli shook his head. “There’s something different about you, today,” he said. “Something heavy, but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

Gimli fought to keep his face free from either surprise or apprehension, but wasn’t quite sure how successful he was; he was an open book even when he had his beard to help obscure his face.

“I had an interesting night,” Gimli said, and grinned. “Maybe I gained the Wisdom of Age that passed Kíli by.”

“You’re just jealous that my beard came in first!” Kíli called back. Ori glanced over his shoulder as well, but tripped and was forced to face wherever it was Kíli dragged him.

“If you can call that a beard,” Gimli returned. He had never seen Kíli with more than a shadow of stubble. He would change that.

Kíli lead them to the left edge of the room, where the stonework had sunk to create a passable ramp to a ledge perfect for four young dwarrows to watch over the heads of the crowd. Kíli went first, then Ori, Gimli, then Fíli was last up.

“Are you sure we should be up here?” Ori asked as they all squeezed onto the ledge. Fíli poked his head over Gimli’s shoulder.

“Not to worry, Ori. We’re princes.”

“That’s right,” Kíli agreed. “It’s got to come with some perks.”

Gimli caught Ori’s eye, crossing his own. Sometimes, Kíli could be incredibly obtuse. Ori bit back a giggle and settled further against the stone. He pulled his journal and a fountain pen from a hidden pocket and started to idly sketch as they waited.

Kíli fidgeted. “Where is he?”

“Maybe he’s lost,” Fíli muttered.

The murmuring of the crowd swelled and crested as Thorin entered the room. He was hard to see at this distance, and Gimli could make out mostly a mass of fur and dark hair. He wore little in the way of trinkets, no great pieces of precious stones, and all he wore that would shine was his mail-armor. Even his sword was unadorned, and hung soldier’s fashion from his hip. Dwalin followed close behind, standing guard while Thorin ascended the dais to speak.

“Dwarves of Ered Luin,” he began, “I speak to you now after long deliberation. We have been here, in the Blue Mountains, for many long years. We have fought and scraped and earned our life seven times over. No longer do we fight like dogs for scraps. We are the Children of Mahal! And we are mighty!” Thorin raised his fist, and the Dwarves stomped their approval.

Thorin held up his hand, and they quieted. “But lately, I look around and I see the faces of our young ones, who have never known the splendor of what our lives could be. Two generations now have been born since the Worm took our home. Two generations who have only stories of our
noble history, only fading memories of gold enough for all.

“Tharkûn has been to speak with me. He brings news of the Dragon Smaug—who has not been seen outside the mountain these past sixty years. It is my intention to make for the Erebor with a company, so as to enter the mountain and take back our home!

“Tomorrow, I make for a meeting with our kin. Dáin Ironfoot’s army is without peer, and that witless worm is no match for an army of Dwarves fighting for their birthright!”

The crowd cheered, and Thorin let them. In the light of the hall he appeared as a king of old, and Gimli felt his breath catch. Here was the King Under the Mountain. Here was the dwarf that the Company would follow to their deaths and beyond.

“Khazad-dûm is lost—the battle at the gates has proved that. Erebor, too, was lost to us—but no longer. The time has come to take back the Lonely Mountain! The time has come to take back our home!”

The crowd roared, and Thorin roared louder. “Dwarves of Erebor! We are going home!”

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After the speech, Óin appeared from the crowd just as Gimli jumped down from his perch. He heard Ori squeak behind him—to be fair, it was a farther height than most Dwarves who had never spent months on horseback, or in the company of elves, would attempt. Óin paused just for a moment, and then took Gimli by the arm and pulled him along to where Thorin was speaking in low tones to Dwalin. As jarring as it was to see the faces of his dead cousins, it was just as jarring to see Dwalin: he had much more hair, and darker, than Gimli was used to, and he moved with the ease of a seasoned warrior in his prime.

Dwalin saw them first, clearing his throat. Thorin paused, turned, and stood a little straighter when he saw who it was. Óin’s status as healer was not inconsiderable, and his status as a visionary was even greater.

Even up close, Thorin really was as larger than life as Gimli remembered—regal, handsome, and with a presence like a thundercloud just over the horizon.

And yet, he looked weary in a way that a truly young Gimli would not have recognized, but Gimli, as he was, recognized very well. It was the look of a leader facing tough times and tougher decisions—of a dwarf who had seen too much strife far too young and for far too long. It was a look he had grown used to on the face of Dáin, had even seen often on Aragorn’s face before his passing, and one he had seen on himself before he sailed with Legolas.

“Cousin Óin,” Thorin said, clapping a hand to Óin’s arm. “And Glóin’s son. You heard, then?”

“Aye,” Óin said. “And you know what a trick that can be.” He held up his horn, and Gimli heard Dwalin snort. Thorin sighed something that could have possibly been a smile.

“I know enough to leave the tricks to you,” Thorin said. “Which trick are you about now?”

“No trick!” Óin said. “We’ve come to sign up to join your quest.”

Thorin looked at them, then past them to where Gimli was sure Glóin and Balin were standing. “Come with me,” he said, and turned, leading them out of the main hall and into his office.

Thorin’s office was rather unlike Dáin’s in Erebor. While they both kept to the austerity of Kings
who were warriors first and foremost in a time of hardship, Dáin’s office was still replete with the ornamentation of his station. Thorin’s, by comparison, was plain and while the furnishings were quality, they were also visibly worn and used. King or no, the bulk of Thorin’s share went to his sister and his nephews, and it showed.

Thorin sat at his desk—massive and made of solid oak, well oiled but deeply scratched. Balin took his place by Thorin’s side, holding his magic eye to his face as he shuffled some papers.

Thorin steepled his fingers. “Cousin—we would be glad to have you. Your skills are a healer would prove invaluable. But I’m afraid Glóin’s son cannot come.” It wasn’t unexpected, but still Gimli felt a jolt of disappointment.

“Oh, now—“ Óin began.

“Finally!” Glóin said. “Someone is speaking some sense!”

“I’ll show you sense!” Óin said, raising his trumpet as if to strike him.

“You and what army?” Glóin huffed, puffing his chest and stomping forward.

“Dáin’s hopefully,” Thorin injected, wry. “But he has yet to respond to my ravens.” It pulled the fight out of Óin and Glóin, and Óin stepped forward with renewed purpose. “Cousin,” he began. “I ask that you reconsider young Gimli, here.”

But Thorin shook his head. “Absolutely not,” Thorin said. “He’s far too young—he doesn’t even have his first whiskers yet!”

Óin was not so easily deterred. “He’s a deft hand with his axe—a born natural,” Óin said. “He can hold his own.”

“The lad is gifted,” Dwalin rumbled. “But he needs practice. He’s yet to beat me in single combat.”

Óin scoffed. “I’ve never beaten you in single combat. If we’re waiting on that, he’d never leave the mountain.”

“He can hear you,” Gimli muttered hotly. He wasn’t going to interrupt—to be seen as young and impulsive would work against him in the long run—but he would defeat Dwalin. Gimli would come to be known across the lands for his axe work. He had his pride!

“Eh?” Óin asked, raising his trumpet to his ear rather then as a cudgel at last. “Oh. Sorry, lad,” Óin said.

“It’s too dangerous,” Glóin said, coming forward and placing his hand on Gimli’s shoulder. “I can’t risk you like that.” He looked up. “Leave it, brother.”

“I cannot,” Óin said, softer now. “I’m sorry, but everything that I am is telling me that Gimli must come with us.” He turned to Thorin. “Gimli has been true-dreaming about this quest. He is an asset that you will need.”

But Thorin shook his head. “That is a matter of opinion,” he said. “And not one that I share.”

“Thorin—“ Óin began.

“Enough!” Thorin said, slamming a hand to the desk with a resounding thwap. “I don’t care if the lad can wield Mahal’s own bloody hammer! He is too young and that’s final.”
“I understand,” Gimli said, making all eyes turn to him. He raised his chin—he was a Dwarf Lord of Erebor, Lord of Aglarond, Elf-friend and one of the Three Hunters, Champion of the Lady Galadriel and Lock Bearer, not a quailing dwarfling. He would comport himself as such. His mother, at least, saw something, and she gasped quietly.

Thorin met his eyes and Gimli stared back. “But you do not agree,” Thorin said.

“That matters not,” Gimli said. “You’re my king.”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “That doesn’t seem to stop certain members of your family,” Thorin said with dry humor.

Gimli said quietly, “Our family.” Balin looked up at him, then, eyes narrowed. It was a good move, appealing to Thorin’s respect for family ties, and one a younger Gimli might not have thought to make. Balin seemed torn between approval of the tactic, a strong skill required in any diplomat, and his own belief that Gimli was not ready to join them.

After a moment, Thorin nodded. “Aye. Our family. And all the more reason for you to stay here.”

“Or all the more reason to go,” Gimli said, then nodded his head. “I know I am young. Untested. I would hesitate to take me on. I still think you should.” He had to play this carefully—it would go just as poorly to understep as it would to overstep, here.

Thorin regarded him steadily. “Know that this is not a slight to your bravery—or your honor.”

“Only my age, and with it my skill. Aye, I know.” Gimli lowered his eyes for a moment. Preheated a different tact. “When you get to Hobbiton,” he said slowly, “bear left at the second fork, or you’ll miss supper. And do not dismiss the hobbit too readily, for the quest will prove a whetstone, not a sledgehammer.” He looked up and bowed, taking his leave to the bewildered faces of his kin.

Well. So much for the easy way.

Chapter End Notes

Inudoy - son
Amad - Mom
Adad - Dad
Tharkun - Gandalf
Khazad-Dum - Moria
Aglarond - Gimli's settlement in Rohan

*Suhni's name is pronounced like "Sunny"
it's finally here! *whew*

SOOO Many thanks to livingmeatloaf for offering to beta for me! I've uploaded a beta'd version of the first chapter as well, so that should read a little more polished.

As I said before, between school and planning a wedding, I have very little time to write. I'm getting these chapters done as fast as I am able. Still, I am SO happy that so many people have enjoyed the first chapter, and your comments have been SO heartening! They've been so wonderful when I'm feeling completely overwhelmed. Thank you all so much!

Enjoy! :)

Gimli needed to think things though, and he always thought best with an axe in his hand. *His* axe was in his room, but there would be weapons at the training grounds and that would work just fine. He headed there, focus already turning inward and not noticing when eyes began to follow him.

The grounds were empty, which was good. No one to ask questions. He stripped his outer tunic and shirt, laying them next to the weapons rack, and took a moment to look at himself. No marks of courage or achievement. No warrior’s ink. No mourning marks. No adornments. (Legolas had always been fascinated by his normally hidden jewelry.) His chest was fully furred, however, so that was something.

He grabbed a pair of hand axes and swung them in gentle circles to warm up. He started with loose figure eights, growing tighter.

On an up beat he stepped forward, flowing through a basic form, one he had long since conquered. From there he spun into another, then another. His arms burned and he nearly tripped into his mastery form—sweat beaded on his brow, dripping into his eyes and he spun, using his momentum to throw himself into the air. He twisted, rolling through the air, and yelled as he came down to land the final strike. He paused, panting—axe embedded in the compact dirt. He was on fire, every inch of him trembled and burned, but he had *done* it. This body, long since grown strange to him, remembered what it did not yet know. The rest, the ease, would come with time and practice.

His mind felt light, clear as it hadn’t since he’d woken in this time. He stood on aching feet and lifted his head proudly.

Someone began to stomp.

Gimli whirled, axes raised, only to see Bifur on the sidelines, stomping his feet.

“Bifur?” Gimli blurted.

Bifur cocked his head, then nodded, pointing at Gimli and slapping his arm, growling in ancient Khuzdul, *You are a mighty fighter.*

Bifur shook his head sharply once, cutting a hand across the air to dismiss Gimli’s words. He signed, “whittling,” as he said, I make toys.

“So you do,” Gimli said. “And yet. I thank you.” He bowed again, lower, and this time Bifur returned the gesture.

The ache in Gimli’s arms and shoulders had waned—a benefit of youth—and he jogged over to the chest to grab a long-handled axe. If Bifur wanted to watch, Gimli would give him something to see.

Gimli spun his axe, using the weight and momentum to propel him forward, adding strength and speed to his strikes. His movements seemed random at first, but to any who had seen combat, it would be clear that he was reliving a battle.

In his minds eye, Gimli swung his axe at wolves at the foothills of Caradhras, at orcs deep in the ruins of Khazad-dum. He fought Uruk-hair behind the wall of Helm’s Deep, his steps shifting to accommodate a partner, an archer fleet of foot with longer reach. He paused to spin his axe over his head as he walked through the Paths of the Dead, swinging down at last at Pelinor and the Black Gates, back to back with Legolas, moving as a unit.

The Tower of the Eye cracked and fell, the terrors of his memory fleeing before the destruction of their master. His axe spun to a stop, and he planted the handle at his feet. His mind was filled only with the sound of his breathing. The little place in his mind that was Legolas glowed like a warm ember before a fire.

A rhythmic pounding entered his mind, and in a breath Gimli was back in Ered Luin. Bifur was no longer his only audience, as he had been joined by Bofur, who stomped and clapped and whistled and made a general spectacle of himself.

Gimli bowed with a showman’s flourish, loose strands of his hair falling into his face. When he righted himself, smoothing his hair back, he saw the third watcher. Lady Dís stood in the entryway, hidden from all but Gimli’s eyes. She nodded her head at him and continued on. Gimli watched the space for a long moment. How long had the princess watched? Lady Dís was well versed in warfare. She would have seen the battle in his moves. Would she have been able to tell he fought as part of a pair? Would she see that his partner was no Dwarf, but was, in fact, an Elf?

The Lady was distinctive in her lack of ire towards Elves, a trait she had tried to pass on to her sons, despite Thorin’s influence. To her credit, she was mostly successful, though both of her sons were wont to ignore their own opinions in this matter in favor of Thorin’s. Indeed, it was due to her lead after the War of the Ring that the reception of Gimli’s marriage to Legolas was anything other than a total disaster. He could only hope that she’d remain an ally this time around.

Shouldering his axe, Gimli went to greet the cousins Ur. Bofur was known to him from his own time in the mines and was good for lifting dark spirits. Gimli knew all too well the benefit of brighter spirits.

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They left in stages, and for different reasons. Thorin left first, headed to a meeting of their kin, the rulers of the dwarf clans, to gather their aid against the Dragon Smaug. Dwalin left next, than Balin. Fíli and Kíli left in the highest spirits, though their parting from Dís was bitter. Gimli watched them as they walked away from Ered Luin.

Gimli’s father had left that morning, still arguing with Óin about Gimli. Gimli had kept his
expression solemn as best as he could, but it was hard; it hurt just as much the second time—more now that he knew what lay in store for them. Suhni had stood with him as they left, her strong hand on his shoulder.

Now, Suhni was at her work desk, drafting the designs for her next collection of jewelry. As a silversmith, most of her commissions were for silverware, and more of that was for repairing existing sets, but small comforts had been coming to the settlement and Suhni could turn her eye towards more ornamental work. Still, Ered Luin had nowhere near the prosperity of Erebor, and the beauty of her work was in its intricacy rather than its weight in gems.

Gimli sat next to the fire, smoking his pipe as he watched the flames, and ran his fingers over his tunic where the Lady’s gift lay hidden. He had to figure out a plan.

He was going after them, of course. He had to. Maybe he would head straight to Rivendell, ask the advice of Lord Elrond. He was wise, and bore a ring of himself. He may have some insight into the whims of the Valar.

It would kill his mother if he just left, but he needed to go.

A knock sounded at the door, quick, loud, and no-nonsense. Suhni looked up, and blinked through her thick jeweler’s lenses. “Who…?” She said, and gestured at him. “Don’t just stand there!”

Gimli scrambled to his feet and to the door. He smoothed his hand over his hair—nothing he could do there—and on the other side of the door, stood Lady Dís.

“Lady Dís!” Gimli said. He stepped back and gestured her inside. “Please!” Lady Dís had grown quite close to his branch of the family once he begun running around after her sons, though he had grown out of calling her “Aunt” years before, and she and Suhni had remained fast friends to the terror of Glóin.

Gimli didn’t remember this visit—was he absent the first time around of was this a new event?

The thought was chilling: he knew he was here to change certain things, but the idea that it could change more than he wanted…

“Dís!” Suhni said, standing and taking her hands. “What a pleasant surprise! May I get you something?”

Dís smiled tightly. “I’m afraid this isn’t a social call, Suhni,” she said. “I am here to talk to Gimli.” She turned and looked at him, her eyes icy clear like blue topaz and just as sharp, and Gimli didn’t need to feign shock.

“Gimli?”

“Me?”

“Yes, you, Gimli.” She undid the clasp of her cloak and hung it by the door. Without the bulk of the fur, she looked much more like Kíli—indeed, she had been the one to teach him the bow, and thus they even moved much the same. She had Thorin’s face, however, slow to smile and quick to anger. She simmered now, though Gimli had no idea why she would be cross with him.

“My brother,” Dís said slowly, and Gimli felt a wave of relief. She was mad at Thorin! “Has seen fit to take my boys, my only sons, with him on this crusade of pride. They are his heirs—” She cut herself off. “They have not yet the sense of wisdom.”
Dís squeezed the bridge of her nose between her fingers, thick from from age and heavy forgework. "You, Gimli, did not join them. Why?"

Gimli raised his eyebrows. "Not for lack of trying," Gimli said. "I was deemed too young—"

"Too young!" Dís exclaimed. "My sons are too young! My brother—That is no excuse."

"And yet, that is all I have," Gimli said.

Dís was quiet for a moment. "All the Company agrees?"

"No," Gimli said. "Your sons are with me, and my uncle. Ori would stand with me, and Nori, if for no other reason than to spite his brother. Bifur is with me, which means Bofur will back me. Balin agrees that I am too young, but admits that I would be useful."

"Yes," Dís said. "I agree. Kíli told me of your dreams, that you saw Erebor reclaimed. Tell me, do your visions see the throne?"

Gimli felt ice settle deep in his gut. "Yes, Lady Dís."

Dís nodded. "And does my brother sit upon it? My sons?"

Gimli hesitated, and it was all Dís needed. "They are marching to their deaths," she said, growing pale. She sat heavily at the table. Suhni rushed and poured her a tumbler of brandy.

Gimli cleared his throat. "Dáin is a good king. He makes us strong—strong enough to face the darkness that is coming."

Dís closed her eyes, fingers tightening on the crystal in her hand. "If you were on the quest, would you bring my sons home to me?"

Gimli bowed. "I would gladly give my life for them," he said, and Suhni gasped.

"No!" Dís snapped. "Not that. I would have you come home with them, Gimli Glóin's Son. Can you promise me that? Can you give me the impossible?"

Gimli met Dís's eyes, wild with the threat of loss. He did not wish to make a promise he could not hold, but he had done the impossible before; the crystal at his breast was proof of that. "Aye," he said softly, "I can."

And well, if he couldn't, he would be dead, too.

Dís tilted her head, and her eyes lightened. "I believe you can," she said. She pulled a sealed letter from the folds of her skirts. "I have a task for you, Gimli. You are to go to Hobbiton and join my brother's crusade, remind my sons to use their heads, and make sure they—and you—return home to me, safe. Do you accept this task?"

Gimli looked at Dís, then his mother who nodded at him. "I accept," he said.

"Good," Dís said, and stood. "You'll have to leave quickly—tonight—if you are to beat the others to Gandalf's rendezvous."

Gimli drew himself up, already thinking of what he would need. "I will leave as soon as I pack," he said. He didn't have new boots. He'd have to mend these fast, or he'd end up with a hole in his boot before they reached Rivendell.
“I can help with that,” Suhni said, and pulled out a bundle wrapped in a thick woolen blanket. She handed it to Gimli and he frowned, looking down at it. Placing it on the table, he unfolded the flaps of blanket and unwrapped a new over-tunic (made of sturdy fabric and larger than he wore now, to have room to grow), pants (optimistically long, Gimli thought, but they would tuck into his boots well enough), and a warm travel hood in deep russet.

Gimli gasped. “Amad…” he said, and trailed off. They couldn’t afford this, especially not with Gimli about to go off.

Suhni smiled sadly, and cupped her hand to Gimli’s head. “I knew the minute you said you had been dreaming. When Dís came to me…I knew.” She sniffed. “You were due for new clothes, anyway,” she said, and forced a smile.

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“Amad,” Gimli said again.

Suhni stopped him. “It’s never a happy day, when a mother sends her only child to war,” she said. “But I do so with pride, for I know you will do me proud.” She kissed his forehead, and then pressed them together. “Bring your fool father back too, will you?”

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Gimli laughed. “I’ll do my best.”

“I have something for you, as well,” Dís said, and returned to her cloak and a large bag that Gimli had missed under the folds of fur. She turned, and handed the bag to him. It was heavy, and distinctive though the cloth. Undoing the tie, he pulled free two new boots, lined with soft wool and fur, and capped in stamped steel.


“All quests depend on the feet of the questors,” she said.

* 

Gimli quickly changed into his new clothes, relaxing into the greater expanse of fabric; while he had stopped noticing the pull across his shoulders, it was never something he had grown used to. The boots from Dís were perfectly sized, warm and water-tight. They reminded him most of all to his old traveling boots, the ones that traveled the span of Middle Earth with a company of nine, and a long honeymoon besides. His mother gave him a spare set of his father’s clothes, for they would serve him better on the road, and they went into his pack with the rest of his things: knitted mittens and a scarf, dry socks and small-clothes, cram and a waterskin, his extra pipe and pipeweed, flint and tinder, and the letter from Dís. The Lady’s Gift remained in his breast pocket.

He had no armor, no helm or mail. His weapons were few—his axe, a couple knives. Of the weapons he had carried on the quest, the throwing-axes were Fíli’s and the great axe his father’s—both were still in the hands of their original wielders. He felt uncommonly light. He would need more weapons before long. Still, this would be enough to get him through the Trollshaw and to Rivendell. The way was perilous, aye, but moreso beyond the Last Homely House in the wilds.

Fully dressed, Gimli met his mother and Dís in the kitchen, where Suhni gave him a wrapped package of bread, cheese, dried smoked meat, and dried fruit pressed into a bar. He placed the package in the top of his pack and embraced his mother. It would be two years before he saw her again, and he felt tears welling in the corners of his eyes.

Suhni pulled back and gently bopped her forehead against Gimli’s. "Du Bekhar, inudoy."

Gimli let out a wet laugh. "Aye," he said. "Amad...May Mahal watch over you while we are apart."
"And you," she said, and pulled away.

Dís laid her hand on his shoulder. "We must go."

"Aye," Gimli said, and followed her to the gates. The guard startled at seeing the Princess appear so late at night, and opened the gate without question. With a final nod, Gimli set off into the night.

It would take nearly a week on foot to reach Bilbo's smial. Gimli had the advantage of the energy of youth, and the knowledge that time was pressing. The moon was nearing fullness, and with his darkvision, Gimli could see quite clearly. He would walk through until morning, and rest to eat. When traveling alone, it was better to sleep in the day, when the nighttime predators were tucked away.

Gimli made good time over the foothills and down into the valley, encountering no more than a fox hunting hares in the gathering dusk. Truly, the Rangers kept the peace well. Gimli chuckled to himself as another piece of Aragorn's past led Gimli to a deeper understanding of his longtime friend.

By the time he reached the rolling green of the shire, he was footsore and tired, but on schedule to arrive before the rest of the company. He camped early that night, hidden just beyond a farmstead and the outer edge of what looked to be an orchard just coming into the first bloom of spring. He had eaten the last of the food from his mother's bundle the day before, but was unwilling yet to eat the cram he had packed. He wished idly for some lembas bread, and shook himself. In the dream-corner of his mind where Legolas lived, the elf laughed merrily at Gimli's fancy, and teased, "And so does the mighty Dwarf Lord of Aglarond find his tastes turn to Elvish delicacy."

Gimli snorted, and thought, "You are the only Elvish delicacy I desire, and gladly would I sup at your sweetness."

The Legolas in his mind flushed as he always did when Gimli used his pretty words, and sent Gimli a look of such heat that Gimli had need to shift in his seat and adjust his trousers. He turned his attention, then, towards food before thoughts of his husband turned him indecent.

This early in the season, there wasn't much to be found. The orchard boughs were budding and nowhere near close to bearing fruit. The gardens were seedlings still. There was no time for roasting nuts, and Gimli was reluctant to build a big enough fire this close to a hobbitish farm, besides. A good stomp with his iron-shod boot on a nearby rock told Gimli of a shallow cave nearby, and where there were hobbits and shallow caves, there were mushrooms. It was the work of merely a quarter of an hour before Gimli had gathered enough mushrooms to feed himself, and still have a sizable amount to gift to Bilbo the next day. On his walk back to his camp, Gimli found some early asparagus and wild strawberries, and a nest of three partridge eggs.

All in all, it was a pleasant little feast, but then again, Gimli expected no less from the land that produced such as hobbits.

As day turned to dusk, Gimli lit his pipe and leaned back against the tree, looking at the sky's colors as he sent rings of smoke dancing away to join the clouds. A gentle breeze rustled his hair. Birds sang in the trees above and around him. It was peaceful, and Gimli allowed himself this: peace would soon be hard to come by.

He wondered how his friends were faring. The hobbits were not yet born, and Gimli was able to count them happy for all of that. Theoden would be yet a boy, and so Eomer and Eowyn counted the same fate as the hobbits, but Aragorn would be a young man, just of age. Where did he roam? And Legolas—in Mirkwood, aye, but how did he fare? Was he looking at the same sunset? The
same stars emerging from their day-long sleep? Did he know to wonder if Gimli did the same? As
Gimli drifted to sleep, he wondered which direction Legolas's dream-paths led.

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Morning came early to Gimli's little camp, and he woke slowly. He stretched, working the
inevitable stiffness out of his limbs, but even so, he was more well-rested and limber than he had
been on any morning previous on this journey. There was something to be said for the rich soil of
the Shire, something softer than the rest of the world that turned even the harshest ground into a
more welcoming bed.

He packed up quickly, and was just setting out as the sun rose fully above the tree line, moving as
quietly as he could in the wake of his discovery: not all hobbits enjoy lazy mornings. The Farmer
was up early, and traveled with several large dogs that not only recognized the scent of a young,
lonely dwarf traveling from the Blue Mountains, but that they knew that said young dwarf had filled
his stomach the night before on ill-gotten gains.

Gimli ran as fast as he could, boots pounding the earth. He was faster than he had been on the
quest, but nowhere near the speed of Legolas, or even Aragorn. Or a hobbit. He hit the road and
continued past, sliding down the hill to hide under the roots of a large tree. He shoved a hand over
his mouth to muffle his breathing, but knew it wouldn't be enough; he had not the hobbit's skill at
hiding.

He waited, and waited, but the dogs never came. Long minutes passed; his breathing calmed and
his heart slowed. He listened to the rocks and the earth behind him, but there was no sign of the
hounds nearby. Gimli started to chuckle, his head falling back against a tree root. How many times
had Merry and Pippin told him of their adventures, stealing crops from Farmer Maggot? It was a
tradition among the young here tolerated by an older generation who had carried the tradition
themselves when young; the dogs knew to chase them off the property, but not to hunt him down.

Hobbits.

Gimli stood and brushed himself off, checking himself over. His pack had been half-crushed
underneath him, but luckily the mushrooms he had picked for Bilbo had remained intact. Whistling
softly to himself, Gimli clambered back onto the road and set off for Hobbiton proper. The roads
were rather empty, and Gimli wondered how much of it was because of him.

It was a Wednesday, which meant the market was open (though, in Hobbiton, the market was open
every day), and Gimli found himself walking bemusedly through the most hobbitish bustle he had
ever had the fortune to find himself in the middle of. Like Dwarven marketplaces, the voices at the
stalls were engaged in lively haggling—something Dwarves had down to an art, but that hobbits
seemed to regard as more sport than anything, a formality, even. Most of the vendors were selling
food, which was unsurprising, though there were a few selling ale and spirits, and one selling
Longbottom Leaf.

Gimli perked up considerably when he saw the familiar barrels; Merry had set up quite a steady
trade with Aglarond, dealing in hobbitish pipe-weed, and Gimli had grown quite used to the
sweeter smoke. He had missed it in Valinor, when there was no pipeweed to be found unless he
was visited by Oloron (for he was Oloron in those Deathless Lands, not Gandalf). He had missed it
even more in Ered Luin, were pipeweed was plentiful, but was the harsh, Dwarfish breed of his
youth.

Gimli had little money to trade, and he knew less the current price for pipeweed, but his beads were
made of gold, and he had a few coins in his pockets. It would be well worth it, to have that smoke
again.
It took a moment for the vendor (a Brandybuck, some relation to Merry, Gimli was sure. They had the same nose and brow), to notice Gimli standing there. He turned, grinning out of the side of his mouth as the other side was preoccupied with a curving long-stemmed pipe.

"And how can I help you, sir?" The vendor asked.

"I would like to buy a supply of your leaf," Gimli said. "I have heard that the Old Toby is particularly fine."

The vendor blinked, surprised, and pushed his hat back on his head. "Bless me," he said. "Beggin' your pardon, but I hadn't realized—we don't get too many Dwarves around these parts. I thought you were a Stoor, with that hair on your cheek, and from down by Bree from your dress. It wasn't until you spoke..." He shook his head. Gimli felt his ears redden; so that's why he had been left alone. Without his beard, they had mistook him for a burly hobbit.

"No matter," Gimli said. "My interest stands." *despite your rudeness,* he didn't add.

"Of course, of course," the vendor said. "I'm Periadoc, folks call me Perry. Old Toby you said? Well, I can't fault your taste. It's our best seller, and with good reason. How much did you say...?"

Gimli smiled wryly. "If I had my way, I'd buy the lot. It's been years since I've last tasted that fine leaf, and it's not plentiful where I am going. However, I intend to be traveling for a good long while, and even I cannot carry several barrels upon my back."

Perry's eyes were wide. "Mayhaps one barrel, then?" he asked, hopeful. Gimli looked at the lot, and nestled in-between the large barrels were several one-third the size.

"Mayhaps a small one," Gimli said, gesturing. "Name your price for that one."

"That?" Perry said. "Oh, that isn't enough for a journey, not for such as you. Are you sure you wouldn't be wanting a larger size? I'd hate for you to run out before you reached your destination."

This hobbit was tenacious, Gimli had to give him that, and he had the Brandybuck way of being blunt in a way so charming, you'd never notice.

"I'm afraid not," Gimli said. "But I am due to pass through here again in about two years time, and then I will be in a much different position. One where I may very well be able to buy out your stock, and perhaps even set up regular shipments, if you are willing."

Perry narrowed his eyes. "I believe you believe that," he said. "And I believe that I believe you. The third barrels are three-silver."

There is was, the test. "Three-silver?" Gimli said. "Seems a bit high for a third-barrel."

"Indeed?" Perry said. "But you said yourself, this is *Old Toby.* It's what you miss, when you're missing your pipe."

"Two-silver," Gimli said. "Is still high for a third-barrel, but you're right; it *is* Old Toby."

"Two-silver," Perry countered, quick as a wink, "And give us a hand with the cart. The axle cracked on the way here. It's braced well for now, but it needs a good shoring."

"Done," Gimli said, and held out his hand. Perry hesitated for the briefest of moments, making Gimli wonder if hobbits didn't shake hands to conclude deals, but then Perry gripped his hand with quite admirable strength for a hobbit.
It was the work of only three quarters of an hour to fix the cart and Perry was impressed enough to throw Gimli a second pouch of Old Toby as a bonus. So, Gimli found himself back on the road to Bilbo's well before tea-time. In fact, he would arrive at Bag End before luncheon.

When Gimli crested that last hill and finally saw Bag End, the hobbit in question was nowhere to be seen, though a plume of friendly smoke curled its way into the sky. As he walked, the round door opened, and a fair-curled head poked out. After a moment looking like so much a bunny in a burrow, Bilbo stepped out onto his front porch and, with yet another glance around, he lit his pipe. He relaxed all at once, sitting on a little bench next to the door, and idly puffed at his pipe, sending rings of smoke over the hill.

Bilbo looked very young. He was older—as a hobbit reckons—than Gimli by a good margin, but his face held none of the weathering Gimli remembered. It was not just his age, Gimli knew, but the weight of the ring that hardened this hobbit—the Ring and the adventure Gimli was about to embark with him upon.

Gimli cleared his throat, and a Bilbo stiffened. "I told you yesterday, I don't want any ad—oh!" Bilbo had spotted his guests and looked quite flustered. "Beg your pardon, I thought you were someone else ."

Gimli smiled. "It is quite alright, Mr. Baggins; if I'm to be mistaken for anyone, I am proud for it to be Gandalf. I am Gimli son of Glóin." He bowed. "At your service."

"Bilbo Baggins," he said standing, "at yours, but you seem to know my name already."

"I'm afraid I am part of that adventure you seem so keen on avoiding," Gimli admitted. "I have come before the others to help you: to have 14 dwarves and a wizard arrive unannounced for tea would tax even the most generous of hosts."

Bilbo paled. "Four...teen? oh..." He sat back down and shook his head. "I'm sorry. I don't understand. I told Gandalf that I wanted to part of this. I don't even know how you know where to find me!"

"The mark on your door," Gimli said. "It says "Expert Treasure Hunter in search of work"—well, it says "Burglar," but,"

"Mark?" Bilbo said, jumping to his feet and examining the door. "There's no mark! It was painted a week ago!"


"No," Bilbo shook his head. "No, no. I've still got some paint. If you want to help me, we can paint it over!"

Gimli smiled sympathetically at him. "Lad, he's a wizard. There isn't a pigment in Middle Earth that would hid that sign unless he wanted it to. I'm sorry. My kin will be here in time for tea, regardless, hungry from a long trek on light rations." He pulled the bag from his pack. "But I've brought mushrooms, as an apology." He held the pack out, and after a moment Bilbo took the sack. He opened it, and stared at the fat caps in his hands.

"Well," Bilbo said after a long minute. "I still don't know about any adventure, but I am still Bilbo Baggins, of Bag End, and I'll be dammed if any guest goes hungry in my home. I need a cup of tea, and a spot of cake, and it's almost time for luncheon, besides. Come on in, Master Gimli, and we will discuss this afternoon like civilized hobbits." Bilbo opened the gate and Gimli followed him in
through the round green door.

"Boots off, if you don't mind," Bilbo called as he hustled down the corridor that hopefully led to the kitchen. Gimli put his pack by the door and looked around; the smial was built neatly into the side of the hill, much the same way Ered Luin was built into the mountain, but there was something very different about the press of the earth around them, something disorienting. Gimli shook his head and hoped he wouldn't get too lost in the winding hallways, as apparently his underground sense was befuddled by hobbitish architecture. "Washroom is through there," Bilbo's voice drifted out, "Second door on your left!"

"My thanks!" Gimli called, back, and went to wash. The room was quaint; it had neither the grand splendor of Dwarvish baths, nor the natural elegance of Elvish pools. It was a hobbit washroom for a hobbit host, and therefore, while it had all the comforts needed, it was designed to serve one at a time. Quickly, Gimli washed the road dust from his face and hands, and brushed the dust from his hair and cheek before leaving the room to find his host.

Bilbo was by the stove when Gimli finally found the kitchen. He was frying two thick slices of bread, each cut with a hole and filled with egg. In the next pan bacon fried, and a small pot of beans was beginning to bubble. A kettle hung over the fire, and a teapot stood waiting on the counter. The table was already covered with dishes of pickled cucumbers and beets, flaky rolls, cold chicken, and cheese. Gimli looked around with wide eyes. Though he was used to the quantity of food Merry and Pippin could eat, after a lifetime of friendship, it was still something to see splayed out like this.

"I have the tea on," Bilbo said, not turning. "Or I've some small-bier if you prefer. Wine. I'd save the ale for later, but I've that as well, if that's your taste."

"Tea is well enough for me, thank you," Gimli said. "But I expect the others will take you up on that offer."

"I've no doubt. Please, have a seat," Bilbo said, and quickly plated the eggy bread. A few moments later the bacon joined the toast, and a plate was placed in front of Gimli. The pot of beans was placed on the table on top of a cunning square of woven rags, and just as the kettle began to whistle and shake, Bilbo scooped it up off of the fire and poured it over the leaves in the pot. With two hands, Bilbo placed it on the table as well. "We'll just give that a moment. Go ahead and eat; if you don't mind, we will discuss what needs to be done after."

Gimli nodded, and following Bilbo's lead picked up his fork. As Bilbo had requested, they were silent while they ate, their attention focused on the food in front of them. After the last week of travel, Gimli was quite hungry, and found himself matching Bilbo bite for bite. Hobbit custom demanded that, while food must always be served at important meetings, no business was to be discussed until the majority of the meal was finished. The nuances of deciding exactly when were many, and Gimli had learned to follow the hobbit's lead, as he had gotten exceedingly lost when Pippin had tried to explain it to him. Frodo, for his part, had only laughed and said he would be no better teacher, as Bilbo was not one for such strict propriety. Gimli had a feeling that he would be more observant now.

At last, after they had put away a rather alarming amount of food, particularly Bilbo who was so very small, Bilbo leaned back in his seat and pulled out his pipe. He continued to nibble at a sweet biscuit, but it appeared it was time for business. Gimli wiped the crumbs from his mouth and hoped his manners had been good enough.

"Now," Bilbo said. "You are the first dwarf I have ever fed, and I had no other idea other than to feed you as a hobbit. You have done well, I must say, but I would know: how do Dwarves usually
eat? I will plan accordingly."

"Well," Gimli said, placing his napkin on the table. What to tell? Gimli had long abandoned most of the traditional secrecy, as had many of the Dwarves post the War of the Ring, but that was not yet even a glimmer, and he had to tell only what Bilbo might hear elsewhere, or he would never hear the end of it from his father. "The traditional food of the Dwarves is heavy and hearty and rich. We have many ways of preparing game meats and grains—though we do not grow them ourselves. We do not regularly farm, you see. Fruit is rare, and thus prized, and our sweets are flavored with nuts and sweetened with honey. As to our eating habits...Dwarves generally eat two meals a day, something small to start the morning, and a larger meal to end the day."

Bilbo appeared faint. "Two meals...but you're so much bigger than hobbits, and we have at least seven on a lean day! How do you manage?"

Gimli shrugged. "We endure because that is our nature. Our meals are smaller; this luncheon would be considered quite the supper for a family, let alone luncheon for two. Many are quite used to going on one meal a day, or none, in hard times. Though, we can eat with the best of hobbits when it comes to feast days." Gimli cracked a smile.

Bilbo's placed the tips of his fingers on the back of Gimli's hand. "I am familiar enough with lean times," Bilbo said. "Winter is always leaner than summer, and some—well." He narrowed his eyes, and Gimli saw a bit of that cunning brilliance that would come to define this particular hobbit. "There have been many hard times, haven't there?"

"A century worth," Gimli said, voice quiet. "The Dwarves who come to you today do so out of a desire to reclaim their homeland and to regain their history, and aye, their gold—for Dwarves, gold means history, and culture, and most of all, the ability to lead lives out of poverty."

"A century," Bilbo shook his head. "Well, hobbit cooking will have to suffice Dwarven appetites, I suppose. We'll need to head to market; I've some cold chicken and smoked ham, sausages and bacon, but that is not nearly enough to feed a century of hunger. goose, I think. A spring lamb, if they still have one, and some more pork from the butcher. Fish!" Bilbo stood and went to his pantry; Gimli followed, and was soon laden with the contents as Bilbo passed them to him, explaining what he was planning on cooking with each.

Soon, Gimli found himself outside of Bad End, head fairly spinning, with a list of supplies to get from the market and a brisk, "With those arms, you can carry a heck of a lot more than me. Off with you then, and hurry! Good meat takes time to prepare!" Bemused, Gimli let his feet take him once more to the marketplace, and he let himself daydream of the surprise that would be waiting for his kin.
Dwalin was the first to arrive.

The knock sounded just before teatime, as Bilbo was directing Gimli on where and how to move the large, cast-iron pot full of dumpling stew. "Oh!" Bilbo fairly squeaked, and Gimli managed to not drop the pot only by sheer luck. "They're here!"

Bilbo scurried off to answer the door. Gimli placed the pot down on the sideboard and smoothed a hand over his hair, his tunic. 'Here we are,' he thought. The letter from Dís sat heavy in his pocket where it rested next to the Lady's Gift, and he just hoped he had been correct in his prediction of who would support his presence here.

"...right through there," Bilbo's voice drifted down the hall, and Dwalin grunted a reply. Gimli rolled his eyes; if that had been Bilbo's first introduction to Dwarves, no wonder he had been a bit overwhelmed.

Dwalin appeared in the doorway and was so distracted by the sheer quantity of food laid before him, he did not immediately notice Gimli. In fact, Gimli was certain he saw a tear form in the corner of Dwalin's eye, and filed that information away for later.

Honestly, it was truly a tear-inducing feast. Even at the height of wealth Gimli remembered, Erebor's feasts would be hard-pressed to match the sheer volume and quality of the dishes before them. There were bowls of potatoes and other starchy tubers, mashed, roasted, and made into salad. There was a plate of spicy sausages next to a creamy gravy to cut the heat, and a little plate of savory meat-pies. A whole roasted lamb sat in the center of the table next to a brace of hens, seasoned with fresh herbs Bilbo had picked from his newly sprung garden. There were three types of rolls, four types of cheese, five types of jam, and a large pot of honey to drizzle over the lot of it. Not to mention the fruit pies and seed cakes Bilbo had on the sideboard for afters, and the bowls of pickled vegetables and whole cooked eggs for munching. And, naturally, the mushrooms Gimli had brought had been stuffed and sautéed and braised and added to every dish possible. Hobbits did really like mushrooms.

Of course, then Dwalin noticed him, narrowing his eyes. Gimli straightened and met Dwalin's stare, unflinching. He had every right to be here, regardless of what Thorin had said. Finally, Dwalin grunted, shook his head, and attended to more pressing matters; he took a seat and settled in
to eat. His first bite of roast chicken was a test and he paused, chicken grease shining in his beard, before he let slip his hunger, barely pausing to fill his plate before feeding his face.

"Very good, this," he said around a mouthful of sausage, once Bilbo appeared in the doorway. "My compliments."

"Oh, Thank you," Bilbo said with a funny little bow, and then the doorbell rang again and he was gone. Gimli took a piece of cheese and an apple, and ignored the look Dwalin gave him. If Dwalin didn't approve, Dwalin was more than capable of saying so.

"Balin," Gimli heard. "At your service."

"Oh," Dwalin muttered, shoving a sweet biscuit into his mouth and standing as Balin joined them.

"Evenin', Brother," Balin said, entering the kitchen with a swaggering step.

"By my beard," Dwalin said, wiping the crumbs from his lips. "You're wider and shorter than last we met."

"Wider, not shorter," Balin said with a wink. "And sharp enough for the both of us."

Dwalin chuckled, and grabbed Balin by the shoulders. Balin returned the grip and, after a moment, they smashed their heads together with enough force to make Bilbo jump.

In his corner, Gimli rolled his eyes. They had seen each other last a week ago. He wondered, if they had lived that long, if Fíli and Kíli would adopt such overblown habits. Probably, he realized, and they would most likely be even more ridiculous than these.

"Oh my," Balin said, when Dwalin showed him the table. "I told Thorin we should have tried to trade--Gimli!" Balin said, finally seeing him. "What are you doing here?" He frowned and placed his hands on his hips. "Thorin was very clear in his decision."

"He was," Gimli said. "And if I was following the will of our king, I would not be here. However, I am subject to a higher power."

"Oh?" Balin asked, crossing his arms. "What power is that, then?"

Gimli raised an eyebrow. "His sister."
Balin's lips twitched, and a moment later his countenance softened. "So," he said quietly, "the Lady Dís has gotten involved. How interesting. Still, I am not one to cross the princess." He hesitated. "For the record, I still agree with Thorin. You are far too young for a quest such as this."

"That may be true," Gimli said, and left it at that. Balin watched him for a moment longer, and Gimli wondered what he saw. Balin had been Gimli's teacher for many years, along with the princes, and the old dwarf still had a canny eye for people. Could he see the age behind Gimli's eyes? How much of who he had become could Gimli actually hide? Did Balin wonder?

(Gimli wished he did; he wished they all would see--could see him and know the truth so he could stop feeling like an imposter in his own skin.)

Balin nodded. “Well then. If you’re here, you’re helping. Let’s move this table into the hallway; we’ll never all fit in here.”
Gimli grabbed one end of the table and, under Balin's direction, he and Dwalin shifted the table. Once again, the doorbell sounded, and a moment later, Gimli heard Kíli and Fíli introduce themselves. He drifted into the foyer just as Kíli said,

"You must be Mister Boggins!"

Gimli rolled his eyes. Bilbo shook his head, hanging his hands on the neckline of his vest, a gesture Gimli remembered well from an older hobbit, and one that Frodo had picked up as well, for when he was taken aback. "What? No."

Kíli's face fell. If it wasn't so funny, it would be pathetic. Then, Gimli would have to feel bad. "Are we in the wrong place?"

"The sign is on the door," Fíli added.

"No," Bilbo said. "You're in the right place."

"Oh, that's a relief," Kíli said, grinning, and bounded inside. Gimli folded his arms and leaned in the doorway, watching as Fíli followed his brother in at a swagger.

"Nice place!" Kíli said. "Is anyone else--Gimli!" He stopped, one boot in the air, like he was about to scrape the bottoms on a lovely little carved chest. He dropped his foot and turned. "What are you doing here?"

"I thought Thorin said you couldn't come," Fíli said, coming up beside his brother.

Gimli smiled sheepishly when he saw Bilbo raise his eyebrow at him; it was ridiculous. Gimli was older than Bilbo was by a good margin! He had no reason to be embarrassed. "True," he said. "But your mother has decided otherwise, and I am here on her orders."

Kíli brightened at the mention of the Lady Dís, but Fíli looked unconvinced. "Why?"

"Oh, why does that matter?" Kíli asked, throwing an arm around Gimli's shoulders. "Gimmers is with us, now, and there is nothing in all of Middle Earth that can stop us."

"Thorin will try," Fíli said. As his heir, Fíli had long been different to Thorin's position on any number of issues, from the unfortunate but necessary winter rationing to this very quest. Kíli, as the second son, had less placed on him and, as the younger brother, had been doted upon. As a result, it was usually Kíli’s ideas that went against their Uncle, and -loyal to his brother first- Fíli was never long behind. Still, it didn't stop Fíli from trying.

"Aye," Gimli agreed. There was no point in denying it. Kíli waved it off.

"Even Thorin wouldn't cross Amad," Kíli said. Fíli nodded, agreeing, but his eyes still drifted to Gimli, giving him the same look he had weeks before, in the tunnels of Ered Luin. That look had never failed to make Gimli confess to whatever plot he and Kíli had hatched without Fíli, and right now it made Gimli feel like he was actually sixty-four again.

A great knock sounded, like someone was banging the door with a great stick.

Bilbo jumped at the noise and quickly pulled the door open, so as to try and save the paint. He had to spring back just as quickly to avoid the pile of dwarves that fell on his doorstep.

Gimli saw Dori's braids and Ori's mittens, Nori's signature points and his own father's bright auburn. He heard his uncle's grumbling with Bofur's groaning. Bifur sat up, the first untangled, and
helped pull off Bombur, whom had fallen on top of the others.

Underneath them all, was Thorin.

Kíli's arm tightened around Gimli's shoulders as Thorin staggered to his feet; having Bombur land on top would knock the wind from anybody. He knew the moment Thorin noticed him. Though Thorin did not stop brushing himself off and working life back into his limbs, his movements took on a particular focus.

Before Thorin could object, however, Bilbo, bless him, made himself known.

"Gandalf," Bilbo snapped, and sure enough, the Grey Wizard stood just outside the door, peering in and enjoying the sight of the piled dwarves far too much. Gandalf raised his bushy eyebrows.

"My dear Bilbo," Gandalf said. "Whatever is the matter?"

"Whatever is the--Whatever is the matter?" Bilbo was quickly flushing a deep red. "Yesterday, you show up quite unannounced, which would have been fine if you had come in for tea--a Hobbit always has space for an unexpected guest for tea--and give me such a fright with talk of adventures of all things, which would be quite enough to get you run out of town, if you were a proper hobbit." He coughed, and muttered, as if to himself, "Only Tooks go on adventures, after all, and they only stay because they seem to have the lion's share of the money, but one knows better than to discuss such things." He sniffed, and continued in a regular voice. "But to top it all off, you were quite content to let guests come to my home, to partake of my hospitality and--"

Bilbo stopped, suddenly aware that every pair of eyes in the room was on him. "Oh," he said. "Beg pardon. I'm not cross with you. If you go on through that hallway there," he pointed, "you will find dinner ready and waiting. Please, help yourselves. It's bad luck to leave a full plate, and bad for digestion to discuss business over food." Bombur, to no one's surprise, was the first to disappear, moving surprisingly quick for a dwarf of his girth.

"That's all I need to hear," Nori said, and slung his arm around Ori. "Come on. You heard the man. No reason to be rude to the host." Dori, who had been hesitating to leave, gave in at that, and followed his brothers into the kitchen, fussing. Bofur saw Gimli and winked, and called a "Many Thanks, Master Hobbit!" over his shoulder as he ushered Bifur through.

Óin was inspecting his trumpet when Glóin thumped his arm to tell him to follow, and when he turned, saw his son standing in the doorway. Glóin turned the color of his beard and Óin, looking up to see him, cheered. Before Glóin could yell, Thorin placed a hand each on his cousin’s shoulders.

"Not here," Thorin said, and glared at Kíli until he turned himself and Gimli both, and they fled into the hallway.

Bombur had taken up residence at the far end of the table and was having paroxysms of ecstasy as he filled his plate, often eating directly from the serving platters. Dori looked particularly affected by the bounty before him, hiding wet eyes. Gimli knew the look of a dwarf who had long gone without for his brothers’ sake, and turned his head out of respect. Bofur was laughing around a sausage, and Bifur was chewing on a piece of decorative lettuce that Bilbo insisted they use as a bed to lay fish on.

Behind them, Bilbo let loose with his temper, taking the Wizard to task over what a cruel prank this could have been and, "Look at them! They haven't had more than a Hobbit's tea to eat in a day their whole lives, and you didn't give me time to stock my larders! What if I had run out of food?"
"I hardly think that's a possibility," Thorin muttered. His eyes had grown quite wide at the feast.

"Indeed," Balin said. His own plate was nearing empty, and he had taken to nursing his tankard as the others filled their bellies, though he continued to nibble on an egg and kippers. "Though I wonder how long it will last once our host joins us. Gimli mentioned before that Bilbo had cooked for fifteen and kippers."

"Did he?" Thorin said, and now he turned to face Gimli. "How interesting."

"Interesting!" Glóin burst at last. "Interesting isn't the word for it! How are you here?" he demanded, pulling Gimli from underneath Kili's arm and gripping him by the shoulders.

"Amad knows," Gimli said, wrenching himself out of his father's grasp. "The Lady Dis sent me." He reached into his tunic. "She gave me this." He pulled out the letter and handed it to Thorin. "I am here to join your quest under her direction."

Glóin shut his mouth with a snap, and Óin didn't bother to hide his snickers. Thorin raised an eyebrow and opened the letter. His eyes scanned the page, one eyebrow arching, and paled. Quickly, he folded the letter and tucked it inside his own coat.
"Very well. Welcome, Gimli son of Glóin, to the Company." He turned to Balin. "When our Burglar joins us, draw them both up a contract."

"Aye," Balin agreed.

"I knew it!" Óin crowed. Thorin glared and Óin rolled his eyes. "Oh, eat your dinner before it gets cold. Healer's orders," he grumped, and to Gimli's surprise, Thorin cracked a tiny smile, and sat.

Gimli was pulled into a seat between Glóin and Óin, to the sympathetic look of Ori, who had not quite managed to escape sitting next to Dori. Kíli sat on Óin's other side, however, so it wasn't all bad. Though, they were pretty close to Bombur and Gimli began to worry about his fingers.

"Bombur!" Bofur called, and tossed a hard boiled egg. Bombur caught it in his mouth without missing a beat, and they were off, cheering and eating with a fevered abandon. Even Gimli was drawn into the frenzy, and he was still mostly full from luncheon. When Bilbo entered a moment later, a chastised Wizard following behind, the meal was in full swing. Rolls were tossed, aimed to bounce off and ricochet, complicating the angles and vectors around the table. Gimli threw a radish and it hit a sweet roll from Bofur, making it careen into Kíli's ale. Kíli cried out, and then drank until he could catch the radish in his teeth. Even Thorin was starting to relax into the game, deflecting the food that flew his way into Balin's beard, or off of Dwalin's head.

Bilbo looked quite distraught at the revelry in his hallway, and considering the fastidiousness of the smial before, it was no wonder.

"They are a merry bunch, aren't they?" Gandalf said, leaning in close. Bilbo, by now quite red, squeaked.

"Gimli!" Óin nudged him. "Get us more ale, will you?"


There was a chorus of agreement, and the others thrust their empty tankards at him. Gimli, arms full of precariously balanced mugs, found himself squeezing past the others seated; he was probably the only dwarf there who was small enough, save for Ori, and Dori didn't look too keen on letting him out of his sight. Bilbo, seeking some sort of peace, took half the tankards from him, and helped him fill them. He still was not fit to speak, and his hand shook on the tap.

"They mean no harm," Gimli assured him. "Look how carefully they aim their throws. No morsel out of place, no crumb out of their control. It is a game of skill, and a source of pride to be so precise."

Bilbo paused, and sighed, then looked over his shoulder with a disgruntled frown. "Couldn't the just play conkers like a normal person?"

Gimli blinked. "What's conkers?"

Bilbo half turned, considering Gimli for a long moment. "A hobbit game of skill," he said at length, "that requires precision of aim."

Gimli grinned. "Then they would probably enjoy it. Truth, they may simply be giddy with food. Notice that they still eat what they throw." Bilbo nodded in agreement, and filled the last tankard. When they returned, Gimli distributed the ales while Bilbo took his seat, to the side of Gandalf and a bit away from the table, and saw to his own dinner with the air of a master craftsman about to begin a new project. He fought his way through to the food easily enough, however, and soon had a plate to rival Bombur's.
Nori, already leaning a bit on the tipsy side, aimed to wing a walnut off of Bifur's axe, and Bifur deflected without pausing his eating (honey smeared on cheese with early strawberries) but the deflect went wide, heading straight for the decorative plates hanging above Balin's head. Gimli grabbed a roll, but before he could toss, a second walnut came from behind Thorin, knocking the first off course and bouncing harmlessly off of the wall.

Everyone, save Óin, who had put his trumpet down in favor of his food, stopped and even Thorin turned to look at Bilbo, who paused, mouth full of roasted tomato and bacon. After a moment, Bilbo swallowed visibly, and said, "Did I do it wrong?"

"Did he do it wrong?" Nori said, watching Bilbo wide-eyed. "Did you hear him?" Most of the Company was looking at Bilbo with some surprise. Even Bombur had paused his eating, and watched, mouth slightly agape.
"No, Mr. Baggins," Balin said, hiding a grin, "you did not do it wrong."

Bofur started to laugh, big-belly laughs, holding his stomach and rocking back in his seat. He slapped his knee. "Best shot of the night, or I'll eat my hat," he hooted.

"Please do," Glóin said, sotto voiced. "Save us all from the smell."

"What?" Óin said, putting up his ear trumpet. "Did something happen?"

"That was an impressive shot, Mr. Baggins," Thorin said, and the table fell silent. "One, I admit, I did not believe you would be able to make. Tell me, are all hobbits so skilled, or is it just you?"

Gimli closed his eyes and resisted the urge to smack his forehead. He shouldn't be surprised that Thorin managed to sound insulting when offering a compliment, but somehow he had hoped it would be different.

Bilbo, not used to Thorin's habit of placing his royal boot in his royal mouth, understandably did not hear the implied compliment, and focused on the actually spoken condescension, and bristled. "It would be a shot playable by any hobbit with a habit of conkers, but I am a deft hand, if you must know."

"And it shows," Balin said, holding up his hands in an attempt to soothe ruffled feathers.

Bilbo paused, as if waiting for an apology from Thorin, but eventually nodded. "Thank you," said Bilbo, and settled back to finish his supper.

Still, the moment seemed to mark the end of the merriment, and the rest of dinner was passed more sedately, if not more somberly.

Once even Bombur had slowed in his eating, Thorin stood, and raised his tankard to Bilbo. "A toast, to our esteemed host," he said, "who has so graciously provided such an abundant feast."

"To Our Burglar, Bilbo Baggins."

"HERE HERE!" The dwarves cried over Bilbo's "Burglar? What do you mean Burglar?"

"To show our appreciation," Thorin said, "as you have cooked, so we shall clean."

Bilbo paled. "What."

Bofur grinned and turned to Glóin. "Let's give them a beat, yeah?" he said and, grabbing his silverware, started banging his fists on the table. Glóin and Dori joined in, and soon Nori as well.

"No, no," Bilbo said, standing. Óin pushed him back into his seat with a single hand on his shoulder. Bilbo sat, still protesting. "Seriously, you don't have to."

"It's our pleasure," Kíli said, standing and moving into position in the hallway.

"Least we can do," Fíli agreed, grabbed the plate Ori was holding, and, with a backhanded move, tossed the first plate to his brother. Kíli caught it one handed and spun it to Gimli, who passed it on down the line.

"Be careful!" Bilbo cried out.

"My Company is always careful," Thorin said, leaning against the doorframe. He didn't join in the washing up, Gimli hadn't expected him to, but Bilbo just gave Thorin an exasperated look, and
called over to where Bofur and Glóin had begun crossing their knives.

"Don't do that, you'll blunt them!" Bilbo said, and Gimli had to bite his cheek. Sure enough, Bofur hooted.

"You hear that, lads? He said we'll blunt the knives."

Gimli was never sure if Bilbo understood more than the gentle teasing of the song; of course none of what they sang would happen, the Company already liked Bilbo enough, and in Rivendell Bilbo would admit to Glóin that he had suspected as much. Still, the threat of wreckage made Bilbo redden in a way that made teasing him irresistible, much the way Fíli would tease Kíli, and Kíli, in turn, Gimli.

It was not easy to win a dwarf's affection or loyalty, as once won it was impossible to break. Still, watching Bilbo fret as his mother's china was tossed about in a dwarfling's game of keep-away, Gimli could not deny the foundation was well laid. It would not be long before Bilbo was once again as solid a member of this Company as any of them.

Dwalin pulled his viol from his kit and Bofur kept the melody lively with his flute. Óin had even joined in, playing Bilbo's teapot like a jug. Gimli took two spoons, holding them as Sam had taught him, and played along.

Dishes were thrown like sport disks, or rolled to bounce off of limbs. Balin used his plate to further on other dishware that was sent his way, a disgruntled look on his face. Kíli bounced cups off of his elbows, and Ori collected the dishes in a towering pile as he moved towards the kitchen. Bofur caught silverware that was flung his way, and added them to the soapy pile in Bilbo's sink. Even Bombur helped, eating the food that was cleaned off the other plates, so that nothing went to waste.

Was this affection present the first time? Did his kin sing to mock or to tease? How long did Bilbo have to wait to have the Company at his back? Thorin was not present the first time, so there was no way Bilbo could have seen the lost King with a mug of ale, blowing smoke rings to act as targets for Gandalf's own smoke, chuckling at the antics of his nephews and kin. Gimli tried to imagine what it would be like, to have no knowledge of dwarven ways and to be suddenly inundated with this dirty baker's dozen, no warning, no food to offer. And he could only too well imagine the way Thorin would have spoken with him, a flustered hobbit who had yet to prove to the world the value of good hobbit sense. Gimli thought back to his discussions of hobbit custom with Sam, and was amazed anew at the resilience and sheer Tookishness of Bilbo Baggins, to put up with all that and join them anyway.

Perhaps Gimli would not need to push so hard, after all.

"That's what Bilbo Baggins Hates!" the Company chorused, and fell back laughing as they finally let Bilbo through to see a neatly stacked array of clean, undamaged dishware. The ire faded quickly from Bilbo's face, and he even laughed, finally able to see the humor of it all.

"Goodness," he said at last, wiping a finger at the corner of his eyes. "My heart may never recover from dwarvish manners."

"That is not the first time we've heard as such, lad," Balin said with a twinkle. "And it probably won't be the last."

"Aye," Thorin agreed. "But now the meal is done, and we have much to discuss." He pushed himself off the wall and fairly loomed over Bilbo, who did move back, but almost as an afterthought. "Come, Mister Baggins, this involved you, as well."
Bilbo cleared his throat. "Yes, about that--"

"My dear Bilbo," Gandalf called. "May we have a bit more light? Night has fallen, and I'm afraid my eyes aren't as good in the dark as they once were."

Bilbo shot Gandalf a look, like the old man act wasn't fooling anyone, but scurried off to find candles nonetheless, leaving the Company to settle once more around the table. Gimli was pulled into a seat by Kili, and was bracketed on the other side by Fili, when Balin asked: "So what news from the meeting in Ered Luin? Did they all come?"

"Aye," Thorin said and tapped out his pipe. "Envoys from all seven kingdoms."

Dwalin demanded, eager: "And what of the dwarves of the Iron Hills? Is Dain with us?" Behind his head, Kili thumped Fili's shoulder, a familiar gesture when Kili felt he had been proven right over his brother. It seemed Fili had held some doubt of their fellow dwarves. Gimli just wished Kili wouldn't gloat behind Gimli's head; his hair kept catching on Kili's arm.

Thorin sighed and lowered his pipe, still unlit. "They will not come. They say this quest is ours, and ours alone." The table filled with muttering, from Dori's "Well, I can't say I blame them, really," to Bifur's epithets in Ancient Khuzdul. Gimli simply closed his eyes and let the voices wash over him; he had known, after all, that Dain would not come until Thorin had the Mountain reclaimed, but a part of him that wondered just how much he could change, had hoped...

"Óin has read the portents, and the portents say it is time!" Glóin insisted.

"Ravens have been seen flying back to the mountain," Óin said, then his voice filling hollowing to resonate as he chanted: "When the birds of yore/return to Erebor/the reign of the beast will end."

"Beast?" Bilbo said, his voice small. "What beast?"

"Oh, aye," Bofur said, pulling his pipe from his mouth. "That would be a reference to Smaug the Terrible, Chiefest and Greatest Calamity of our age. Teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks--extremely fond of precious metals--"

"Yes, I know what a dragon is," Bilbo snapped. "I just didn't realize there were any left in this world."

"There are indeed dragons left in this world, Mr. Baggins," Balin said. "As we know all too well."

He turned to Thorin. "This task would be difficult enough with an army behind us. We number just fourteen. And not fourteen of the best," he raised his mug and looked at it's contents, lips pursed. "Nor brightest."

"Hey now," Gimli said, but it was lost in the cacophony of protest. True, some of the Company could be a little slow on the uptake, but they knew enough to know when they were being insulted.

He jumped when Fili spoke, opening his eyes to meet the speculating gaze of Gandalf the Grey.

Gandalf raised a bushy eyebrow and held Gimli's gaze. Gimli swallowed, and turned to his cousin. "We may be few in number, but we are all of us fighters! To the last dwarf!"

"And don't forget we have a wizard with us! He must have killed hundreds of dragons in his time!"

Gandalf coughed, "Oh, well, I..."

Gimli hid a grin behind his hand as the Company started badgering the Wizard. "How many dragons?" "How many have you killed?" "Go on, give us a number!" For such a meddler, it was
gratifying to see Gandalf face a group that would have none of it. It was no wonder the old Wizard would speak of Thorin's Company with such exasperation.

It was Thorin who silenced them with a roar, jumping to his feet, and the Company fell in line. "If we have read these signs, do you not think others have read them too? Rumors have begun to spread. The dragon Smaug has not been seen for sixty years. Eyes looks East, assessing. Weighing the risk; the vast wealth of our people lies unprotected. Do we sit back, let them take what is rightfully ours, or do we use this chance to take back Erebor! Du Bekar!"

The Company cheered, but Balin's voice of reason sailed over them all. "Are you forgetting something? The front gate is sealed! There is no way into the mountain."

Thorin's eyes met Gimli's and Gimli knew with a foresight he did not actually have, what was coming next. "Perhaps we should ask our youngest member. You have dreamed of our victory, have you not, Gimli son of Glóin? Have your dreams given us a way into the Mountain?" Thorin sat, looking smug in the way kings had, when they had never been told to "stop looking so smug" but still managed to look like royalty. Gimli bit back a frown that he couldn't hide, and saw, from the corner of his eyes, Gandalf.

Gandalf's eyes were a weight upon him, burning, and Gimli cleared his throat. Careful, now, Gimli. If he gave too much, it would make Gandalf too suspicious. But if he did not say enough... "In all of my dreams," he began, "there was a map, and a key--for what, I'm not sure, but it was vital."

"If there's a key, there must be a door," Fíli said, and Gimli wondered if this was why Legolas's tendency to state the obvious never grated his nerves.

"There's another way in," Kíli said, marveling, and Gimli knew it was why, and missed his husband deep in his heart.

"Indeed there is, Young Gimli," Gandalf said, and pulled from his robes a map and key. He turned to Thorin. "You father gave these to me for safekeeping." He held them out, and Thorin took them with some reverence.

"Why to you and not to me, their rightful owner?" Thorin asked with surprisingly little heat. His fingers traced the edges of the key, the words on the map, and lingered over the image of Erebor.

"I have chosen my own time in which to give them," Gandalf grumped. "And I have chosen now; they are in your possession, that is what matters." Thorin nodded.

"These runes," Gandalf pointed to the map with the mouthpiece of his pipe, "speak of a hidden entrance to the lower halls. The exact location is hidden somewhere in this map, but I do not have the skills to read it. However, there are those still in Middle Earth who do." He paused for a moment. "The task I have in mind will require a great deal of stealth, and no small amount of courage. However, if you are careful, I believe it can be done. A small party may go where an army can not, and a single Hobbit," Gandalf said, turning to include Bilbo, "may go where even a small party would falter, and is as fierce as the dragon himself in a pinch."

Bilbo sat up straight. "Well, now, I never said I was burglar. I've never stolen a thing in my life."

"I'm afraid I agree with Mr. Baggins. He's hardly burglar material." Balin looked at Bilbo. "Sorry, lad."

"No no," Bilbo said. "Its true."

"Aye," Dwalin growled. "The wild is no place for gentlefolk who can neither fight nor fend for
Bilbo drew himself up. "Well now, I wouldn't go that far. I've done a fair amount of traveling, for Hobbit of my station, alone and often overnight."

Gandalf chuckled, but it was mostly kind. "A walking holiday is not a quest, Bilbo," he said. His voice softened as the Company began to chatter. Gimli had to strain to hear "Your mother knew that."

Bilbo paled. "I am not my mother," he said, quietly.

"There is more of her in you than you realize," Gandalf said, quietly, and turned his attention back to the Company, who had begun to tussle between themselves over whether or not Bilbo should come. Fíli and Kíli were both for it, and arguing quite loudly in Gimli's ear about it to Dori and Bifur, who was not actually part of the argument, but shouting anyway.

"Enough!" Gandalf roared, not so much standing but swelling larger where he was. "If I say Bilbo Baggins is a burglar, than a burglar he is!" Not even Gimli had noticed when they had pushed too much for the Wizard's temper, and when Gandalf revealed what Gimli knew to be just a fraction of his true self, filling the room with a terrible power, the Company settled very quickly. Gandalf sat, once again the Grey Pilgrim, and Gimli could just see Bilbo's pale face. Poor old Bilbo looked quite stricken, no doubt remembering his own loss of temper earlier and wondering just how close he had come to being nothing more than a hobbit-shaped streak on the floor.

"I have selected Mr. Baggins to be the fourteenth member of this Company," Gandalf said, talking right over Bilbo. "Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet, and may go unnoticed by most if they so wish. And the dragon, while well acquainted with the smell of dwarf, would find the smell of hobbit most unknown to him." Gandalf turned and fixed Bilbo with a look when the Hobbit would have interrupted again and Bilbo's mouth snapped shut. "Let's have no more argument. I have chosen Mr. Baggins and that ought to be the enough for all of you. If I say he is a Burglar, a Burglar he is, or will be when the time comes. There is a lot more in him that you guess, and a deal more than he has any idea of himself. You may (possibly) all live to thank me yet. Now," and Gandalf turned back to Gimli. "Of course, I have misspoken. Apparently Bilbo is to be the fifteenth member of this Company?"

Before Gimli could speak, Thorin cleared his throat. "Gimli is as much a member of our Company as any of us, and has right besides, being kin. That is the last I want to hear on the matter." Glóin humped, but Óin looked quite smug and winked at Gimli, rather unsubtly.

At last, Bilbo found it in him to speak. "So, the quest?" he said, weakly.

"Indeed, Master Baggins," Thorin said. "We quest to reclaim our home from such a beast, as I am sure you have been told?" The last was a question, and Bilbo, recovering some of his footing, had it in him to respond in a tone dryer than the ore veins in the Blue Mountains.

"I've the gist," he snapped, hand on his hips.

"Good," Thorin said, not noticing, or more likely not caring about, Bilbo's tone. "Balin, give him a contract."

Balin handed over the contract, explaining the standard form while he did so, and Bilbo pulled tiny round spectacles from his pocket to examine the fine print. It would seem, as rattled as he was, a hobbit's sense of fair business went, perhaps, as deep as any dwarf's. Bilbo muttered aloud as he read, too quiet to hear, until...
"Funeral arrangements?" Bilbo folded out a clause of the contract and continued to read, "Cash on delivery, remuneration up to and including one fourteenth total profits," Bilbo cocked his head to the side, as if to say, *that's fair.* Gimli wondered if Bilbo knew just how much wealth that could be. "Laceration, evisceration...incineration?"

"Oh, aye!" Bofur said with a grin. "The old worm has a nasty temper; dragons do you know, and fire hot enough to melt stone. Why, he'll melt the flesh off your bones in the blink of an eye." Bilbo made a funny little sound and Thorin turned. Bofur stood to peer through the door, and Gimli had to crane his neck to see. "Think furnace with wings," Bofur said. "One look and poof, you're no more than a pile of ash!"

Bilbo paled rapidly, and Balin leaned in. "You alright, laddie?"

"Nope," Bilbo squeaked, and fainted dead away.

"Very helpful, Bofur," Gandalf grumbled.

Bofur shrugged. "Better he faint now and get it out of his system, than faint later and at a worse time."

Óin heaved himself up and away from the table. "Out of the way, out of the way," he said. "I'm the healer, let me do my work." He crouched down by the insensate hobbit, and checked his eyes, and the pulse at his neck. Bilbo roused at bit at Óin's touch, which was a good sign, and after a moment Óin said, "He'll be fine. Gimli, make him a cup of tea."

"Right," Gimli said, and worked his way around to the kitchen while Óin scooped Bilbo up and brought him to a plush chair in the den by the fire.

Gimli pushed Bilbo's kettle into the flame, filling the teapot with new leaves and bringing down an earthenware cup. Waiting for the water, he turned the cup over and ran his finger over the maker's mark; hobbitish craftsmanship lacked the precision of dwarven craft, true, but there was no less pride in the work for the softness of the edges.

And truly, dwarven aesthetics would be much out of place in this little hamlet; hobbits were creatures of round shapes and natural curves, not quite to the level of pretension the defined elvish design, of course, but in a way that felt like home, nonetheless. Dwarven edges and repeating patterns would stand out here, far too harsh for everyday life.

There was much of dwarven life that Gimli had found too harsh for the people he surrounded himself with. Too harsh, and too misunderstood.

"Son," Glóin said softly behind him, and Gimli put the cup down before he crushed it without meaning to. He turned and faced his father.

"Da," Gimli said. With nothing in his hands, he didn't know what to do with them. So he did nothing, and they hung by his legs, feeling far too large and out of place on his body. Glóin sighed, stroking a hand over his beard, counting the beads in an unconscious gesture that spoke of long habit.

"Even if I could convince you to go back, you couldn't," Glóin said. "We're too far from the mountain for me to send you back."

Gimli frowned, crossing his arms. "I made it here," Gimli said. *By a far longer road that you image,* he thought.
"You were walking away from danger, not towards it," Glóin countered, gesturing at the comfortable kitchen--the bright light from the setting sun, the quality of the cookware, the abundance of food. "These hobbits live a very sheltered life, and you know it."


"I did not want this for you. I do not," Glóin said. "This road will be rough, rougher than any you have yet known, and I would spare you that a little longer. Your life will be hard enough without rushing headfirst into danger." He cupped Gimli's too-bare cheek in his hand.

"How long would you have me wait?" Gimli asked, turning his face into the warm leather of his father's glove. He pulled away. "I am young yet, aye, but I am not the youngest to have faced peril. Dain was but twenty-five--"

"Aye," Glóin snapped, gripping Gimli by the back of his neck and squeezing. "And look what happened to him! He is a great king, sure, and solid kin besides, but you weren't there to see him, newly crowned, newly orphaned with a missing foot and a lost people looking to him, a mere lad of twenty-five." Glóin looked away and sighed, dropping his hand. "That is not a life I would want for you."

Gimli bit his lip. "Then it's a good thing I'm not to be king." Glóin glared, but Gimli held up his hands. "I know what you are saying, I hear you, Da. Trust me. But some things are more important than our own comfort. You know this."

Glóin humphed. "You said you mother knows?"

Gimli raised an eyebrow. "Ma practically had my bags packed for me."

Glóin laughed at last, shaking his head. "She would. You get your stubbornness from her, you know."

"Aye," Gimli said, grinning. "I know." The kettle started to whistle, and without thinking, Gimli took the kettle off of the flame bare-handed, and poured the water.

Glóin stepped closer. "You're getting better at that," he said.

"Tea?" Gimli asked, looking over his shoulder with a grin. He had developed a taste for the drink in his later years, under the tutelage of an aged Samwise Gamgee in the Undying Lands. He hadn't lost the knack of it.

"Fire-touch," Glóin said, his face wistful. "Last I saw, you were still using gloves."

Some dwarves were born with the ability to handle flame bare-handed. Some dwarves would never develop the ability, and yet some, like Gimli, grew into a milder form of the ability as they grew older and tougher. The ability didn't fully manifest in Gimli until he was closer to one hundred, but Gimli had grabbed the metal like it was cool. Apparently, muscle memory wasn't the only ability that had returned with him. Gimli grinned, and Glóin put his hand on Gimli's hair, and knocked their heads together gently.

"Maybe it's time for me to accept that my son is growing up," Glóin said. "It's not what I would have wanted, but I am proud to have you with me." He pulled a folded piece of parchment from his tunic. "Balin drew this up for you," he said, and handed Gimli his own contract.

Gimli took the parchment with trembling hands. He had known, but to have his own contract--to really be part of The Company of Thorin Oakenshield...after everything he had done in his life, he
had not expected to be so moved. Gloin produced a pen, and Gimli signed his name. It was done. Gimli passed back the parchment, and tapped his forehead against his father's again. "And I am proud to be here."

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Gimli brought Bilbo his tea and Gandalf met him in the hallway.

"I will take that, thank you," Gandalf said, and took the mug. Then he stopped and looked at Gimli, and Gimli forced himself to stand still. He was filled with the sudden urge to spill, to tell Gandalf everything. Maybe the Wizard--

No. No, this was Gimli's quest, and his quest alone. It was up to him. Gimli kept his mouth shut.

"There's something about you, Gimli son of Glóin, that I can not put my finger on," Gandalf said in a quietly rumbling voice. "Why are you here?"

"The portents read in favor of his joining," Óin said, coming up behind Gandalf. "Gimli's had the true-dreaming." Gandalf looked back at Óin.

"Has he?" Gandalf said. "How interesting." He gave Gimli one last look, and disappeared into the den with the tea.

"How is he?" Gimli asked.

"Eh?" Óin looked up. "Oh, he's fine. Just a bit shook up." He shook his head. "He better be made of surer stuff when facing that dragon."

"He will be," Gimli said, thinking of Frodo, of Sam. He saw Merry and Pippin in their livery astride their horses. "Hobbits are amazing creatures."

From the other room, Bilbo's quiet voice became quite clear as he said, "I can't. I'm sorry, Gandalf. I just can't." His footsteps were barely audible as he disappeared down the hall to his bedroom.

"It seems as if we've lost our burglar," Balin said, walking over to Thorin. "Probably for the best; odds were against us. After all, what are we? Merchants? Miners? Tinkers? Toymakers? Hardly the stuff of legends."

Thorin smiled, soft and warm. "There are a few warriors among us."

"Old warriors," Balin corrected.

"I would take each and every one of these dwarves over an entire army from the Iron Hills. For when I called upon them, they answered." He paused, sending a sideways look at Gimli. "Some, even when turned aside." Gimli flushed, but met Thorin's gaze steadily. He raised his chin, baring his throat--it was a powerful, defiant gesture, exposing skin usually covered with hair, akin to the ancient tradition of the Warrior's Crest that Dwalin used to bear, and made all the more poignant for Gimli's youth. Thorin nodded, message received. "Loyalty, Honor, a willing heart. I can ask no more than that." Gimli bowed his head.

"You don't have to do this," Balin said, standing. "You have a choice. You have done honorably by our people. You have built a new life for us in the Blue Mountains. A life of peace, and plenty. A life that is worth more than all the gold in Erebor."
Thorin seemed to grow, not in size, but in something Gimli could only call kingliness, and resembled none other than Aragorn, King Elessar Telcontar, at the height of his reign. It was no wonder Thorin was able to retake the Mountain. "From my grandfather to my father, this has come to me." Thorin lifted the key and held it between them. "They dreamt of the day when the dwarves of Erebor would reclaim their homeland. There is no choice, Balin." He shook his head. "Not for me."

Balin put a hand on Thorin's arm. "Then we are with you, laddie. We will see it done."

Ori appeared at Gimli's side. "What will we do if he doesn't come?" He twisted his fingers together; there was ink under his fingernails and staining the edge of his fingerless mittens. Gimli had a sudden flash in his minds eye of a skeleton, dusty and clutching an ink stained volume.

Gimli cleared his throat. "He will come," he said.

Ori frowned. "He doesn't seem to think so."

Gimli gripped Ori's arm. "That's the wonder of people, Ori," he said. "He has the ability to change his mind." Ori didn't look convinced, but Gimli had been waiting since the meal ended for a pipe, and the others were gathering around the fireplace.

Thorin, while the others gathered, had pulled his harp from his pack and was seated by the fire, idly plucking deep music from the strings. Dwalin sat next to him with his viol, and Fíli pulled out his fiddle. Together, the three of them played the music of their lost halls, a melancholy shadow of what once was. At length, Thorin paused his strings, and the group fell silent.

Staring into the fire, Thorin began to sing, in a voice as deep as velvet darkness.

"Far over, the Misty Mountains cold
To dungeons deep and caverns old
We must away ere break of day
To seek the pale enchanted gold."

His voice echoed through the room, sounding like a big brass bell as it spread through the halls. The others joined him, adding their voices to the droning chants, the lilting melody. Gimli sang with the rest, feeling fiercely the love of his home, and the loss from the dragon. He wondered how any could hear such a song and remain unmoved, especially when Thorin began to chant.

"The dwarves of yore made mighty spells
While hammers fell like ringing bells
In places deep, where dark things sleep,
In hollow halls beneath the fells.

For ancient king and elvish lord
There many a gleaming golden hoard
They shaped and wrought, and light they caught
To hide in gems on hilt of sword.

On silver necklaces they strung
The flowering stars, on crowns they hung
The dragon-fire, in twisted wire
They meshed the light of moon and sun."

Out of the corner of his eye, Gimli saw a flash of white as they sang together again, and when he
looked, saw Bilbo hovering just beyond the doorway. His look was rapt, his eyes seeing far, far away. *This,* Gimli thought. *This is what convinces him.*

"Goblets they carved there for themselves
And harps of gold; where no man delves
There lay there long, and many a song
Was sun unheard by men or elves.

The pines were roaring on the height,
The winds were moaning in the night.
The fire was red, it flaming spread;
The trees like torches blazed with light.

The bells were ringing in the dale
And men looked up with faces pale;
The dragon’s ire more fierce than fire
Laid low their towers and houses frail.

The mountain smoked beneath the moon;
The dwarves, they heard the tramp of doom.
They fled their hall to dying fall
Beneath his feet, beneath the moon."

There was something about being here, in this place, in this moment; there was no way for Gimli to be unmoved by this song. To hear the tragedy of their people, the last in a long line of such tragedies, even knowing the prosperity that was to come, roused a spirit deep within him.

"Far over the Misty Mountains grim
To dungeons deep and caverns dim
We must away, ere break of day
To win our harps and gold from him."

Their voices trailed off into reverent silence, and though this was long in his past, Gimli felt the moment seize in his chest. Curses! Curses to the Dragon Smaug! How dare he take their lives, their *history* like it was so many trinkets! Smaug would rue the day he crossed the Dwarves of Erebor. Gimli would make sure of it! For Erebor!
HUGE thanks to livingmeatloaf for betaing this chapter. It's a LOT longer than I thought it would be. *whew*

Some dialogue is taken directly from *The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey*. Some is taken from *The Hobbit* book, and some is taken from the 1977 *Hobbit* cartoon.
Interlude: A Shadow In The Greenwood

Chapter Summary

A brief glimpse into life on the other side of the mountains....

Chapter Notes

Much Thanks to livingmeatloaf! She continues to be an AMAZING beta!

NEW! Art by Kooricolada, embedded in the text!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

From behind bushy brows, Radagast peered with one eye at the Elvenking's messenger. The elf was tall, as elves were, with the large ears that marked her Sylvan heritage and shining red hair that hinted at a more complicated parentage. She stood alert, not quite at attention but more like the rabbit in the wood when the fox was nearby.

"I... I'm afraid I don't understand," Radagast said, and the elf focused on him and frowned. "Why does the Elvenking want me? Isn't this the sort of thing Gandalf usually handles?"

"Mithrandir is not here," the elf said, her voice hard, and Radagast sighed. This was why he preferred his hedgehogs; they never spoke harshly to him. "Please," she said, and her voice softened. "My lord king would not bother you unduly. His son is very sick; a malady like that which claimed my lord's wife, though it has come upon his son with a troublesome swiftness."

Radagast chewed his lip, and the sparrow that nested in his hair alit on the brim of his hat. "I'm really not healer..."

The elf's eyes narrowed. "We have healers," she snapped. "They can do nothing; there is nothing physically wrong with him. He suffers from a malady of the mind and--" She stopped, seemed hesitant, and her eyes scanned the forest; he frowned, what was it that put her on such high alert? "The prince is a dear friend of mine. If not for his station, I would not hesitate to call him brother, as he does not hesitate to call me sister. His father does not know of the time I have spent by his bedside." She swallowed, and raised her chin to meet Radagast's eyes. "I do not think it a coincidence that Legolas had fallen ill. The giant spiders have returned, and grow bolder in their attacks. King Thranduil closes his boarders even more tightly than before, and refuses to speak of why. Now, Legolas is ill, and in his fevered mutterings and wild ravings he warns of a growing darkness; the return of The Shadow."

Radagast stilled, his eyes flashing with a power nearly forgotten. "Take me to him."

The elf, Tauriel, that was her name, nodded. "At once." She turned, as if to run, and Radagast stopped her.

"We'll take my sled," he said, and whistled. Tauriel cocked her head and her eyes widened when
she heard the thumping rushing towards them. His sled, pulled by his rabbits, burst from the underbrush and stopped before them. Radagast climbed on, then held his hand out to Tauriel. "Hold on tightly," he said. "We're about to go very fast."

Tauriel gingerly took hold of the railing, and Radagast whistled sharply once. "Run!" he cried. "To the Elvenking!"

They sped off with a lurch and Tauriel let loose a shriek of surprise that turned quickly into wild laughter as they disappeared into the Greenwood.

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From the back of the sled, it was hard to see the details of the forest, but that didn't stop Radagast from feeling that there was something greatly wrong with the wood they sped through. There was a darkness, an oppression he hadn't felt in an age. The forest was sick, and the malaise had spread far further than Radagast had known. When they passed the border of Thranduil's kingdom, the difference was staggering. Thranduil's rule still kept his lands free from the gathering darkness, but Radagast could feel it pulsing at the edges of the realm, ever threatening.

"How long?" Radagast yelled into the wind. Tauriel didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"It was slow," she said. "The spiders arrived several seasons ago; just one the first time. It was many months until we saw the next, but there were two, then three. My king ordered us to clear the forest; when we did, we discovered several nests, and set fire to them all. They were back before a full phase of the moon, and in greater numbers.

"Legolas led the hunting parties. It was on one such that he fell ill. It was sudden; one minute he was directing clean up, and the next he had fallen to the floor, wailing for his star." She leaned in closer. "Nobody knew of what he spoke, but his affect was so much like mortal grief. He spends his days and nights as if in trance. If not for the fact that he will eat if prompted, if not much, one would think his fea had fled his body." She stopped and shook her head. "Thranduil closed the borders the very minute he heard, and has been by Legolas's bedside every passing moment, trying to coax his son back to him."

Radagast frowned. The woods, and the creatures that lived there, the birds and the bugs and the hedgehogs, those he understood. He understood them more than he understood the firstborn. Olorin--Gandalf, yes. He was Gandalf here. He was always more familiar with the ways of Elves. But--if this really was the work of the Enemy...

"I will do what I can," Radagast said. "And we can hope it is enough."

The rabbits drew the sled up and over the high bridge that spanned the gorge that kept Thranduil's palace separate from the rest of the forest. The Elven guards startled and drew their spears, but Radagast pulled to a stop just outside of their reach, holding his hat to his head as he rocked with the force of it. Behind him, Tauriel gingerly stepped from the sled, as if unsure of her footing. Most unusual for an elf--maybe she was getting sick as well. Radagast squinted at her, but Tauriel spoke to the guards as if nothing was amiss, declaring in the peculiar dialect of the Greenwood that she had the Wizard Radagast, at behest of the King.

The guards were still slow to lower their spears, but lower them they did, and Radagast scurried along behind Tauriel and into the darkness of the Elvenking's halls. It had been--

Well.
Radagast wasn't sure he had ever been in Thranduil's halls. He seemed to remember, once, when Oropher was King, a visit, but the memory was hazy like so much was these days. His clearest memories of Thranduil were in the wood, astride his great Stag, as he and his fellows hunted. They had run across Radagast once or twice, and the king had always been respectful to even the least of the Istari (at least, according to Saruman, and, oh, did that hurt).

Tauriel led Radagast through the main audience chamber and past the great throne. Elven lights danced along the walls with an amber glow, much like fire, though only half were lit, as if the hall itself was sleeping. It didn't seem like the Elvenking had been much at court these past few weeks.

At last, Tauriel brought him to a door, delicately carved and curved in the graceful arch of the leaves of the Greenwood. The lines of it were comforting, and Radagast sighed as Tauriel knocked.

"Who dares?" called a voice from within, and, with a startle, Radagast realized it must be Thranduil. The Elvenking's deep timbre was dry, cracked with long and futile use. A far cry from the richness that Radagast remembered.

"It is Tauriel, my Lord," she said, hand pressed against the door. "I have brought the Wizard Radagast to help."

There was a long silence. "Help," Thranduil said at last, and there came a scuffing sound, like he had snorted in derision. "What help can be given?"

"My Lord," Tauriel began, but Thranduil cut her off.

"Send him in," he said. "Though I doubt there is much he could tell me."

Tauriel sent Radagast a hooded look and opened the door. Radagast stepped through and surveyed the scene before him.

The room itself was great, as befitting royalty, with the open airiness that defined elven architecture, though not as airy as Rivendell or Lorien; this room felt like he Greenwood itself, old and sturdy. In the middle of the room, on a little dias, was a large, if simply decorated, bed of white birch, which was dressed in light linens. The Elvenking, in simple robes and without his crown, sat beside the bed, holding the hand of his son, Radagast's patient, Legolas.
"Come closer," Thranduil said. "I hardly expect a wizard to deduce an ailment from across the room."

Yet, Radagast did not move right away, his focus completely on the Elf in the bed. His skin was flushed with fever, and his pale hair was damp with sweat and stuck to his face. From what Radagast could see, he was dressed in a simple shift, but he had sweat through the fabric and it clung to his skin. His eyes were closed, his breath was quick, and his brow furrowed as if in great pain.

"He is resting, if you can call it rest," Thranduil said, spitting the last word as if it had caused personal offense. Radagast finally stepped closer, coming up to the side of the bed. He rested his staff against the headboard, such as it was, and after a moment's pause, took Legolas's other wrist.


Radagast dropped the wrist like a hot stone, and Legolas moaned, arching off the bed, eyes snapping open to stare, sightless at the ceiling.

"Not good," Radagast said, mostly to himself, but Thranduil heard and rounded on him.

"If that is the best you can offer, you might as well leave!"

But Radagast did not hear him; there was something in the prince's words, something that filled Radagast with fear--the answer to a question Radagast had long since stopped asking: why were the Istari still here? Why had they not been called back to Aman?
His mouth was moving, but there were no words, no sound--

Except...

Radagast leaned in closer, put his ear right up next to Legolas's mouth.

"...coming," Legolas was whispering. "Ai, Elbereth, Gilthoniel! The Eye! The EYE!"

Radagast paled, nearly fell, and pulled back, only to be grabbed by strong hands as Legolas reared up. Legolas's eyes focused on him, present and startlingly clear. "The Enemy has returned to Dol Guldur."

In the span of a heartbeat, Legolas lost his focus again, falling back against the pillows. His eyes closed again, but now he was restless, and shifted constantly beneath the sheets.

Staring, Radagast's mind spun. Gandalf! Gandalf had predicted this! Gandalf must be told! "The Eye," he whispered.

"More raving," Thranduil said, drawing Radagast's attention, and placed his head in his hands. "You see what has become of my son? First I lose his mother to the darkness seeping through the wood, and now it looks like I will lose my son as well."

Radagast shook his head. "There is something else at work here." He patted his pockets. Where was it? Where--ah! He pulled a smooth blue stone, clear like glass, from his pocket, and pressed it to Legolas's forehead, muttering an incantation older than time. The stone flashed red like fire and Radagast nodded, looking more like a wizard than Thranduil had ever seen. "There is a magic at work here that is beyond my own," Radagast said. "And beyond any wizard that walks Middle Earth. The Valar have touched him, though for what purpose I cannot say."

"The Valar," Thranduil said, and his expression darkened. He stood, towering over Radagast with a face like thunder. "What good is he to the Valar if he can not--can not..." Thranduil trailed off, his anger fading like fog in the sun.

"I already said I couldn't say," Radagast snipped. "I know not why he is like this, but there is no illness, no dark magic upon him. You are his father, and should know your own son; what does it look like to you?"

Helpless rage shone through through Thranduil's eyes, as he bit out the words: "Grief. It looks like mortal grief."

"Then that's what it is," Radagast said. "I do not know what the Valar showed him, or what they asked of him, but whatever it was affected your son greatly. He will recover, or he will not. There is nothing anyone can do, save for him." Radagast paused. "Stay with him. He has lasted this long, and that is heartening. It may well be due to your presence." He turned to leave.

"Where are you going?" Thranduil asked.

Radagast turned, hat pulled low on his forehead and his face completely serious. "Your son warned of the Enemy in Dol Guldur. It is not something to be taken lightly. I must investigate, and if necessary, tell Gandalf. If the Dark Lord has returned, the White Council must be made aware."

"Beware of Saruman," Legolas warned from the bed. "He speaks lies that sound like sweet truth, and his voice holds great power. Already, he may be lost to the Enemy's council."

"Impossible," Radagast said, his voice a ragged whisper. "He is the greatest of us-- He cannot fall
to darkness."

But Legolas was lost again, and, "Ai, my earthen star, my love, you have left me! You have gone where I cannot follow! The sea is cold to me now, and it calls me still like a lover to her side."

The White Council would need proof; even Radagast could not sound the alarm without something. His eyes turned South. He would go to Dol Guldur himself, and hopefully, it was not already too late.

Chapter End Notes

So...this is it for a while, I'm afraid. I'm getting married on Friday! I'll be dark for a while (about a week) and probably won't be posting anything for at least another week or two after that. BUT! I've already started the next chapter, so don't worry! More will be coming!...eventually.
The Inevitability of Roast Mutton

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to livingmeatloaf for continuing to be an awesome beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Bilbo was asleep long before the dwarves settled in for the night. Gandalf was given the largest of the three guest rooms, with Thorin, Fili, and Kili given the other two. The rest settled in on low couches and overstuffed chairs; Bilbo's home was not short on comfortable furniture, even if Nori did end up asleep on the table, with Bofur snoring underneath. Gimli was dragged into Fili and Kili's room, and the three piled onto the bed to sleep like they hadn't done since before Fili's beard came in.
They rose before the sun, when the sky was just beginning to grey at its eastern edge. Gimli startled awake, chased by dreaming: on a hunt for Uruk-Hai with Legolas and Aragorn, once more dressed in Ranger green and brown. Together, they rode across the plains of his mind, and Gimli would swear that he could still smell horse and burnt orc in the twilight moment before full waking. He stared at the ceiling of Bag End and let the snoring of his cousins drift over him for a moment, centering himself in the now through their presence.

"Up and at 'em, nephew," Oin said, poking his head through the doorway. "Get those two up while you're at it."

"Right," Gimli said, shaking his head to clear the cobwebs. "On it."
Oin frowned, and stepped into the room. "You alright?"

"Fine," Gimli said. "Fine." He sat up and stretched. Kili shifted and burrowed into the warm space Gimli left behind, fingers tangling in Fili's hair. They looked so very young; Gimli's heart ached.

"You've seen something," Oin said, but he no longer sounded the eager uncle. Now, he was the healer and truth keeper of their Company.

Gimli shook his head. "No-- or, rather, aye, but nothing to make sense of. I do not think it was related to this quest."

Oin crossed his arms. "I'll best be the judge of that. There are aspects of this quest that you do not yet know, so how would you know if it pertained, hmm?"

Gimli raised an eyebrow. "Well, my beard had grown in fully, for one, and starting to grey to boot. So, unless this quest takes several decades, I can assume this was an unrelated issue."

"Hm," Oin grunted. "Very well. Get them to the kitchen soon. Bombur's cooking up the last of the larder for breakfast, and just in case Mr. Baggins does indeed decline to join us, we'd best be long gone by the time he wakes."

Gimli rolled his eyes, but he turned to wake his cousins only to find Fili looking at him. Kili, thankfully, was still asleep. "So, what were you dreaming?" Fili asked.

Gimli looked back for a long moment. It couldn't hurt, really, to tell his cousin. It's not as if Fili could deduce "time travel" from a dream, and it would be nice to speak of his friends again. "I was one of three hunters representing the Free Peoples of Middle Earth: a dwarf, an elf, and a man. We hunted a pair of hobbits across the vast plains to the south, as they had been taken by an army of orcs, each the size of the pale orc of old."

"It’s a good dream," Fili said, "but I fear that might be all it is. An elf lower himself to hunt with mortals? One of which is a dwarf? And an army giant orcs? Come, Gimli. You were deeper in your cups last night than we realized."

Gimli shrugged, stung but not surprised. The dream was a long way from the reality of today. "Say what you like," he said, and slid himself from the bed. "I know what I saw." He crossed the room and grabbed his pack, still mostly full, and returned to the bed. "One," he said.

"Two," Fili echoed.

"Three," they said together, and Gimli dropped the pack on Kili's stomach. Kili came up swinging, trying to fight off his attacker, only to find himself tangled in the sheets and fell from the bed with a thud, cocooned. The sheets muffled his voice as he cursed and swore his vengeance, but Fili and Gimli were laughing too hard to hear. At last, Kili's head, hair now a rats' nest that fell about his face, emerged from the blanket and he glared, looking so much like he had when he was a lad of twenty-five and Not tired, Ma! I want to play with Fee! that Gimli felt himself sobering. He redressed quickly, checking his braids with his hand, as Fili gave in and began untangling Kili. Kili let himself be untangled, but continued to stare morosely at the hair in front of his face, blowing at a particularly errant lock of hair.

"You know," Fili said, "if you would braid it like a proper dwarf--"

"I am a proper dwarf, hair braided or not," Kili said. Fili made a face, but didn't say anything else. Kili's hair was a touchy subject; the hair on his head was more fine than his brother's and uncle's, prone to looking thin when fully braided, and his beard was only just now growing in. He would
look fine in his Centennial Braids, once he got them, or even his Eightieth, like the braids his brother wore, and that was only three years away. Kili was determined to wait, which simply meant Fili had become a deft hand at unknotting Kili’s hair-- something he began to do once Kili was free of the blanket.

Gimli cleared his throat; watching Fili groom Kili was a familiar sight, and one that never bothered him as a lad, but now, watching Fili’s hands run through Kili’s hair, Gimli could feel long fingers in his own, deftly twisting or gently combing, and made a quick exit, calling over his shoulder that he’d save them some breakfast.

Maybe.

Sure enough, Bombur was in Bilbo’s kitchen, happily cooking up a thrown-together breakfast from the remnants of last night’s raid on Bilbo’s larder. Most of the others were already up. Thorin was in the corner with Balin and Dwalin, who was still finishing a biscuit, discussing the route they were to take. Bofur and Bifur had taken over the washing up. Nori was eating, as was Ori, through Dori had finished and was beginning to fuss over the young scribe, who, in the irritability of early morning, batted Dori’s hands away. Dori huffed, and stood with his plate. Nori signaled "Nice Word" in Iglishmêk to Ori while Dori's back was turn, and Ori sketched a shallow bow. Oin and Gloin were not in the room, and Gimli imagined they were out with the ponies.

"Morning, Gimli," Bombur said. "Here," and he handed over a plate of food. Gimli's mouth watered. It smelled wonderful like good, dwarvish cooking full of spice and flavor. Bombur must be traveling with a spice kit, there was no other explanation. Gimli sat, and began to eat with all the speed and desperation of an adolescent. After last night, he had doubted he’d be hungry again for a week, but apparently time had dulled the memory of what it was like to be a growing dwarrow and constantly hungry, and he finished his breakfast quickly.

“Gimli,” Thorin called over as Gimli stood with his plate. “Go help your Uncle; they could use another hand.”

Gimli nodded and went to get his boots. He grabbed his pack from the bedroom. He sat on the ground in the front hall to pull on his boots, were they still rested from the night before. He was desperate for a pipe, but there was little time for idleness. They intended to be out of Hobbiton by noon, which meant they had to leave Bilbo’s by ten of the clock, and it was pushing nine already.

Pushing nine, and there was no sign of Bilbo Baggins. Their host was still abed, his slumbering form clearly visible to dwarven eyes even in the low light of the morning. Shaking off his doubts, Gimli stood, grabbed his pack, and went to join Gloin and Oin.

Thorin’s company were set to ride on a team of ponies; from what Gimli remembered, procuring them had been Gloin’s job as treasurer of the quest. Gimli also remembered that Gloin did not have his brother’s affinity for animals, and so while Gloin had haggled over price, Oin had checked for quality and temperament.

Since tying off over a dozen ponies, and a full-sized horse for Gandalf besides, in the middle of Bagshot Row was not only unsightly but a terrible idea besides, the ponies were stabled in town at the Green Dragon Inn, and it was a brisk walk to town. Unsurprisingly, when Gimli arrived he found Gloin in the tavern proper, red faced and bristling up against the innkeeper, a burly hobbit who was just as red-faced and just as bristling.

“Da?” Gimli asked, half in the door.

Gloin deflated at once, turning to his son. “Hullo, Gimli. Your Uncle is in the stables. Why don’t
you give him a hand?"

Business as usual, then. If there was really a problem, Gloin wouldn’t switch gears so easily.

“Alright, Da,” Gimli said, and closed the door behind him. Through the thick wood, he could just hear:

“Was that your son?”

“Aye! My Gimli! Looks just like his mum, he does.”

“Fine young lad! Now, to the matter at hand—” and then Gimli was too far away to hear more, though the sound of raised voices followed him to the stables. He passed a sleepy older hobbit who cracked an eye to watch him pass, but other than that the streets were mostly empty. It was nearing ten, which would mean most were eating their second breakfast. They would set out, then during elevensies, which should mean empty roadways for the beginning of their travel.

Gimli pushed open the stable door and looked for his uncle. He found Oin at the far end, his staff propped against the wall and his pack hanging from the end to keep it from the stable floor. He had pulled over a small hobbit-sized stool, and was sitting, staring at a ring of stones on the ground; in the ring, several smaller stones of varying colors were scattered. Oin stared at the stones, muttering to himself.

“Uncle?” Gimli prompted, and Oin looked up, blinking from behind his spectacles.

“Eh? Oh! Gimli! Come here, my lad, come here!” Oin waved at him until Gimli found a stool of his own and sat next to the circle. Gimli nodded at the seeing stones.

“Good news?” he asked, and Oin snorted.

“No news, I’m afraid. I’m not getting any clear answers.” Oin frowned, and looked at Gimli speculatively. “But maybe, I’m not the one to be asking.” Gimli raised his eyebrows as Oin stooped to scoop his rocks back into his pouch. “Go find a rock the size of a late fall apple, the rounder the better.” Gimli nodded, and stood. It wasn’t hard to find rocks, but it took a moment to find a rock the appropriate size and shape. Though to be fair, if Gimli walked everywhere barefoot, he’d make sure the larger rocks were cleared away. In the end, Gimli had to pry a rock out of ground from where it had rested, mostly submerged beneath the earth.

“Good!” Oin said when Gimli returned. “Sit.” He gestured at the stood, and Gimli sat, holding the stone with one hand. “Now, think of the quest, grip the rock like you would an apple, and twist to halve it. Then, we read the cracks.” Oin settled onto his seat, focused on the rock. “Well, come on then! We don’t have much time.”

Gimli gripped the rock and twisted, forearms straining. “Come on, Gimli lad! Put your back into it!” Oin coached, and Gimli let out a bark of a laugh. He stopped, adjusted his grip, breathed out slow as he closed his eyes. He thought of the quest—of his frustration and anger at being left behind the first time, the long days of waiting to hear word, the bittersweet joy— they had the mountain, but at what cost? The resignation: this is what it means to be a dwarf of Durin's line; punished for crimes of dwarves long dead, even as they seek to atone. The determination: he would not fall so easily. The fate of his kin would not be his. He was sent back to change things, and by Mahal, his family would not fall so easily. (And in the back of his mind, always, a shining, dancing presence—a promise of what was to come.)

With a cry that started in his very toes, Gimli twisted, and with a loud CRACK the rock split in two. He sagged, breathing through the years in his mind until he was once again in the present.
Gingerly, he pulled the halves apart.

The inside shone, glittering amethyst in the morning light. Gimli had cracked a geode, a sign of luck and wealth. Oin crowed when he saw.

"A clearer sign we couldn't ask for!" he cried. "There are riches at the end of this, make no mistake. No more scrabbling for scraps! No more long hours in unsafe mines for the dwarves of Erebor." Oin sighed. "This should make Thorin happy."

Gimli nodded, but his eyes were still on the geode in his hands. The amethyst was darkest in the center, a purple so deep it was nearly black, reaching yellowed violet that was almost brown at the edges. It was a sickly color, for all the richness of the center, and Gimli frowned. He didn't like the look of that at all. It looked too much like sorrow, but before Gimli could point it out, Gloin entered the stables, and Oin called out, "Gimli cracked a geode!" Then Gloin was cheering, and it was all Gimli could do to hold on to the stone as, one by one, the rest of the company arrived in a steady stream. He was so distracted, in fact, that he didn't notice that Bilbo wasn't with them until they were already well on their way.

"What happened to Bilbo?" he asked Bofur, who was carving at a clever wooden figure, balanced crossed-legged on his saddle.

"Still asleep, I'd imagine," Bofur said. "I know I would be if I fainted like he did. Gandalf left a note to join us at the inn, but, well." Bofur shrugged.

"I've got ten to one odds on him joining us," Nori added, coming up along the other side. "Care to make a wager?"

Gimli eyed Nori for a long moment, but the thief didn't give anything away. He fished his money pouch from his pocket and handed over a small handful of coins. "My money's on Bilbo," he said, and Nori bit a coin, then sketched a slight bow and let his pony drop back.

Bofur blew on his carving, sending up a puff of dust. "You might have just lost your money," he said.

Gimli shook his head. "I don't think so," he said, then narrowed his eyes at Bofur. "And I don't think you will either."

Bofur grinned. "Guilty as charged. Way I see it, we're the most interesting thing to happen to the little bugger in decades. What's he going to do if he sits home? Crochet more doilies?" Bofur snorted. "He's better off with us."

"Ah, but the trick, Bofur," Gandalf said, riding up beside them. Gimli jumped; he hadn't sensed the wizard approaching. "Is convincing Bilbo of that."

"Er, right," Bofur said, and thumped at the pony's side with his hand until he pulled ahead, leaving Gimli riding with Gandalf.

"So, Gimli son of Gloin," Gandalf mused. Gimli waited a moment, but Gandalf said nothing more.

"At your service," Gimli said, bowing his head.

"Of that I have my doubts," Gandalf said. "It is clear to me that you were not intended to join this company. Has no one thought to question your presence?"

Gimli raised his eyebrows. "On the contrary. I've got nothing but questions to my presence, my
skills, my training... I am here by the grace of my cousin, the Lady Dis, and nothing more."

Gandalf hummed. "The Lady Dis is known to me. So, too, is her love of dwarflings. I do not believe that she would sponsor one as young as you, especially not with both of her own sons on this quest."

"I may be young," Gimli said, quietly but steadily. "But I am not a dwarfling. The Lady Dis felt that my foreknowledge and dreaming may aid Thorin, and that these traits outweighed my age."

"Ahh, yes," Gandalf said. "Your dreaming. Tell me, young Gimli, of what do you dream?"

"The future," Gimli said. "The past. I see some events that have yet to happen as if they happened long years past, and some as if they happened only yesterday."

Gandalf narrowed his eyes under his bushy brows. "And these dreams," he said. "Do they tell you of this quest?"

Gimli considered his words carefully. "I do not need dreaming to tell that there is more at stake than our homeland," he said, and felt his temper, never quite cooled even in the peace of Aman, bubble under the surface. His words, when they came, snapped like branches in a fire. "I do not need dreams to tell me that, in the eyes of Middle Earth, we dwarves are only thought of when needed, are only aided when it is to the benefit of others. When the dragons chase us from our homes, we are only helped when a greater darkness threatens--" Gimli cut himself off, clenching his jaw and looking away. "Fool! he thought. This is not your Gandalf. You have not traveled in fellowship with him. He will not take kindly to such words. And what words! You might as well have spilled the whole thing!"

"Your eyes see truly, Gimli son of Gloin," Gandalf said, low and dangerous. The air around him seemed darker, like the edge of a thunderstorm, though the world around them still shone with early spring brightness. "I am not proud to admit it, but admit it I shall, if only you tell me this:" His face tightened, and the Wizard had not looked so desperate since Khazad-dum. "What. Darkness. Threatens."

Gimli swallowed. "You know what darkness," he said, quietly, and looked away. "The ring has been found, Gandalf, many years past, though only now it wakes and seeks its old master; the Dark Lord grows in the shadows."

The storm fell away and Gandalf closed his eyes, looking all his many years. "Tell me, young dreamer. Are we too late?"

"No," Gimli said. "Do not despair." He smiled wanly at the wizard. "Erebor will be the watchtower of the North, and we will hold through the coming darkness, never fear. We are the dwarves of Durin’s line; we were built to endure. But Gandalf: I know the route you have planned, and I agree. We must get to Rivendell. Do not let Thorin turn us aside. I have much to tell, and there are those there who need hear it."

Gandalf looked at Gimli, swaying with the motion of his horse. "Very well, son of Gloin. I will get us to Rivendell, regardless of what your king thinks. This comment was pointed; Gimli was actively plotting to undermine his king, he knew that. But Gimli had lived a long time, much of that time away from direct rule and in the company of kings not his own. Aragorn was just a Man, as was Theoden and Eomer. Thorin, at the end of the day, was still a dwarf, and one biased against elves besides. No, it was better this way; Gandalf would get them to Rivendell in such a way that Thorin would have to accept it, one way or another."
With a final nod, Gandalf kicked off his pony and trotted ahead, leaving Gimli last in the line. Gimli sighed, and patted the mane of his ride. His pony, named Whimsy of all things, was a much more sensible size that what had come to be his usual mount, but that still didn’t stop his feet from trying to reach beyond his saddle, or stop him from finding his saddle to unwieldy and cumbersome. There was nothing for it. He sighed; he missed Arod.

They were just at the edge of Hobbiton when Gimli heard it. “Wait!” Very faint, but growing louder. “Wait! I’m coming! I signed it! I’m coming!”

Bilbo had come.

***

Bilbo was placed atop their supply pony, wedged between Bombur’s cook-pot and a bag of dried barley. In fact, he rode about just as well as the sack of barley, and held the reins like they were asps ready to strike. It would be comical if it didn’t highlight how absolutely miserable Bilbo was. As well as Gimli knew that Bilbo would adapt to their journey, it was difficult seeing the hobbit in such a state, and Gimli fell into a habit of riding next to Bilbo when he could, trying to draw him into conversation about anything and everything to distract Bilbo from his misery. Bilbo had to see through him, but the hobbit didn’t complain. Far from it—Bilbo appeared to look forward to these talks far more than many grown dwarrows Gimli had known in his past. (And if every once in a while, Bilbo said something, or tilted his head, or laughed in a way that Gimli had come to know from Frodo, well…)

They planned to make camp that night beyond Bree. Most of the company had been through Bree more than once looking for work in the lean seasons. Bofur was especially known around festival times, when he would arrive with Bombur and Bifur and a cart of clever toys for the market. Thorin had more than one commission as a blacksmith, and Dwalin had on occasion taken work as a sell-sword. So yes, the town was familiar to them, but not as welcoming as it would be for Bilbo; Bilbo wouldn’t be cheated for coin, or turned away at the inn. No, it was better to avoid the towns where they could.

Bilbo paused at the crossroads, looking down the path that went to town. Gandalf had disappeared—probably went to town himself for news—so it fell to Gimli to pause beside their burglar. “All right there, Bilbo?” he asked.

“Well?” Bilbo asked, shaking off some thought. “Oh, yes. Quite. I’m just—we’re not spending the night at the inn?” he asked.

“Best not,” Gimli said. “Secret quest and all that.”

“Right,” Bilbo said, and worried a thumbnail with his teeth. “We won’t be staying in any inns?”

Gimli shrugged. He didn’t consider Rivendell an inn, nor Beorn’s home. Thranduil would gladly charge them for their stay, but it wasn’t the same. “It’s an expensive way to travel,” he said. “And not one we’ve budgeted for.”

Bilbo nodded and clumsily steered Myrtle down the path after the others. “I guess it does make fiscal sense…” he said, trailing off. Gimli could almost see the seed cakes and tea cups dancing in Bilbo’s eyes.

“This is not the first journey for many of us,” Gimli said. “My father included, and he’s in charge of the financials. He’s a financier, you see, in addition to being a dwarf of many travels. He knows how to balance cost with morale. We won’t spend every night in the open, Mr. Baggins. Believe
me.”

“If you says so,” Bilbo said, in a tone that clearly said I’ll believe that when I see it. “And call me Bilbo, lad. Mr. Baggins was my father, and a very respectable hobbit. Not one to be found on adventures without the promise of an inn at the end of the road, anyway.” Bilbo winked at Gimli, and Gimli laughed.

“Thank you, Bilbo,” Gimli said. “And I am Gimli.”

“Well met, Gimli,” Bilbo said. They traveled in silence for a few moments, and then Bilbo asked, “We will be having supper once we stop, won’t we?”

It took Gimli some time to stop laughing and answer.

They took shelter on a small plateau of rock, sheltered by a shallow cave that was little more than a slight curve of the rock. Still, it was enough to break the wind, and Gloin soon had a merry fire going. Gimli had to help Bilbo down from Myrtle, as he had stiffened up from being in saddle all day. Still, he limbered up again quickly, far more quickly than Gimli had his first time mounted, and the two of them helped Fili and Kili settle the ponies. Bombur was quick with dinner, and those with third shift watch were soon asleep, Bilbo among them.

Fili and Kili tucked themselves into the alcove by the fire, and as often happened with them, Gimli found himself tagging along and sharing a much desired pipe.

“How’s he holding up?” Fili asked, nodded to Bilbo. “He doesn’t seem much the adventuring type.”

“Neither does Ori,” Kili said, “and yet he’s here.” He turned to Gimli. “Fili bet against him.”

“Thorin said he wouldn’t come,” Fili protested. “And it’s different with Ori, isn’t it? He has a personal stake in this, like the rest of us.”

Kili rolled his eyes. “You’re just jealous that I made money you lost.” Fili humphed, and Kili nudged Gimli’s boot. “How’d you bet then?”

“My bet will always be on Bilbo,” Gimli said, smoke curling out of his nose as he savored the leaf. So far, none had cottoned on to the contents of Gimli’s smoke-pouch, but it was only a matter of time. Kili blew a wonky smoke-ring, and without thinking, Gimli blew a smaller one and sent it through Kili’s, dispersing it. Fili laughed at Kili’s expression.

“You’ve been practicing, cousin,” Fili said with an easy grin as Kili tried to create a more rounded ring.

Gimli shrugged. “Aye,” he said, and attempted to show Kili what he had done. Distantly, he was aware of Bilbo rousing, but didn’t pay much attention to it until the wolves howled in the distance—but still closer than strictly comfortable.

Bilbo had frozen, pale as a sheet, a half eaten apple in his hand as even Myrtle paused in her late-night snack. “Wolves,” Bilbo said, barely audible over the night-wind and crackling fire.


After a moment, Bilbo forced himself to move, through his motions were even more stilted than when he was horse-sore. He grabbed his pipe and his pouch, and sat gingerly on the rock Gimli had offered to share, hands still in his lap and hunched over to be nearer the fire, as if the heat and
light would protect him. No, Gimli realized, as if he was trying to get warm.

“Mr. Boggins?” Kili asked, genuine concern showing on his face, even as Fili rolled his eyes and elbowed his side. “You’ve gone pale.”

Bilbo breathed in sharply through his nose. “Have I? Goodness me.” He packed his pipe with shaking hands, and swore softly in hobbit fashion under his breath when he couldn’t get the pipe to light. Gimli held out a hand with a flint-sparker and, with a defeated sigh, Bilbo let Gimli light his pipe.

“They’re not going to get you,” Fili said, eyebrows drawn together. “They’re too far away, and we’d get them first even if they were close.”

“Yes, well. Let’s try to avoid that necessity, shall we?” Bilbo said, puffing quickly. When the three young dwarves didn’t seemed inclined to let it drop, Bilbo sighed and took his pipe from his mouth. “Gandalf doesn’t know this, and I want to keep it that way, agreed?”

“Agreed,” Gimli said readily, echoed by Fili and Kili. Bilbo nodded and began his story.

“I was a young lad, just barely in my tweens, when the Fell Winter came,” he said. “The snows came fast and heavy, catching the late-harvest crops off guard. We had little food and less stored away…and then the wolves came.” Bilbo paused, eyes on the fire yet far away. “The deep cold had frozen the Brandywine and allowed the wolves to cross. The Rangers that normally protect our borders were caught up in the snow, and there was little to be done.

“My mother was a Took, the favored daughter of the Old Took in fact, and knew there was food to be had in the stores of Brandyhall; the Brandybucks and the Tooks have always been close, you see, and more worldly than the rest of the Shire (and thus more odd). They had planned for a day like that day. However, we had to get there, first.” Bilbo paused and took a long drag on his pipe

“My mother dressed me and my father in our warmest clothes, handed me a spade, my father a rake, and took for herself her favorite cast-iron pan. Together, along with the Gamgees next door and the Hartfoots along the ridge, we started the journey to Brandyhall, moving as swiftly and as silently as we could through the snow. We nearly made it.” Gimli closed his eyes. He could only guess where this was going, and it hurt to think of Bilbo living through such loss.

Bilbo stopped, jaw clenching rhythmically for a beat. “My mother had traveled in her youth; it’s how she met Gandalf. She insisted on taking the rear, as she had the most experience fighting. But that was over twenty years past, and they came from behind. I remember her yelling for us to run, the snow coming in thick waves, the snarling and howling and the blood.”

He cleared his throat. “The Rangers found us the next morning. We lost my father, Mrs. Gamgee, and two of the Hartfoots. Though I had at least injured one, I had been bitten,” he pressed a hand to his side, just above his hip, “but the cold had slowed the bleeding enough that they were able to bring me back. My mother—“ his voice cracked and he paused, swallowed. “My mother was not so lucky, but she had taken three of the pack with her before she fell; bashed their skills in. The Rangers found them in a circle around her; she still had the pan clenched in her fist.” He sighed, and ran a shaking hand over his face.

“She was a hero,” Kili said, solemn.

“She was my mother,” Bilbo said, and wouldn’t say anything else. Gimli looked away from the fire, needing a moment himself, and saw Thorin. Though Thorin had appointed himself third watch, he was awake now, and watching Bilbo with shadowed eyes. But Gimli thought there was
something new in that look, like Thorin was truly seeing *Bilbo* and not just their hobbit. They sat there in the growing darkness until the second shift were roused from their slumber.

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Bilbo seemed in much better spirits the next day, though he moved like a dwarf of three-hundred after a day in the saddle and a night on the ground. He gave no sign of his melancholy the night before, and Gimli wondered just how much loss Bilbo was used to hiding.

He thought of the old Bilbo he had met in Rivendell; how much pain was that wizened, smiling face hiding? The thought made him feel ill.

Fili and Kili began to show some difference to the hobbit as well, often joining Gimli by his side as they rode, and when Fili was required by Thorin's side, or Kili to scout ahead, Ori rode with them and soon found a kindred spirit in Bilbo's scholar. Bilbo soon revealed his love of languages, and though his desire to learn the Elvish tongues got him some censoring looks, no one yet offered to teach him any Khudzul, though Mahal knows it was the only language Bifur could speak, and it certainly didn't stop the others from slipping out of Westron occasionally.

Gimli never understood the need for such secrecy himself: the knowledge of a dwarven language was an open secret, and thus no longer a secret at all! By the time the Fellowship had reached Moria, Merry and Pippin (and Sam, too, though he blushed furiously when caught out) had learned some key dwarven swears. When the Fellowship at last parted ways after the war and the return of the king, Frodo could hold polite conversation to counter Merry and Pippin's impolite conversation.

It was Legolas, however, who had the distinction of being the first non-dwarf to gain passing fluency in the language, to hear the secret rites and chants, and most secret of all, Gimli's true name, though all but the last were learned by the quiet shores of Aman so that Gimli, a dwarf alone, could speak his native tongue with his husband, at least. He never did lose that horrible accent, however.

Gimli chuckled to himself as he rode along. Legolas had spent centuries speaking only the dialect of the Woodland realm, a Sindarin so peppered with Sylvan to be nearly incomprehensible to most. As the prince, he had learned the Sindarin of the High Elves, and Westron, but he had been left with a heavy accent that, though it lessened slightly with time, never left him. It made his Westron dip and crest like a storm at sea, and he would swallow bits of Khudzul whole. What was more, the only word he seemed able to pronounce flawlessly was "fuck," and more than once Gimli had heard a stream of lilting gibberish punctuated by that one perfect word.

Gandalf reappeared he next morning, as if he had never been gone, and stayed with them over the next week of soggy late-spring travels, until they reached the foothills of the Ettenmoors. The sky, which had been threatening rain all day, was finally beginning to loose it's battle and splatter tiny raindrops down upon their party. Thorin called them to stop in the burned out remains of what had once been a farm house, so they could use what little shelter was left to dry themselves and their things.

Honestly, there wasn't much left in the way of shelter, especially not for thirteen dwarves and one very wet hobbit, who seemed to drown in Dwalin's extra hood. Still, Thorin called for Gloin to start a fire, and Bombur to start their supper. Gandalf pulled Thorin aside, and they spoke in low, urgent voices as they made camp.

Gimli joined Fili and Kili in stowing the ponies; there was something familiar about this place. They had passed through this way in caravan when emptying Ered Luin for Erebor, but what was it?
Gandalf suddenly cried out against the stiff necks of dwarves, and stormed off just as the skies opened and Gimli could hear no more for the rain.

Between the three of them, they made a decent shelter for the ponies out of branches, but it was dark and oppressive from the rain, and even their dark vision could not help them much to see. Between one lightning strike and another, however, Fili noticed something that made Gimli freeze.

"Where are the ponies?" Fili asked.

"Right there!" Kili said. "I know it's dark, but honestly, brother. You're a dwarf!" The lightning struck again, and before the after-image burned into Gimli's eyes, he counted. Twelve ponies. Twelve of fourteen.

*That's what it was*, Gimli thought. *Trolls.*

"All right, lads," Bilbo said, coming up to them from camp. He had three bowls balanced in his hands and his hood was hanging heavy before his eyes, dripping down the side of his nose. "I've your sup-- What's wrong?"

"Wrong?" Kili asked. "Nothing's wrong."

"Right," Fili said. "We've just come up against one teeny--"

"Tiny"

"--issue with the ponies," Fili finished.

"What," Bilbo said. He seemed more resigned than anything, which Gimli chose to take as a good sign.

"You see, we had fourteen," Kili said.

"Only now, there are twelve," Fili said. The lightning flashed, revealing the ponies, the shelter, and the patch of old oaks torn up and twisted aside like so many blades of grass. Gimli boggled. How had they done that without any of them noticing?

"Ten," Gimli corrected

Bilbo stared at the path, jaw slightly slack. "Should we tell Thorin?" he asked.

"No," Kili said immediately, and took one of the bowls from Bilbo.

"Better not," Fili said, taking the other two and handing one to Gimli.

"We thought you might be able to tell us," Kili said. "Being a burglar and all."

Bilbo tilted his head, as if thinking "and what precisely about burgling prepares one for dealing with--whatever this was?"

Gimli cleared his throat. "It's trolls," he said, and the others turned to look.

"How do you know?" Bilbo asked, and at the moment the lightning struck again, sending into stark relief the outline of a giant mountain troll carrying a pony under each arm.
"It's got Myrtle and Minzy!" Bilbo gasped. "We have to do something!"

"Excellent idea!" Kili said. "You go set the ponies loose, we'll keep watch!"

"What?" said Bilbo and Gimli together, even as Kili and Fili ushered Bilbo closer to the troll camp.

"You're so small, they'll never see you!" Kili continued. Gimli stared at that back of his cousin's head in wonder. Had he been this brash when he was this young? He must have been, because when Fili said:

"If there's trouble, hoot once like a barn owl, twice like a brown owl," and together with Kili, pushed Bilbo forward, Gimli was right behind him, axe in hand.

"Once like a...twice--what?" Bilbo turned around, but Fili and Kili were gone, off to scout the area and, hopefully, alert Thorin and the rest of the Company.

"I've got you, Bilbo," Gimli said. "It's a familiar warning, and one we used often as dwarflings. I'll keep the trolls off your back."

Bilbo didn't look convinced. "Gimli," he said, and Gimli shook his head, to indicate silence.

"Trolls are slow and stupid," Gimli whispered. "Hobbits are quiet and clever, are they not? They are no match for you. All you need do is cut through those ropes, release the ponies, and disappear. You can do this, Bilbo."

Bilbo's bewilderment was quickly turning to a scowl. "This is a terrible plan, you realize. Of all the bad plans I have heard in my day, and I was part of the Maggot-Mushroom incident of '35!"

Gimli had no idea what that was, be he was pretty sure he knew what Maggot-Mushrooms were, and remembered those dogs with a crystal clarity. "That may be," he said. "But at the moment, it's all we have. We need those ponies, Bilbo." He held out his boot-knife, and after a moment, Bilbo took it.

Bilbo sighed. "Right," he said. He squared his shoulders, tugging down the front of his waistcoat (which had grown dingy and not a little bit raggedy with travel), and crept off into the underbrush with nary a whisper and a rustling of leaves that could have very well have been naught more than the wind.

Gimli stayed just out of the firelight behind the tree-line, watching the camp. The trolls seemed to be arguing over the preparation of their dinner, and while "good-natured" didn't fit their temperament, there was no extra malicousness in their actions. One, whose voice whined and squeaked like water forced through a clogged hose, seemed to have a cold, and often blew his nose into a dirty handkerchief.

As Gimli watched, Bilbo seemed to appear from the tree-line, hugging the shadow as he made his way to the pony-pen. He shushed them gently, and Gimli saw his knife flash as Bilbo started to cut through the rope. It was slow going however, and after a moment, Gimli saw Bilbo scowl and tuck the knife away.

Gimli felt his stomach sink. *Bilbo, you fool, what are you doing?*

Apparently, Gimli's knife wasn't enough for the rope, and Bilbo was attempting to take the sick troll's pocketknife. Gimli covered half his face with one hand; Bilbo was most definitely related to Peregrin Took. Gimli had wanted to get past the trolls without engaging directly, but as Bilbo was grabbed and used as a kerchief, Gimli adjusted the grip on his axe and steeled himself. Nothing for
it.

With a loud cry, Gimli raised his axe high and went to save their hobbit.

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Wet burlap itched.

Gimli rubbed at his tender chin. The sack they had tied him in had rubbed his skin raw, and by the time Oin had untied him ("Parasites as big as your arm, uncle?" "Shut it, lad, I'm not proud."), he had been scraped and scratched to near-bleeding. It was luck that had the rain clearing away in the early hours of morning, and the sunrise had come none-too-soon. He was one of the first dressed, and he sat, cleaning his axe as the others put themselves back together after nearly becoming troll-food.

It just didn't make sense! There was no reason for Bilbo to go for the troll-knife. Gimli had seen the rope; his knife had cut the fibres fine! So why had Bilbo changed the plan?

"Fan out!" Thorin called. "Look for their cave! They may have a hoard nearby."

Bilbo cleared his throat. All eyes turned to him, and he flushed. "I think it's other that way," Bilbo pointed. "I saw something cave-like when they had me high.

"Then we will look," Thorin said. Sure enough, there was a cave, reeking of troll and filled with plundered treasure. Gimli looked around the cave, mouth and nose covered by his damp sleeve. Nori, Bofur, and Gloin were digging holes to bury treasure. Dwalin and Balin stood sentry by the door, Balin holding a piece of cedarwood under his nose. Bilbo was poking around in a dark corner, face scrunched, while Thorin and Gandalf stopped by a large barrel filled with weapons. Gimli followed. This would be the perfect place to get a new axe to carry; finally, he would stop feeling so exposed.

"These were not made by any Troll," Thorin said and pulled a familiar sword out of the barrel by its hilt. Gimli stared in shock. *Orcrist.* His father had always said Thorin had been given the sword by elves, not that it had be found in a troll-hoard-- In fact, Gloin only ever mentioned the chests of gold that they had returned for on the way back to Ered Luin.

"Nor of any smith among men," Gandalf confirmed, looking at the hilt of his own sword, *Glamdring.* "These were forged in Gondolin, by the High Elves."

*What else had Gloin changed in the telling?*

Thorin made as if to drop the blade, and Gandalf snapped: "You will not find a finer blade!" Thorin stopped, and pulled Orcrist from its hilt with one smooth stroke. It looked like it was made for his hand, for all that it was in an elvish style. Gimli blinked away the memory of it's likeness carved of stone in the memorial halls of Erebor.

*What else did Gimli not know?*

"It seems we were meant to find these," Thorin said, and Gimli stepped back in shock, a horrible thought forming. If they were *meant* to find these swords, then there were greater forces at work than Gimli, or even whatever it was that sent Gimli back to his own past. What if Gimli *wasn't* meant to save his kin? What if they were *meant* to die?
No--Gimli couldn't think like that. He had to believe he could change things. Why would he be sent back if he couldn't? What other purpose could he have? He had to talk to the Lady Galadriel; it was even more imperative now than ever before. He pressed his hand to his breast, feeling the Lady's Gift with his fingers and steeling himself for what was to come, and went to look for a new axe.

Chapter End Notes

Good news! I am successfully married! Thank you to everyone who wished us well, it was an amazing ceremony and a great start!

For more related news, I am doing nanowrimo! You can find me on the site under "scarletjedi" and don't be afraid to buddy me! I'm using nano to bang out the next 50k of this fic. It wont finish it, but it'll put a good dent!

Wish me luck, and I hope you enjoyed this chapter.
A Short Rest With Elvish Nonsense.

Chapter Notes

Thanks SO MUCH to livingmeatloaf for betaing this so quickly! Oh my god, this chapter kicked my ass, but I like it. It's a bit shorter than the last, but that's okay, because the next chapter is loooong :)

You'll begin to notice more and more direct text from the book and the movie, so it's safe to say that if you recognize it, it's borrowed. Also, I share many popular headcannons, and many of them come from determamfidd and Sansukh, so you may see a bit of that as well, in this chapter and the next. Needless to say, if it's new, it's all mine :D

Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Well, it wasn’t his father’s axe, but it was a perfectly balanced great axe, and a fair sight better than his training weapon. Gimli sat on a large stone next to Fíli, cleaning the years of dust and cobwebs from the blade and handle. It was remarkably free of rust, and inscribed with a delicate knotwork pattern that marked it as a product of the Ironfists to the East. Gimli didn’t know much of their history, having focused most of his studies on the Firebeards of his grandmother, but he recognized skilled craftwork nonetheless. The weapon was light but steady, more curved than the axes of the Longbeards, and razor sharp, which meant he could achieve more damage with less brute force—better for him, as he wouldn’t come into his true strength for years. There was a line of Cirith runes etched along the handle, giving the axe a name: Peacemaker. Gimli did not know whose craft went into this axe, but he certainly liked their sense of humor.

Bilbo perked up, still as a rabbit sensing a fox, and said hurriedly, “Someone is coming!”

They froze and Gimli quietly tucked his cloth away, gripping his new weapon with both hands. Sure enough, they heard it then: a rustling like a charging Oliphaunt, and then a cry, “Flee! Fire! Foes! Flee!” Gandalf lowered his sword with a resigned air. Gimli didn’t have time to wonder why, as a giant sled pulled by the largest rabbits Gimli had ever seen burst from the underbrush, carrying with it an old man dressed in tattered brown robes. He pulled the sled to a halt, and stood, blinking at them from underneath a wild hat to rival Bofur’s.

“Radagast,” Gandalf breathed. “Radagast the Brown.” A wizard. A wizard like Gandalf. One by one, the dwarves lowered their weapons. Gimli took out his rag once more, though he didn’t bother to sit again. “What are you doing here?” Gandalf asked, drawing Radagast away down the hill to speak in privacy.

“Another wizard,” Balin said to Thorin. “What do you think that means?”

Dori sniffed loudly, radiating his affront. After the way Gandalf has spoken to him, Dori wasn’t to keen on other wizards. Thorin barely spared him a glance, however. He had, in fact, hardly looked away from Orcrist since he had claimed the blade.

“I think,” he said slowly, “that it means our wizard has divided loyalties.” He slid Orcrist back into
its sheath and slung it over his back. “From now on, we plan as if he is not there,” he said, quietly. Balin looked at him for a long moment, and nodded.

“Aye,” he said, and stepped back as Gandalf came back, face grim and Radagast trailing behind, worrying the brim of his hat nervously. Was—Gimli squinted, looking closer. Was that a bird’s nest in his hair?

“Thorin Oakenshield,” Gandalf said. “Do not mistake me, you are a strong leader, and your devotion to your people does you credit, but we must make for Rivendell; this blind hatred of the elves cannot continue.”

Thorin crossed his arms. “So you are dictating how I am to feel, now? And how I am to best serve my people?”

“I do when your feelings endanger your people,” Gandalf snapped. “Lord Elrond is a dear friend, who bears you and yours no ill will. We will find there food, shelter, and a reader of that map. More, there are those in Rivendell with whom I must consult. The winds of change are blowing in Middle Earth, and I fear they do not carry good news.”

Gimli nearly threw his hands up in despair. This was how Gandalf planned to get Thorin to Rivendell? Gandalf, whom Gimli had seen talk Sauroman out of Theoden? Who talked Denethor into war, and then out of madness? He was as bad as Pippin!

And yet, it worked. Thorin unfolded his arms and nodded. “Very well. We shall make for Rivendell. We will let these elves supply us and we will move on; it is the very least of what they can do to right the wrongs they have done us.” He turned and called to Ori, “Get the ponies!”

Ori scrambled to comply, Kíli going along to lend a hand. Gandalf turned to Radagast. "You will be coming with us, of course?"

Radagast shook his head; the frantic, hunted look of before was gone, but the solemn look Radagast wore in its place suited him no better. "I'm afraid not, Gandalf. I must be back to the Greenwood; the prince of Ered Lasgalen is very sick, affected by what I do not know, but I suspect might be some terrible magic."

Gimli felt his knees go weak and staggered a step, earning him a concerned look from Fíli. Gimli took no notice. Legolas—sick? And here he was, so far away. Gimli cursed the lands between them. It would be months before they reached the Greenwood. Would they be too late?

But how? Legolas had told him, when first affected by the sea-longing, that he, like many of his kind, had never been subject to long sickness. Legolas would not have lied to him, not about this.

He closed his eyes. Something else different. What else was changing? By the time it mattered, would Gimli even recognize the world he was in?

“Gimli?” Fíli asked quietly, placing a hand on Gimli’s back.

“I’m all right,” Gimli said hazily. “I’m fine.” He grinned at Fíli. “Nothing a hot meal and an ale wouldn’t fix.”

Fíli snorted, the tension in his shoulders easing. “That is true of all of us,” he said. “Let us hope the elves in Rivendell are as obliging as our Mister Baggins.”

Gimli rather doubted that, and it must have shown clearly on his face as Fíli laughed. “Right,” he said. “Fat chance, I know. Still. One must hope.” Fíli smacked the palm of his hand onto Gimli’s
back where it had rested, and went to help Kíli and Ori bring in the ponies. Gimli turned his eyes to the East.

*Legolas! What ails you so?* his mind cried out. *Be strong, my Ghivashel! I am coming!*

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Radagast left in a flurry of rabbit fur and the Company set out upon the road to Rivendell. They soon broke through the trees to a great grassy plain, broken only infrequently by large, jutting boulders like teeth though a crust of bread. The ponies made the best time they could, but the way was muddy, sodden with the night’s rain, and it was slow going. By early afternoon they had forded a small river, and on the other side saw their first glimpse of the Misty Mountains.

“Is that *the* mountain?” Bilbo asked, voice hushed with awe.

“Of course not!” said Balin, chuckling but not unkindly. “That is only the beginning of the Misty Mountains, and we have to get through, or over, or under those somehow before we can come into Wilderland beyond. And it is a deal of a way even from the other side of them to the Lonely Mountain in the East where Smaug lies in our ancient homeland.”

“Oh,” Bilbo said, and his voice was very small. He seemed to sag a bit in the saddle, though pressed up against the cookpot as he was it was hard to tell.

Kíli pulled his pony alongside Bilbo’s. “It’ll be months before we reach the mountain,” he said. “Our people wouldn’t have been safe from the dragon if we had settled any closer.”

“If they’d have let us settle any closer,” Dwalin grumbled as he rode past. Kíli considered this and nodded.

“True enough,” Kíli said.

“No time for that now,” Balin said. “We’ll never get there if we don’t start moving. Come on lads, let’s go.” He clicked at his pony and they trotted off, Bilbo’s following out of habit.

Bilbo followed. And followed. And followed, and there was still no sign of the house. At one point he muttered, just loud enough for Gimli to hear, “You’d think, if you had a house of rest for weary travelers, you’d put the blasted thing where they could find it, wouldn’t you?”

Gimli hid a grin, but he had to agree. He had been to Rivendell several times over his lifetime—invited as a friend of the elves—and he always had difficulty finding the path. They searched through the long light of early evening, as the sun turned red and gold on the horizon, and still there was no sign of their destination, the house or the valley. Then, as twilight turned over fully to evening, Gandalf stopped his horse with a cry.

“Aha! Here it is! Just as I remembered!” Gandalf gestured with a flourish and, through the growing gloom, Gimli could just make out a path that sloped gently downwards along a sheer cliff face of rock.

“We have to go down that?” Bilbo asked, quite pale. Hobbits, as a general rule, don’t like heights.

“Never fear, Bilbo,” Gimli said, reaching over to pat the neck of Myrtle. “These are mountain ponies. They’re sure-footed, and know how to climb. Trust your mount; she wants to fall as little as you do.”

Bilbo made a sound that could have been an assent, or could very well have been the precursor to
another fainting spell. Either way, Gandalf had already disappeared down the path, and the rest of the Company were following him down into the valley.

It was slow going and far more arduous than Gimli’s previous visits. Though, he had never approached from this direction, before. Still, this difficulty felt deliberate, like there was something to the West that Rivendell wanted protection from. What it was, Gimli had no idea. Dwarven cities were always East-warded.

They came at last to an open glade, the green of the grass glowing ice-blue in the moonlight, and Gimli felt the magic of Rivendell ripple over his skin like the air on the verge of a lightning strike. The air smelled of honeysuckle and jasmine and something uniquely Elven.

Gimli sneezed.

Bilbo, on the other hand, looked the happiest he’d been since they first set out on their quest, his round face open and shining with joy and amazement. Bilbo retires here, his mind reminded him. No wonder he looks as if he’s come home.

Thorin looked thunderous. What else is new? snarked a voice in the back of his mind that sounded far too much like Legolas; Gimli had to bite his lip rather hard to keep from laughing aloud. It was true that Thorin resembled a storm on the best of days, but there was more to his current expression than being surrounded by elves and the obvious signs of effortless elven prosperity. Gimli would bet good money that Thorin wanted to be the one to put that look on Bilbo’s face, that he did not want to lose the hobbit to the elves. Gimli shook his head; as if it was a contest. Sure, Bilbo retires to Rivendell, and spends his days learning their languages, but Gimli knew that Bilbo preferred to write with a clever fountain pen of dwarvish design and cursed his ill fortune in nearly accent-less khuzdul. Thorin need not fear that Bilbo would choose elves over dwarves: Bilbo was not so easily swayed.

As if that was the only reason Thorin would want to impress Bilbo.

Gimli looked at Thorin as he led the way across the river. No. It was too soon. Yet, as Gimli watched, Thorin looked back over his shoulder, eyes clearly searching until he caught sight of Bilbo, and the scowl deepened even further.

Of course, the singing started once they were over the bridge.

“Oh, I don’t believe this,” Glóin grumbled as the lilting elven voices grew ever nearer. “At least they have the decency to mock us in a language we all understand.”

“Eh?” Oin said, raising his trumpet. “What?”

O! What are you doing,  
And where are you going?  
Your ponies need shoeing!  
The river is flowing!  
O! tra-la-la-lally  
Here down in the valley!

“What on earth is ‘tra-la-la-lally?’” Nori griped.

“Elves,” Thorin grunted.

“I like it,” Bifur said, but no one paid him any mind, save for Bofur, who cocked an ear to listen to the next verse.
O! What are you seeking,  
And where are you making?  
The faggots are reeking,  
The bannocks are baking!  
O! tril-lil-lil-lolly  
The valley is jolly,  
ha! ha!

“Oh, I don’t know,” Bofur said. “There’s a beat to it, at least. Most elvish singing is all lamenting wailing. Can’t hardly dance to it at all.”

“You can’t dance to this,” Kíli said.

“I could,” Bilbo said, but turned red and wouldn’t say anymore when the others turned to look at him. Hobbit dancing, Gimli knew, was much different than dwarven dancing.

O! Where are you going  
With beards all a-wagging?  
No knowing, no knowing  
What brings Mister Baggins  
And Balin and Dwalin  
Down into the valley  
In June  
ha! ha!

“Mahal’s hairy arse,” Dwalin grumbled.

“How do they know our names?” Bilbo asked, quite confused. Gimli looked to Gandalf, who looked far too amused.

O! Will you be staying,  
Or will you be flying?  
Your ponies are straying!  
The daylight is dying!  
To fly would be folly,  
To stay would be jolly  
And listen and hark

Til the end of the dark  
To our tune  
ha! ha!

“That’s no good,” Ori said at last, pulling his mount to a halt. “There’s no consistency to those verses at all. They’re all different lengths, the rhyming is shoddy at best, and some of it seems rather forced, if you want to know what I think.” The others turned to look at Ori, and he crossed his arms. “What?” he asked. “Verse is an elegant and noble craft!”

“That it is,” Balin said. “But mayhaps we best be on?” The Company continued past, though Ori remained where he was, stung, until Nori sidled up next to him and pulled him along to the cajoling cries of the elven singers, who were not very happy about Ori’s critique.

At last, they came to a stone bridge so narrow that they had to dismount and lead their ponies across one by one. Still, the elves teased them from the shadows, calling for them to roll Bombur along like a barrel, and to warn the kitchens that Bilbo was coming. One brave voice even called
out to Gimli as he was spanning the bridge, “Are you not cold, master dwarf, with no wool on your face? Or are there two hobbits in your party?”

“I thank you for your concern,” Gimli called back. He was focused Whimsy, who did not like being on this bridge at all. “But I am far too hungry to be cold, and being a hobbit is no bad thing to be.”

“Don’t talk to them, Gimli,” Thorin called over to him. “You’ll just encourage them.”

“Hush, hush! Good People! and goodnight!” said Gandalf, coming last over the bridge. “Valleys have ears, and some elves have over-merry tongues. Goodnight!”

The elves laughed, still having never shown themselves, but Gimli had the sense that they were settling in to watch, content for a time with their jeering.

The bridge path took them to small courtyard, a welcoming entrance to the Last Homely House. Gimli looked about; Rivendell was certainly something to see at the first blush of summer. The place was very green and bursting with flowers. Bifur seemed quite taken with one particular budding plant that stood to about his waist and sent up thick stalks that ended with flowers like orange trumpets. There was a peaceful smile on his face as he leaned in to smell them. Gimli moved to the front, and waited by Thorin and Dwalin.

They were greeted—or rather, Gandalf was greeted, and in elvish no less—by a dark-haired elf in long robes the color of deep wine. Lindir, Gimli remembered his name was, and he smiled in that reserved elven way at Gandalf. At the Company, however, his smile faltered.

“You did, of course, get my message?” Gandalf prompted in Westron.

“Yes, of course,” Lindir answered. “My master has told me to welcome you to Rivendell. He would welcome you himself, but there was a matter that attracted his urgent attention. He will join you for dinner.”

“I don’t like this,” Glóin grumbled from behind Gimli. “Does he offer us insult by not showing his face?”

Óin snapped, quite at the end of his patience, “You see insult in the way the wind blows, brother.” He adjusted his pack. “He’s offering us dinner! Even I heard that.”

Glóin glowered, but he was mollified all the same. “Right. Carry on, then.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Thorin muttered. Dwalin grunted, shaking his head, and stayed behind to take the rear as Thorin led the Company after Gandalf. They hadn’t gotten far when a group of elves seemed to melt from the shadows to attend their ponies. After a brief scuffle as the dwarves scrambled for their packs, they continued on to their rooms.

They were brought to a suite of candlelit rooms with a large balcony. The beds were all in the elven style, low to the ground, which was nice, but overly soft and sized for a much larger frame. They had only soft sheets, and little in the way of blankets. There were no furs, no quilts. Gimli wondered how any of them slept without that comforting weight.

The Company looked about the room with barely concealed disappointment, which Lindir was gracious enough to ignore. “Someone will come and fetch you for dinner in an hour,” he said. “Mithrandir, your room is this way.”

“Thank you, Lindir,” Gandalf said, and followed him from the room after sparing a warning glare
for Thorin. Thorin just raised an eyebrow, unimpressed.

Gimli dropped his pack by a bed and stretched. He felt the travel of the last few weeks upon his skin, and while a Dwarf was usually comfortable with a good layer of clean dirt on his skin, this was not clean. If they were going to be guests at Elrond’s table, they might as well make a good show of it. Gimli reached into his pack and grabbed his grooming kit, much neglected these past weeks even if they had made time for quick clean-ups on the road, and wandered over to the attached water closet.

The room itself was large, though not as large as the bedrooms, and was rather more open to the air than Gimli would have liked. A stream of water fell from its place near the ceiling as a gentle waterfall into a stone basin large enough for three or four dwarves to lounge in. The basin was angled to siphon away the water in a continuous stream, and it flowed away through a hidden hole in the floor. The walls were covered with ivy and other such creeping plants, and it was this very foliage that created a privacy screen between the washbasin and the large open windows. Or were those doors? They went from floor to ceiling, either way, and offered a breathtaking view of the starry night over the valley.

He set his kit down and began to disrobe. It wasn’t his first time using such elvish means, but that didn’t mean he liked them. The water was always cold, for one, and while Durin’s folk were hearty northern dwarves, they were not overly fond of icy water on their sensitive bits.

Gimli stripped his tunic and hesitated with his hands on the chain of his Lady’s Gift. Did it glow more brightly in this elven place? Or was there something else that made it shine so?

With a shake of his head, Gimli pulled it over his neck and hid it in the folds of his clothes, and not a moment too soon as Kíli spilled into the water closet, pushed by Fíli.

“Uncle said we’re to wash in shifts,” Fíli said. “We’re to go first, then keep watch while the others bathe.”

Gimli rolled his eyes. “We hardly need to keep watch here,” he said, but Fíli just shrugged.

“Uncle’s orders,” he said, and began piling his knives in the far corner.

Kíli was sitting on the edge of the basin, hand out to test the water. He pulled it back in surprise. “It’s like ice!” he said. “Where are the taps?” He began looking for a lever that would send hot water to their room.

“There are no taps,” Gimli said.

“No taps?” Kíli looked up, horrified. “But then, how do their heat their water?”

“They don’t,” Gimli said. “They’re elves.”

Kíli stared, slack jawed, as Gimli pointed to the stream of water. “Look at it,” he said. “It’s a natural water fall: no pipes needed. It’s rather clever, really,” he added.

“Except for the way that there is no hot water!” Kíli said. “Even Bilbo had hot water!”

Gimli shrugged and skimmed out of the rest of his clothes. “Well,” he said. “If you’re not dwarf enough to take a cold bath...”

Kíli glared but began stripping down. Gimli, who really hadn’t thought this through, looked at the water. There was nothing for it; he had to just—
Gimli practically threw himself into the water, covering as much of himself as possible to try and acclimate quickly, but the water really was icy cold, and he couldn’t stop gasping at the feel of it. “See?” he called out through teeth tightly clenched. “Tis fine!”

“You lie,” Fíli said, but his voice was mild. He finished stripping, waited the half-moment for Kíli to pull off the last of his clothes, and pushed his brother into the water before him. Kíli shrieked, floundering, and Gimli laughed at his expression, finally relaxing to the temperature. Kíli scowled and splashed water at them before setting about scrubbing his own skin. Kíli was the last to start scrubbing, and also the first done; he had the least amount of hair, so it was a simple matter to wash it clean. Even Fíli was done before Gimli as, even though his hair was shorter than he would ultimately keep it, he had a staggering amount of curls. It took two scrubbings to get the last of the troll-stink out of it, and then it plastered itself to his head and lay heavy down his back, a knotted mess. Gimli sighed as he tried to wring the water from his hair. It would take forever to comb. He redressed in clean smallclothes, made sure the Lady’s Gift was securely hidden, and followed his cousins out of the washroom.

Dori grabbed his brothers next, pulling Ori by the arm and Nori by the ear, having grabbed him just as Nori was trying to slip a candlestick into his tunic. Kíli, still undressed, grabbed his comb and ran it quickly through his hair, tying the top back with his clasp before digging through his pack for clothes. Fíli, dressed to his trousers and undertunic, was at a mirror, re-braiding his mustache. Gimli, not wanting to be wearing a wet tunic all night, pulled on his trousers, and set about working the knots from his hair. It wasn’t going especially well.

He swore under his breath when his comb got stuck again and stopped when he felt a hand on his arm. He looked up through a curtain of red ringlets and saw his father. “Ease up, lad,” Glóin said, “or you’ll leave nothing in your head to braid.” Gently, Glóin took the comb from Gimli and set to work, untangling his hair with gentle motions. Tired, Gimli let his eyes slip shut.

When Gimli opened them again, his father was putting in the last of his beads, and Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur were gone. Dori was fussing over Nori’s hair while Nori rolled his eyes and made faces at Ori, who was doing his best not to laugh where his eldest brother could see. “There now,” Glóin said. “Almost as if you were my own wee lad again.”

Gimli reached up to feel his braids, relieved that they felt like they always did and not like the twinned braids his father used to have him in. His marking braids were done tightly—they wouldn’t have to be rebraided for a while—and the rest of his hair was loose and, while not sopping wet, much dryer than before. Glóin hadn’t put it back in its traveling braid, which meant that they were attempting some level of formality. Gimli looked at his pack. He hadn’t exactly packed his fancy dress. His clean clothes would have to do.

Glóin was pulled into conversation with Balin as Gimli was pulling his clean tunic on and, waiting for the eyes of the room to be off of him, he turned his back and slipped the Lady’s Gift back over his head to be once more safely hidden. Then, he went to sit by the fireplace to wait for his hair to dry the rest of the way.

In the end, it was closer to one hour and twenty minutes before they were called to dinner. Thorin, freshly scrubbed if still a little damp behind the ears, was led away to meet Gandalf and their host before meeting in the dining hall. The rest of them were led directly to a low table, not quite dwarf-height and chaired with floor cushions. The main table was up a step on a little dias with three chairs for Elrond, Gandalf, and Thorin. Lindir stood against the wall just behind Elrond’s chair, ready to be called upon.

Bilbo, who looked much happier now that he was clean, even if he was still a bit red from having
shared the bath with Thorin (and hadn’t that stirred up some looks in the main rooms), settled himself between Gimli and Balin, and looked quite intently upon his empty plate. While dressing, Bilbo had lamented quietly that his waistcoat didn’t fit quite right anymore; that it hung just a bit too loose to look like a proper waistcoat. Gimli had said it was a good thing Bilbo wore braces, otherwise he’d be putting another notch in his belt for sure. Bilbo had looked quite pale at the thought.

They heard footsteps and turned to look as Lord Elrond, dressed in robes of deep amber and crowned with stars, entered. He nodded at the low table, as Gandalf apologized for not being dressed for dinner. Elrond looked back at him with a half-smile. “You never are,” he said, amused, and Gimli relaxed a fraction. He had never seen Lord Elrond quite so happy; most of the time he had known him had been during the first days of the War of the Ring, and then it had been the dawn of the Age of Men, and Elrond was fading from this world with bittersweet sorrow of the choice of his daughter. Thorin, not knowing the strategist and war leader that Gimli knew, did not know to marvel at his easy smile and walked with head high, as if into a trial by fire. They took their seats at the high table, and at once a team of elves brought out plates of food.

It was a salad. Gimli closed his eyes. Of course it was a bloody salad. Already he could hear the grumblings of the Company as they realized there was no meat on the plates. He sighed and opened his eyes; Bilbo did not seem to be bothered by the dwarves’ distress, and was eating with a single-minded focus. Balin was politely picking at his plate, and Bifur was eating the centerpiece. Gimli titled his head, but no—Bifur was, in fact, eating the centerpiece.

“There’s no meat,” Dwalin said, an edge of panic to his voice.

Ori was refusing to eat. “I don’t like green food,” he said. “Never trusted it.” As if Lord Elrond would serve them moldy or rotten food. Honestly, Ori.

Gimli picked up his fork and pierced a bite of salad. It did really look like a bunch of leaves on a plate, and Gimli knew it wouldn’t do much to fill their stomachs. He wondered if Elrond even knew this, or if their menu was a decision left up to Lindir. Lindir struck him as they type of elf to think that the elven way was the only way, and all deviations were merely wrong-thinking. He ate the bite.

It wasn’t bad, per-say—surprisingly spicy, tender-yet-crunchy, with a gentle aftertaste of nuttiness. Delicate flavors for a delicate palate. Still, taste was all it seemed to be. Typical elvish fare, really, much like the musicians playing around them. Gimli knew enough to know they were masters of their craft, but it didn’t change the craft from being one to grate against dwarvish sensibilities. Óin, he saw, solved the problem by stuffing his napkin into his trumpet.

Next to him, Bilbo had finished his plate and was surreptitiously looking around for more. Bombur had solved this problem by eating not only his own plate, but Bofur’s and Fíli’s as well.

The muttering was beginning to get louder as Dori started losing his patience with Ori, and Dwalin and Bofur began laughing at Kíli. Gimli missed the joke, but from the pink expression on his face, he could guess. Gimli couldn’t blame Kíli: it had taken a while for Gimli to recognize the subtle differences between elven men and women, and even then he still slipped from time to time. He had spent the first few weeks of their quest thinking Legolas a woman.

"Change the tune, will ya?" Nori complained. "I feel like I'm at a funeral."

"Let's have a proper song then, lads! What do ya say?" Bofur called, pushing away from the table.

"I'd prefer a decent meal," Glóin said. He glared accusingly at Elrond. "My boy's still growing; he
needs meat!"

"Da!" Gimli protested, over Fíli's quiet, "Aye, sideways."

Lord Elrond didn't seem offended, however. Instead, he seemed rather bemused. "My apologies, Master Dwarf," he said. "My sons have been grown many a long year, but I do remember them young and hungry. It is not our custom to eat meat, save on special occasion, but what occasion is more special than company?" He gestured and Lindir only barely hid a look of surprise, but nodded and disappeared, presumably to speak with the kitchens. "Food more to your needs will be prepared."

Glóin looked like he had swallowed a fish, whole and wriggling. His jaw snapped shut and he stood to bow in thanks. Bofur looked between him and the dias. "Does this mean no song?"

"Perhaps after dinner, lad," Balín said, and Bofur sat, glum.

"Da!" Gimli hissed again, leaning around Bilbo to look at his father. Glóin, if he heard pretended not to, but Nori smirked at him.

"It's his job to worry," Nori said. "And what's a little embarrassment when it means meat on the table, aye? You've sacrificed for our cause, Gimli, and we won't soon forget it."

"Aye," Bombur said in his quiet way. He had worked his way through three salads and most of the bread basket. When he reached for another roll, Bilbo's hand shot out, quick as thought, and snatched it from beneath his grasp. Bombur looked at Bilbo in surprise, and Bilbo looked a bit embarrassed, but he also breathed deep the aroma of the fresh baked bread, and nibbled on it anyway.

"Gimli," Thorin called. "Come here."

Gimli stood, wondering what it was about the last exchange that would require his presence, but had a sneaking suspicion that he knew exactly what it was. He stepped onto the dais, and bowed low.

"Gimli, son of Glóin. At your service."

"Well met, Gimli, son of Glóin, and welcome to Rivendell," Elrond said. He was relaxed in his chair, but his gaze was steady and made Gimli itch to stand straighter. Gandalf, when he looked at you, always seemed to be hearing what you weren't saying, and the Lady Galadriel looked into your very soul and showed it to you. Elrond, however, looked at you and read you like a scroll, unwinding you and exposing information long since hidden from light. It was disconcerting, and would have been nigh unbearable had Gimli not been a dwarf and Elrond not been himself. He was, by far, the most mortal elf Gimli had ever met, and it showed in his compassion.

"Thank you," Gimli said, and meant it.

Elrond nodded at him, hearing the sincerity. "Your king tells me you have had visions."

"Dreams," Gimli said. "Dreams that feel like memory."

Elrond watched him for a moment, and dim starlight spun in his eyes. "Are you sure it isn't memory?"

Gimli shifted on his feet. "My Lord Elrond, if it is memory, it must be my own, but how could I have memories of events that have not come to pass?"
"That is my question," Elrond said. Thorin bristled.

"Do you doubt his words?" he said, low and dangerous, as if to disbelieve Gimli would be a personal attack on Thorin himself.

"Not at all," Elrond said. "But I also do not think they are the only words on the subject. I have sources I must consult before I say anything further, and it is not appropriate dinner conversation, besides." After a moment, Thorin nodded, accepting that it was not, in fact, an attack. Elrond turned to Gimli. "Son of Glóin, I would like to speak with you more on this, after you have had time to rest from your journey; but now, I see that dinner is served." Gimli turned and, sure enough, the same elves from before now came bearing platters of food, hot and steaming. Gimli bowed to the dias, and quickly took his seat.

Unlike Bilbo's earthy hobbit fare, or the hearty, spicy dwarven fare Gimli was used to—or even, the game-driven diet of the Mirkwood elves—the food of Rivendell was light for a delicate palate. The meat served was mostly fish, prepared in a variety of ways (including, Gimli was pretty sure, raw), with some preparations of shelled fish as well. There were fewer dishes of fowl, duck, and goose it looked like, and a large quantity of grains, mostly rice. Most of the food was placed on the tables in platters, though three elves, one for the dias and two for the table, carried with them the steaming carcass of a large fish which they sliced upon demand. A smaller fish of the same kind was placed before Bombur, and Gimli thought the rotund dwarf would cry.

The food tasted mostly of what it was, with hints of salt and sharp ginger and something not unlike horseradish, but mostly it was hot and plentiful, and Gimli ate until full.

Chapter End Notes

Determamfidd: Tag! You're it!!
In the morning, Gimli learned that they would be spending the next two weeks in Rivendell, and while he ached to continue on as quickly as possible, he knew crossing the mountains and the Wilderland beyond would be difficult enough. His love would have to wait, and Gimli would just have to trust that Radagast would not let Legolas fade in the meantime.

Breakfast had been served sometime before he had woken, large platters of venison sausage and eggs with the flakey, airy breakfast rolls with honey that Gimli first sampled here at Elrond's council. There was also, more importantly, a large platter of fresh fruit, including a basket of apples that were surprisingly ripe for being so early in the season. Gimli grabbed an apple as he filled his plate and set it carefully next to him as he sat.

"Morning, Gimli," Bilbo said from across the little table. His plate was less full than Gimli had come to expect from the hobbit and, after a moment, narrowed his eyes.

"Morning, Bilbo," he said. "And which breakfast are you eating?"

"Second!" Bilbo said, beaming. "I've always been a bit of a light sleeper, and as tired as I was last night, I woke when they brought the food, and since no one else was yet awake, save for poor Dwalin—and really, is a watch absolutely necessary? He glared so hard at the poor girl she nearly dropped the kettle!" He shook his head. "There's security and then there's paranoia, I fear. Either way, since no one else was up, I helped myself, seeing as there was more than enough to feed us all, including Bombur."

Gimli swallowed his bite of egg. "And how long ago was this? The food seems fresh."

"I know!" Bilbo said. "It's a bit of a marvel, really." He paused, then looked sidelong at Gimli, eyes twinkling. "Perhaps it's elvish magic."

Gimli snorted a laugh. "And I'm sure it's one even the most hobbitish of hobbits could get behind, am I right."

"Absolutely," Bilbo said, raising his cup in a toast. He waited patiently, nibbling on a morning roll, for Gimli to eat more of his breakfast. It was good, there was no denying it, though Gimli had always preferred his eggs with a bit of red pepper—the kind that could be dried and ground into a hot powder. Bombur would come to be known for skill with using this spice in his chocolate confections, a foreign treat made by local hands. "I was hoping to do a bit of wandering today," Bilbo said. "I've never been to an elvish city, and I would very much like to look around. Would you like to join me?"
"I'm afraid that won't be possible," Thorin announced, appearing as if summoned behind Gimli. "We have been granted an audience with Lord Elrond," he said, clear that he felt slighted by the assumption that he could be denied audience, "and he has requested Gimli's presence."

Bilbo sagged. "Oh." He sighed.

"I could go with you, Mister Bilbo," Ori said. "The library of Rivendell is well known, and I would much like to see it."

Bilbo grinned, nodding his head to Ori. "Then that's settled. Ori and I will quest for the library," he turned back to Gimli, "and perhaps you can walk with me another day."

"Perhaps," Thorin said, and Gimli paused, mouth open. He closed it and turned to look at Thorin. "But right now, we are expected. Eat quickly," he said, then paused. "But not too quickly."

Gimli raised an eyebrow. "Of course," he said, and returned to his food. Thorin went to talk to Balin, who was waiting by the door with Gandalf, and Bilbo leaned in to Gimli.

"What is his problem?" he asked.

"Thorin is not fond of elves," Gimli said, picking up the apple and examining its skin. It was smooth and unblemished, a young green-gold that faded to a delicate flushed pink. "Because when the mountain burned, the Elvenking in Mirkwood brought his troops to the mountain, then turned away, offering no aid. It was a betrayal of trust, and many dwarves see it as the elves' fault we lost the mountain." Gimli bit the apple, relishing in the resounding crunch and the burst of sweet-tart across his tongue.

Bilbo raised an eyebrow. "They don't blame the dragon?" he asked, dry.

Gimli stared back, chewing slowly, and Bilbo seemed to flinch, as if just realizing what he said. "We know full well that it was our own actions that brought the dragon, Bilbo," he said. "But it was the lack of action on behalf of the elves after the dragon that they blame. Many feel that with the elves' help, Smaug could have been beaten back and the many trials and travails that have fallen upon our people since would have been avoided."

Bilbo nodded, tightening his grip on his teacup. "But you don't agree with them, do you?" he asked.

Gimli smiled thinly, wiping the back of his hand across his mouth. "You caught that, did you? It's not a popular opinion, and it is one better kept to yourself for now, but the wrath of a dragon is fierce, and none there then knew that better than Thranduil." He popped the last piece of apple into his mouth, swallowing it down as he stood. He would have to get more before they left. "The Elvenking has many failings, Bilbo, but protecting his people has never been one of them." He bowed and joined the others by the door.

"Ready, Master Gimli?" Gandalf asked, but while his tone was one of impatience, there was something assessing—and approving—in his gaze, almost as if he had heard what Gimli said to Bilbo. Not for the first time, Gimli wondered just how keen Gandalf's hearing was. Gimli nodded, and Gandalf led the way to Elrond's chambers, Thorin and Balin keeping pace behind, and Gimli following after.

Thorin had Orcrist strapped to his back, Gimli noted, and Gandalf had Glamdring on his belt. For a brief moment, Gimli wondered if he should not have also gone armed, but Balin was not carrying his sword, so their business must be with the troll horde. It's not as if Elrond would meet them on
the training grounds, as Dain occasionally met envoys from Mirkwood.

They made their way through the hallways, the ceiling arching high above them. Even during mid-morning, the light had an amber quality to it, as if the entire valley was in a state of perpetual early twilight. Gimli thought of the war and the mass exodus of the elves, and wondered if the valley wasn’t onto something.

Elrond’s offices were large, and one descended into them via a long staircase that spiraled along the rounded wall. Yet, even though they most definitely walked down stairs, there was no sense of descent. It felt just as airy and open as the rest of the house; even the furniture felt like it flowed organically through the room.

Typically elvish.

Elrond was standing by a pillar next to a grand opening to a small veranda. In his hands was a graceful pitcher, and he was gently watering the greenery that lined the path. He looked up when they arrived and smiled gently at them. “Welcome,” he said, putting down the pitcher. “I hope you are finding our hospitality to your liking.”

Thorin was silent for just a beat to long, and Balin jumped in, “Very much so, thank you. A rest was sorely needed.” Thorin nodded in agreement, at last, and Gimli bowed low. He had grown to like Elrond by the end, even though his initial opinion of the Elf was somewhat low: it took time for Gimli to learn the wisdom of tactical inaction. It would never be his preferred method, but he could understand it, at least.

“Gandalf mentioned yesterday that you were in possession of some swords?” Elrond asked, and at Gandalf’s urging, Thorin unslung Orcrist and passed it to Elrond.

“We found them in a troll horde on the East Road,” Gandalf said. “We saw there were runes, but we could not make them out.”

“I can see why,” Elrond said. “These are old swords, and old Runes, rarely used any more, forged by the High Elves of the West, my kin. They were made in Gondolin for the Goblin-wars. They must have come from a dragon’s hoard or goblin plunder, for dragons and goblins destroyed that city many ages ago. This, Thorin, the runes name Orcrist, the Goblin-cleaver in the ancient tongue of Gondolin; it was a famous blade.” He passed it back, and Thorin took it with new reverence, his face far more open than Gimli had yet to see in the presence of elves. “This, Gandalf, was Glamdring, Foe-hammer that the king of Gondolin once wore. Keep them well!”

“Whence did the trolls get them, I wonder?” said Thorin securing his sword once more; it looked as if it had been made for him, and Gimli wondered how he had ever looked otherwise. Even Balin seemed to look at him with new eyes.

“I could not say,” said Elrond, “but one may guess that your trolls had plundered other plunderers, or come on the remnants of old robberies in some hold in the mountains.” He tilted his head in what Gimli had come to learn was an elvish shrug, and raised a pointed eyebrow. “I have heard that there are still forgotten treasures of old to be found in the deserted caverns of the mines of Moria, since the dwarf and goblin war.”

Thorin scowled. “There is not but misery in those old halls,” he rumbled. “Desecration and death are the only reward for those who enter there.” Balin closed his eyes and bowed his head. Gimli saw again the marble tomb, the flash of deep fire in the darkness, and had to shake himself.
“I will keep this sword in honour,” Thorin said at last, surprising a look out of Balin. “May it soon cleave goblins once again!”

“A wish that is likely to be granted soon enough in the mountains!” Elrond said. “But show me now your map!”

Reluctantly, Thorin pulled the map from inside his jerkin, brushing off Balin’s arm when he grabbed him with a soft, “Thorin, no!”

Elrond took the map with a nod of his head, and unrolled it gently, angling it in the morning light. “Strange,” he said. “There is much text missing, hidden, I assume. Nothing that reveals itself at the moment, but I wonder…” He handed the map back to Thorin. “Bring this here tonight at moonrise, and we will see if that changes things.”

Thorin nodded, and Elrond turned, at last, to Gimli. “And now, Son of Glóin, we turn to you.”

Gimli stood straighter as all eyes turned to him. This really was becoming an alarming habit. Had he realized, back in Ered Luin, that his little lie would come under such scrutiny, he never would have made it. Still, he was a dwarf. He would endure.

“The veil of time is not easily pierced,” he said. “And foresight is rarer still. Not many have possessed the ability, and for most the seeing is clouded and obscure.” He stepped closer, and Gimli was forced to crane his neck to keep his eye. “Why you, Gimli of Ered Luin? Why have you been given this gift so denied to the rest of the world?”

Gimli thought, suddenly, of the gift at his breast, though he couldn’t say why, and he clenched his fist to keep from feeling for it, yet again.

“And why not him?” Thorin asked, breaking the spell. Elrond stepped backwards and Gimli breathed deeply, closing his eyes for a moment. “Gimli is a descendant of Durin himself, the first of our kind and Mahal’s most beloved.”

Elrond turned to Thorin. “Even the Lady Galadriel cannot tell the future with certainty, and she is the wisest of us all.”

“I doubt it’s escaped your notice,” Balin said. “But Gimli is not, in fact, an elf.” He tucked his thumb into his belt when they turned to look at him, a familiar mannerism Gimli remembered from his early tutoring. “ Elves may have a hard time of it, but there is a strong tradition of far-sight among our people, and in Gimli’s line in particular. His uncle is a Reader of Stone, and one of no little skill.”

“‘Reader of Stone,’” Elrond repeated. “That is not a title I’m familiar with.”

“That’s not surprising,” Gandalf cut in. “The dwarves are known for their secrecy about these matters.”

“And for good reason,” Balin retorted, but he did not say more. He crossed his arms, and glared mildly at the room at large. Gimli lowered his head. The dwarves guarded their secrets closely, true, but these traditions started only after they were burned by those they trusted. Why did no one else seem to remember this?

Gimli cleared his throat. “I do not know why I have these dreams,” he said. “Nor do I know how I have them. It is not my place to question the will of the Valar. All I know is what I see, and all I
can do is my best to do good with the information I have been given.”

Elrond stood back. “Wise words,” he said. “But there is more to this than what we can know. You have been given a gift, Glóin’s son, and, I fear, a curse. The Valar do nothing without a reason, and they have chosen you. I only hope that we can discover why.”

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Gimli left Elrond's offices at a brisk clip, too wrapped up in his own thoughts to see where he was going. At least, that's what he would say, later, to explain why he tripped over the human child crouched by the doorway.

They went down in a tangle of limbs, Gimli quickly rolling away and hoping that he hadn't crushed the boy. They were of a height, but Gimli knew he weighed a good deal more than even a grown man.

"Are you all right?" he asked, coming to his feet and crouching to help the boy up.

"I'm fine," the boy said, and shook the hair out of his face, and there was no mistaking those piercing grey eyes. Gimli's jaw dropped and he struggled to shake the expression before the lad--Aragorn! This is wee-Aragorn! --noticed. He grabbed Gimli's hand and let himself be pulled to his feet. He was rather lighter than Gimli was expecting and he nearly tossed the lad into the air. Young Aragorn's laughter was boyish and bright, and he was still giggling when he regained his footing.

"I am Estel," Young--Estel said.

"And I am Gimli, son of Glóin," Gimli said, and bowed. "At your service."

Estel looked nonplussed. "My service?"

"Indeed," Gimli said, and explained, "It is a traditional greeting, to be sure, and a bit old fashioned, but then again we dwarves are a bit old fashioned ourselves. It is meant to express no ill-intent, for if I am at your service, then I will offer you no harm. The proper response is to say your own name, and then 'at yours and your family's.'"

"Ah," Estel said, brightening. He then bowed, a near-perfect imitation of Gimli, and said, "I am Estel, son of Gilraen, at yours and your family's." He straightened. "Like that?"

Gimli grinned. "You'll make a proper dwarf yet!" he said, and laughed. Estel smiled wryly.

"And why not?" he said. "For I am to also be a proper Man and a proper Elf. Why should I not be a proper Dwarf, as well?" His smile faded and he looked away. Here he is, Gimli thought. It is no wonder that he grows into such a sour adult. At least Lady Arwen makes him smile. Estel sank to the floor once more, arms wrapped around his knees.

"It is not easy, is it?" Gimli asked quietly, "Learning to be Noble. There are many rules and many variations of those rules, and to break those rules means mortal offense to any number of people."

Estel sighed. “My parents were Rangers. One day, I will be a ranger, too. I’m never going to need this!” His pounded his fist against the floor.

Gimli raised his eyebrows. Aragorn had been reluctant to take up his birthright the first time Gimli had met him. It seemed as if those attitudes began early. “That may be so,” Gimli said. “But you never know what the future may bring. If you learn it, and never need it, what’s the harm in
knowing? But if you don't learn it, and do need it..."

“I know,” Estel said, sighing. “It still stinks.”


Estel just shrugged. Gimli shook his head. “Oh, no, lad. That just won’t do. Come on. There are people whom you must meet.” He stood and held out a hand. “Come on.”

Estel took his hand, and let Gimli lead him through the halls.

Fíli and Kíli were sitting on a bench near a large fountain, smoking their pipes. Fíli was actually seated on the back of the bench, his boots braced on the seat, but Kíli was sitting properly, kicking his feet like a young dwarfling.

“Now,” Gimli said. “My cousins always made the best games. I am sure they will have some good ideas.”

Kíli saw them first, and thumped Fíli’s leg. “Gimmers!” Kíli called out. “You’ve caught yourself a shadow!”

“Hello shadow!” Fíli said. “Do you have a name?”

“I am Estel, son of Gilraen, at your service,” Estel said, bowing. The princes grinned.

“Fíli,”

“And Kíli,”

“Sons of Dís. At yours and your family's,” they said, and bowed in unison.

“And how may we be of service, Son of Gilraen?” Fíli asked.

Gimli cleared his throat. “Estel here has never played a game.”

“What?” Kíli asked, nearly dropping his pipe.

“Never?” Fíli asked. The brothers exchanged a look.

***

Lindir was a creature of habit, and it was his habit to oversee the many gardens of Imladris. True, he could have delegated this task, as he did many others, but he enjoyed, no delighted in walking the garden paths, and made sure to do it at least once a day. It was a job he especially enjoyed now that they were playing host to a company of...dwarves. The dwarves did not walk the paths. The dwarves did not spend their time in the gardens. The gardens were then the perfect escape from--

Estel ran past, shouting with excited joy, and Lindir was glad to see the boy to happy. He was such a serious youth, and with the weight of his ancestry it was no wonder. Then, however, three-
Three—of the dwarves ran after him, tossing some sort of ball around by some set of complicated rules, and Lindir turned tail and strode away at a stately, measured run.

***

Lord Elrond would have an easier time, Gimli thought later on, grabbing a moment for himself, if he knew the whole truth. I should tell him; he can be trusted to keep the secret. I just need to get away from Thorin. He can know nothing yet. Of that much I am sure.

Fili walked by, fully armed, swords strapped to his back. Kili walked swiftly beside him, with bow and full quiver. “Oi,” Gimli called out. “Where’s the battle?” They weren’t going to fight with Estel, were they?

They stopped, and Kili broke into a grin. “Gimmers!” he said. “Estel had lessons, so we’ve the afternoon free.”

“We’re going to the training ground,” Fili said. “Grab your axes, yeah? Come with us.”

Fili didn’t need to ask twice; a good old fashioned sparring match or three was just what the physic ordered.

The training grounds in Rivendell were, like most elven setups, geared more towards archery than anything else. It was long said that elves learned the art of war through hunting, and Gimli thought that was nowhere clearer than in Mirkwood, where they still battled the darkness around them. Here, the grounds were—cleaner wasn’t the word. Less weathered was closer to it, even though Rivendell was far older than her cousin to the East.

Kili looked over the archery range, shading his eyes with his hand. “We should have come at twilight,” he said. “I can barely see the targets in this glare.”

“It makes no sense,” Fili said, mild. “How many battles are fought in the daylight, anyway? Orcs and Goblins only come out in darkness.”

“Elven eyes see better in daylight,” Gimli said. “Has something to do with the way their eyes were made, and the light before the sun.”

“Oh yeah?” Kili said, arching an eyebrow. “And how do you know that?”

Gimli rolled his eyes. “When you were thinking of new ways to make Balin pull his beard out by the root, I was actually listening, that’s how,” he said. “Just because it was elven history doesn’t mean it wasn’t relevant. Elves ruled these lands for ages, and get rather fixated on themselves as a result. Sometimes, it doesn’t matter how relevant your own story is, you need to know the stories people actually tell.”

Fili snorted. “Figures. You don’t see the elves learning two sets of history, do you? No. Just us.”

“If not us, then who?” Kili asked. He turned back to the range. There were easily two dozen lanes, and most were empty. “But now, I think I’m going to show these elves who can really shoot.” He pulled himself up and sauntered over to the range.

“‘You don’t go against elves in archery,’” Fili said under his breath. “He doesn’t really get it at all, does he?”

Gimli shook his head. Before them, Kili approached the lanes, and was greeted by a tall elf with long golden hair and dressed in leathers dyed a deep blue. After a moment, the elf bowed, and Kili
strung his bow.

“I can’t watch this,” Fíli said. “Spar with me?”

“Aye,” Gimli said, and led them to the nearest sparring round. Elven fighting was by no means less deadly than dwarven styles, but it was lighter, for lack of a better word. Elven fighters danced their way through battle, where dwarves barreled through like a charging Oliphaunt. Thus, the round was little more than an half-inch trench in a circle on the hard earth floor. There were no pitfalls, no trench to prevent the spread of blood. There were no judges stands or seating at all.

Oh well. It would have to do.

Gimli unslung his axe, and Fíli readied his swords. They faced off, weapons braced in front of them and feet firmly rooted to the ground. So far, no one was paying them any attention.

Gimli smirked. That would change.

Without warning, Gimli let loose with a fierce war-cry, charging forward. Fíli side-stepped neatly and returned the cry as a taunt, but Gimli spun on his front foot, twisting to send his axe swinging past Fíli’s head. Fíli’s sword came up and knocked Gimli’s axe aside, but the move had served its purpose and Gimli was once again facing Fíli and bearing down.

Fíli countered easily—he had always been the best of the three—and the two of them danced about the ring, dwarven steel clanging and echoing across the distant mountains.

Gimli had to keep reminding himself to pull his swings; he still wasn’t at his full adult strength, but his blade was so sharp that it did not matter. If Gimli wasn’t careful, he might slice something off of Fíli, something permanent.

Still, Fíli was undaunted, and Gimli quickly had to adapt, pulling old moves from his memory and hoping his body was on board. His new axe was a blessing, and the lessened weight meant he could move with his old speed, spinning out of the way of Fíli’s doubled swords. Gimli wasn’t sure how long they fought, matched more evenly than ever before, when he heard Nori call out “Odds on the prince!”

A quick glance revealed most of the Company and quite a few of the elves had been brought over by the display, and Nori was quickly running numbers for both dwarf and elf alike. The blond from before seemed very keen, and Kíli called out;

“I’ve got winner!”

“I’ll deal with you in a moment,” Fíli called back, and Gimli grinned, bearing his teeth as he felt the thrill of battle rise within him. He would make Fíli work for every amount of confidence he showed, and maybe, just maybe, by the time they reached Erebor, it would be enough.

Fíli faltered, and Gimli pressed his advantage, stepping in a disarming him far too easily. They stood, at last, with Gimli’s axe pressed close to Fíli’s throat and Gimli asked. “Do ye yield?”


Gimli frowned. Something was wrong. “Fíli?” he asked.

Fíli shook his head. “You won, little cousin,” he said, louder. “Good luck against my brother.”

“Not just yet,” Dwalin said, and Gimli turned. He hadn’t seen his teacher standing there. “It’s been
months since you’ve had a proper lesson.” Dwalin unslung his axes, Grasper and Keeper. “And I’m in the teaching mood.”

Fíli quickly bowed out, going to stand by his brother, and Gimli turned to Dwalin, settling into the same ready stance he had used with Fíli.

This time, Dwalin attacked first, bellowing as he charged, spinning his axes in tight circles. Gimli had to dodge and jump, practically running in the face of Dwalin’s frenzied attack. His long axe would help him little here, and he jabbed the hilt at Dwalin’s feet, making him leap to avoid tripping, and it was just enough time for Gimli to unslung his own axes, countering Dwalin’s strike for strike. Sparks flew as the metal met, but Gimli stood his ground, flowing with the motions, but never retreating.

The crowd had gone silent, watching the display before them. Gimli could hear nothing but the roaring of time in his ears, could smell the stink of battle and feel its toll in the sweat running down his back and across his forehead.

Dwalin crowded in close and landed a blow to Gimli’s gut with the handle of Grasper, and Gimli dropped out of range of Keeper’s backswing, gasping for breath.

But he would not fall so easily.

He used his momentum to roll in, knocking into Dwalin’s legs like a boulder, and popping up over him, axe in hand and ready to mark the “kill.” But Dwalin was ready for him, and knocked his hand aside. His other hand shot out and grabbed Gimli by the neck, to the gasps of the audience. It was a tactic used by instructors on first year students, a lesson of humility.

Gimli stopped moving, and Dwalin said, “Do ye yield?”

“No,” Gimli said, and cast his eyes downward. Dwalin followed the line, and there at Dwalin’s belt, was Gimli’s dagger, places well to spill his innards. “Do ye?”

Dwalin grit his teeth and sneered, but when Gimli simply raised an eyebrow, he barked a laugh and let Gimli loose. “Aye,” he said. “I yield.”

“No!” Nori called out. “No, not fair!” Apparently, the house had just lost.

Dwalin rocked to his feet, and held his hand out to Gimli. “Where did you learn that, lad? Not from me.” His voice was mild, for Dwalin, which meant there was only the threat of violence under his words. While Dwalin would never begrudge Gimli and skill that would aid him in battle, knifework was nearly as undwarven as, say, archery, requiring the fighter to move in much too elven a way for most dwarves. It didn’t stop Fíli, however, who was generally armed more like a metal porcupine than anything else, and thus it didn’t stop Kíli or Gimli, though neither had taken it to Fíli’s extreme.

“No,” Gimli said. “I didn’t.” It had been Legolas who inspired him to dust off his old set and learn more knife-work, so they could practice together. In his older days, he had been fond of using his skills to best Elladan and Elrohir; they never quite stopped being surprised when Gimli would pull knives on them, and the looks on their faces had always been worth it. Gimli grinned, and then the rest of them were crowding around, congratulating Gimli on his victory. Glóin was particularly proud, and Óin was nearly weeping.

Over the heads of the Company, Gimli caught sight of Thorin and Gandalf watching from the distance, and it caught him like ice. He nodded greeting, and Thorin returned it, face never
breaking its stony expression.

There was a hand on his shoulder, much too long for a dwarf, and Gimli looked up into the face of the blond elf from the range. “Congratulations on your victory, Gimli son of Glóin.”

Gimli blinked up at him, remembering to bow only after the fact. “My thanks,” he said. “But how do you know my name?” There was something familiar about this elf. He had seen him before, but where? In Arda? In Rivendell?

The elf smiled, wider than any Gimli had yet seen in this time. “Why, your cousin told me,” he said, and gestured to Kíli behind him. “Your match was enough to draw him from our own competition.” He smiled at Kíli, who flushed through his ears. “He is quite the competitor himself.”

“He’s just saying that,” Kíli mumbled. “He had my score beat twice over.”

“I am sure you would have caught up eventually,” he said. “But I am being rude; I know your name but you do not yet know mine. I am Glorfindel of Rivendell.” Here, he laid his hand on his breast and bowed in elven fashion.

“The Balrog-slayer!” Gimli blurted out, memory connecting at last. Glorfindel had been at Elrond’s council, and had come at the climax of the war with Elrond’s sons. He was a legend of the first age, originally from Gondolin and reborn after defeating a Balrog of Morgoth—one of the few elves to live on, as well, in the dwarven histories. Glorfindel raised an eyebrow.

“I see you have heard of me,” he said.

“Of course he has,” Glóin said. “My son knows his histories well.”

“It’s true,” Fíli said. “Gimli has always had a head for words, story, and song.”

Glorfindel’s eyes light with a new light. “Do you indeed?” he asked. “Well, then you must come to The Hall of Fire! It is where we gather to share tales and song. None are turned away, and all may have their chance to speak.”

“Sounds like my kind of place,” Bofur said. “Is there ale?”

“Aye,” Glorfindel said. “Though wine is a more common choice.”

Bofur grinned. “Sounds perfect.” Gimli had to agree. He had planned on leading Bilbo to the Hall before they left, and this sounded like a perfect opportunity.

“Would we really be welcome?” Ori asked quietly, and the dwarves all quieted to hear the answer, looking first to Ori, who blushed. “I mean,” he said, “We have all been to welcoming places that are so to all but us.”

“Aye,” Dwalin added. “We heard your elven songcraft on our way through the valley.”

Glorfindel’s face softened, and his smile sobered. “You need not fear of your welcome,” he said. “The elves here care more for song than for the politics of this world. They truly welcome all with good intentioned hearts, even if they can be rather silly.”

“Then we would love to,” Fíli said, standing a little taller. “We’re long overdue for an evening of song, right lads?”
“Aye,” Gimli said, the Company chorusing around him.

“Then it is settled,” Glorfindel said. “You shall join us for story and song this evening.” He held out his hand in invitation for Gimli. Then, with the same hand, extended the gesture to Kili, then the others. Kili, who had begun to fall back, the disappointed expression on his face making him look his age, lifted his head and joined them. “Do you sing as well?” he asked, smiling at Kili.

“All dwarves sing,” Kili said, shrugging his shoulders. Gimli repressed a smile; if Glorfindel ever heard some of their sacred music, Gimli doubted he would think it singing.

“Really?” Glorfindel asked, eyes wide. He looked between the two of them. “I had no idea.”

“Not many do,” Kili assured him, patting him on the arm then looking at his hand like it had a mind of its own.

“Not many sing like elves, that’s for sure,” Fili said, joining his brother.

Glorfindel nodded at him. “That is true enough. Not many sing as elves do. Still, I would like to hear dwarven singing, if you are so inclined this evening.”

Gimli looked at his cousins. “I think we may be able to come up with something.”

Fili raised his eyebrow at Gimli, while Glorfindel beamed.

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“Singing!” Glóin near-shouted, back in their rooms. Gimli shook his finger in his ear to ease the slight ringing. It seemed like yelling was all his father had done since they came to Rivendell. “You would share our songs with them?” Glóin was nearly incoherent with rage. Nearly. “Gimli— they are elves!”


“You think that really matters?” Glóin asked. “They will laugh. They will mock and insult, simply because you are a dwarf and to them you will always be less.”

“Naugrim they call us,” Óin said from where he sat at the table. “Stunted. As if we were not made to be exactly what we are.” He shook his head.

“They call hobbits periannath,” Bilbo said, voice dry, “and we certainly aren’t half of anything. I don’t think it’s personal.”

Balin patted Bilbo on the shoulder. “That doesn’t actually make it better, lad,” he said.

Bofur shook his head. “Well, I still think it’s a fine idea. We need more song on this journey, and the Hall of Fire seems like an ideal place to do it.”

“You’re not going!” Glóin said. “And that’s final.”

***

“We’re going to get in so much trouble,” Ori said as Kili and Fili peeked their head around the corner. Gimli patted Ori on the back. They had waited until the others had gone to bed, listening on the balcony to the distant strains of song from the hall. Luckily for them, Bofur had been on first watch, and turned a blind eye as they slipped out.
“No one’s coming,” Kíli said.

“Thorin and Balin left a long time ago, and could be back any minute,” Fíli said.

Gimli walked past them. “Then we’d best not dawdle,” he said, and then he was walking very quickly as his cousins chased after him. By the time they hit the end of the hall they were running flat out, as best they could while laughing, anyway.

Glorfindel was waiting for them by the main hall where they had dined their first night, and by his side was Bilbo, pipe unlit between his teeth and thumbs thrust importantly into the sides of his vest. Glorfindel greeted them with a smile, laughing as Kíli greeted Bilbo once more as "Master Boggins," to Bilbo's amused faux-displeasure, and ushered them through the doors.

They passed through several smaller halls, walking quickly to keep pace with the long-legged elf, and came at last to a large hall with no tables or chairs, but with a large fire burning merrily in the center of the room. The walls were draped with many fabrics of bright colors that reflected the light of the fire, and while many elves stood in clustered, speaking and laughing, and others danced gaily to music provided by an array of musicians, a few chose to lounge on the many cushions and pillows strewn about the room. It was a decadent design, made for long hours of opulence, and quite removed from any life his cousins and Ori had known. Even Gimli, with his long exposure to elven lifestyles, had rarely seen such places. The elves in Mirkwood tended towards more lively gatherings.

They paused in the entranceway, and looked about. Ori frowned. "Is that elvish dancing?" he asked.

"Aye, looks like," Gimli said. He knew why Ori was asking; Elves danced like branches in the wind, or sea-plants caught in a current, with many graceful sways and swoops. It was a far cry from the fast-paced athleticism of dwarven dancing.

"But how do they know who wins?" Ori asked.

"I don't think it's that kind of dancing," Bilbo said. Gimli looked over to him, and Bilbo shrugged. "It's nothing like hobbit dancing, either." He looked over the scene before them. "Nobody's doing a jig on the table, that's for sure." Gimli couldn't quite tell if Bilbo was disappointed by that or not.

"Come!" Glorfindel said suddenly, and then they were following him through the crowd, drawing strange looks but none of them were overtly hostile. Mainly, Gimli felt not unlike a trick pony, but one that was honestly admired for his ability. Ori hung to the back, unnerved by the attention, and Fíli didn't seem too keen on being the center of such attention. Kíli didn't seem to notice, and was openly ogling the male harpist from dinner, who thankfully didn't seem to notice him.

Bilbo, on the other hand, was in his element, and within minutes was discussing poetry with a trio of elves draped over themselves on a long amber colored cushion.

"Well," Glorfindel said, coming up to them. "What do you think of elven music?"

"It suits you," Gimli said, and Glorfindel laughed.

"You did not tell me you were training to be a diplomat, son of Glóin," he said.

"He's a cousin to kings," Fíli said. "Of course he'd being trained as a diplomat. He's quite good at it, too, when he can keep his temper." Gimli stuck his tongue at Fíli, who returned the gesture.

"I'm terrible at it," Kíli admitted. "Too many arbitrary rules. I'm a dwarf who likes function in his
"To be fair," Gimli said, "Many of those rules had a function at one point." He turned to Glorfindel. "There is a calling in creating beauty in function, and the many rules of court are an example of such; it is as much a craft as any other, and it takes time and aptitude to learn."

"Gimli," Fíli said, a hint of warning in his voice, but Gimli waved him off.

"Relax, cousin. I've told nothing that any would find fault with. And remember why we are here, after all."

Glorfindel leaned in with excitement. "That's right! You are going to show us dwarven music!"

It was as if his words were a sort of signal, and the hall fell silent save for the crackling of the fire and the sort of hum that pervades the air when a crowd is quiet.

"I think that's our cue, Fíli."

"I think you're right, Kíli."

Gimli put an arm around Ori and led him over to where Bilbo was sitting. "What is it?" Bilbo asked.

"My cousins are about to show off," he said. Behind them, Fíli had pulled out his fiddle and was tuning the strings. Kíli, his own fiddle in his hands, was stomping his boot and listening intently, gauging the acoustics of the room.

Kíli stopped, and the brothers shared a look. Then, as one, they raised their bows to their instruments.

Kíli played first, a mournful little melody that Gimli recognized as a refrain from a lullaby from the East. Fíli followed, playing the same melody, but dropping half an octave. Kíli went again, playing another melody line, a little bit faster. Again, Fíli followed half an octave lower. Kíli played a third line, holding the last note for half a beat longer, then they were playing as one, fiddles flying as the melodies raced and soared, dancing around each other to the beat as Fíli and Kíli stomped their boots.

The elves were entranced, leaning in intently, they seemed to be swept away by the song, breath catching as the melody popped and tumbled. Fíli chased Kíli higher and higher until they reached the peak, dropped their bows to clap their hands against the back of the fiddle in a complicated rhythm, calling out "Hey!" and bringing the melody back without missing a beat as they swept their fiddles up once more.

The elf sitting next to Gimli gasped, and clapped his…her?... didn’t matter hands together excitedly as the brothers began to dance.

The thing about dwarven dancing, Gimli thought, is that when it’s done well, it looks incredibly easy. Much like the way the best warriors look natural as breathing when they wield their weapons, so too do the best dancers look as if they were born to move this way. In reality, it takes years, decades, to learn the dances, longer still to master them. Formal dwarven dancing was nearly a craft in itself, one in which all nobility were required to achieve at least journeyman status.

This was not formal dancing. This was the dancing of their people, the common born; the movements mimicked the rhythm of the work, and their stomping boots the heartbeat of the mountain. Together they danced the fiddler’s jig, knees high as they spun in circles around each
Across the room, a pair of elves sprung to their feet from the cushions, and so moved by song, began to dance themselves. It was unearthly graceful, as all elven dancing was, but there was an element of fire to their faces, an earthiness in their movements that was entirely dwarven by design.

Fíli and Kíli split, taking off in a skipping run around the fire, and where they went the elves danced. Some musicians, keen of ear, had picked up the melody and began to play along. Even Bilbo ended up on his feet, dancing in the unrestrained way of hobbits.

The brothers danced around the hall, and ended up at last where they had begun, and played the final racing chords up to the end of the song. They ended with a flourish, pausing for a moment, bows raised to the sky, and the entire hall cheered and filled with laughter.

“Oh, what fun!” Bilbo said, sitting once more, face flushed and breath heavy. “I think I’m developing quite the taste for dwarvish music. Though, it doesn’t quite compare what I heard in Bag End.”

“Of course not,” Gimli said. “This is not the deep music; that is not for the ears of any outside our mountains. This is inn-music, played wherever drink flows strongest.”

Bilbo nodded, thoughtfully.

A trio of elven musicians—one with a harp, one with a flute, and one with the oddest looking horn Gimli had ever seen—were pressing Fíli and Kíli for more song. Fíli looked ready to demur, he was not as keen as Gimli nor as reckless as Kíli when it came to sharing their culture, but Kíli had a look in his eyes.

“Well, this seems like a regular party,” said a familiar voice behind Gimli, and he turned to see Bofur with a mug of ale.

“Where did you get that?” Gimli asked, and then held up his hand. Who was he kidding? This was Bofur. “I don’t want to know.”

“Aye,” Nori said, appearing on Gimli’s other side. “Best not.”

Gimli shook his head, bemused, and turned back just in time to see Kíli’s face light up with a plan.

“Bofur!” he called out. “How about a song!”

“Bofur!” Bofur cried back. “Why do you think I’d sing a song?”

Kíli paused for a moment. “Because you’re…you?”

Bofur grinned. “Right you are!” he said, and hopped up onto a plush ottoman. “All right, lads! A true song for a true ale.” He lifted his mug and took a swig. “Sing along if you know it.” With a deep breath, he began:

There is an inn, a merry old inn
beneath an old grey hill,
And there they brew a beer so brown
That the Man in the Moon himself came down
One night to drink his fill!

Gimli sang along, as did Ori and Kíli and, surprisingly, Bilbo. The elves did not appear to know the words, but they picked up the rhythm easily enough, and clapped along, some of the braver ones...
laughing. At last, with a dramatic pause, Bofur sang the last of the song.

With a ping and a pong the fiddle-strings broke!
the cow jumped over the Moon,
And the little dog laughed to see such fun,
And the Saturday dish went off at a run
with the silver Sunday spoon.
The round Moon rolled behind the hill
as the Sun raised up her head.
She hardly believed her fiery eyes;
For though it was day, to her surprise
they all went back to bed!

He tipped back his ale at the end, drinking the rest down, and raised the empty mug high in victory. Gimli cheered, and was joined by Bombur, who had a surprisingly warm voice when he could be persuaded to speak.

“What fun!” Glorfindel said, returning to them from across the fire. “Dwarven song is full of such life! But tell me, is it all tavern songs and army chants?”

Gimli raised an eyebrow. “Is all elven song tragic? Melodic but with no drums to speak of?”

Glorfindel shook his head. “No, of course not.”

“Then why,” Gimli asked slowly, “would all dwarven song be the same? We sing for many reasons, and have many styles spread across our kingdoms. What’s more, we craft, and create, and build new styles as we continue on. We sing to remember, Master Balrog-Slayer. We sing our past, so we may hope for a better future.”

Glorfindel’s easy humor had faded, leaving behind a sincerity that would be easy to read as cold if one did not remember that elves burn with starlight, not with sunlight. “And there is much to sing of, I fear.”

“Aye,” Gimli agreed. “But we are lucky we do; all too often our books are lost. Ori could tell you.”

“The library of Erebor was immense,” Ori sighed. “One could wander for days and not reach every hallway. The collected knowledge of our people, our history; it was all there on silvered vellum wrapped in the finest leathers.” He sighed. “It’s all probably ash, now.”

Glorfindel looked surprised. “You speak as if you remember such a place. Surely you are too young to remember.”

“Oh, I wasn’t born yet,” Ori said, “Neither was Nori, and Dori was yet a dwarfling. No, Balin has told me tales.”

“Balin,” Glorfindel said softly. He shook his head. “Time has little meaning here,” he said. “I had not realized there would be those of you here who would remember.”

“We all remember,” Gimli said. “Whether we were there or not has no difference.” He stood. “If you’ll excuse me.” He walked over to Fíli and Kíli, who were quickly packing away their fiddles.

“We should sing it,” Gimli said. “Remind these elves that we are more than tavern songs and quick jokes.”

Fíli frowned. “Did something happen? You look mad.”
“How can you tell?” Kíli asked, but he looked concerned as well. “Did someone say something?”

“Yes—no,” Gimli shook his head. “I think we should.”

“Then we will,” Kíli said, grabbing an arm each. “The sound is best by the fire. Trust me.” He half-dragged them over to the fire in the middle of the room, and set them up in a triangle around the flames.

It wasn’t that Gimli didn’t trust Kíli, it’s just that he trusted his own ears a far sight more. He stopped his foot and cocked his head; the curve of the arch brought the sound around in a perfect echo; it was like they were back in Erebor already, the long sounds echoing off the polished walls.

“Ready?” Kíli asked, and Fíli and Gimli nodded. He cleared his throat and the near elves fell quiet. Bofur fell quiet, too, and watched them with intense eyes that read strange in his merry face.

Kíli raised his head first and began to sing, letting out a long, clear note. It radiated out and bounced off the walls, catching Gimli at all angles, and he listened to the resonance of each note. Fíli sang next, up half an octave, his voice blending seamlessly with his brother. Gimli sang last, the lowest note in the chord, and they held the harmony for a full three beats. When they fell quiet, the hall was silent, waiting. Three sets of dwarven eyes glittered at them from the half-dark, but none of the mattered. Gimli closed his eyes, and Fíli began to sing.

Oh, misty eye of the mountain below
Keep careful watch of my brothers’ souls
And should the sky be filled with fire and smoke
Keep watching over Durin’s sons

They three sang, raising their voices together before Fíli sang again, Kíli echoing above.

If this is to end in fire
Then we should all burn together
Watch the flames climb high into the night
Calling out father oh stand by and we will
Watch the flames burn auburn on
The mountain side high

From the dimness of the hall, other dwarven voices raised up their chants, and someone, probably Bombur, began to drum. Gimli added his voice to the verse.

And if we should die tonight
We should all die together
Raise a glass of wine for the last time
Calling out father oh
Prepare as we will
Watch the flames burn auburn on
The mountain side
Desolation comes upon the sky

With the next verse they began to dance, stomping their boots with the drums, clapping their hands together, against their chests, snapping their fingers in time with the song as they began to circle the flames. Their hair flew behind them as they spun, the heat of the flames warm and dizzying.
Now I see fire
Inside the mountain
I see fire
Burning the trees
And I see fire
Hollowing souls
I see fire
Blood in the breeze

They stopped, and sang still to each other.

And I hope that you'll remember me

They spun away. The voices from the crowd were growing stronger. Gimli saw Dori, Óin and Glóin. Dwalin and Balin stood with Bifur. They all sang, proud and shining, and coming closer, ringing the fire. There was only one dwarf missing.

Oh, should my people fall then
Surely I'll do the same
Confined in mountain halls
We got too close to the flame
Calling out father oh
Hold fast and we will
Watch the flames burn auburn on
The mountain side
Desolation comes upon the sky

The ring began to dance, opposite to the three at the fire. It was a vision of what the dances in the Lonely Mountain used to be, circles within spirals, every step perfectly placed or it would send the entire dance grinding to a halt.

Now I see fire
Inside the mountains
I see fire
Burning the trees
And I see fire
Hollowing souls
I see fire
Blood in the breeze

There. Thorin. Inside the outer circle, and watching without moving, without singing until now, when he added his voice to the chorus…

And I hope that you'll remember me

…and joined them in the dance, lending his deep timbre to Fíli’s lead and they spun and spun and spun, the pain and determination in his voice captivating, crystallizing the moment, and it was all Gimli could do to keep up, swept along in the power of his voice.

And if the night is burning
I will cover my eyes
For if the dark returns then
My brothers will die
And as the sky is falling down
It crashed into this lonely town
And with that shadow upon the ground
I hear my people screaming out
And they cried out! Voices raised to practically roaring,

*And I see fire!*
Inside the mountains
I see fire
Burning the trees
I see fire
Hollowing souls
I see fire
Blood in the breeze

They froze, stomping down with one final echo, lending their voices as as Fili and Thorin sang together:

*I see fire
Burn auburn on the mountain side.*

Gimli realized he was practically panting, but he could not look away from Thorin, who looked more kingly than ever in the dimness in the hall, the beads in his hair and crags of his face etched with firelight. Thorin met his gaze, deep eyes glinting cat-green, and Gimli bowed.

Someone began to clap. “Excellent!” Gandalf called over. “Simply, excellent!” Gimli looked, and Gandalf stood next to Lord Elrond, who looked almost surprised, as if he hadn’t expected dwarves singing in his hall—no. As if he hadn’t expected Thorin to be in the thick of it. He resisted the urge to shake his head; it never ceased to surprise him how little elves really understood of them.

Thorin bowed, accepting the compliment, and clasped his hand to Fili’s shoulder, passing the praise on to where it belonged. Fili flashed a rare beaming grin, and Thorin bumped their foreheads together.

“Yes, it was,” Thorin said, still close. “But that is enough for tonight. Stay if you wish, but no more songs.”

“Yes, Uncle,” Fili said, Kili chorusing right behind him. Thorin paused, looking over at Gimli.

“I promise,” Gimli said quickly, and Thorin may have possibly given him the tiniest of smiles before disappearing back into the crowd, stopping only to nod at Bilbo and smack his hand across the back of Dwalin’s head.

“Well,” Bilbo said, popping up at Gimli’s side. “That was fun!”

***

It was as if that night marked something—an easing of hostility, if not an all-out cease fire. The elves that brought them food and drink thought now to ask for their preferences, and in turn the Company kept their tempers when faced with elvish frippery and nonsense. Thorin was even seen walking with Lord Elrond once or twice in their nearly three week stay, though they always had Gandalf walking with them. Still, they knew their time there was coming to an end, and once more then began to pack camp, ready to leave at any time.

One night, a little over week since their foray to the Halls of Fire, Bilbo wished to walk and asked
Gimli for company. Honestly, Gimli was glad to have it; he loved his cousins, had missed them fiercely for most of his life, but absence had seemingly made him forget just how tiring it was to be in their constant presence. They left just after supper, when the sun was reaching towards the end of the sky, but the world was not yet turned to red and gold, and together they walked through the fires of sunset and into the blues of gathering twilight. They talked of many things: Rivendell, their journey, various family stories. Gimli made Bilbo laugh with tales of Fíli and Kíli before Fíli’s beard grew in, and Bilbo in turn made Gimli snort with laughter with tales of his exploits as a young hobbit with a tendency for Tookish pranks. It was good conversation, as Bilbo was quite quick witted when not overrun by unexpected company, and reminded Gimli so much of his friends that he longed to hear Pippin and Merry bickering, or Sam grumbling under his breath, or the rare bird of Frodo’s laughter.

Gimli hummed, laughter easing to a comfortable silence. "Truly," he said after a moment. "There is not a dwarfling that I've yet met that wouldn't like the life of a hobbit, nothing to do but work and eat and simply live." Gimli paused. "Though, I do fear dwarves prefer to get their hands dirty in a different sort of earth than hobbits."

Bilbo chuckled. He had a high-pitched giggling sort of laughter that was very infectious, and Gimli could see why Thorin was so smitten. "True," Bilbo said. "Dwarves don't seem to take much of gardening, though they enjoy the spoils well enough. I saw you with those apples."

Gimli flushed. "Fresh fruit is rare in the mountain, and while only a fool would call gardening easy work, it's far too fleeting for many dwarves' taste. The work only lasts a season, maybe two, then all of nature works against you. And the result—what isn't eaten fades and rots. Metal and stone do not rot.

"Neither do pickles and preserves, and I have seen both in your packs," Bilbo countered. "And I've no doubt that if any on Middle Earth could find a way to grow food in winter, it would be a dwarf."

Gimli laughed. "Aye. You're probably right. But the Green and Growing are the providence of the Green Lady, and no dwarf would dare cross the wife of our Maker. It is often said that dwarf women were made in her image, and if you ever meet a dwarrowdam, you'll understand our hesitation."

Bilbo grinned. "I've got a pretty good idea already, of the letter from Thorin's sister is any indication."

"The Lady Dís is a force in her own right, and that she was chosen not to join us speaks highly to her wisdom," Gimli said. "And that both of her sons are...well, Fíli and Kíli..."

"Say no more," Bilbo said, laughing. "I am well aware that the foolishness of youth has little to do with the parent. Remind me to tell you of my Brandybuck cousins."

Gimli smiled, remembering a particular Brandybuck cousin, and his lifelong Took companion. "I'd like that," Gimli said.

"Are you sure?" Bilbo asked. "Get a hobbit talking about family..."

"Is like asking a dwarf about craft," Gimli said. "But that is for another time." They could see a merry little fire on the balcony above their heads. A cooking fire. Nori, standing by the edge, saw them and waved.

Bilbo sighed. "What are they burning?"
That better not be the furniture, Gimli thought. I thought we were past that! "Best not ask," he said. "It may be better if you do not know."

Bilbo opened his mouth, eyes narrowing, stopped, though better of it, then shook his head, wandering away. Gimli watched him go for a moment, seeing with his mind instead a weathered old hobbit, helped along by his younger nephew. He shook the image off, but before he could follow:

"Master Gimli," Gandalf said from behind him, and Gimli started.

"Gandalf," Gimli gasped, a hand to his chest. "How may I help you?"

"You may talk," Gandalf said. "The time has come."

Chapter End Notes

The link at the song is to Peter Hollens's cover of "I See Fire" because it sounds more dwarven to me, somehow.
Gimli looked up at Gandalf. "Time to talk," he repeated. "Very well. To whom will I be talking?"

Gandalf frowned. "To Lord Elrond, and to myself," he said. "There is something suspicious about your dreams and we intend to find out what it is." He crossed his arms, hiding his hands in the folds of his robes. He was not carrying his staff, and Gimli did not see it nearby. That, more than anything, made him narrow his eyes.

"You're scared," Gimli said, realizing it as he spoke. "You're scared and yet you leave your staff behind. What is happening, Gandalf?"

But Gandalf's frown only deepened and he gestured for Gimli to walk before him. Gimli spared a glance up at the balcony, but none of the Company was watching. With a deep breath, Gimli moved, and Gandalf fell into step behind him, placing a deceptively strong hand on his shoulder.

"Many things are happening," Gandalf said softly, once they were down an empty path. "And I fear there are ears everywhere, and not all of them friendly--not even here. The world is in motion, son of Gloin, and your Uncle is not the only one to read portents."

Gimli thought back to the geode, the image of wealth spoiled with sickness. "You fear the return of the Enemy," Gimli said. "You fear the consequences if Smaug is in the mountain when the Enemy rises, and you fear that no one will hear you until it is too late." Gimli looked back at him. "That was why you went to Thorin; only he would dare brave a dragon on its horde. That is why Radagast's words shook you so."

Gandalf raised an eyebrow. "And did you dreams tell you that?"

Gimli scowled. "I don't need dreams to tell me what my eyes can see," he snapped. Gandalf stopped, and pulled Gimli to the side of the path.

"Then you are far more perceptive than your kin," Gandalf snapped, "or I would not need to fight with them as I do. Now tell me: what, exactly, do your eyes see?"

Gimli met Gandalf's eyes properly for the first time since they met in Bag End. He stood tall as was his right as a Lord, and let the weight of his memories come forth. Gandalf leaned back, surprised, but Gimli leaned in close. "They see a world headed for war," he whispered intently. "You are not alone in your fears."

Several emotions crossed Gandalf's face -- surprise, worry, fear, annoyance -- and Gimli crossed
his arms and waited. A shadow moved, down the path, and his eyes flicked to see. "Lord Elrond approaches," he said, and Gandalf turned to look.

"Lord Elrond," Gandalf greeted warmly, all trace of his earlier mood gone in a flash. Elrond looked at him as if he knew exactly what shift took place and why.

"Gandalf," he greeted, and then looked to Gimli without a trace of surprise. "Gimli," he said.

"Lord Elrond," Gimli said, and bowed. So Gimli would be telling him after all. Good. Elrond had a way of tempering Gandalf, adding a cooling strength to his more passionate plans. Elrond nodded to him and began to walk down the path, Gandalf walking in step. Gimli once again followed behind, and listened to what they had to say.

"So," Elrond said. "Were you planning on telling me of your plans at any point?" Gimli bit his lip to hide a grin. Elrond sounded like his Ma when Gloin did something foolish, like agree to going on a quest against a dragon without consulting her first.

"Of course I was going to tell you; I was waiting for this very chance. And really, I think you can trust that I know what I'm doing," Gandalf said, rather testily.

"Do you?" Elrond said, raising his eyebrow. "That Dragon has slept for sixty years! What would happen if your plan should fail? If you wake the beast?"

"What if we succeed?" Gandalf pressed. "If the dwarves take back the mountain, our defenses in the East will be strengthened."

Elrond was silent for a moment, and Gimli realized with a start that Elrond agreed with Gandalf. (And, also, that they had pretty much forgotten that he was there, which was rude, aye, but he would let it slide this time). Elrond knew there as a growing need in the world, that the darkness was returning, but it was still not enough to move him to action. Gimli glowered at the ground. Elves! he thought. Pah! They're so afraid to make the wrong move, they won't make any moves at all!

"It is a dangerous move, Gandalf," Elrond said at last.

"It's dangerous to do nothing!" Gandalf countered. "The throne of Erebor is Thorin's birthright. What do you fear?"

Elrond stopped Gandalf, and leaned in close, dropping his voice in an effort to hide his comments from Gimli. It did not work: Gimli's body was still young enough that his ears had not dimmed through long exposure to the cacophony of the mines.

"Have you forgotten?" Elrond hissed. "A strain of madness runs deep in that family. His grandfather lost his mind. His father succumbed to the same sickness." In his passion, Elrond's volume slipped and he grew louder. "Can you swear that Thorin Oakenshield will not fall?"

Gandalf was silent for a moment, and Gimli spoke. "It's true, isn't it?" he said, and they turned to look at him, as if surprised to see him there. "There is a curse on the line of Durin, and well do we know it. We are not blind, as so many believe. But what else are we to do?" He planted his fists on his hips and narrowed his eyes. "Since our Father made us, we have been beset on all sides, but he made us strong to endure and so we have." He glared between the two of them. "The rings of power have not corrupted our kings as they had the kings of men, but neither were they kept clean of his darkness, and slowly have they poisoned our minds where they could not reach our bodies, turning what is sacred to us to profane lust. We know this," he said again, and shook his head. "He
and his dark master hated us so that they created dragons, dragons to destroy us for the simple sin of existence. We, who have been long punished for crimes that are not ours, that are not crimes at all, will stand it no longer. We will take back our home from that which was sent to burn us, and Erebor will be our shining kingdom once more!"

Gandalf turned to Elrond. "You see?" he said, and Gimli rolled his eyes. All of that, and once more they speak as if he was not there. He wondered, if he appeared to them as he saw himself in his own head, would they dismiss him so easily?

"With or without our help, these dwarves will march on the mountain. They are determined to reclaim their homeland. I do not believe Thorin Oakenshield feels that he's answerable to anyone." Gandalf paused, and added, grumpily, "Nor for that matter am I."

They had reached the top of the steps, Gimli a few paces behind, when Elrond turned and said, "It is not me you must answer to." They passed through the doorway, and Gandalf stopped.

"Lady Galadriel!" he said, surprise and pleasure warring in his voice.

"Mithrandir," she said. "It has been a long time." Oh! Her voice was even lovelier than he remembered. Gimli froze. His Lady! His hand went to the gift and it felt warm beneath his jerkin.

"Age may have changed me, but not so the Lady of Lorien," Gandalf said smoothly, and Gimli was frozen by the warring desires to hide and to throw himself at her feet. "I did not know Lord Elrond had sent for you?"

"That's because he did not," said a voice, familiar for a very different reason, and Gimli's stomach filled with anger. "I did."

"Saruman," Gandalf said, and Gimli clung to the shadows.

Saruman! Of course, this was before Gandalf knew of his treachery. He’d have no reason to suspect--

"You’ve been busy of late, my friend," Saruman said, with some wry humor in his voice, and Gimli wondered. Could this be before? Could the White Wizard have not yet fallen to the Enemy’s council?

Elrond looked to Gimli, barely moving his head, and indicated for Gimli to remain out of sight. Gimli nodded and crouched in the shadows. He could just see the light of dawn cresting beyond the council, and in its rosy glow, the members of the White Council.

The Lady Galadriel was even more radiant in the light of morning.

"Tell me, Gandalf," Saruman began. He had standing just out of Gimli’s sight, but as he spoke he walked closer to the table in the middle of the room. Gimli nearly didn’t recognize him; here before him was an Istari of full power and control. Gone was the cracked madman they had met in the ruins of Orthanc. Suddenly, Gimli could see why Gandalf had deferred to his council. “Did you think these plans and schemes of yours would go unnoticed?” Saruman sat in a chair, sighing like an old man.

“Unnoticed?” Gandalf shook his head, a look of exaggerated innocence on his face. Gimli hid a snicker. Had that look ever worked? “No, I’m simply doing what I feel to be right.”

Galadriel walked in slow, measured steps around the room, and she spoke in her deep manner, “The dragon has long been on your mind.”
Gandalf sat at last, and with a weary acceptance that belied the confidence of his words. “This is true, my lady. Smaug owes allegiance to no one.” He leaned forward and tapped his fingers on the table. “But if he should side with the enemy, a dragon could be used to terrible effect.”

“What enemy?” Saruman scoffed. “Gandalf, the Enemy is defeated. Sauron is vanquished. He can never regain his full strength.”

Elrond stepped forward, earnest. “Gandalf, for four hundred years, we have lived in peace. A hard-won, watchful peace.”

“Are we?” Gandalf asked, turning to look at him. “Are we at peace?” He looked back to the Lady and Saruman. “Trolls have come down from the mountains. They are raiding villages, destroying farms. Orcs have attacked us on the road.”

Elrond shook his head. Gimli frowned. Elrond was on Gandalf’s side: why did he not side with him? “Hardly a prelude to war.”

“Always you must meddle, looking for trouble where none exists,” Saruman said, like a father to a wayward child.

“Let him speak,” Galadriel said, eyes flashing. Never did she cease her motion, but when she walked by where Gimli hid, she hesitated for a brief moment, and Gimli felt her in his mind, the quickest of brushes.

Gandalf nodded at her in thanks, and steepled his fingers together. “There is something at work beyond the evil of Smaug. Something far more powerful. We can remain blind, but it will not be ignoring us, that I can promise you. A sickness lies over the Greenwood. The woodsmen who live there now call it ‘Mirkwood’ and they say...” He trailed off, and Gimli smacked his forehead then froze. Did they hear?

“Well, don’t stop now. Tell us about what the woodsmen say,” Saruman said, and Gimli rolled his eyes. There it was, that air of smug superiority. Why did Gandalf listen to him?

Gandalf sighed, as if bracing himself, and said, quietly clearly, “They speak of a Necromancer living in Dol Guldur, a sorcerer who can summon the dead.”

“That’s absurd,” Saruman said. “No such power exists in the world. This...Necromancer is nothing more than a mortal man. A conjurer dabbling in black magic.”

Gandalf nodded. “And so I thought too.” He leaned in, “but, Radagast has seen--”

“Radagast?” Saruman interrupted. “Do not speak to me about Radagast the Brown. He is a foolish fellow.” Gimli’s eyes widened. Did Saruman not like Radagast?

“Well, he’s odd, I grant you. He lives a solitary life,” Gandalf said.

“It’s not that,” Saruman said, shaking his head. “It’s his excessive consumption of mushrooms.” Gimli’s jaw dropped. His what? “They’ve addled his brain and yellowed his teeth. I warned him, it is unbefitting of the Istari to be wandering in the woods...”

Radagast was a bit odd, sure, but Gimli thought that no reason to speak of him as such. Was he not a wizard, like they?

But it was soon clear to him that not all felt as Saruman did; the Lady looked to Gandalf and he nodded his head. She smiled, the barest sliver, but it’s brightness shone like the very sun. Gimli
Gandalf lifted Radagast’s package and dropped it onto the table with a dull thud.

“…or I’d think I was talking to myself…” Saruman said, then stopped, staring. For the first time, he looked genuinely unsettled.

“What is that?” Elrond asked, coming closer and reaching out to touch the outer wrapping.

“A relic of Mordor,” Galadriel said, her honey voice full of horror. Elrond stopped, drawing his hand back as if he had just realized the flower he was reaching for was home to hornets. He hesitated for just long enough for Gimli to really see him hesitate, and ripped the cloth open with a strong flick of his hand. They all looked in shock at what was on the table, but Gimli in his hiding place could not see what that object was. He only knew that he could have happily lived a thousand lives without seeing that look on his lady’s face.

“A Morgul blade,” Elrond said in a dreadful whisper.

“Made for the Witch-king of Angmar,” Galadriel confirmed, and, to Gimli’s dismay, she faltered as she spoke. “And buried with him.” She shook her head slowly, as if it could deny the truth of what she was seeing. “When Angmar fell, men of the North took his body and all that he possessed and sealed it within the High-Fells of Rhudaur. Deep within the rock they buried them, in a tomb so dark it would never come to light.”

“This is not possible,” Elrond said. “A powerful spell lies upon those tombs; they cannot be opened.”

Saruman leaned back. “What proof do we have this weapon came from Angmar’s grave?” he asked, and Gimli closed his eyes. Agent of the Enemy or not, Gimli knew that tone from those nobles at court who decide on a truth with little reason, and then stand by that decision no matter what was told to them. They cannot be convinced, because they refuse to agree that there is an issue.

“I have none,” Gandalf admitted.

“Because there is none,” Saruman said, and Gimli hoped that it was simply denial, that he was refusing to believe because he did not want to believe and not because he knew the truth and was deliberately misleading him. For Gandalf’s sake, let Saruman be yet untouched by evil. “Let us examine what we know. A single Orc pack has dared to cross the Bruinen. A dagger from a bygone age has been found. And a human sorcerer, who calls himself the Necromancer, has taken up residence in a ruined fortress. It’s not so very much, after all. The question of this dwarvish company, however, troubles me deeply. I’m not convinced, Gandalf; I do not feel I can condone such a quest. If they’d come to me, I might have spared them this disappointment. I do not pretend to understand your reasons for raising their hopes…”

Gimli stopped listening. There was no point any longer; if Saruman wouldn’t listen to Gandalf, then Gimli wouldn’t listen to Saruman. Once again, The Lady was watching Gandalf’s face as if they were speaking, and Gandalf must have made some sign, because Galadriel’s face filled with such mischief.

Elven steps on the stairs behind him, and Gimli sank further into the shadow of the shrubbery. It was the steward, Lindir.

“My Lord Elrond,” Lindir said, crossing into the room and interrupting Saruman. The White...
Council stopped and looked at Lindir, who faltered only slightly.

“The dwarves,” he said. “They’ve gone.”

_Gone!_ Gimli nearly stood and broke his cover. _And they left me behind? Impossible. Father would never willingly let me stay in an elven household. There has to be some plan, even if I was not privy to it._

Elrond left with Lindir, and Saruman stood as well. “I hope this has put any worry out of your mind,” he said to Gandalf.

Gandalf bowed. “Of course,” he said, but Gimli knew all too well what that “of course” really meant. Saruman, however, seemed to miss the clue. He held out his hand and his staff rushed to him. Gimli reared back; he had no idea! Wizards couldn’t—Gandalf didn’t! His mind seemed to stick on “how?”, and it played on repeat as Saruman left the chamber.

Alone in the room, the Lady Galadriel smiled like Gimli remembered from Lothlorien and held out her hands. “Mithrandir,” she said again. “It is good to see you.”

Gandalf took her hands and kissed her knuckles. “It is good to be seen by you,” he said.

Galadriel hummed. “You are not the only one to share that privilege,” she teased, “though I have not yet seen the other with my eyes.” She looked up and seemed to meet Gimli’s eyes through the verge. “You may come out, now,” she said. “The others have gone.”

Gimli swallowed, a knot in his throat sharp and cracked like granite, but he stood and walked around the pillar next to him to enter the room.

“May I present to you Gimli, son of Gloin, of the Royal Line of Durin,” Gandalf said, and Gimli bowed low. “He is from Ered Luin, and of the Dwarves that fled Erebor and the fires of Smaug nearly two hundred years ago.”

“I am familiar with that family,” Lady Galadriel said. “I remember well the battle on the plains of Azanulbizar, and earlier still the thriving might of Khazad-Dum in the golden days of the first age.” She stepped forward. “Rise, Gimli Gloinul, and be well met on this fair morn.”

Gimli, heart full, bowed even deeper, and said to her once more the words he had at their first meeting. “Yet more fair is the Lady Galadriel, above all the jewels that lie beneath the earth.” He saw on her face a look of wonder, and of recognition.

“Those words,” she said. “I have heard them before, deep in the waking dreams of my kind.”

“It is not the first time I have said them,” Gimli confessed. “Though it is the first time you have heard them from my own self.”

Gandalf frowned. “You have not met the Lady before,” he said.

“On the contrary,” Gimli said. “I have known the Lady Galadriel for many years, and she me, though she has not yet met me.”

“Speak plain,” Gandalf demanded. “What do you mean?”

Lady Galadriel raised her eyebrow. “He means what he says,” she said, that glimmer of playfulness in her eye. “Though I would love to know how.”
“It is done,” Elrond said, coming back into the room. “Thorin and his Company passed over my borders at dawn.” He paused, looking at Gimli. “All except for present company, that is.”

“Good,” Gandalf said. “Gimli and I must be off soon as well, if we are to meet them in the mountain.”

“They won’t be there,” Gimli said. He looked over. “They won’t wait,” he said. “They will push on, and fall down the Goblin’s back door.”

Elrond crossed his arms. “You seem very sure.”

“I am sure!” Gimli said.

“But how?” Elrond demanded, elven reserve cracking at last. “I have thought on this and thought, and even my own gifts fail me; foresight does not work this way!”

“No,” Gimli snapped. “But memory does!”

Gimli had grown used to Gandalf the White, his joys higher and his anger hotter, and then again to Gandalf the Grey as he was with Bilbo, wise and kind-enough and constantly nearly wong-footed —so to have this Gandalf the Grey and weathered like the granite of the mountainside—look at him, eyes piercing and achingly familiar, raw and wordly from under his bushy brows, hit him off guard and he had to stop and breathe for a moment.

“Speak, son of Gloin,” his Lady said, drawing his attention to a power more beautiful, but no less terrible. “I much desire to hear your tale.”

How could he say no?

“The simple truth,” he began, “and all that I know, is that nearly three months ago, now, I closed my eyes for what I believed to be the last time as a very old dwarf. I held the hand of my husband in our home—” Here he paused. Should he tell them of Legolas? No, not yet. Nothing of that without Legolas with him. “I opened my eyes in my childhood bedroom in Ered Luin, once more a young dwarf of sixty-four, on the eve of the quest for Erebor that I was too young to join the first time ‘round. All that remained of my life before were my memories, held so dear...and this.”

With a flourish, Gimli pulled the Lady’s Gift from his pocket, removing the cloth wrapper with a flick. The gem flared and glowed brightly in the dim light of evening--a twinkling light like the stars above, and all were silent with awe.

“Is it…?” Elrond breathed. “Can it be?”

“No,” Lady Galadriel said, her pale face white as death. “And yes. Or rather, as they could have been.”

“No,” Gandalf breathed. “Lady, your hair?” He looked at Gimli. “How did you get this?”

“I made it,” Gimli said, puffing up. He was proud of his work, and had spent years perfecting his skill before he had even attempted a mock up. The implication that he had somehow taken it made his blood boil. “I crafted the setting out of the finest mithril; it took many months and I had to relearn much of the art that was lost to us. I set the lock myself, in ways secret to our people. And the hair,” he paused, “your hair, my Lady, was given to me at the end of our first meeting, a generous gift to a weary traveler who asked for nothing, his heart already full with gratitude at unsought kindness.” He bowed his head and watched the light play in the facets of the pendant. “It is a symbol of peace,” he said, his voice softening. “A new peace between our two people, and
cherished by my house as a reminder of the kindness you had shown me.” He bowed again. The elves who had seen the Lady’s Gift always reacted oddly, but had never been quite willing to tell him why. He wished they had, as now the Lady was staring at him and it was most uncomfortable.

Lady Galadriel placed her hands on his shoulders, and encouraged him to stand tall. “There is no lie in your heart,” she said. “And the evidence you bring is hard to deny. But tell me; why have you traveled thus?”

Gimli shook his head. “Is it not obvious?” He asked. At their blank looks he went on; “I am here because of this very quest.” He turned to Gandalf. “You spoke to Thorin out of a desire for a stronghold in the North. You fear the return of the Enemy, and do not trust King Thranduil to hold, not the way Erebor can. You are right to act: Erebor will serve as the stronghold on the North, and it will hold.”

“Hold against what?” Elrond asked.

“War,” Gimli said, and looked between the three of them. He sighed. “The Company will reach the mountain, and in doing so, will wake the dragon. That is the sad truth. But in waking him, and setting him loose on Laketown, he is slain for good. Yet, the destruction of that worm is not the true danger of this quest.” He looked to Gandalf, and willed him to believe.

“Thorin’s Company is headed deeper into the Misty Mountains; they will not wait for you. Already, Thorin doubts your commitment to his cause, and will seek to go against your advice when he can. By nightfall, there will be rain upon the mountain and the rock giants drive them to take shelter in a goblin cave. There, in the depths beneath even the roots of the mountains, Bilbo will find something.” He paused. “A ring. The tiniest of rings, unadorned and made of shining gold, that turns its wearer invisible.”

“No,” Lady Galadriel whispered, backing away. “No, that ring was lost long ago.”

Gimli braced himself. “It was found,” he said. “Years ago, by a creature known as Gollum. He lives his wretched life under the Misty Mountains and you, he turned to Gandalf, “have sent Bilbo Baggins right to him.”

“Then there is no hope,” Elrond said. “There will be war. The Dark Lord returns.”

“The Dark Lord returns,” Gimli said mildly, “but so too does the King of Men, and the Dark Lord is no match for him.”

Elrond narrowed his eyes. “The heir to that throne is no more than a boy, one with no desire to become king.”

“I’ve met Estel,” Gimli said, dryly. “Aragorn son of Arathorn is one of my dearest friends. He is well grown by the time the War is inevitable.”

Gandalf closed his eyes, face pained. “Oh, dear Bilbo,” he whispered.

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Dear Bilbo, but do not fret, Tharkun. Bilbo Baggins is made of stern stuff; for sixty years he keeps the Ring hidden and safe, not knowing what it is.” He spread his hands. “He used it to hide from the Sackville-Bagginses and other unwanted visitors.” He bared his teeth. “The enemy of the free peoples did not account for Hobbits, and that will prove to be his undoing.”

“Tell us no more,” Lady Galadriel said, sharply, then softened. “We are not meant to see such events before they happen.”
“Truthfully, my Lady,” Gimli said. “I am not sure how much it will matter. Already, I have seen events change from what happened before, and events that I meant to change have still come to pass.”

Elrond raised an eyebrow. “This is why foresight is limited among us here.”

“And well I know it,” Gimli grumbled. He sighed. “I have not asked for this, and I do not want it, but I am here, and I will do what I can to reclaim Erebor and prevent what tragedies that I can along the way.”

“What tragedies to you mean?” Gandalf asked.

Gimli met his gaze. “Erebor will see war before the Dark Lord’s return. Sick with dragon gold and twisted further by the will of the Ring, battle is joined by the armies of men, elves, and dwarves for the treasure history of our people. It is a petty fight, and many good people die. I would stop such battle if I can.”

“Be wary, traveler,” Lady Galadriel said. “For while some events cannot be changed, more too should some that can change not be changed, for they set in motion events that map our futures.”

Gimli nodded, but remained silent. What could he say? He would not let his cousins fall.

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"Come, Gimli," Gandalf said. "If what you say is true, we have little time."

"I speak truth," Gimli grumbled, but hurried after Gandalf all the same. Gandalf’s horse had been readied, but Gimli’s pony had been taken with the others. Once more he found himself required to ride pillion, and while Gandalf’s current steed was no Shadowfax, he also was no Arod.

"You will ride with me," Gandalf said, mistaking Gimli’s hesitation for confusion. "Bredun will bear us both."

Gimli sighed. "Of course he will," he muttered to himself. He turned to nearest elf. "I hate to ask, but if you have not noticed, that horse is quite a bit taller than I."

The elf’s expression never changed, but there was an air of definite resentment when he crouched to help Gimli take his seat. Gimli touched his hand to his brow, nodding his head. "My thanks, master elf," he said, and then they were off to the mountains.

***

They rode hard, and Gimli soon found even his dwarven endurance taxed when the skies darkened above them. The rain came down in sheets, blinding as the wind blew, and Gimli clung tighter to the wizard.

The path was in shambles, and sleek from the rain besides. They had to move slowly, and a few times had to dismount and climb over boulders or around gaping holes. Gandalf looked into the distance.

"The rock giants are active tonight," Gandalf called.

"Wonderful," Gimli called back. "I am so happy for them!"
Gandalf stopped and looked around, shielding his eyes from the rain and lifting his lit staff high. "We should have met up with them by now," he said.

"I told you," Gimli said. "They never planned on waiting for you. They've been taken by goblins by now."

"Then we must make our way inside the mountain," Gandalf said. He turned and said something to Bredun, and the horse whinnied, thrashing his head. Gandalf took his pack, and Bredun turned and disappeared quickly into the storm. "He will make his way home," Gandalf said. "And he has a far better destination than we. Come! This way!" He led Gimli to a shallow cave. It was empty, which was odd for a cave in the mountains in the rain.

"A cave," he said. "Lucky."

"It is not a cave," Gandalf said. "It's an entryway to the Goblin City, and I fear the answer to what happened to your company."

Gimli looked around. "They wouldn't dare make camp at a goblin door--" He cut himself off when he saw it, trapped among the rocks. He picked it up, looking at it closely while Gandalf examined the back of the cave. He nearly dropped it when he realized; it was his father's pipe.

"Gandalf," he cried, and held it aloft when Gandalf turned to look. Gandalf's already grim expression turned even more dour.

"We are running out of time," he said, and hefted his staff high. He called out a word of power in the ancient tongue, and the floor opened beneath them.

Down, down they tumbled, and it was only the shock of it that kept Gimli from screaming the whole way. He hit the side of a tunnel and rolled. He tried to keep his head tucked in, but the force of impact flung him about, and made his eyes star. The darkness was absolute save for a growing ring of red like fire down below. The Balrog! Gimli's mind screeched. Durin's Bane has come!

But no; it was Balin's colony that woke the Balrog. These were goblin fires, seen at the end of a long tunnel. Gandalf, next to him, had his limbs spread in freefall, as if with enough will he could fly.

"Hold on," Gandalf cried.

"To what?" Gimli tried to say, but before the words could be spoken, Gandalf angled his staff down and let loose a blast of energy that blew them both back, slowing their descent. Three more blasts, and Gimli finally toppled down onto a rickety platform made of scrap wood and bone. He picked himself up gingerly and brushed the dirt from his clothing. He had made it down, pack intact, and when he looked, Gandalf was already up and ready.

"Ready your axe," Gandalf said, and Gimli did without hesitation. Now that the ringing in his ears had stopped, he could hear the resonating drumbeats in the deep. "The Goblin King is holding court," Gandalf sneered. "Come!" He took off, leaving Gimli to scramble behind.

Gandalf was fast, for an old man, and Gimli had to give his best effort just to keep pace. He was quiet, too, much more quiet than Gimli's stomping books, and was often forced to kill a goblin guard from behind lest he notice them and warn others of their coming.

They came at last to the main audience chamber of the Goblin King. None paid them mind, as all were focused on the King's wailings.
"I know that sword!" He cried. "It is Orcrist, the Goblin cleaver!"

"Well, we found them," Gimli muttered, only to be shushed by Gandalf.

"Murderers! Elf-friends!" The King wailed, and really, Gimli thought, Thorin was not going to like that. "Kill them!"

"Now," Gandalf whispered, and thrust up his staff. At once, every fire burnt out, pitching them all into darkness. The Goblins began their horrible chatter, and Gimli could just make out some Dwarven voices in the fray.

The darkness was broken by a beam of blue light—no, not a beam, a sword! Gandalf’s sword, Glamdring, held aloft and burning blue. The Goblins fell back, screeching. "Take up arms!" Gandalf cried out to the company. "Fight. Fight!"

And then there was no more time to think. A goblin came from his right, and Gimli blocked, easily sweeping its feet from its legs in one clean stroke. Another jumped at him from behind, and Gimli spun just in time to take its head clean off its shoulders. Gandalf killed two of his own before the Goblin King got his voice back.

“He wields the Foe-Hammer, the Beater, bright as daylight!” He cried. "No!" He cowered back from the blade, forcing himself backwards on his hands and rolling some of his subjects beneath him.

Dwalin and Dori get to the pile of weapons first, Nori and Bofur right behind them, and they begin tossing weapons to each other with only the barest regard for whose weapon belonged to whom. They could sort it out later, once they were free. Gimli fought his way closer, scooping up a piece of flattened metal as he did. He knocked a goblin loose with the butt of his axe, and helped Oin to his feet. "Here," he said, and handed Oin his squashed trumpet.

"Oh," Oin said, blinking at it. He didn't try to put it to his ear, however, and tucked it away in time to catch his staff from Nori. Gimli saw Ori run by, Dwalin's war hammer held easily aloft. Gimli exchanged a look with Oin and shrugged. No, he hadn't known Ori had it in him, either.

Meanwhile, the Great Goblin had regrouped and picked up his mace. He charged them with a cry, and Gimli raised his axe, but the blow was blocked by Thorin, spring-boarding off of Dwalin's back, and the Great Goblin staggered backwards and off the edge of the platform.

Still, however, the goblins came at them.

“Follow me," Gandalf shouted. "Quick! Run!"

Cutting down another goblin, Gimli turned and ran towards Gandalf. The rest of the company did the same, killing what goblins came close enough as they went.

Unlike Dwarven cities, which were built with some kind of plan, of sense in mind, Goblin cities were like a hive, filled with twisting tunnels that lead to nowhere and rickety suspensions that nearly sent them all reeling. Gimli wondered just how often Gandalf had been through these tunnels, as he led them unerringly through them, a horde of goblins chasing behind.

“Quickly!” Gandalf cried

“Faster!” Balin urged, running up alongside Gimli, sword in hand. “Gimli, good to see you.”

“Cousin,” Gimli said, grinning fiercely.
Dwalin called out behind them, “Post!” and Gimli dropped back as he saw a clutch of goblins coming at them to head them off. He swung his axe, and between he, Dwalin, and Kili, they cut a massive guardrail post and held it before them like a giant spike.

“Charge!” Dwalin cried, and forward they went, swinging the rail before them and sweeping goblins clean off the path until a small goblin jumped and landed atop the rail, running towards them. Dwalin dropped the rail, pulling his axes, and knocked the goblin aside, splitting him in two. Gimli dropped the rail as well, and the company pulled their weapons once more. The goblins were coming more and more quickly, attacking from all angles, and Gimli was forced to spin in circles to keep them off of him. He slashed forward, separating one from his head, and heard one cry out behind him as Ori squashed him with one mighty swing of Dwalin’s warhammer. Balin was at an intersection, wielding his sword in smooth loops, his movements as graceful as any dance and his expression peaceful. Beyond him, Thorin spun, his hair and clothes flying out behind him as he cut a path forward.

Thorin pointed out to the abyss. “Cut the ropes!” He cried, slashing at them as more goblins swung towards the company.

An arrow hit the rock next to Gimli’s head and he jumped back, looking for the source: a team of goblins had targeted Kili, and he was stuck, deflecting arrows with his sword. Fili fought his way towards his brother, and grabbed the back end of the ladder Kili grabbed as a shield. Gimli nearly smacked himself—who uses a ladder as a shield?—but it was working, so Gimli wouldn’t question it. He grabbed the other end, and together they rammed the goblins coming towards them, forcing them back and off the path where it came to a sudden end.

“Bridge it!” Someone called out, and they dropped the ladder, letting it swing forward to connect the paths. It was not the narrowest bridge Gimli had ever crossed, that honor went to Lorien, nor was it the most perilous, for that went to the fellowship’s flight from the Balrog, but it was certainly narrow and perilous enough, that later Gimli would barely remember the steps he took to cross it, though Ori would say he moved so quickly he barely touched the ground. Dwalin, the last across, broke the ladder behind them.

And so they fought, the paths and goblins blurring together until Gimli was aware only of his next step, his next strike, his next opponent. He had reached the meditative peace of the warrior, when the active mind surrendered to the body’s memory. His pace quickened, and his motions smoothed until his axe was an extension of his arm. Under his breath, he began to count.

“Twenty-three, twenty-four,” he muttered, and then Gloin was calling his name. The path before them broke once more, the chasm spanned by a spinning bridge, and as it swung towards them Gimli leaped and ran, riding the pendulum to the other side. He watched as the bridge swung back, half their Company still on board, and this time joined by goblins. The piece swung to the side as it returned, but still the rest of the Company managed to make the distance, the goblins falling by the wayside.

“Quickly!” Gandalf cried, and turned only to stop short when the path before them exploded upwards and the Great Goblin jumped onto their path. Their way was blocked and, as they stood, they were surrounded.

“You thought you could escape me?” The Great Goblin cried, swinging his mace at Gandalf, who staggered back, nearly falling. “What are you going to do now, wizard?” The Great Goblin taunted.

Gandalf sneered and leapt forward, striking the Great Goblin in the eye with the end of his wizard’s staff. The Great Goblin clutched at his face, crying out with pain. So distracted, he did not see Gandalf move again, slicing Glamdring across his belly, sliding easily through layers of fat and
exposing stinking entrails.

The Great Goblin clutched at his stomach. “That’ll do it,” he said, sounding nearly resigned, and then he fell backwards, landing with a resounding crash on and through the path. It was too much, and it crumbled beneath his weight, taking all of them, dwarves, Gandalf, goblins, and all, down with them.

Some luck was with them, and their section of the bridge slid down the side of the cavern in mostly one piece, and the company rode it down, screaming. They landed in a pile of dead timber, half-buried in the wreckage. Gandalf was the first to his feet, and carefully, the dwarves poked their heads from their dusty pile.

“Well,” Bofur said, disgustedly cheery, “that could have been worse.”

“Oh no,” Gimli said, and then a great weight landed atop their wrecked section of bridge; the corpse of the Great Goblin stinking and sinking further down as his great mass settled.

“You’ve got to be joking!” Dwalin cried out, straining with the effort of lifting a beam off of himself.

“Gimli,” Gloin cried. “Gimli, are you hurt?”

“I’m fine, Da,” Gimli said, and for the most part he was. The siege-state had receded, and he was aware of any dozen minor hurts, but he was still small enough have been kept mostly safe from the wreck, and he was able to slither free with little difficulty. He climbed over to his father, pulling bits of timber off of him until Gloin was free and together they worked to free Oin.

“Gandalf!” Kili cried, suddenly, voice trembling. Gimli looked to Kili, and followed his pale-faced gaze up to see what looked like every living goblin in the mountain rushing at them.

“There’s too many!” Dwalin cried, picking Ori bodily from the wreck. “We can’t fight them.”

“Only one thing will save us,” Gandalf said. “Daylight! Come on! Here, on your feet!” He righted Dori and ran. The rest of them, still dusting each other off, ran after, close at his heels.

They encountered no more goblins before them, and after a few twists and turns, emerged into a blinding golden sunset. Blinking spots from their eyes, they ran down the side of the mountain, sliding from tree to tree to slow their peeling descent. They had made it through the Misty Mountains.

They were some ways down when they finally slowed, Gandalf counting off heads. “…Bifur, Bofur, Bombur, and…Bilbo. Where is Bilbo?” He cried out, spinning on Thorin. “Where is the hobbit?”

Thorin just stared back, and after a moment, turned that stare on Gimli. Gimli frowned, what had he done?

“Curse the halfling!” Dwalin said, and Gimli could hear the worry under his bluster. “Now he’s lost?!”

Next to Gimli, Gloin shook his head. “I thought he was with Dori!”

“Don’t blame me!” Dori said. He had Ori pulled in close. Dwalin’s warhammer rested easily in Ori’s hand.
Gandalf spun on Dori anyway. “Well, where did you last see him?”

Nori spoke up. “I think I saw him slip away, when they first collared us,” he said, faltering at the last.

“What happened exactly?” Gandalf demanded. “Tell me!”

Gimli stiffened. There was something wrong, something familiar about this. For some reason, he thought of Boromir, noble Boromir, picking up a chain on snowy Charadhras, and felt dread pool in his stomach. Not again, he thought. Please, not again.

“I’ll tell you what happened,” Thorin growled, and Gimli closed his eyes. No, no.

“Master Baggins saw his chance and he took it! He’s thought of nothing but his soft bed and his warm hearth since first he stepped out of his door!” Thorin gestured, dismissing. He shook his head, disappointment settling over his shoulders like a mantle. “We will not be seeing our Hobbit again. He is long gone.”

“No, he isn’t,” Bilbo said behind them, and Gimli spun to see Bilbo step out from behind a tree. It may have only been a trick of the light, but Gimli could have sworn he saw Bilbo appear behind the tree, as well.

Gandalf let out a harsh breath of laughter. “Bilbo Baggins!” he said, relief flooding his voice. “I’ve never been so glad to see anyone in my life!”

Bilbo walked—no, that was nearly a strut. Bilbo strutted towards the company, greeting Balin with a friendly hand on his shoulder.

“How on earth did you get past the Goblins?!” Fili asked, and the company turned as one, eager to hear his answer.

“How, indeed,” Dwalin asked, clearly not believing that Bilbo, genteel elf-loving Bilbo, could have fought his way alone, not when the goblins nearly had them so many times.

Bilbo laughed, holding up a finger like he was going to instruct them, but did not say anything, simply put his fingers in his waistcoat pocket. Gimli saw a flash of gold disappear into the faded brocade, and looked at Gandalf, who looked disturbed, like he had seen it too.

“Well, what does it matter?” Gandalf asked. “He’s back!”

“It matters!” Thorin demanded, and Gimli silently pleaded for Thorin to let it go. He was not ready to learn of the ring, not when it was so clear to Gimli that Thorin would be the one most affected by its influence. He may never be ready to know of the truth. “I want to know: why did you come back?” he demanded, standing too close to Bilbo and staring down. Gimli blinked. That was not what he thought Thorin would want to know. He cocked his head; maybe he was being premature, doubting Thorin.

“Look,” Bilbo said, obviously nervous but staring down Thorin anyway. Gimli raised his eyebrows. Thorin at full-glower was intimidating, no matter who you were. To face it without flinching took a new kind of courage. “I know you doubt me,” Bilbo said. “I know you always have. And you’re right, I often think of Bag End.” Around him, the dwarves looked to each other and away, for all of them had thought such and thought it weakness. “I miss my books. And my armchair. And my garden. See, that’s where I belong.” Bilbo pointed to the ground. “That’s
home.” He looked around. “And that’s why I came back, cause you don’t have one.” He looked about, watching as one by one, the dwarves looked back to him. “A home,” he clarified. “It was taken from you.” He stood a little taller. “But I will help you take it back if I can.”

Thorin looked gobsmacked, and Gimli wished he had better skill with a pencil to capture that look forever. *Never underestimate the kindness of hobbits*, he thought to himself.
Many thanks to livingmeatloaf for being an AMAZING beta. TWO CHAPTERS IN ONE WEEK! WHAT WHAT!

*edit!* I realized an error in my timeline. We're coming up on Midsummer, not the Feast of Starlight. That's not for another two months.

"You're a brave lad, make no mistake," Balin said. "And quiet! I wish you'd tell us how you got past the goblins. It's the first time any have gone under my nose without my notice, and I take off my hood to you." Balin sketched a short bow, even as Kíli and Fíli both sent him a look, sharing just how familiar they were with Balin's keen attention.

"Oh, very well," Bilbo said, and proceeded to tell them all of what had befallen him once he had been tackled from the goblin platform. Gimli listened in ever growing wonder: Bilbo really was a first-rate storyteller, and from the look in his eye, he knew it, too. It was good to see a bit of pride return to their hobbit; he had been so down since their journey began.

Still, Gimli crossed his arms and knew he was listening to history: the first of many times that Bilbo would tell the whole story, though not the first time Gimli had heard it from the hobbit's own mouth. That honor belonged to a different time, in Rivendell, when Glóin had taken them to Bilbo's quarters to visit just after Elrond's council. Then, unlike now, Bilbo had given the whole truth of it, his gaze turning inward and his words slowing as he confessed, at long last, the real contents of his pockets.

"Oh, what a silly thing I was," Bilbo had said, voice trembling. "If I hadn't--If--oh, Frodo!" He had covered his face with his hands and wept, and without a word, Glóin--creaky, cranky, old Glóin--had wrapped his old friend in his arms and held him though his sorrow.

There were no tears now, not even a gambler's twitch to reveal the omissions from Bilbo's tale. Bilbo looked too proud of himself... Gimli felt vaguely ill. The Ring's powers were insidious, indeed.

"What did I tell you?" Gandalf said, laughing at Bilbo's triumphant conclusion. "Mr. Baggins has more about him than you guess." He gave Bilbo a queer look, then, from under his bushy eyebrows, and Gimli saw Bilbo pale and twitch like a man spent too long on poppy-juice before shaking it off.

The moon was just a crescent over the trees when Gimli heard the first howl. Ahead of him, Bilbo froze solid, growing pale. "Wolves," he whispered, but Gimli knew. These were no wolves, these were dread wargs of Gundabad, foul twisted things aligned with the dark forces of this world.

Thorin looked to him, concerned, but there was no time to ask—the howls were far too loud, the wargs far too close.

"Run for the trees!" Thorin cried, pulling Orcrist from its sheath. Dori grabbed Ori with one hand and Bilbo with the other and pulled them both along behind him. Gimli pulled his own axe,
remembering another night with another quest, killing wolves by the first flush of darkness.

Fíli and Kíli were the first to the trees, swinging up into the lower branches. Kíli climbed further, readying his bow, and Fíli turned to help the others up.

Gimli reached the base of a large fir, and turned to hold his position. Glóin was right after him, and together they hoisted Óin up into the tree. Óin turned and helped Glóin climb, so that together they could lift Gimli. Before they could grab him, however, the wargs were on them.

Gimli turned, and just in time as the warg’s jaws snapped on the empty air where his head had been. Gimli dispatched the beast with a swift stroke. In his place, there came another, and another, and it seemed that with each swing, Gimli killed a warg only to face another, and another.

In the tree, Glóin was calling his name, but Gimli couldn’t let his focus waver.

The next warg fell before him, an arrow in his eye, and Gimli turned to cheer on Legolas, but it was Kíli in his tree, slinging arrow after arrow his way to give him space. Two hands grabbed the back of Gimli’s coat, and he found himself lifted into the tree by his father and uncle.

Glóin gripped him tight. “You were so fierce, my son!” Glóin cried, then smacked Gimli’s ear with the broad of his palm. “But don’t you ever be so reckless again. You scared nearly half my life from me.”

“Sorry, Da,” Gimli said.

Óin sniffed the air. “Does anyone smell burning?” he asked, and Gimli turned to look.

A second wave of wargs had come, bearing both the goblins of the mountain and orcs more fierce than their goblin cousins, each carrying a lit torch and setting the woods alight around them. At the crest of the horizon, one orc, pale and, to Gimli’s eye, as large as the mutated Uruk-hai of Saruman, stopped to watch their end.

“Climb higher!” Gandalf cried, and Gimli scurried up the tree, glad for his time in Fangorn with Legolas. By the end, he had grown quite used to trees, though he’d never see them with the same comfort as good, solid stone. They climbed to the highest branches, and through the wargs’ howling, Gimli heard the terrible voices.

_Fifteen birds in five fir trees,_
their feathers were fanned in a fiery breeze!
what funny little birds, they had no wings!
Oh what shall we do with the funny little things?
Roast ‘em alive, or stew them in a pot;
fry them, boil them, and eat them hot?

_Burn, burn tree and fern!_
Shrivel and scorch! A fizzling torch
To light the night for our delight,
Ya hey!

_Bake and toast ‘em, fry and roast ‘em!_
till beards blaze, and eyes glaze;
till hair smells and skins crack,
fat melts, and bones black
in cinders lie.
beneath the sky!
So dwarves shall die,
and light the night for our delight,
Ya hey!
Ya-harri-hey!
Ya hoy!

Gimli shuddered. Goblin song.

One Goblin came barreling down the side of the mountain and into their tree, nearly knocking them loose. Another, smaller goblin ran by, setting fire to the underbrush.

“We won't last long in these trees!” Balin cried out.

“Not if they keep using them for kindling!” Nori added.

“Better them than us,” Bofur said.

“Gandalf!” Dori called out. “What are we to do?”

Through the smoke, Gimli could see the wizard standing tall, balanced the way only a wizard can in the swaying boughs. “We fight fire with fire,” he said, and gathered up as many pine cones as he could reach. Calling out in a long-forgotten tongue, Gandalf lit each cone with magic fire, and tossed them at the wargs where they burst in a riot of color. The others soon followed his lead, lighting cones of their own and flinging them at the wargs, who reared back from the sudden attack.

“This way!” Gandalf cried once the wargs had backed off a pace, and Gimli found himself leaping from branch to branch, heading away from the orcs and goblins and flames, and towards the large, lone pine at the edge of the cliff.

Then, there was nowhere left to run, and Gimli turned his eye to the sky. Where were they? Glóin had certainly complained enough about being carried off in an Eagle’s talon, Gimli knew they were coming, but where were they? Surely, they would arrive in time. Gimli swallowed.

Below them, the wargs with riders circled the base of their tree, waiting, but for what, Gimli wasn’t sure. Maybe they were waiting for the tree to fall and give them a heaping of seared dwarf. Gimli tightened his grip until the bark under his fingers groaned. They wouldn’t find Gimli going down easy.

But the orcs parted, and made way for a shadowed figure to come forth. It was hard to see, Gimli’s eyes were stinging from smoke and tears, but he knew enough to know it was the Great Orc before him. “No,” he whispered. It was impossible. Azog wasn’t supposed to be here, not now. Glóin hadn’t said anything about--

“Azog The Defiler,” Balin said, low.

“No,” Thorin said. “He’s dead.”

Azog pointed his mace at Thorin, (and only then did Gimli realize that his weapon was imbedded in his arm) and said something in the dread speech of Orcs. Gimli growled. This was the monster that killed his cousins. This was the beast that tried to end the Line of Durin. This must be Gimli’s mission – to take out Azog before the battle. If Azog didn’t fight, he couldn’t kill Thorin.

Gimli shifted his stance on the branch. It wasn’t the sturdiest, but it was a fair sight larger than the
rope bridge the elves of Lothlorien had expected him to cross. It would do. He pulled his axe and readied himself. If only Legolas were here to see him. He’d prove to his husband yet that elves were not the only fighters capable of dramatic feats.

Before he could move a muscle, however, Glóin clamped a hand around his arm. “Don’t even think about it,” Glóin hissed.

“Da!” Gimli protested, but got no further as the tree let loose a loud crack, and teetered backwards towards the cliff. Gimli dove for his branch, nearly knocked free, and as it was, he had to hold on with both arms and brace himself with one foot to keep in the tree when it landed. Beneath his feet, Gimli could see clear to the bottom of the cliff. He gripped a little more tightly.

Before them, the Pale Orc drew closer, a challenging sneer on his scarred face, and Gimli heard Balin’s hushed “Thorin, no!” and knew what was coming. Craning his neck, Gimli could just see Thorin, though the fire and smoke, standing tall, Orcrist in hand and coat billowing behind him. He looked every inch a figure from legend, a Dwarf Warrior of fire and steel, and Gimli felt his stomach sink to his boots.

Thorin charged. Dwalin beat at the branch pinning him in place. Balin cried after him. Glóin tightened his grip, and Gimli closed his eyes.

He knew what happened next. He could see in his mind’s eyes, Thorin’s charge and Azog’s swing, knocking Thorin to the ground. He didn’t need to look as Azog sauntered forward on his warg, and raised his great mace high.

Gimli had come to help, and in the end, had doomed Thorin to an earlier fate. He didn’t know what he had done, what change his presence had rendered that had called Azog here, now, but in trying to help he had doomed their mission from the start.

Gimli dropped his head to the bark beneath his head; it was rough and hard, but not as hard as the stone he wished to beat his head against. All was lost. Not even the Eagles could help them now.

Bilbo screamed - no, Bilbo charged. Gimli’s head shot up and he watched as Bilbo, little Sting shining bright blue, jumped on the Pale Orc. Azog brushed him aside, but he also pulled his attention from Thorin, who had yet to move from where he had been flung. Bilbo looked sickly pale in the glow of elvish-blue, but he held firm in the face of Azog. Kíli was the first to cheer, but the voices of the dwarves raised near as one, cheering him on, until Dori’s cheer turned to a shriek as he fell, and the first great flap of wings was seen.

The Eagles had come.

Gimli saw an Eagle swooping towards Thorin, then suddenly he was plucked from the tree himself, wrapped in great talons that, for all their obvious sharpness and strength, were gentle as they held him. Still, Gimli would not want to run afoul of them.

To his left, Fíli was screaming for Thorin. All around him, the Company looked anxiously at their leader, who still hung limp as he was carried aloft through the air. Gimli closed his eyes and let the Eagle take him where it willed. It mattered little now.

The Eagles took them to the edge of the wilderlands, to an outcropping of stone. The Eagle carrying Thorin lay him gently down on a patch of moss and circled away. One by one, the Eagles let them down. One larger than the rest, who had carried Gandalf, stayed to speak with him in the language of the Eagles, but Gimli’s attention was on Thorin. Óin hurried over and knelt by his side, laying his hands on his neck, his face. “Gimli!” Óin called. “Come here!”
It took a moment, but Gimli forced himself to move, and he sank to the ground next to Óin.

“Great time to lose my kit,” Óin grumbled, patting down his pockets. “A good swift sniff of something strong would wake him right up.”

Gimli blinked at him. Wake up—Thorin was still alive! Gimli nearly fell on Thorin in his desperation to be sure. There, weak but steady, a pulse. Gimli sagged in relief, and Óin eased him back.

“Careful now,” Óin said. “You don’t want to jar him more than he already has been.” He shook his head. “I don’t like that he hasn’t stirred yet. He should have woken by now.”

“But he will?” Gimli asked. “He will wake?”

Óin met his eyes, but before he could say anything, Gandalf joined them. He called Thorin’s name, and when Thorin didn’t so much as twitch, Gandalf pressed the tips of his fingers to Thorin’s forehead and passed his hand over Thorin’s face, muttering under his breath. With a short gasp, Thorin opened his eyes.

“The halfling?” he said.

Gimli felt his eyebrows rise. Really? He looked up to see Óin rolling his eyes as he sat back and got to his feet.

“It’s all right,” Gandalf said. “He’s here. Quite safe.”

Thorin struggled to his feet, shaking off Dwalin who had moved to help him. (Gimli stood too, and the way his head spun reminded him that he had not eaten since Rivendell, nearly two days past.)

“You!” Thorin barked, his eyes settling on Bilbo. Gimli’s heart dropped at the way Bilbo’s face fell. “What were you doing?” Thorin demanded. Bilbo looked between the members of the Company, sputtering for an answer. “You nearly got yourself killed.”

Bilbo shook his head, but Gimli wasn’t sure if it was in denial of Thorin’s words or bewilderment at his sudden fury.

“Did I not say you would be a burden? That you would not survive long in the wild?” Thorin demanded, stalking forward. Gimli braced himself, ready to come to Bilbo’s aid if needed—the urge to protect the Ringbearer an old one indeed, and felt Glóin put a warning hand on his shoulder. Gimli shrugged it off.

Thorin stopped before Bilbo, his voice dropping low. “That you had no place amongst us.”

Bilbo looked away, jaw set against rage or tears.

“I have never been so wrong in all my life,” Thorin said, practically melting as he pulled a very surprised Bilbo into a great hug.

Gimli couldn’t help the way he yelled, the way his fist pumped the air. Around him the Company cheered, even as Bilbo looked like—well—like he had woken in a reality that wasn’t his own.

Gimli saw, however, Bilbo’s arms wrapped around Thorin in return, his fingers tangling in the fur of Thorin’s coat.

Glóin’s arm wrapped around Gimli’s shoulders, though his Da didn’t say anything. He didn’t need
Thorin at last took a step back. “I am sorry I doubted you,” he said, but Bilbo shook his head, dismissing the apology.

“No, I would have doubted me, too,” he said. “I am not a hero, nor a warrior.” He leveled a look at Gandalf. “I’m not even a Burglar.”

Gimli snorted. He knew of a mushroom farmer who would disagree with that. Around them, the Eagles took to the sky.

“They’ve gone to get food,” Gandalf said, and Gimli’s stomach rumbled. “We’ve gone quite a long way without, and we’ll be safe enough here for a while.” A pair of Eagles passed overhead, and dropped a pile of dry wood by their feet.

“Then here we shall rest,” Thorin said. “Glóin, get a fire going.”

“I lost my flint box,” Glóin said.

“Aye, me too,” Óin said. “It was in my pack.”

“I have mine,” Gimli said, and dug through his pockets. He had long since learned the advantages of not keeping it in his pack, and he was grateful for it now. Though, as he dug, his fingers closed on his weed-pouch, and he spared a thought for the little barrel—still half-full—in the pack on his pony. He was lucky he had filled this pouch while they were still in Rivendell.

Glóin built the wood and Gimli caught the spark, and by the time the Eagles returned with rabbits and pheasants and a young sheep, the fire was warm and merry.

Bombur stepped forward to butcher the animals with a skill and dexterity rarely seen from the rotund dwarf, and Gimli looked at Bilbo. The hobbit was sitting by the fire and staring rather dully into the flames.

“Are you all right?” Gimli asked, sitting with him. Bilbo blinked, and it took a moment before he drew in a deep breath and spoke.

“I…” he trailed off, and tried again. “Night before last,” he said. “Catching up to me.”

Gimli nodded. He had thought as much. Bilbo had done well, adjusting to the frugal means of travel meals, but he had never before gone so long. He had seen Pippin like this, soon after they had set out from Rivendell, and it had been an easy matter to save some of his rations to help ease the lad along.

“There will be food enough, soon,” he said. “The Eagles have brought us quite the fare.” Sure enough, the first brace of rabbits was soon spitted and held over the fire by Bifur and Bofur, who was poking fun at his brother while he worked. Bombur was content to let Bofur pester, and merely waved his knife at him distractedly, muttering about the lack of spices, when Bofur pushed too far.

The rest of the Company had settled as well. Ori was inspecting his journal, and had collected a small pile of Eagle feathers, most likely with the intention of turning them into quills. His pen must have gotten lost. Nori was inspecting his hair with a small hand-mirror and picking at unruly locks as needed. Dori was haranguing both with something that, judging by the way they ignored him, mattered only to him.
Glóin was seated a little ways down from Bilbo, taking stock of his pockets and fingering a hole in the lining of a tunic. Gimli hoped it hadn’t been a doctored hem, and that his father hadn’t lost too much of his coin. He didn’t look too upset, so it couldn’t be too bad. Óin sat next to his brother, and was trying to pry his horn back into its proper shape. It was hard without tools, and the formerly smooth sides were looking decidedly lumpy.

Balin and Dwalin were standing at the peak of the outcropping, looking out to the lands beyond. There, in the distance, the clouds were parting to reveal a single, solitary peak, purple against the blue sky.

Erebor.

They were so close, yet Gimli knew the path before them was still long.

A poorly hushed whisper caught his attention, and Gimli turned to see Fíli and Kíli whispering heatedly to each other. Kíli looked his way, and when he saw him looking, turned back fast, folding his arms as if his point had been made. Gimli wasn’t sure what they were arguing about, but he would have to be more simple than he was to not recognize that they were talking about him. He felt—uneasy.

“Allright,” Bofur called, pulling the cooked rabbits off the fire. “First up.”

Thorin turned from the view and went to the fire, taking the spit from Bofur. It was easily enough for two, and Thorin brought it, gleaming, over to Bilbo.

“Here, Master Hobbit,” Thorin said, and gave Bilbo his share. “Eat. Well have you earned it.”

Bilbo moved slowly, but he took the proffered food, and with the first bite, his lethargy fled. He made a small sound in the back of his throat, the desperate groan of one starved, and tore into the meat with surprising ferocity. Thorin was struck still, staring at the grease shining on Bilbo’s lips and cheeks.

“Thank you,” Bilbo said at last, mouth full. “And call me Bilbo, already.” He licked his wrist where the juices had run, and Thorin swallowed thickly.

“Bilbo,” he said, his voice hoarse and deeper than his usual.

“Hmm?” Bilbo looked up, distracted, and waved a hand. “Sit, sit,” he said. “You’ve been banged up enough. Eat!”

And Thorin did. He sat next to Bilbo and took a bite of his rabbit in stunned silence. Gimli took his leave and his food and sat with Ori, who looked at him gratefully when, at last, Dori let him be.

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“Gimli,” Óin called, once the food was eaten and most of the Company turned to their pipes. Gimli himself had his pipe lit, and he watched as Thorin offered his weed-pouch to Bilbo, who had lost his in the tunnels. Bilbo looked quite unaccustomed to the harsher Dwarvish smoke, and coughed like it was his first pipe. Thorin had patted him on the back until the urge passed.

Now, however, Gimli tapped out his pipe, and joined his uncle where he sat by the fire.

“Did you learn much from Lord Elrond?” Óin asked. “I’ve often wondered how the Elves read signs.”
“What?” Gimli asked, frowning.

Óin looked at him. “When Gandalf and Thorin made their plans to leave Rivendell, Gandalf said he would take you to Lord Elrond for a lesson, to distract him from our leaving? You didn’t hit your head in the tunnels, did you, lad?”

“No, no!” Gimli said, the pieces finally slotting into place. “No. The Elves don’t scry like we do, Uncle,” he said. “Lord Elrond just knows.” He paused. “The White Lady has a mirror into which she looks, but that is tied to other magics, I think.”


“Do not speak of her thus,” Gimli snapped. “The Lady Galadriel is kind, and beautiful beyond measure. She is wise, and not at all cruel. Those tales do her injustice.”

Óin backed off, hands held up. “All right! Easy. No offense meant.” He shifted, and narrowed his eyes. “You feel strongly about this.”

Gimli sighed. “She was there,” he admitted, and began to twist his narrative into what his Uncle would believe. “She has her own ability, and Lord Elrond had called to her when we first arrived and he learned of my gift.” He licked his lips and considered his next words carefully. Thorin stood, and joined them by the fire.

“You have spoken with the Lady of Lorien,” he said. “There are many stories of her power of the minds of those she meets.”

“Be careful what you say about the Lady of Light,” Gandalf cautioned, voice grave. “She is a dear friend of mine, and no threat to you or yours.”

“She greeted me with kindness,” Gimli said. “More than the grudging hospitality of Lord Elrond, or the mask of goodwill that I have heard of Thranduil.” Gimli looked around. Once more, he had the attention of all. “She spoke to me in our deep language, with words of friendship. Her accent was ancient, but honestly learned.” Balin muttered to himself, and Thorin looked grave. Gimli looked to his King desperately. “She is a friend to us, and much concerned over the fate of our quest, for the fate of Middle Earth lies in the balance.” He looked away. “She said that is why I have my dreams.”

“I do not like this,” Thorin said. “But it cannot be helped. We must know more. When last did you dream?”

Gimli scowled. “The last time I slept; and my dreams were dim and uncertain.”

“Then we cannot rely on them. Óin, see if you can’t train him to see a different way. And be quick. I want to leave within the hour.” He stalked off, back to the edge of the cliff and the view of Erebor.

Óin humphed. “I don’t know where he got his ideas, but it’ll take more time than we have to teach you scrying proper.” He looked Gimli over. “But maybe I won’t need to. You’ve had luck so far. No reason to think this might be different. Here.” He gestured for Gimli to kneel.

“Ordinarily,” Óin said, “scrying takes time. You need to be in the right headspace, and many use powders to jump-start the process. We have neither, so we will do what we can.” He placed his hand on Gimli’s shoulder and leaned in, pointing to the fire. “Watch the flames. Look to where it burns brightest. Let it burn the world away, and show you what it can.
The flame had burned low, and the logs glowed as embers. There wasn’t a good center to watch, but there were still plenty of flames left dancing in the wind. Gimli breathed like he had been taught on the training field: even, steady, and slow. The edges of his vision dimmed and darkened as he stared, his eyes tingling from the brightness. Still—all he saw was flame.

Gimli shook his head. “I don’t see anything.”

“Look again, lad,” Óin said. “Give it time.”

“We don’t have time,” Gimli said, but he looked once more. Still, all he saw was flame, dancing across the logs as if stirred by a great breeze, though in truth the air was more still than Gimli had anticipated. He strained his eyes for pictures to show themselves, but all he could see was flame, and the shining spots where he had stared too long, like bright light on a lake.

“Just flame,” he said. “It’s only flame.”

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Thranduil stood before the waters of his bathing pool, glass of wine held loosely between his hands as he watched the reflection of fireflies dance. He had taken his crown from his head and it lay at the end of his bed; he did not need it. He had removed the raiment of his office and dressed himself in a simple robe against the chill of night.

His son was unwell.

It had been three months since Legolas had first fallen ill, succumbing to some sickness of the mind that not even the wizard had been able to parse. It mimicked mortal grief, but it was not, as what was there for Legolas to grieve? He had read and read again Tauriel’s report, and there had been nothing unusual about their spider hunt. By her account, it had been an easy task, and Legolas had been victorious.

So, too, did this illness mimic the sea-longing. This...this is what Thranduil feared, for it was not unheard of for elves to hear the call of the sea far inland, when rivers ran the right way. True, the rivers through his lands did not lead to the sea, and he had never heard of one of his people called thusly, but it was possible.

If Legolas heard the call, he would have to leave, or be subject to a long-wasting that, in his current state, he would not survive.

Thranduil sipped his wine, the liquid thick and heady rich on his tongue.

There had been some improvement: since the wizard’s return, Legolas had seemed to wake from his dark visions. The first time his son had looked at him and truly seen him, calling him “Ada” in a voice hoarse from his cries but with eyes clear as crystal, Thranduil had been near tears.

The moment of clarity had not lasted long. Too soon, Legolas slipped away, but the next day brought another moment, and the next, each a little longer than the last. The past week Legolas had spent more aware than not, though grief still seemed to hover behind his eyes, and he would still lose himself to the blank spells, where his mind was far to the West.

The wizard had spoken of a darkness, an Enemy that Thranduil well remembered that poisoned his son’s mind as it poisoned his kingdom—a cunning Enemy that lied with sweetness.

A nearly silent step behind him—“Ada?”
Thranduil turned. Legolas stood in the doorway, dressed in a white sleep-shift and barefoot. His hair was braided roughly and not in his usual style, but his eyes were bright and present.

“Ion,” Thranduil said, swallowing past the sudden thickness in his throat. “You should not yet be out of bed. You are not well.”

Legolas scowled, and it so called to mind the elfling he had been, small and stubborn and looking so much like his mother, that Thranduil felt his heart ache. “I have been abed for months,” he said. “I am tired of it.”

“And yet,” Thranduil said, and walked to his son’s side. He raised his hand and cupped his son’s face. “You have frightened me, my son.”

Legolas closed his eyes, leaning into his father’s touch. “Dark my mind has been of late, and far have I walked in my dreams. I have not always known what I have seen, and often I have seen things I know cannot be. It has been…troublesome,” he said, and opened his eyes. “But I have found my way back, Ada. I am here.”

Thranduil smiled sadly, feeling every one of his many years. “For how long?”

Legolas sighed and pulled away. He walked over to the edge of the pool and looked into the water. “I do not know,” he admitted. “But I would not waste what time I have lying in bed!” He turned. “A darkness grows. You know it. I have duties that I have ignored for long enough. By your leave, I would return to my post, and protect the borders of this land.”

Thranduil watched his son for a long moment. His son stood tall and strong, like a warrior of the Greenwood should, and his grace shone through his disheveled clothes and hair. Indeed, there was a greatness about him that reminded Thranduil of Oropher—a greatness held by the elves of the First Age, but that his son had not possessed before his illness. There was a tension around his eyes, the corners of his mouth. His son sought an end to his illness.

But did he seek distraction, or a swifter end?

“I will consider it,” Thranduil said, placing his wine on the table. “You must be tired of your room if you are trying new braids.”

Legolas blinked. “What?” he asked “New…?” He brought his hand to his head, and ran his hands over the braids. Recognition flashed over his face, then confusion as his eyes began to cloud. “I…”

“I will give you an answer on the morrow,” Thranduil said, stepping forward and taking his son’s hand. It was too much to hope for, but that was a father’s prerogative, surely. Gently, he led Legolas towards the door. “But for now, it is late, and you have done much to make you weary. Rest, and we will meet again in daylight.”

“Daylight,” Legolas said, distant. “Yes. Rest.” He walked slow with dreamy feet and left Thranduil’s chambers. Thranduil closed his eyes and pressed his lips together.

After a moment, he spoke, “Guard his room. He is not to leave, under any circumstances.”

In the shadow, Tauriel started, but nodded her understanding and followed Legolas back to his room. Thranduil watched her go. She had grown well, in his care, and he had observed her friendship with his son blossom and grow. There was once a time when he would have disapproved of the match; his son deserved a wife of higher birth. Then, Legolas had fallen ill, and Thranduil had seen, first hand, the care Tauriel felt. His son could do worse, he decided. He would not stand in the way.
Nothing would happen to Legolas, not while it was still in Thranduil’s power to prevent.

Nothing.

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Tauriel hurried after Legolas, deeply unsettled. She had stopped by his room to check on him, as was her routine, only to find him missing. She had tracked him to his father’s rooms, had heard his wish to be out in the wood. She had seen him fade again.

No. Fade wasn’t the right word. He wasn’t growing less, he was growing confused, as if the world had changed around him. It was disconcerting to watch.

Now, he made for his room unerringly, gait still like that of one dreaming, but his way sure.

What did he see, when he did not see the world as it was?

Legolas stopped in front of his door, and turned his head, at last, to look at her. She stopped still, and met his gaze. There was no way to hide that she had been following him, and truthfully she did not want to. He was her brother in all but blood; she was not ashamed of her concern for him.

He smiled crookedly at her; it wasn’t a smile she had seen before, full of self-awareness and mockery. “You are to guard me, aren’t you?” He said. Tauriel nodded. “He will not let me out, will he?” Tauriel paused, then shook her head. Legolas nodded, looking down. “I expected as much. Still,” he looked back to her. His eyes were clear once more. “I had to try.”

“You worry him,” she said. You worry me.

“I worry myself, sometimes,” Legolas said, and pushed open his door. “But this is not a conversation for hallways. Come inside?”

Tauriel stepped forward, and hesitated. “I am not sure if that is proper,” she said.

“You have not been concerned with proper before,” Legolas said, opening his door, and leaning in the doorway, facing her. “I have not been unaware of your visits, and you were not shy of visiting me before. I have missed our talks.”

Tauriel met his eyes. “That was before I saw the looks your father gave me. He thinks of me as a match for you.”

Legolas raised his eyebrows and smiled, and stepped forward. Tauriel raised her chin, and refused to step back. “It is true that once my heart could have been turned to you in such a way.” His smile turned wry. “It seems I have an affinity for red hair.” His smile gentled once more. “But I have called you friend, and I call you sister.” He place his hands on her arms. “I would call you sister still, and only sister, for that is how I feel for you, and I know you do not feel more than thus for me.”

Tauriel sagged, relieved. “True. Though, your father may be harder to convince.”

Legolas grew distant once more, but before Tauriel could worry, he said, “He will be, but that is my problem, not yours.” His face cleared “I ask again; keep me company?”

“I will,” she said, and followed Legolas inside. He drifted through his quarters, clearly avoiding his bed, and walked out, instead, to his small balcony.
The balcony overlooked a large courtyard, and he had been known to sit and watch the elves below go about their lives. The center of the yard was a large fountain, and in the evening dusk, several floating lanterns had been lit and floated on the water’s surface. It was a place perfect for lovers, and several pairs of elves were taking advantage of that in the shadows of the square. Legolas’s hand drifted to his hair once more as he watched the yard below.

Tauriel cleared her throat. “I have never seen you braid your hair that way before,” she said.

“Habit,” Legolas said, absently. “I forgot.” His fingers caught on a crooked piece, and he sighed. “He usually does it for me. I am not nearly as skilled.”

“He, who?” Tauriel asked, frowning.

“Gimli,” Legolas said.

Tauriel blinked. “Who’s Gimli?”

Legolas’s head whipped around to stare at her. “How do you know that name?”

“You just told me,” she said. “Are you feeling well?”

“I did?” He looked away, thinking. “I did; I must have.” He closed his eyes. “I have not felt well since I saw him last.” He opened his eyes. “He is my husband.”

“Husband!?” Tauriel said, rearing back. “You cannot be married!”

“And yet,” Legolas said, spreading his hands. “I do not know how what has happened has come to pass, all I know is what I have seen. As you would count the days, our first meeting is nearly sixty years off, and yet, three months ago, to my mind, I watched his passing from this world after over a century together. I have grieved for him, for in his death he is lost to me, and yet still I feel him in my mind. He is well, and often frustrated, and his love for me shines like a beacon in my darkness. He does not feel me as I feel him, but he must know I am here.”

Could this be true? Could Legolas truly have lived through events that have yet happened? She had heard of the prescience of Lord Elrond, of the Lady Galadriel’s mirror, but this? Surely, it was madness!

And yet, Legolas did not seem mad. He seemed resigned, knowing how impossible his story seemed. It seemed to her that, if Legolas had truly lost himself, he would not be so self aware. Maybe there was something to his tale. If so, the implications were grim. (And if these implications matched her own fearful conclusions, well…) She looked at Legolas, and saw the truth of it, for in his face were the markers of near-mortal grief. (Or, grief of a mortal. It did not sound as if his husband died of wounds, but of age, and Gimli did not sound like an Elven name.)

Tauriel sat on the bench. “Tell me about him.”

Legolas grinned. “He is my love. The stars shine in his eyes. He has hair as fiery as the sun, and twice as wild. His tongue is silver, and his won him the regard of even the Lady Galadriel. He laughs like water runs over rapids, with untamed abandon, and when he sings, the mountains sing with him. He is brave, and strong! He is a fierce warrior. And he dances…” Legolas sighed, clearly smitten, and Tauriel giggled.

“You clearly love him,” she said. “But who is he?”

“It is a long story,” Legolas said, growing serious. “And not one easily believed.” Tauriel looked at
him, really looked. He looked tired, worn in a way uncommon in elves. (Of course, his long illness was uncommon, but illness wouldn’t put that need in his eyes, that desperation.)

“Tell me anyway,” she said and, after a moment, Legolas sat. He stayed perched on the edge of his seat, like a hummingbird ready to fly away at the slightest movement.

“When I said this is not easily believed, I did not jest. I scarcely believe it, and it is my life. I beg of you, listen to the truth of my words and if you cannot believe in them, then believe in me that I would not lie to you about this.” He bit his lip. “Certain events are coming swiftly, events that lead to our first meeting, and that decide the fate of middle earth.” He leaned in closer. “Tauriel, I must leave this room. The Enemy is returning to this world; I fear what will happen if I do not.”

“The Enemy!”

Legolas looked back at her, grave. “The Greenwood is sick. You have seen the evidence with your own eyes. The spiders grow bolder daily, and the darkness grows despite our best efforts. It is all connected, Tauriel, it has to be. I have to fight!”

Tauriel shook her head. “You are not ready, Legolas. You still drift far too easily. All it takes is one moment’s inattention at the wrong time, and the spiders would have you.”

“That will not happen!” Legolas insisted.

“I cannot take that chance!” Tauriel cried, standing. “Not only would your father have me killed, but I would not be responsible for your death!”

Legolas looked up at her, and for a moment, looked older in the manner of mortals. The force of it was jarring, and Tauriel’s anger left her.

“You’re right, of course,” he said. “Forgive me.”

Tauriel sighed. “I have duties to attend to,” she said, and turned to leave. She stopped in the door, and spoke over her shoulder. “Midsummer will be here in a few days. If you can hold out until then, I will speak with the King.”

“That is all I can ask,” Legolas said. His eyes were bright in the deep shadow, and it was a long time before she could shake the feeling of them watching her.
Queer Lodgings and Bear Necessities

It took the better part of the afternoon to climb down the Carrock, for the way was winding and steep. Gandalf led them down a roughly hewn stair, one that, in places, was indistinguishable from the natural shape of the rock. The crafting was old, far older than any Gimli had yet experienced, and it was obvious it was cut for beings far larger than dwarves or elves. Even Gandalf, who stood quite tall without his hat, had to scramble down like a child.

Fíli and Kíli were having the easiest time of it, being young enough to bend, and each in turn helping the other. Nori also seemed to find the trek less daunting and his ease at such acrobatics had Dwalin muttering under his breath. Bombur had it the worst, however, and had to be helped by Dwalin, Dori, and Bofur, as no one else could support his weight properly. The poor dwarf’s face was as red as his hair.

Gimli had been tasked with helping Bilbo, but the hobbit was actually making the best time, once he had gotten past a momentary pause at the sheer height of their climb. “Well, if done, then best done quickly,” Bilbo had said, and crouched down to take his first step down. Unlike with normal stairs, Bilbo had positioned himself as if to climb upwards, belly to the stone, and was thus able to control his descent while still moving quite quickly. It helped that he did not wear boots, and his toes were much better at grabbing the stone than his iron-shod companions.

As for himself, Gimli had asked Legolas, once, what allowed the elf to play in the branches as he did. Legolas had laughed and said that he trusted the woods and he trusted his body, and that it was when one focused too much on what one was doing that mistakes happened. Gimli had thought about his axe training and could see the logic. He was putting that logic to the test, now, forcing himself to ignore the aches of long use beginning in his muscles, trusting his hands to find rock, and his boots to find purchase, and with a sensation not unlike falling, he followed Bilbo down.

Still, by the time the last Dwarf (Bofur) had made it off the Carrock, the sun had passed to mid-day and the Company was covered in sweat and dust. Bilbo smacked his palms against his jacket, sending up plumes of grit. “Oh, that will never come out,” he muttered, and inspected the front of his jacket. His fingers caught and worried at a loose thread where one of his buttons used to be, and Gimli remembered those clever brass buttons of which Bilbo had been so proud.

“Look,” Balin said, pointing to the North. “There!”

The stairway turned into a well-worn path that led to a little cave with a pebbly floor. Beyond the cave, the path opened up to a stony jetty in a wide but shallow river. The dwarves headed there with heavy feet and discussed what to do next.

“Our path leads through the Greenwood,” Balin said, addressing the group. The fire had singed him a bit around the edges, and the tips of his hair and beard were curled from the heat. “We saw as much from the top of the Carrock. It would take too long to go around it in either direction.”

“There is an elf-road that passes through the wood.” Thorin said. He was leaning against the cave wall, arms folded and face dark. “It is what we used to flee Erebor all those years ago. We can use it now to reclaim it.” He turned to Gandalf, silently asking for his input. It took the wizard a moment to realize the silence, and that he was expected to respond. He seemed to shake himself, and then frowned at the group.

“The road, yes.” He cleared his throat. “I had always meant to see you all safe - if possible - over the mountains,” he said, “and now by good management and good luck I have done it.” He
nodded, as if decided, and stood a little taller. “Indeed, we are now a good deal farther east than I ever meant to come with you, for after all this is not my adventure.” Gimli’s head shot up. No, no, not now. Not this time!

Others murmured their protest as well, and Gandalf held up his hand. “I may look in on it again before it is all over, but in the meanwhile I have some other pressing business to attend to.” He looked meaningfully at Gimli, and he suddenly understood: The Necromancer, Sauron’s first attempt to regain control over this world, needed to be dealt with, and quickly. Gimli nodded, but the others were not so calm. Thorin had turned away, anger warring with disappointment on his face, but the Brothers Ri were talking over each other and his Da was demanding answers. Bilbo, Gimli saw, was unsuccessfully trying to hide his tears. Gimli put his arm around the hobbit’s shoulders, ignoring the way Thorin’s gaze seemed to bore into him, and Bilbo turned into it, just a fraction.

“Now, now,” Gandalf tutted. “I’m not going to disappear this very instant. I can give you a day or two, maybe more. At the very least, I can get you to shelter, and soon. We have no supplies, and while you are correct as to the path you should take, do any of you know how to get there?”

Gandalf looked between their faces, and Gimli slowly nodded his head. He knew the path to Erebor very well, and had traveled it often even before he had traveled with Legolas. But still, Gandalf glared at him as if to say “of course you know, but you don’t count.”

“You are several miles north of our original path, and not many people can live up this way. However, I do know of one – the carver of those great steps.” He pointed back at the Carrock and Gimli felt a shiver down the back of his spine. Their maker yet lived? What manner of creature—Oh, of course. It must be Beorn Gimli realized. They were just at the edges of his home, after all. Glóin had often said they had visited the shape shifter after the Eagles had come and, though Gimli’s caravan had given Beorn’s house a wide berth on their return to Erebor, he had stopped with Glóin on their way out to Rivendell, and Gimli had visited with Legolas after the War of the Ring.

…and he is not fond of visitors, none that walk on two legs at any rate. I will see you safely to him, but then I can dally no longer.”

“Must we walk just yet?” Dori asked, rubbing his legs. “Climbing down that thing was no easy stroll.”

Gandalf huffed with impatience. “Of course it wasn’t. Very well. It would be best to have our wits about us, at any rate. A small delay won’t be amiss.” He looked over the Company. “A quick wash wouldn’t hurt, either,” he muttered.

Gimli thought about being offended, he really did, but he was already shuffling towards the river and the shallow pools created by the jetty. He stopped at the water’s edge, where the rocks of the jetty emerged from the water to create a small inlet, and began stripping off his clothes and boots. He had made it down to his under clothes when a pale blur streaked past on the rocks above him, whooping. Kíli, naked as the day he was born, jumped merrily off the last rock and splashed down into the water, where he sunk like a stone. He was joined moments later by Fíli, and they two crested the water together, laughing like loons.

“Come on, Gimmers! Give it a go!” Kíli called. “Live a little! You’re so serious, now.”

Gimli humphed, but paused. Why shouldn’t he? He could swim, and well enough. The water was deep enough to jump, yet shallow enough to climb out once more. He had earned a bit of fun. Off came his undertunic, the Lady’s Gift tucked neatly inside, and his small clothes. It was easy
enough to climb the rocks on the other side, and with fleetness of foot, he ran off the end of the jetty with a cry.

The late summer sun had done its work and the water was refreshingly cool, as opposed to the ice-melt waters of the bath in Rivendell. Gimli let himself sink for a moment, the sounds of the others splashing dim and far away to his ears. He opened his eyes and, through the haloed mass of his hair, saw only shadow and light. It was peaceful.

But it was not to last. Gimli kicked and broke the surface, tossing his head to fling his heavy curls from his face, sending water flying.

“There he is!” Kíli said behind him, and Gimli turned. Kíli had climbed back onto the jetty and was perched on a rock. Fíli tread water at his feet.

“You look like a drowned rat,” Fíli said. Gimli raised an eyebrow. Fíli was one to talk. Kíli’s thin hair was plastered to him; Fíli’s hair looked darker and stringy when wet. Gimli, at the very least, had the kind of thick curl that kept some of its shape in the water.

Gimli splashed water at Fíli in response, and Fíli splashed back, laughing. Kíli jumped after him with a roar, and the next several minutes were lost to the kind of tussling horseplay Gimli had so sorely missed when his cousins had been lost to him. (In truth, Fíli had tried to keep himself from such antics once Thorin had named him heir, and it was good to see his cousin relax from his burdens.)

Their play was interrupted by Bofur, who started splashing them all, and Nori, who would swim under the surface and behind his unsuspecting target, to splash them from behind, like the sneak he was. Then it was Fíli, Kíli, and Gimli against Nori, Bofur, and Ori, who they recruited when Dori was distracted by Balin.

All play came to an end, however, when Bombur dropped like a cannonball into the middle of their arena, soaking everyone with the subsequent wave. He rose to the surface, smiling like butter wouldn’t melt in his mouth, and Bofur laughed. “Looks like game over, Lads,” he said. “I think Bombur’s won this one.” Bombur simply grinned, and kicked himself up to float atop the water.

“Agreed,” said Fíli. “Good one, Bombur.”

Bombur preened, touched his hand to his forehead, and let himself drift gently downstream.

“I’m going to make sure he doesn’t float downriver,” Bofur said, and chased after him, calling “Oi! Bombur!” as he went.

“Ori!” Dori called, and Ori rolled his eyes.

“Mahal sweaty balls,” Ori swore under his breath, making Kíli gasp in mock shock, and left to rejoin his brother, Nori following behind, laughing.

Kíli placed his arm around Gimli’s shoulders. “That was fun,” he said.

“Aye,” Gimli agreed. “But we’d best wash quickly, or Gandalf will do it for us.”

Kíli shuddered at the image, but the three wadded to the shoreline all the same.

Their soaps had been lost in their packs, but there were a few old travelers tricks known to them. Luckily, the river’s bottom was sandy rather than muddy, and it was simple enough to grab a loose handful of clean sand. Keeping his arm submerged, Gimli scrubbed with the sand until he was
satisfied, and then moved on to the next part. It didn’t aid softness, or add sweet perfume the way their oils did, but it took the caked dirt and sweat with it and one was left feeling cleaner, nonetheless.

Still, it wasn’t easy to do, and Gimli found himself falling into a rhythm with his cousins; lift the sand, scrub it in, rinse it clean, and fling a piece of muck at whoever wasn’t looking. He hit Kíli first, then Fíli twice, and his cousins each got him twice before the three of them were rubbed raw and clean, and left the water to dry on the bank.

The sun warmed them as they dried, and the lingering heat of the afternoon meant they dried quickly. Kíli pulled out his pipe to inspect it for damage, and it was such a good idea, that Gimli found himself lighting up.

The rest of the Company was finishing their ablutions. Dori, Nori, and Ori had already left the water, and Nori was swatting at Dori as he tried to fix Nori’s elaborate hair. Glóin was helping Óin out onto the bank. Bombur and Bofur were still in the water, helping Bifur, and while Dwalin and Balin had obviously finished their washing, they, too, remained in the water, talking to each other as they waited for Thorin to finish. Thorin was only half-paying attention to his own care; most of his attention was focused on Bilbo, who refused to go into water deeper than his ankles and looked quite pale whenever his foot slipped farther in.

Hobbits don’t swim, Gimli remembered. He had spoken to Frodo once about what had happened to his parents, but it had been Merry who explained that, save for the Brandybucks who worked the river, Hobbits avoided more water than a bathtub as a matter of habit. Even some of Merry’s family had failed to learn to swim, especially after what had happened to Primula and Drogo Baggins.

Gimli also remembered Bilbo’s plan of escape from Thranduil’s dungeons and was impressed once more by Bilbo’s fortitude.

Bilbo looked quite ready to flee the water, when his foot slipped and he pin-wheeled backwards. Before he could fall, however, Thorin was simply there, and caught him quickly. Bilbo froze and flushed a deep red when he looked up and saw Thorin. Gimli couldn’t hear that far, but he did not need to in order to know Bilbo had sputtered and rambled some quick excuse as he scuttled away. Thorin watched him leave with a curious expression on his face.

Kíli looked up from his pipe and snorted laughter. “Your hair is a fright,” he said. Gimli scowled, and tried in vain to flatten his hair with his hands.

“Come on,” Fíli said, and looked around. “There.” He pointed. A little ways up the river, the rocks created a shelf like a low bench. They gathered their things and made their way over. Fíli sat on the bench and pointed at the ground at his feet, looking pointedly at Gimli. Gimli rolled his eyes, but sat. He could not wait until his hair was once again at a length that made his curls more manageable—or at the very least appeared an age that would have those around him stop treating him like a dwarfling. He was very aware of how young he looked!

Still, Fíli’s hands were gentle in his hair, and Kíli sat in front of him, radiating smugness that he hadn’t been forced to order yet. Fíli handed Gimli Kíli’s comb and cleared his throat. Kíli scowled, but turned around so that Gimli could reach his hair. It was harder, now that Kíli had his height, but Gimli was used to one taller still, and he started to tame Kíli’s mop.

Since his journey began, it seemed like everyone had their hands in his hair: his mother pulling too tightly, his father braiding him too young, and now Fíli, with the quick economy of one used to braiding Kíli’s hair.
Gimli yanked the plait in his hands and Kíli squawked. “Hold still,” Gimli growled, and Kíli swore softly in khuzdul under his breath. “Aye,” Gimli said calmly in response, “but I’ve oft been told that my head is too big to fit up my arse, so I’m afraid I’ll have to disappoint.” He threaded Kíli’s silver clasp, and clapped his cousin on the shoulder. Kíli bounced up, then dropped next to Fíli to watch him work.

Fíli snorted. “Were they talking of your head or your hair? Honestly, cousin, I’ve never seen another dwarf with as much hair, however little you have of it.”

“It’s growing!” Gimli snapped.

“Aye, and will one day be as fine as your father’s,” Fíli agreed calmly. “But right now, it’s a beast.” He tugged one last time. “There. That’s the best I can do.” Gimli touched his hand to his hair. Fíli had managed to give him three tight braids that captured his curls as they went, and then met in the back in a short tail that would, one day, become his customary plait. It was a warrior’s style, perfect for under a heavy helm, and that Fíli had chosen such a braid spoke to his confidence in Gimli.

“Thank you,” Gimli said, quietly, and Fíli squeezed his shoulder, and leaned in close.

“You earned it,” he said. “I saw you, in the tunnels and against those wargs. You were like a dwarf from legend the way you moved—it’s no wonder you beat old Dwalin.” He squeezed his shoulder tightly, and his voice dropped further. “And soon, you will tell me exactly how that came to be.”

Gimli’s heart stuttered in his chest. Of course, he had not been able to throw Fíli. His cousin was Thorin’s heir for more than just bloodline. There was simply so much riding on his secrecy… But when had secrets ever helped him? They had never served his people, other than to foster mistrust. They had never served him in his life, and in fact the opposite had proved true, for when he opened up his secrets he gained the regard of The Lady, and the Love of his One.

And he was so tired of the lies.

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Aye.” By the banks, the others had begun to redress for the next leg of their journey. “But not yet. Not here. Not now.”

“No,” Fíli agreed. “But soon, aye?”

Gimli nodded. Fíli clapped his shoulder, and then stood, returning to the others with Kíli. Gimli watched them go, feeling his goal slip farther away. They did not look back.

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It was several hours to Beorn’s house, through wilderland and a paddock with giant bees that Gandalf called a honey farm. As it was, it was only the grace of summer that let them arrive in daylight. They felt him first, a rhythmic pulse that was more than familiar to any axe-wielder—he was chopping wood with steady strokes, and no little force to be felt so far away. (Though, most dwarves could feel such vibrations at quite a distance, a legacy of a life spent underground, when such could be warning of a disturbance far greater. It was said that this was the greatest danger of dragons; their flight left no sign in the rock beneath their feet.)

Gandalf stopped them just out of sight. “We shall enter by twos,” he said. “save for Bilbo, who will come with me. Then Thorin and Dori, Balin and Dwalin, and so on. Bombur, you will come last with Gimli—you could almost enough for two yourself, so the youngest with you.”
Gimli scowled up at Gandalf, not at all liking the implication that he was less than a whole dwarf, but went to stand by Bombur in solidarity. Gandalf strode off, then, Bilbo trotting along at his side.

“I understand he’s a wizard and all,” Bofur said, uncharacteristically bitter, “but he can be a right prick when he wants to be.”

Gimli nearly choked on air—one must be cautious about what one says of wizards, after all—but Bombur seemed brighter for it.

“That may be so,” Thorin said. “But he’s a powerful prick, and still useful to us.”

“Not for much longer,” Dori griped. “Who does he think he is, leaving us?”

“He’s Gandalf the Grey,” Gimli said, surprising everyone, but most of all himself. He had everyone’s attention. “He’s a wizard—and they call him the meddler for a reason.’’

Thorin’s eyes widened. “You know why he’s leaving.”

Gimli sighed. “Aye,” he said. “I heard some of their talk in Rivendell, and…” he trailed off.

“What is it, lad?” Glóin prompted, gently. “Was it something you saw?”

Gimli nodded. “Some of my darker dreams made sense. I do not know the whole tale, as even my dreams shy away from where he is going, but I do know that he leaves now only for the most important reason.’’

“More than that fell beast?’” Dwalin grunted.

Thinking of the last battle, of the darkness that had spread over the land and the dark armies on the march, Gimli nodded. “Aye. Far more.’’

“Either way,” Thorin said, “he will be leaving us soon. Let us try not to hasten the prospect. We shall be on our own soon enough.’’

The Company murmured their agreement, and then heard the first signal. Thorin and Dori left for the courtyard.

Slowly, by twos, the Company entered the yard. Soon, only Bombur and Gimli were left.

“Do you think he’s terrifying?’” Bombur asked, quietly. “If he built that Carrock he must be dreadfully strong.’’

Gimli nodded. Beorn had a bear’s strength as a man—and three times that as a bear. He was, indeed, very strong. And aside from Thorin’s Company, he really didn’t like dwarves. Being Glóin’s son, Gimli had faced little distrust when they had first met. Now, however, Gimli doesn’t have Beorn’s memory to count on.

“Gandalf would not willingly lead us to peril,” Gimli said. He had to believe that.

“Aye, but who says what is peril to a wizard,” Bombur said. “I don’t like any of this. If you were not here, I would not have had the courage to wait. I would have run after them, and would have ruined everything.’’

“After twelve uninvited guests, I hardly think three more would be the tipping point,’’ Gimli said. “Besides, you have courage plenty, or you would not be here, on this quest.”
Bombur looked away. “I didn’t come for me,” he said, quietly. “Bofur was convinced while he was in his cups. They promised him ale along the way, and failing that, enough gold to buy a tavern, if he wished. I love my brother; there was no way I would let him go without someone to watch his back, and as fierce as Bifur is, he drifts too often and is overlooked too much. So, Gimli,” Bombur said, finally meeting Gimli’s eyes. “I am here for them, not for me.”

Gimli raised an eyebrow. “And that does not require courage? In my experience, it matters little one’s reasons and more that they act when it is needed, despite misgivings.”

Bombur didn’t say anything, but he did begin walking to Beorn’s gate. Gimli wasn’t sure if it had been five minutes, but it mattered little now. They passed through just as Beorn said:

“But fourteen is not sixteen, no matter how you count them.”

“No, no. Of course not,” Gandalf said. “Here are the last two—Bombur, and Gimli son of Glóin.”

Gimli bowed, but Beorn waved it off. “Yes, yes, but come. Finish your tale,” he urged, and Gandalf proceeded to tell their story so far.

Beorn was seated on a great, scarred stump, clearly where he had been splitting logs; there were splinters and a fresh pile of wood. A great axe, nearly as tall as Gimli, sat propped on its head, and Beorn rested his mighty forearm on the handle as he listened.

Gimli watched Beorn as he listened. Beorn was large, larger than Gandalf and nearly twice as wide with thick muscle. Even as a man, there was something bear-like about his mass. Maybe it was his dark eyes, or the way his nose and mouth looked almost snout-like. Then again, maybe it was his hair, chestnut brown and coarse-shaggy, that tufted atop his head and down his cheeks.

He laughed at something Gandalf said, and when he threw back his head Gimli saw the points of his teeth like fangs.

“That is some tale, indeed,” Beorn said, his voice deep and oddly accented. “And enough to earn you your supper. Come and dine with me; there is no point in turning you away now.” Beorn stood, and the Company, including Bilbo, bowed deeply.

“Enough, enough. No need to dirty your beards on the ground.” He stopped in front of Bilbo. “Except no beard for you.” He poked Bilbo’s stomach, and Bilbo half-stepped back, affronted but too unsure to let loose his tongue. “Little Bunny,” Beorn chuckled. “We’ll soon get you fat on bread and honey.”

“Oh, Bread,” Bombur muttered with sincere reverence.

“Honey,” Gimli agreed.

The Company that sat at Beorn’s table was quite different than that which first met at Bilbo’s, or that came to Elrond’s in Rivendell—and Beorn’s table was unlike any Gimli had seen before.

The table itself was wide and long, as fitting Beorn’s size, but short enough that even Bilbo was able to sit with ease on the low bench provided. The rest of them, that didn’t fit on the bench with Bilbo, sat on barrels and crates provided by Beorn’s friends—dogs that walked on their hind legs and ponies with wise eyes. The food was bread and honey, but also berries and nuts and wild greens and fresh cream. There was nothing cooked on the table, save for some roasted nuts and the hearty bread, but everything was rich and filling and bright on the tongue, and they ate their fill.
with their best manners.

Bilbo fell to with such happy gusto that he was soon rubbing his stomach with unease, having eaten too much too quickly, and sat through the second half of the meal chewing on a ginger root, listening to Beorn as he told tales of Mirkwood. Some were from a time before the Elves, when the wood was wild. Some, however, were from a more recent darkness.

Across the table, Fíli was hanging on every word, mouth open, and a large dollop of honey hung from a hunk of bread forgotten in his hand, inching further as he listened. Just before it fell to the table, Fíli’s hand reached out and caught the honey on his finger. Fíli ate the bread, Fíli licked his finger, and Gimli tried not to think about the coming trials.

The first time, the Company had faced the river, the spiders, and the Elves. From Beorn’s tales, they were lucky they didn’t come across anything worse. Gimli looked at the few summer berries still on his plate. If they avoided the spiders this time, would Gimli be leading them into something far worse? Without the spiders, would they get to Eryn Lasgalen? Would Gimli be forced to walk right past his husband?

“Of course,” Beorn said at last, “no dark creature has caused Thranduil as much grief as what besets him now, for the woods speak of an attack in his own home, affecting the mind of his son.”

Gimli cracked his cup in his hand, and fresh milk spilled over his fingers. Next to him, Óin startled and turned his horn to Gimli.

“Yes,” Gandalf said, sparing a concerned look at Gimli. “We had heard from Radagast that the prince had fallen to a strange illness. Can you tell us more?”

A hound appeared at Gimli’s side with a rag, and was mopping up the spilled drink. Óin put his horn down and gently pried Gimli’s fingers open, letting the hound take the broken cup with him. Quieter than Gimli would have thought possible, Óin hissed his name. Gimli couldn’t say anything, just turned his grip on his Uncle’s hand and squeezed tight.

Beorn shrugged. “Only that he has earned the title of Mad Prince where his father cannot hear. It is said with no little sadness: I have met him before, his father dotes on him, and so he is headstrong and will act without thinking, but he is a caring elf, and good to his people.”

Thorin sniffed, but he said no ill words. Gimli was grateful, for he would not strike his king if he could help it, and if Thorin spoke ill of Legolas, Gimli would have no choice. Gandalf bowed his head. “Legolas is well known to me,” he said. “And it is no comfort to hear he is still unwell.”

Beorn shrugged philosophically. “Illness of the mind is not so easy to heal.”

Gimli sank back in his seat, and the world seemed to swim before his eyes—or maybe his eyes refused to focus on the world around him, looking instead for the world that was. He could hear the echo of Legolas’s laughter, clear and sweet, and could barely hear Óin asking if he was “all right, lad? Gimli, can you hear me?”

“Fine,” he said, but his voice sounded dull and far away to his ears. “I’m fine. Tired”

“If you’re sure,” Óin said, and Gimli nodded. Óin pulled back, and Gimli hunched over his dinner, but he had lost his appetite.

Late afternoon turned to evening, and evening to dusk. The dogs lit the great beeswax candles, and as the food dwindled, the Dwarves began to tell their own tales.
Now, Elvish tales are told through song, generally slow to be sung and lingering, just as they are. Men tell tales with cheerful faces and crude allusions. Hobbit tales are winding things, good natured and detailed, just as their holes. Dwarven tales, however, are full of grandeur. The tales are of great deeds by great ancestors, of overcoming miraculous odds, of the greatness and glory of their kin.

And why not? Gimli thought bitterly to himself. Men and Hobbits tell the tales of Eves, and some Elves even know the tales of Men. Nobody really knows the tales of Hobbits to tell, save the hobbits, and no one is stopping them. The Dwarves, however, are the only tellers and the only listeners.

Except for now. Now, Balin had stood, left hand tucked into his belt and right hand gesturing as he spoke, a trained orator. He told the tale of Thorin Oakenshield—of his valor in the slaughter outside of Moria, and the first blush of the leader he would become. Beorn seemed interested in the fighting, but paid little heed to the descriptions of the Mithril mines.

When Balin’s tale ended, Nori spoke, surprising everyone. He told of a caravan of Ironfist dwarves he had traveled with to the far East. Dwalin glowered, and it wasn’t hard to realize that Nori had been most likely running from the law at the time. The story itself was nigh impossible, filled with ancient curses and an army of the dead brought to life (the day saved by an amulet that Nori had “found” along the way), but he spoke with surprising grace of the long, clear desert nights and the vastness of the starry sky.

Then, with a sly grin, Fíli began telling of when he and Kíli had been young and had decided they wanted a cookies from the kitchens. It was not a grand tale, or a particularly fanciful one. What it was, was true, and ended with the saving grace of Gimli, then just old enough to undress himself, running starkers, covered in cooking oil and malachite dust, through Thorin’s council-chambers during a state-visit with Dain and the head of the Northern Rangers.

“It was damned lucky wee Gimli was such an adorable scamp,” Fíli finished with a grin, ignoring Gimli’s beet-red groaning. The rest of the Company was laughing, and that seemed good enough for him. “Or we would have been in more trouble than we were.”

“You’re in trouble with me, now!” Gimli snapped, and then covered his face in his hands. “You had to tell that one?”

“Yes, of course he did,” Kíli said, snickering. “The memory of your baby bum’s had us laughing for years.”

“And that wasn’t the only time,” Glóin added, and Gimli slumped back in his seat. If Glóin was in on it now, there was no escaping the childhood stories. So he had gone through a naked phase! Many young ones did, and Gimli knew he had nothing to be ashamed of. Still, these were not the types of stories Gimli wanted told when he had to appear mature. “There was a solid year when anything you put on him came right off again. We had a devil of a time in winter, let me tell you, and the threat that his pud would freeze wasn’t always enough—"

“DA!” Gimli cried. “Enough!”

Glóin looked in no way apologetic. “Well, it’s true,” he said.

Gimli covered his eyes with his hand. “Aye, I’m not denying it,” he said. “But can we please not talk about my privates with everyone?”

“You didn’t seem to care then,” Glóin said, and really. He was enjoying this far too much.
Gimli opened an eye. Time to fight fire with fire. “You mean like you didn’t when I caught you and Mum—”

Glóin cleared his throat loudly. “Fair point, fair point,” he said quickly, and settled back into his seat.

“I have a tale,” Bilbo said, and the Company turned to look at him. He was seated next to Thorin, and was leaning sleepily against a giant post.

“Then we shall hear it,” Thorin said, and Bilbo smiled at him, more open and warm than he would most likely be if he wasn’t quite so tired.

“Very well,” Bilbo said. He forced himself up straight, and puffed at his pipe. “When I was but a faunt, with naught but down on my feet, my mother would tell me stories of her days before my father, when she would travel far and wide and have marvelous adventures. She was often accompanied by a Great Wizard,” here, he nodded at Gandalf, who looked fond, if distracted, “and met many strange and wonderful people. This story happens on one of her adventures when she was caught all alone, just beyond the borders of the Shire in the Old Forest.” He paused, and began.

“‘Don’t go into the woods at night,’ they say with bright, round faces.
‘Don’t go into the woods at night for it’s filled with dreadful spaces.’

One fair eve, a hobbit lass,
With flowers in her hair,
Wandered into the woods at night,
Abandoning all care.

Her pace was quickly running free.
Her sword was silver bright,
But no match was she for the tree
That hunted in the night.

Her blade was swift, her eyes were keen.
She fought with all her might.
She sliced and hacked, almost fought it back—
That hunter of the night.

Her feet were caught up in his roots.
Her hands were bound by vines.
Her cries were muffled by the bark
That soon had her entwined.

“‘Don’t go into the woods at night,’ they say with bright, round faces.
‘Don’t go into the woods at night for it’s filled with dreadful spaces.’

‘This is my end,’ she thought with fear
and prayed for a way home
to her family she loved so dear,
though far she oft did roam.
Then she heard a voice singing
And coming down the path.
The song was like a bell ringing
Though wartime aftermath

“Old Tom Bombadil is a merry fellow,
Bright blue his jacket is,
and his boots are yellow.
None have ever caught him yet,
for Tom, he is the master:
His songs are stronger songs,
and his feet are faster.”

Then the tree did let her loose,
Unbound and raised up fast,
And spat her out past jaw and tooth
And left her blinking on the path.

Far ran she once she was free:
She met none on the way.
What power had he, that he could be
The champion this day.

To this day none do know
Just who could wield such might.
It is far better, not to go
Into the woods at night,”

Bilbo stopped, sitting back with his pipe. It was Balin that broke the silence.

“Your mother must have been a great warrior to have been memorialized in song.”

Bilbo hummed, and looked up. “While the story is hers, the verses are of my own design,” he said.
“Although…” he trailed off, staring for a long moment into the fire. “I think she was,” he said,
softly. He shook his head. “Either way.”

“She must have been, to have mothered such as you,” Thorin said. “It was a fine tale.”

Bilbo looked up at him, open, and Thorin held his gaze. Gimli wondered if he and Legolas had ever been that bad. He rolled his eyes. If you listened to Aragorn, they were probably worse.

“It is a night for darkness,” Óin said. “Dark thoughts faced in safe places don’t seem so dark.”

“So it is.” Thorin agreed, looking away from Bilbo at last. “Cousin, if you would do the honors.”

Óin bowed his head. His role as mystic often required him to lead the verses. His voice wasn’t the greatest, and had only grown rougher with age. Still, he could keep a note, which was all that was needed.

The wind was on the withered heath,
But in the forest stirred no leaf;
There shadows lay by night and day,
And dark things silent crept beneath.

The wind came down from mountains cold,
And like a tide it roared and rolled;
The branches groaned, the forest moaned,
And leaves were laid upon the mould.

The wind went on from West to East;
All movement in the forest ceased,
But shrill and harsh across the marsh
Its whistling voices were released.

The grasses hissed, their tassels bent,
The reeds were rattling—on it went
O’er shaken pool under heavens cool
Where racing clouds were torn and rent

It passed the lonely Mountain bare
And swept above the dragon’s lair:
There black and dark lay boulders stark
And flying smoke was in the air.

It left the world and took its flight
Over the wide seas of the night.
The moon set sail upon the gale,
And stars were fanned to leaping light.

The room was somber and still as the last notes faded. Beon had disappeared before the song had ended, and Bilbo had drifted off against his post. He startled when Gandalf stood and spoke.

“Time for bed, I think,” he said. “Bed down where you may, but remember what Beorn said! Do not leave this house! There are fell creatures abroad this night, but we are safe enough in here.”

Gimli stood, back popping, and the room swayed. He was more tired than he thought. Then again, he had been up for days. He had just enough presence of mind to shuffle over to the nearest pile of hay and spread his blanket. He fell asleep face-down to the wool and did not stir all night.
Gimli woke later than his usual, but still earlier than he had expected, considering how tired he had been. Several of the others were already up and about, murmuring quietly to themselves, but Gimli was not the last one awake. Bilbo was still burrowed into his blankets, and Bofur was snoring in the loft above him. Beside Gimli, Kíli lay sprawled, and Gimli realized that the weight on his leg was actually Kíli’s foot. Fíli lay curled next to his brother, one hand tangled in Kíli’s curls, and the other resting on the hilt of a knife still tucked inside his coat.

Rolling his eyes, Gimli moved to push his leg away and then had to stop as his muscles protested, a groan caught in his throat. Oh, merciful Mahal, he couldn’t remember the last time he had been so sore—running across Rohan, maybe? He remembered pain, but not like this. Every limb had stiffened in the night, and when he forced himself to stretch with gritted teeth, his spine popped in several places. It took him several tries to get his left knee to pop, and his neck cracked loudly enough to wake Fíli.

Blearily, the blond raised his head. “You a’right?” he muttered.

“Aye,” Gimli said tightly. “Just a little stiff ’s all.”

Fíli snorted. “Yeah, it takes some getting used to,” he said, and settled back down. “’specially the way you fight.” He was asleep again in minutes.

Gimli sat up slowly, rolling his right shoulder and shaking his head at his own foolishness. Just because he could still fight like he once did, it did not mean that his body was used to such stress. No wonder he felt like three miles of bad mine.

Beorn’s house looked different in the morning light, open and airy and welcoming. The far wall opened as a great door to a shaded veranda. There, a table had been set with breakfast, and those who were awake were clustered around it.

Breakfast seemed like a wonderful idea, and the hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach seemed to agree. Since breakfast would not come to him, Gimli pushed his way to aching feet to go to it. He staggered briefly before he caught himself. By the time he made it to breakfast, he was moving with most of his former ease, though the pain remained a constant background noise.

Glóin sat at the table with Nori, Bombur, and Balin. Bifur sat whittling on the steps that led down into the garden, and Thorin sat with him, smoking his pipe and watching Dwalin show Ori how to stand when wielding a war hammer, off in a clear spot among the flowers. Óin and Dori were walking in Beorn’s garden with one of the dogs, inspecting various plants that Gimli was sure could become ointments and teas respectively.

“Morning, lad,” his father greeted him and shuffled over to make room on the bench. Gimli
dropped into the seat and blinked blearily at the table. “This Beorn fellow doesn’t seem to hold with kafé,” Glóin said, “but this isn’t bad.” He poured Gimli a mug of something steaming.

“Tea?” Gimli asked, sniffing it. It was floral and herby and sweetened with honey.

“Of a sort,” Glóin said. “Gandalf called it something odd, but he assured us it was fine.”

Gimli hummed and took a sip. If it wasn’t a type of tea, Gimli would be very surprised. He looked around, but saw no sign of their wizard. “And where is our wizard?”

Glóin pointed off to the West. “He went off that way not too long ago. We’re to remain here until he returns, whenever that is.” He took a bite of fresh sour-bread. “Thought Thorin would put up more of a fight, to be honest.”

“Our illustrious leader? Put up a fight?” Gimli said dryly, staring into his cup. “Perish the thought.”

“It’s because of Bilbo,” Bombur said, pointing a bread crust at Gimli. “Either because he’s finally noticed that our dear hobbit needs a break, or Bilbo’s convinced him that he needs to heal before tackling that.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the treeline.

Nori grinned down the table at him. “Care to make a wager?”

“Not with you, you old cheat,” Bombur shot back. “What’re the odds on you winning no matter what happens?”

Nori placed a hand to his chest, mock-offended. “Surely, I wouldn’t know what you’re talking about!”

“Tell it to my purse.”

Gimli turned back to his father, grabbing some bread and clotted cream. “So we’re to remain here with Beorn?”

“Well, we would, if Beorn was here,” Glóin said. “He never came back after last night.”

“Who never came back?” Fíli asked, coming up behind Gimli. He sat on a low barrel and cracked his neck. So it wasn’t just Gimli, then.

“Beorn,” Gimli answered.

Kíli dropped down next to Fíli and leaned his head on Fíli’s shoulder, eyes closed. “I don’t blame him, after last night,” he said, sleepily. “Prowling around to the wee hours, giant bear or not.”

The other stared at Kíli for a moment, unsure how to react. “Well,” Gimli said, “That’s...well. Cheers.” He raised his cup to them and drank.

Gandalf was not back that morning, when Bofur rolled off his platform onto Bilbo and the hobbit finally woke to eat his breakfast. He was not back at luncheon, to watch Thorin hang on every word Bilbo said as he detailed the exact nature of the animosity between Lobelia Sackville-Bagginss and himself, from its earliest beginnings when they were fauntlings. He was not back at tea, when Bofur caught Gimli looking at Mirkwood, and mistook his eager worry for apprehension and got the whole company singing ever more raunchy pub songs.

It worked as a distraction, but only briefly as soon Gimli was looking once more to the East, knife held loosely in his hand as he absently tapped the small half-carved branch against his knee. It had
been weeks since they had left Radagast, and Gimli had naught but hope since then. Did his husband yet live? He must, for Gimli would surely know if he perished. But how did he live? Did he mourn? Did he fade? Did he remember Gimli at all? What was this mysterious madness?

“You look like you are thinking big thoughts,” Bilbo said, appearing as if from thin air. Gimli startled, and for a brief moment was sure Bilbo had actually appeared from nowhere. He certainly had that ability now. It unsettled Gimli, that Bilbo was so flippant with the Ring’s use, but he was oddly pleased, too, that for the last few decades of its existence, the Ring’s primary function was to allow Bilbo to remain an eccentric recluse. “All you need is a pipe that shoots multi-colored smoke, and you could almost be Gandalf.”

Gimli snickered. “Aye,” he said. “Because that’s the biggest difference between Gandalf the Grey and myself.”

“Only one that matters,” Bilbo said, and took out his own pipe. Hobbit pipes, from what Gimli had seen, were simple things compared to Dwarven pieces. Like Gandalf and Aragorn, Bilbo favored a long stem on his pipe, and Gimli remembered seeing an old Dwarvish tall-pipe in Bilbo’s home, probably sold to his parents by a Dwarven merchant some years ago, though he traveled with one much shorter for convenience. Methodically, Bilbo cleaned the bowl of the pipe, letting Gimli’s mind return to his own task. Neatly, Gimli sliced another round from the wood.

When Bilbo started to pat down his pockets for some new pipeweed, Gimli reached into his tunic and pulled out his own pouch. “Here,” he said. “I lost most of it in the tunnels, but there’s enough left yet to share.” Bilbo thanked him, and took a pinch. He stopped when the sweet smell hit his nose.

“This isn’t Dwarvish pipeweed,” Bilbo said, slow with wonder. “This is Old Toby.”

“Aye,” Gimli said, and grinned. “I bought a small barrel on my way to your home. Merry managed to bring me around to Hobbitish weed many years ago, and it has been some time since I could indulge.”

“Well, I don’t know any Merry,” Bilbo said, happily packing his bowl. “But he has excellent taste.” He lit his pipe and sighed happily. “Dwarvish weed is good in a pinch, and I’m quite grateful to Thorin for letting me share in his,” he said, “but it is altogether too rough for my tastes.” Gimli hummed, and thought of the way Bilbo’s eyes lingered on Thorin and the difference Thorin now paid him. His weed may be too rough, aye, but I do not think you believe he is, after all.

“It is an acquired taste,” Gimli agreed. Bilbo rolled his neck, and rubbed his shoulder.

“I feel much like a piece of meat, pounded thin for breading,” he said. “After the trolls, I thought I knew what bruises were. I was wrong.”

Gimli hid a smile. “Fighting an entire mountain of goblins does tend to leave a few bruises,” he said.

Bilbo scowled, but there was a sadness behind it. “None of you dwarves seem affected,” he said.

“You did not see me this morning,” Gimli said, raising an eyebrow. “I was stiff and creaking like a stuck hinge in need of oil.”

“You seem fine now.”
Gimli shrugged. “A trade off of youth. I have to wait for my beard, but I recover quickly.” He patted Bilbo’s knee. “I wouldn’t fret over your bruises, Bilbo. We Dwarves are made to withstand, to endure. We are hard as stone, and only get harder as we age—and there are quite a few old dwarves in this Company. You have more than kept up, and that does you credit.”

“Yes, well, I have had help,” Bilbo said, shifting. His hand strayed to the front pocket of his waistcoat and Gimli followed it with his eyes.

“Aye, you have,” Gimli said slowly. He looked up at Bilbo, and felt his age press against behind his eyes. “But be wary of help found in dark places, Bilbo. Often, there is a reason, and some things are better left lost.”

Bilbo blinked, rearing back, fingers pressed flat to his side. “What do you know of it?” Bilbo snapped, and Gimli felt his heart tremble at the fear in his voice. This was not the Bilbo he had grown to know—this was a shade of Gollum, overly cautious with little reason. “Explain yourself!”

Gimli held up his hand. “Easy, Bilbo.”

“Do not treat me like—”

“Like a child?” Gimli countered, cutting Bilbo off. Bilbo stopped, and blinked at him, as if he was willing sleep from his eyes. Gimli frowned, his lips pressed together. “I am older than I look, Bilbo—far older than Thorin, though I admit Gandalf has me beat. I know what it is like to have those around you constantly underestimate you—to treat you like you cannot be trusted, like you cannot understand, like you are too stupid to know any better.” Gimli sneered, looking away. “When all they see is a bare chin and cheeks, and refuse to hear the voice.”

Breathing loud in the space between them, Gimli almost missed Bilbo’s voice—quiet and barely heard. “They listen,” he said. “They listen to you as much as Thorin—and even he listens to you.”

Gimli closed his eyes. “They listen to the words of a mystic,” he said. “They do not hear me, they hear what they think I am. They are not my words.”

“I don’t understand.” Bilbo shook his head.

Gimli groaned. “Nobody does.” He rubbed his face with his hands, then smoothed his palms over his hair, tugging on his braid. “I don’t understand, and it’s happening to me.”

Bilbo puffed on his pipe. “I have, in my experience, found it helpful to explain confusing ideas to others, or at least out loud. The mouth often solves what the mind cannot.”

They would have to know eventually. Gimli couldn’t keep up the lie indefinitely—not once he had met Legolas again. Even if his husband had no memory of him, even if the bond was one-sided, and stayed that way, Gimli would not be the same having met him again. They would have to know.

He would start with Bilbo—when the time came, he would need Bilbo’s help with Thorin.

“This may take some time,” Gimli warned.

“We have it!” Bilbo said, gesturing. “We won’t be leaving until Gandalf returns, and who knows where he’s buggered off to, pardon my language, and you have said many odd things that I think you better explain. I am sick and tired of only understanding half of what is going on!”

You don’t know the half of it, my dear hobbit. “Very well,” Gimli said, and stood. He pocketed the
wood and slid the knife back into its sheath. “Would you walk the garden with me? Away from prying ears?”

Bilbo nodded and stood, and Gimli led them into Beorn’s bee pastures. It was pleasant, the air thick with heat and the rich, sweet scent of grass. The bees’ buzz was a steady counterpoint. Once Gimli deemed them far enough away, he began. “It has not struck you odd that I am here? That I have traveled so far on the promise of dreams?”

“Thorin seems to think your visions are important,” Bilbo said. Gimli snorted.

“I am on this quest by the grace of his sister, and here at all by the will of the Valar.”

*His sister,* Bilbo mouthed, then the rest of what Gimli said caught up with him. “The Valar?” He asked. “Somehow, I do not think you mean luck.”

“Indeed, I do not,” Gimli said. “My tale is strange, but I swear to you by the Lady of Light, that my tale is the truth. Ask Gandalf, if you wish. He knows of my…unique circumstances, and has ever been my ally.”

Bilbo searched his face, and Gimli made himself relax as far as possible, to project as much honesty as he could. He knew his bare chin revealed much, more than he was wont to share, and he only hoped that it helped him now.

It did, for whatever Bilbo saw, it made him ease. “Tell me,” he said.

“Very well,” Gimli said. “I have never had a prophetic dream in my life, and yet I have been able to predict, and accurately, several things on the course of this quest. A conundrum, aye?” He asked, and Bilbo raised an eyebrow at him, as if to say *yes, yes, get on with it.* “To you, this is the present moment, but for me, it is far in my own past, for while I appear before you a Khazad of sixty-four, I am, in truth, over three-hundred. I died, Bilbo, of old age after a long, full life. Why I then woke as my younger self has puzzled greater minds than Gandalf the Grey, though not many. Thus, my memory of my life, and the tales my father told me of this quest, make up the stuff of my dreams and I do what I must.”

Gimli stopped, turned to Bilbo, and leaned in close, eyes intent. “I know what it is you carry, Bilbo,” he said. “Your actions in the Misty Mountains will lead to a war the likes of which this Earth has not seen in over an Age. I have been sent to lessen some of that darkness, without sacrificing the light.” He backed, looked out at the fields, the honeybees trumbling lazily through the air. “I must do everything I can.”

“To single-handedly save the world?” Bilbo asked, dry, and Gimli looked up. Bilbo looked at once defensive and cross, but also darkly amused. “It all seems an awful lot for someone with such small shoulders.”

Gimli raised an eyebrow. “It was narrow shoulders that saved us all the last time,” Gimli said. “I believe they will again.”

Bilbo looked away, puffing on his pipe. “What must I do?” He asked, quietly, not looking at Gimli. “To save everyone, what do I do?”

Here, Gimli spread his hands. “I do not know.”

Bilbo’s head whipped around, and he glared. “Do not know! How? How can you change things if you do not know how?”
Gimli snorted. “With the devil’s own luck,” he said. “This isn’t my first time facing impossible odds against this particular foe. But already, things have changed by my presence here. I fear if I tell too much of what was, then it will not happen, the good included.

“Then there is nothing you can tell me?” Bilbo asked, incredulous. “Nothing at all?”

“Just...be Bilbo Baggins,” Gimli said. “Do as you feel best. It worked last time.”

“Not enough! That is not enough. What can one hobbit—” Bilbo cut himself off, pressing his fist to his mouth.

“One hobbit can do more than you think,” Gimli said, and put his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “That is why I am here,” he said. “And this time, I have a plan, but it hinges on you being you. Do that—and I will take care of the rest.”

“I’m not sure I believe all this,” Bilbo said. “It seems so very strange.” His fingers were back at his pocket again, and Gimli ignored the little voice of temptation that sparked and flickered in his ear. He already denied the Ring. It had nothing to offer him.

“As I said, it is hard to believe,” Gimli agreed. “But, nevertheless, it is the truth. I have no reason to lie—if I were, it would be more believable.”

Bilbo nodded. “Every so often,” he began, voice dream-like and soft. The tone filled Gimli with no little dread, for he had heard it before in the words of Boromir on Caradhras. “I hear something, or I think I do, a whispering in my mind. I cannot make out words, but it seems to be the most wonderful voice.” He sniffed, and straightened. “I must think,” he said, and placed the stem of his pipe back into his mouth. Gimli nodded, and let him, continuing to walk in silence.

It was some time before Bilbo spoke. “What were you carving?” Bilbo asked. “When I met you on the veranda. What was that?”

Gimli looked over at him, fished a piece from his pocket, and offered it to Bilbo in his palm. “Buttons,” he said. “For your waistcoat. They are not brass, but they will do their job. I was going to give them to you once they were finished.”

“Oh!” Bilbo said, startled, and picked it up. “Why, it’s a little acorn! How clever! Thank you, Gimli. But I have no way of attaching them. I’m afraid I left quite without my kit.”

“You can ask one of them,” he said, pointing to a dog in the garden. “Or Dori. He usually travels with extra.”

“I will,” Bilbo said. He gave the button back, and said, “I have thought, and I have decided to trust your story, at least until I can ask Gandalf. It is no more unbelievable than anything else on this trip,” he added.

“Everything happens for a reason,” Gimli said. “But sometimes, it is not a reason we can, or will, understand.”

Bilbo nodded. At the house, Thorin stepped out into the sun, looking about. “I think he’s looking for me,” he said, blushing a little at the sly look Gimli sent him. “I am going back inside,” Bilbo said, flapping his hand as he turned towards the house. “Dinner will be presently, I feel.”

“I will be in shortly,” Gimli said. “And Bilbo?” Bilbo turned back. “None but Gandalf may know. Not until I can tell them, and that may be for a while yet, I fear.”
Bilbo nodded and walked back to the house.

Gimli sat on a giant tree stump and continued his work. He had finished all but the last button when he realized the dogs and ponies were working in unison, once again getting a table ready for the evening meal. He stayed just long enough to finish the final details. On his way to the great table, Gimli stopped by Bilbo’s bedding and placed the acorn buttons on his blanket.

The Company had just sat down to their supper when Gandalf finally appeared, dusty and windswept from travel. They were on him immediately, but he waved away their questions in favor of food, and wouldn’t speak to them until he had eaten two loaves of bread loaded with fresh honey and butter and clotted cream and drank nearly a quart of mead. He pushed his dishes away, and pulled out his pipe, sending up rings of marvelous colors that reminded Gimli of his famous fireworks as they danced over the ceiling. But there is no dissuading a Dwarf who has set their mind on something, and Gandalf was at last forced to answer their questions.

“I have been picking out bear tracks,” he said. “There must have been a regular bear’s meeting outside here last night.” Kíli hit Fíli’s shoulder excitedly, and Fíli rolled his eyes and thumped his brother back. “I soon saw Beorn could not have made them all: there were far too many of them, and they were of various sizes, too. I should say there were little bears, large bears, ordinary bears, and gigantic big bears, all dancing outside from dark to nearly dawn. They came from almost every direction, except from the West over the river, from the Mountains. In that direction only one set of footprints led—none coming, only ones going away from here.” Here, Gandalf paused and sent a rich red ring floating up to the rafters. “I followed these as far as the Carrock. There they disappeared into the river, but the water was too deep and strong beyond the rock from me to cross. I had to walk miles before I could find a place where the river was wide and shallow enough for me to wade and swim, and then miles back again to pick up the tracks again.” He shrugged. “By that time, it was too late for me to follow them far. They went straight off in the direction of the pine-woods on the east side of the Misty Mountains, where we had our pleasant little party with the Wargs the night before last,” Gandalf finished dryly.

“He doubted your word.” Thorin said. “That must sting,” he added, and his smile was as sharp as Orcrist.

Gandalf scowled, well aware of Thorin’s criticism, and not happy with giving him an opportunity. He sat back and said nothing for a long time.

"Ah, lad," Glóin said to Gimli, leaning back on his barrel and crossing his hands over his stomach. "It's nights like this that I miss your mother, most."

"Half the mountain's been missing your wife since you married her," Thorin said, walking behind them, making Glóin drop to his feet.

"And just what is that supposed to mean?" Glóin demanded, growling.

Thorin raised his eyebrows, but he spoke to Gimli instead. "Your mother was famed for her beauty. She broke many hearts when she chose your father." He sat. "Including Dwalin's."

"Including yours, you mean," Dwalin grumbled. "You mooned like a dwarf half-your age."

"She was half your age," Balin added.

"Doesn't matter now," Glóin said, sniffing. "The best Dwarf won."

"What's she like?" Bilbo asked. They all turned to look at him. "I mean, it's just—you never hear of
"Aye," Balin said. "That's true. Most other races can't seem to tell the difference between us."

"It's the beards," Gimli whispered to Bilbo, and Bilbo had to bite his lips to keep from laughing.

"It's a failure on their part," Thorin said. "They don't care to take the time to learn."

Dori cleared his throat. "It's not only that," he said, not looking up from where he was darning one of Ori's mittens. "Many dwarrowdams prefer not to be seen as such in the wider world, and go dressed as male, using male names. We learned long ago that Men would not give dwarrowdams the same deals as dwarrows, and would instead try to cheat—as if a dwarrowdam had less business sense! Humph!" Dori tied off the thread with a forceful tug.

"It started with a confusion, apparently," Bofur added, "A Man trader asked a Dwarf merchant where their women were, and the Dwarf, not quite as used to Westron as we are now, asked what a woman was. The man said 'the ones who give birth,' and thinking the man meant 'those with child,' said they were back in the mountain and didn't travel without great need. The man went away never knowing the merchant he spoke to was a dwarrowdam!" He laughed, then added: "Bombur's wife, here, has had a nearly a dozen children, and I can tell you, Alris was not going on any caravans any time soon." Bofur shook his head.

"Eleven children!" Kíli exclaimed. "Bombur!"

"Twelve by now," Bombur said and blushed. "Four girls," he said, and the Company hooted and gave their praise.

"Is it uncommon?" Bilbo asked. "Many children? I mean—an average hobbit family has at least eight, though I've seen as little as one or as many as twenty."

"Twenty?" Glóin mouthed, looking faint.

"Ah, no, Bilbo," Óin said. "Most Dwarves have, at most, three."

Glóin puffed. "I have one, and I couldn't be more proud," he said, and put his arm around Gimli's shoulder. "He takes after his Mum, though he has my hair."

"Thank Mahal he has his mother's sense," Óin said, not quite quietly enough.

Glóin glared, but he turned back to Bilbo. "You asked what she was like, well. She's a beauty, aye, and a rare one in the North. She comes from a Blacklock clan far to the South. Her parents came North while she was yet a wee babe." He puffed on his pipe and his eyes turned dreamy as he thought of his wife. "If the Dwarves of the North are made of granite, pale and rough-hewn, she is made of onyx—smooth of skin and very dark. Her hair is thick and she wears it in many braids that flow about her head. She is a silversmith, works best with wire and delicate things, and often has twists woven through her braids." He grinned. "She's far too good for me. Still, I love her with all I am, and I thank Mahal every day that she loves me, in return."

“Aye,” Bombur said. “I know the feeling. The happiest day of my life was the day I first saw my Alris laugh. I knew then there’d be no one else for me.”

“And how did she know you?” Kíli asked.

“How else?” Bofur said. “He cooked for her.”
“Aye,” Bombur agreed. “Turns out none can resist my dumplings.”

Nori snorted. “I’ve never felt the pull, myself,” he said, and then looked at Ori and faltered. “Still, it seems awful nice.” Ori looked up at Nori, then at Dwalin, and looked away.

“It’s a bit frightening, though,” Bofur said, more serious than his usual. “To feel the pull and not know who it is—what if they’ve found their One in another? Or are dedicated to their Craft? Or you never meet?” He shook his head. “Sometimes, I wonder if it’s worth it.”

“It is,” Gimli said. The others looked at him and he cleared his throat. “It has to be,” he said.

“Aye,” Glóin said. “It is.”

Gimli nodded, and once their attention had drifted away once more, he slipped through the shadows and out onto the veranda.

The moon was bright in the sky, and the tips of the trees glinted like silver in the distance. Gimli watched the branches sway in the night breezes, and thought of the creaking night-noises of Fangorn, filled with wild sounds—of Lorien’s mournful melody, and of Ithilien, young and joyful—the tree’s song sung to him with Elven voice.

It was some time later, though Gimli was not sure how long—the voices near the fire had not waned, nor the fire dimmed—that Bilbo sat next to him.

“Is that why you watch the woods?” Bilbo asked after a moment. “Is there someone there?” Gimli looked at him, and Bilbo explained. “It’s just—that look on your face. That was the look of one longing for love lost, not unsure of love to come.”

Gimli chuckled dryly. “Someone, aye,” he said. “Several, really. Our road takes us through the realm of Thranduil, the Elvenking. He is a key player, though he does not yet know his part. But my reasons are personal,” he said. “My love is there: my husband and my One. We are connected still,” he raised a hand to his breast, “but I do not know if he remembers me, if he feels our connection as I do. I do not know if he thinks of me, longs for me, as I have done little else since I woke.” Gimli gestured to the woods ahead of them. “I long to move on from here,” he said. “To run to the woods with all my strength and speed. To stop this waiting, and be with him again.”

“He is an elf?” Bilbo asked. Gimli closed his eyes.

“Aye,” he said, and in his mind he saw golden hair like silk tucked over a pointed ear. “An elf. Legolas is his name. Legolas Thranduilion. The Elvenking’s son.”

Bilbo blinked. “Oh dear,” he said, and tugged on his lapels. “Oh dear, oh dear.” It seems Bilbo had heard the stories about the Elvenking. Hopefully, they were told by Balin—if Thorin was the storyteller, there would be no hope for peace.

“Aye,” Gimli repeated. “You see my dilemma.”

Bilbo nodded and sniffed, nose twitching like a rabbit. “You could go, of course,” he said, voice mild in a way that had Gimli on instant alert. “I would even cover for you, as best I could, if you wanted. I am not unfamiliar with the frustration of having what you want just out of reach.” Bilbo looked at Gimli though narrow eyes. “But I wouldn’t.”

Gimli sighed. “And why not, Mr. Baggins?” he asked, tired. “Give me a reason to stay.”

“You had him, once, yes? For a lifetime?” Bilbo asked.
Gimli nodded. “Aye. The life of a dwarf. It was not long enough.”

“It never is,” Bilbo said, blunt. “But it doesn’t change the fact that you won. You had your life and your love, and…you did not get sent back for him.” Bilbo stood. “I would remember that, Gimli son of Glóin, as you make your decision. You are a true friend, and I will stand by your either way.” He turned, but then paused, looking back. “Thank you for the buttons,” he said, and disappeared back inside.

***

The wizard Radagast was leaving, after being back not long at all, and it had put the King in a foul mood.

Though, Tauriel mused, there was not much that didn’t these days—not since Legolas had first fallen ill. She stood in the archway of the King’s chambers, not hidden, never hidden from the King, but out of the way and patient. She would wait for as long as he willed.

While she waited, she listened.

“I don’t see why you’re so cross. He’s made wonderful progress when we first thought he’d make no progress at all,” Radagast said at last. He seemed honestly confused, but Tauriel thought many things confused Radagast that were not four-legged or feathered.

“He is still not well,” Thranduil snapped.

“And he may never be!” Radagast countered. “Some wounds remain, no matter how we heal. Keeping him captive in his room will not help him learn how to live!”

There was a dreadful silence, and Tauriel closed her eyes against the look she knew would be on her king’s face.

“I am not,” Thranduil said slowly, snapping his voice on each word, “keeping my son captive.”

Radagast snorted, seemingly oblivious of the danger coming. “You keep guards on his rooms. He is not allowed to leave without an escort. He’s not allowed to leave the palace at all—I don’t see how he isn’t a captive.”

Tauriel heard a whisper of fabric—Thranduil turning away. “It is not safe for him.”

They were quiet for a long moment and then Radagast said, “It is not safe for any, now. Gandalf is calling me south, to Dol Godur, and I fear what the White Council feels we will find. Still, I must go, and the rest of the world remains as it was. Your son is in no more danger than anyone else, and keeping him hidden away will not help him.”

“If you’re going to go,” Thranduil said softly, “then go now, before I change my mind.”

Moments later, Radagast left, walking past Tauriel. He winked at her as he walked by, the birds nesting in his hair chirping, and then he was gone, off to the south. Tauriel wondered if she’d see him again.

“Do not hover, Tauriel. It is unbecoming,” Thranduil said, and Tauriel couldn’t stop herself from jumping. Every. Time.

Swiftly, she left the cove and bowed to her king. “My lord.”
“Do you agree with the wizard?” He asked. He had yet to look at her, his focus far away, as it was so often of late. “Would my son benefit from a blind eye?”

Tauriel thought for a moment before she spoke. “I agree that your son grows tired of his room, and it would be good for his mood if nothing else. Midsummer is only a few days away, and it may be good for the people to see their prince.” Thranduil remained still, and Tauriel backpedaled. “Of course, we will do what your feel is best; the opinion of a lowly Sylvan elf is nothing when compared to a king.”

“No,” Thranduil agreed. “But you are not a lowly Sylvan elf, Tauriel. Not when you have so caught my son’s eye—and my attention.” He turned, then, and looked at her. She straightened further. “If you feel he can attend the feast, then I will trust my son’s judgment and so, your opinion. You will watch him, and if nothing happens, then we shall see. I hope this pleases you.”

Tauriel bowed. “Yes, my Lord,” she said, and did her best to hide her panic. She knew, knew, that Legolas loved another—there could be little doubt of that, and it seemed silly that she ever doubted. Legolas did not move like one unmarried, not anymore, thought it was easily missed under the rest of his ailments. But more, if anything happened to Legolas, it would fall on Tauriel’s head.

“You may go,” Thranduil said. “Tell my son of the good news.” Tauriel nodded, and left.

If nothing else, Legolas would be happy to attend the feast.

Chapter End Notes

as always, some of this text is taken straight from The Hobbit. If you recognize it, it's not mine.

Also, Determannfidd has generously lent me Bombur's family, so any reference to them belong to her. :}


A Memory of Flies and Spiders

Chapter Notes

Thanks to livingmeatloaf, who continues to make time to help me with her crazy busy schedule!

I HAVE MORE ART!

jaegervega arted HERE and HERE

jakeziyal arted HERE

and piyo-13 arted HERE

I love seeing art, so if any of you want permission to draw stuff for this fic, please do!
Just tag me, so I can see it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 12: A Memory of Flies and Spiders

Beorn woke them all the next morning with booming good cheer, picking up a still half-asleep Bilbo and poking his stomach, which was not quite so small as a few days ago. “This is good to see,” he said. “Come, eat some more.” He put Bilbo down, and Thorin stepped forward, placing himself between Bilbo and Beorn. Beorn didn’t notice, however, as he had already turned towards the table. Bilbo tugged on the front of his waistcoat, smoothed his hand over his new buttons, and placed a hand on Thorin’s elbow. Thorin looked at him, eyes searching, and nodded, visibly calming.

Their host was in an unparalleled good mood, telling them all funny stories until they were hooting with laughter, their previous reticence forgotten. They pounded on the table, threw their heads back, and stomped their feet. Soon, once their good humor had eased, Beorn told them where he had been.

“I have been traveling,” he said. “I, and a few of my kin, went West to the mountains. We found there a burnt glade, still smelling of charred wolf-fur, and also we found a Warg with his goblin rider. They were part of a hunting party, one that was hunting dwarves. They hunt you,” he said, “for you killed their king. It was not easy, getting him to tell this.” Beorn grinned, and it was full of teeth. “But he spoke to me when I bid him.” He looked to Thorin. “But there was something off, with this goblin’s story. I do not trust it completely. There is more wickedness afoot, Thorin son of Thrain. You must be cautious.”

Thorin nodded, accepting the warning. “So you believe our tale?” he asked.

Beorn waved his hand. “It was a good story, that of yours, but I like it better now that I am sure it is true. You must forgive my not taking your word. If you lived near the edge of Mirkwood, you would take the word of no one that you did not know as well as your brother or better. As it is, I can only say that I have hurried home as fast as I could to see that you were safe, and offer you any help that I can.” He grinned. “I shall think more kindly of dwarves after this.” He chuckled fiercely.
to himself, saying, “Killed the Great Goblin,” over and again.

“What did you do with the goblin and warg?” Bilbo asked, and Gimli could only imagine.

“Come and see!” Beorn said, and stood. They quickly stood to follow him around the house. A goblin’s head was stuck on a spike outside the gate and a warg skin was nailed to a tree just beyond. Beorn was a fierce enemy.

“Remind me never to get on his bad side,” Óin muttered.

“Indeed,” Gandalf said. “You have true friends in this Company.” Gandalf said to Beorn, and looked at Thorin, who nodded. “It is time you heard the rest of our story.” Then there, in the sunlight, Gandalf told Beorn the rest of their tale, including the purpose of their quest—Erebor, and the dragon within.

Beorn nodded. “That is a true tale,” he said, “and a noble purpose. A dragon is no good neighbor, but I remember the bounty of Thror’s halls. A neighbor like that is good to have. This I will do: I will provide ponies for you and a horse for Gandalf. I can give you food for weeks, if you do not waste it, and skins for water.” He looked to Thorin. “Make sure that you fill them before the forest, for there is no water that runs clean of the darkness that now dwells there.” Thorin nodded, and Gimli felt his excitement rise. They were finally going to depart.

The rest of the morning was spent in readiness. Beorn did provide them with ponies and his helpers stocked their bags with provisions aplenty. Soon, the Company was off into the great plain between Beorn’s house and Mirkwood.

They made camp that dusk in bright spirits, though they kept a wary eye that night, and in the morning, they continued on as dawn broke.

They reached the edge of the wood in the early afternoon and Gandalf bid them to unburden the ponies and send them back, as asked.

“You sound as if you aren’t coming with us,” Thorin said.

“That is because I am not,” Gandalf replied. When the others protested, Gandalf held up his hand. “Peace! You knew this day was coming. I have already spent far too much time with you all. You have Bilbo, now. Look to him as you would to me.”

“Me!?” Bilbo squeaked, but the others simply grumbled and nodded their heads.

“Here, Bilbo,” Gandalf said, and handed Bilbo a scroll. “Write down what happens, so that I may read it when we meet again and tell you of your missteps.”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow that clearly expressed how rude Gandalf was being, but he snatched the roll from Gandalf’s hand without a word.

“I do not like this,” Dwalin rumbled to Thorin, and Gimli cocked his head to hear.

“No,” Thorin said. “But he was right; we knew this day would come. It is time we took charge of our own fates. The Mountain is ours to reclaim.”

“Aye,” Dwalin said, satisfied.

“I must be off,” Gandalf declared.
“Then you best do it quickly,” Thorin snapped. “Or you may never leave.”

Gandalf leveled his eyes at Thorin under bushy brows, and Gimli was glad to not be on the receiving end, though Thorin didn’t seem too cowed. “Very well. Goodbye, and do not leave the path.

And with that, the wizard was gone.

***

Walking into Mirkwood was like walking into a nightmare.

Gimli had never been through the forest at the height of its malevolence, and he couldn’t say he was enjoying the experience. It was dark, a thick darkness that challenged even Gimli’s darkvision. Poor Bilbo had to be traveling mostly by feel at this point, though Hobbits did have keen eyes.

“This place feels sick,” Bilbo muttered, and stumbled. Gimli caught him, and helped him righten.

“That’s because it is,” Gimli said. “Poisoned by evil. It’s more important than ever that we retake the mountain, with the Greenwood thus.”

Bilbo nodded, and Gimli let him keep ahold of his forearm. They traveled for hours, for days. At night, they made fireless camps watched by glowing eyes and prayed for morning. It was never much lighter, but it was enough to keep them moving. Their food stores were dwindling. Their water was scarce.

Everything looked different. Granted, Gimli had spent little time here: Legolas had left for Ithillien after only a few years, and the landmarks he had come to know—well, either they had changed, or he had never been on this path before. They could be walking in circles, for all Gimli knew, and without an elven guide, they would have no method of finding their way without the path.

“This way,” Thorin called, and the Company turned left.

“Must stay on the path,” Bilbo muttered.

“Aye,” Gimli agreed.

*

“Where is it?” Dwalin growled. “Where the path?”

“It ends!” Balin called out. “It just ends!”

“We’re lost,” Ori moaned.

“Keep moving,” Thorin ordered.

*

Dori bent and picked up a brown leather pouch. “There’s dwarves in these woods,” he said. His voice had gone quite long, and Gimli blinked his eyes to clear his slurred ears. What?

Bofur grabbed the pouch. “From the Blue Mountains, no less! This looks like my pouch!”

“It is your pouch,” Bilbo snapped. “We’ve been going in circles!”
“What?” Nori cried out, and the others started to yell and complain. Gimli reached a hand into his shirt and clutched his Lady’s gift, wishing for light. Slowly, the world ceased its spinning.

“We need,” Bilbo said. “We need…”

“Light,” Gimli croaked, and for the first time since they’d entered these woods, Gimli felt confident in his words. Bilbo looked at him intently, and then at the trunk of a tall tree.

“Yes,” Bilbo said. “Light.” He staggered over to the tree and tried to climb, but the lowest branch was just out of reach. Gimli forced himself to walk over, to let go of the Lady’s gift and offer his help to Bilbo.

“Here,” he offered, holding his hands out, laced together at the fingers, as a step to give the hobbit a boost. Bilbo stepped into it carefully, bracing himself on Gimli’s shoulder, and once he was steady, Gimli lifted him up. Bilbo scrambled up into the branches and was soon gone from sight.

“Enough!” Thorin cried, silencing the group. “You will bring nothing good with your yelling. Where is Bilbo?”

“He went to get a look,” Gimli said, and pointed at the tree.

Thorin looked at him for a long moment. “Then we will wait to see what he finds,” he said.

It was close to quarter of an hour later when Bilbo climbed back down from the tree. They crowded around, desperate to hear.

“It is daytime,” he said, with quiet wonder. His voice seemed quite strong and clear. The air had done him good. “The sun is setting golden, and there were butterflies all around. So many.” He closed his eyes, and sighed happily.

“Did you see where we are?” Thorin demanded.

“Yes,” Bilbo said, and opened his eyes. “We are in the middle of a ruddy great forest! The Mountain is that way,” he pointed, “But there is nothing but woods that I could see.”

Thorin looked away. “That matters little,” he said. “If the mountain is that way, then that way we must walk.”

Quietly, the Company collected themselves and continued on.

Fíli, scouting ahead, saw it first. He hooted twice like a barn owl and Thorin stopped, holding up his fist. A minute later Fíli appeared from the trees. “There is a river ahead, and it is black as ink. If there ever was a bridge, it is not there now.”

“That must be the river Beorn warned us of,” Bilbo said.

“Aye,” Thorin agreed. “But how do we cross?”

“We look,” Kíli said, and joined his brother. They headed back to the bank, and the others followed.

It was Bilbo who saw it first. “There!” He pointed. “Do you see? There’s a little boat drawn up the opposite bank! I don’t think it’s tied to anything. It’s not more than twelve yards!”

Gimli closed his eyes. Not another elven boat. They floated like leaves on water, which was good enough for elves, but he knew that they sailed low under the weight of dwarves.
“Twelve may be as good as thirty,” Thorin said. “It is too far to jump, and we cannot swim the distance.”

Bilbo thought for a moment. “Well, do you have any rope?” They dug into their packs and soon a rope with a mountain-hook was brought forth.

Kíli was chosen to try, as his bow had given him the most practice with aim, and with a mighty heave he tossed the weighted end. It landed with a splash in the water.

“Close!” Bilbo said. “Only five feet or so short. Try again! I don’t think the little bit on the rope will hurt you.”

Still, Kíli held the rope gingerly, even though he was still wearing his thick gloves. This time, he threw with all his might, and overshot the boat. Gently, he pulled the rope back until the line went taught, and with a mighty pull, the boat broke free and began to drift downriver, though he pulled it in as quickly as he could. Bilbo took off after it, but Balin reached it first.

Gimli had been right. The boat was small, and seemed insubstantial at best. Still, it was of elven design, and he knew how deceptive such things could be. Once more, Kíli threw the rope and anchored it to the far shore. This way, they could pull the boat across the river without a paddle.

“We will have to go over in pairs,” Thorin said. “Bilbo, you’re with me. The rest of you, come in twos with the packs. Bombur, you and Gimli must come last. You’re the largest of us, and will need the lightest load.”

Bombur opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again. Gimli patted his arm.

It took nearly half an hour for Gimli and Bombur to get their turn, and Bombur was quiet for most of it. At last, they stepped into the boat. Bombur climbed in first, and settled in towards the front. The sides of the boat were worryingly low, but Gimli would not be left behind. He climbed into the boat and, after a moment of uneasy rocking, Bombur began to pull them across.

“Almost there,” Gimli said. Bombur didn’t answer.

In the end, they reached the other shore without incident and Gimli let out a breath he didn’t know he was holding. Carefully, Bombur stepped from the boat, but when he had no more than one foot on the shore, a great white hart, full antlered and proud, bound into the clearing, scattering the Company.

Gimli saw Thorin raise his bow…

Bombur started to pinwheel…

“No!” Gimli cried, but it was too late; Bombur fell back into the water, overturning the boat, and taking Gimli in with him.

***

The caves were just as majestic as he remembered—delicate and vibrant, full of color and shining radiance. It was a long trek through a multitude of beauties to get to this particular cavern, where water dripped from the rock above to ring out like the tinkling of many bells. Before them, a great lake was filled with luminescent algae, and it bathed the room in a cool, blue light. All around them, it glittered and they walked as if though a field of stars.

Next to him, Legolas was spellbound.
“Gimli,” he breathed. “I…my words fail me…” he slipped into his own tongue, then, his words lilting like birdsong, and Gimli grinned.

“Aye,” he agreed. “I think my people will be happy here, in this place of beauty.”

“Aye,” Legolas agreed, breathless, and Gimli turned to catch the elf watching him. The blue light had made Legolas’s skin glow like the full moon against the starry night, and Gimli was transfixed.

Legolas, caught staring, flushed and looked away.

Gimli caught his hand. “Legolas,” he said, his voice barely more than a rumble. “My love.”

Legolas turned back. “My heart,” he answered, and stepped closer.

Their courtship had been a long one, beginning between the shining trees of Lorien with the first blooms of friendship, growing on a long trek across the lands, admitted in aftermath of battle—but not yet consummated.

“Here?” Gimli asked, surprised. He had thought the elf would want the trees around him, the stars above him, and he said as much.

But Legolas shook his head. “Here,” he said. “Soon, you will bring your kin to shape and build, and this will be a city to rival Khazad-dum in its beauty. It will surpass it, for it will be a living city, filled with laughter and love.” He smiled. “So let it first be a place of love, and bear witness to our union.”

“Marry here,” Gimli said, and raised an eyebrow. “And honeymoon in your trees?”

Legolas’s smile turned to a grin, wicked and teasing. “My trees will have their own turn as witness. Long have I desired you, and if we were to make love in every cavern in these caves, it would not be enough to cool my ardor.”

“Good,” Gimli said, and pulled Legolas closer.

They would make their vows to each other first, in elven fashion, and after Gimli would braid binding braids into Legolas’s hair and teach him to do the same. Later, there would be time for public declarations, for the pomp and formality of Dwarven custom, but now Gimli had his love in his arms, in his caves, and that was more than enough for him.

***

“I wonder what they’re dreaming of,” Ori said, quietly. He walked along side them; Glóin had taken his son’s shoulders, and Kíli was ahead, scouting the path. Óin walked next to his nephew, and would occasionally pull something from his pocket for Gimli to sniff, but it never got a reaction.

Fíli looked at Gimli’s smiling face. “Something pleasant,” he said, and shifted his grip on his cousin’s boots.

***

It had been several months since he had last seen his husband. His absence was never any easier, but at least Gimli had the ruling of Aglarond to occupy his time. Now, having set out from Edoras with Eomer’s company on their way to Minas Tirith, there was nothing separating them but time. Already, they had entered the woods that bordered Ithilien.
The waiting was terrible.

Eomer, the cad, was no help.

“You are as lovesick as a maid with a fancy,” the cad himself spoke, pulling his horse up beside Gimli’s pony. “I would think you my sister, sighing over the moon.”

Gimli snorted. “If I was your sister, you would be paying for that comment in blood.”

Eomer laughed, the braids in his mustache swinging. Odd. When had Eomer started braiding his mustache? “Too true. I have thus far avoided the lessons of your axe; I would continue in that vein.”

“Then you would do best to watch your tongue, for my husband’s axe is swift and true.”

Gimli and Eomer startled and looked up. Legolas was perched in a tree, his shining face laughing.

“You rascal!” Gimli thundered, but he was laughing. Legolas dropped like a cat from the tree, landing with nary a sound next to Gimli’s pony.

“Meleth-nin,” Legolas said, and kissed him.

***

“My love,” Gimli said, opening his eyes and looking straight into Fíli’s face. Fíli raised an eyebrow.

“My darling,” he replied. “How forward of you.”

Gimli yelped, and shoved himself backwards. He skittered back a few paces before he hit a tree. Thorin’s company—Thorin’s Company—was He looked around wildly—This was impossible! He was just in Agla—in Aman—

In his past. He was in his past. On the quest for Erebor, charged with—with—

Bombur was sobbing, brokenly wishing he had never woken from such a lovely dream. Bifur had his arms around him.

There was a warmth at his breast, and he covered it with his hand. The Lady’s Gift; he could feel its power, buzzing against his fingers.

Fíli was shoved aside, and his father and uncle leaned in close.

“My boy!”

“Gimli, lad, are you all right?”

His old life had never felt so far away.

“I’m fine,” he said. “I’m fine.”

***

They had no water and little food, but after such a day, Thorin decided they would camp there for a while and rest. They had to keep moving; they would only last so long without fresh water.
Somehow, Gimli slept, but his dreams were fractured, and he woke choking back a scream—
And kept choking, spider-silk filling his mouth. His nose barely made it past the foul stuff, and he had to force himself to breathe evenly. He felt ill, his stomach rolling, but thankfully empty. He was dizzy, upside down and spinning. He could barely move. The spiders.

The bloody spiders.

His vision was sparking at the edges, the darkness growing darker.

The next thing he knew, he was moving, falling and hitting the ground, and there was a sword cutting through the webs. He kicked and struggled his way free, but his arms did not want to work and his legs would not hold him. Someone pulled the web from his face, and Gimli coughed, blinking and seeing nothing but a dagger floating before him, glowing blue.

“Move,” Bilbo hissed, closer to his ear than Gimli expected, and he jerked back, into Dwalin, who caught his shoulders. “Go! I will hold them off!”

Who? But Gimli couldn’t speak. The world was spinning, and Dwalin was forcing him forward and he tripped into a staggering run. His pack was gone and there were webs in his ears, sticking to his eyebrows and cheeks, but his axe was still at his back and the Lady’s Jewel thrummed at his breast. Behind them, Bilbo taunted the spiders, “Attercop! Attercop! Old Tom Noddy!”

Gimli had no idea what that was supposed to mean. Hobbits. Still, it worked, and the spiders shrieked with rage and fear as they died.

Somehow, he moved, but he could not say how far, or where. He was aware only of Bifur before him and Dwalin behind him as they staggered through the undergrowth towards a lighted clearing.

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They were watering down his wine.

Legolas sat slumped in his seat, far less gracefully that his father was draped across his own, but he did not care. Legolas knew they did it out of fear for him, but it still irked. He had not needed to drink watered down wine for nearly two-thousand years. He could hold his own with his father, after all, and had competed often with dwarves. With Gimli.

Still, as the night went on, Legolas’s eyes kept drifting to the tree-line. He hadn’t been at the festival the first time; he and Tauriel had been far to the north, cleaning out spider nests. Still, he had heard the story: the Company of Thorin Oakenshield “attacking” at Midsummer on their way to wake the Dragon. Too, he had heard of the Company of Thorin Oakenshield, lost and hungry and sick, begging for food only to be imprisoned in his father’s dungeons.

He knew there was truth to each tale, and he knew which he believed held more. When Oakenshield came through those trees, Legolas would be ready. For Gimli, he would help his husband’s king. His position was weakened from his illness, would have been helped by returning to his duties, but his father still listened when he spoke. Mostly listened. Listened enough for this.

There was little Legolas could do against the dragon Smaug, but he could do all he could against the aftermath.

Then, after, Legolas would ask about his Husband, and he would go to him and finally, finally, quiet the voice in the back of his mind, the one that sounded so much like his heart that it hurt—the one that would make Legolas laugh, and turn to return the favor, only to see none there.
Oh, my love, do you miss me as I miss you?

At the fire, the others were singing and dancing in the torch-light, and Legolas felt himself sway. There was something richer about midsummer music, something that touched a place deep inside Legolas and urged him to move, but his father had bid him not leave his side, and it had been many years since the king had last danced.

(Too, did this music remind him of his husband, for Gimli would visit at midsummer, and he would dance his dwarven dances to midsummer music, grinning at Legolas when he would be struck, entranced. “Not bad,” Gimli has said, the first time. “Though, I know a few drum beats that would make it better.” Legolas’s heart had been so full, he could only grin.)

Oh, but the urge was growing stronger, and Legolas fairly ached with the need to run, to fly through the trees to—

Legolas sat up straight. His was not the urge to dance, though he could feel that too in the joy that filled him; his was the urge to run, to chase through the woods to his husband’s side, for surely he could feel him coming closer.

Legolas stood, and faced his father. “Ada, I wish to dance.” Thranduil looked at him, and his face softened.

“You wish to dance,” he said, and he smiled. “Then you shall dance.” Legolas grinned, and ran to join them.

Oh, it felt so good to move, let the music take him and guide his feet. His heart felt full, and he knew his joy shone clearly. Often, he had danced before the Quest, but never so fiercely as he had after, feeling his love’s passion burning through him. They say elves with mortal loves dance with more fire, for their loves’ lives burn all the more quickly, but none burn with the fire of the dwarves, who were forged in the fires of the earth. They had danced together, Gimli’s stomping feet giving Legolas’s freedom to fly. They danced through battle. They danced through love. They danced with words, with hands and mouths on skin, with light and love and laughter.

All of this, Legolas danced now, for if Gimli was not yet here, then Legolas would dance for him. And if, those who watching saw and understood, well let them. Gimli was near, and Legolas would not hide.

The elves around him slowed, and when Legolas turned, he saw his father standing before him. “Ada?” he asked, faltering.

Thanduil did not speak, and instead he moved into the first formal steps of the summer dance. Legolas met him, sure step for sure step, and the musicians played with brighter tune, and the dancers swung with merrier step, and through it all the Elvenking danced.

Everything stopped when the Company burst through the tree line. For a timeless moment elf and dwarf stared at each other. Oakenshield was in the lead, there was no mistaking that noble bearing, as dirty and web-covered as he was.

But it was not Oakenshield that made Legolas stop where he was. It was not Oakenshield that forced the cry from Legolas’s lips. It was not Oakenshield that made his heart soar.

There, at the far end of the company, a dwarf smaller than the others, fire-red of hair and painfully bald of face, standing fierce and defiant, though he was too pale and swayed on his feat—was his own Gimli.
His king clapped his hands once, the sound echoing through the clearing, and the lights went out. The sudden darkness was full of noise as the guards went for the dwarves and they scattered. His father called after him, but Legolas was already gone, running towards his love even as the lights went out.

Legolas danced through the chaos, aware that he would be chased; they could not catch him. He could not let them. He had to get to the trees. He had to get to Gimli.

He grabbed the knife off a passing guard, ducking the guard’s surprised reaction, and took to the trees.

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Gimli’s eyes were failing, his vision blurring as he staggered through the darkness. His boot hit a root and he fell, landing hard on his knees, his palms. He stayed still, shaking with exertion. He would not fall. He could not fall. His blood roared in his ears, and he did not hear that dreadful clacking until the spider was nearly on top of him.

He rolled out of the way, but when he reached for his axe, his arms were heavy and sluggish and would not reach. The spider rubbed its front legs together and venom dripped from its fangs to sizzle against the leaf-covered ground.

A shadow dropped from the trees above him, landing on the spider’s back, and with a cry, plunged a knife into the spider’s head. The spider twitched, choked on a wail, and fell forward. The shadow rolled and landed, on bended knee, before Gimli.

Gimli blinked. It couldn’t be. His heart was racing in his chest.

“Legolas?”

Legolas looked up at him and grinned so brightly it would outshine the sun. “Aye, Meleth-nin. Aye.” He cocked his head, smile fading slightly, and reached a hand out to cup Gimli’s cheek. Gimli covered his hand with his own. “My love, what happened to your beard?”

“My beard!” Gimli cried, his anger belied by the way he clutched Legolas’s hand. “You impudent —nothing happened to it! It hasn’t grown in yet!”

Legolas’s expression cleared. “So young,” he said. “I had not thought…” He trailed off, thumb stroking the soft fuzz. “You never said you had dimples,” he accused, and it was just so—so Legolas!

“Legolas, they said—I heard—” Gimli said again, and it came out a half-sob. “Oh, ghivashel, kurdûh” He reached his other hand out, and Legolas surged forward, kissing him with a desperate passion until Gimli’s head swam, and he pulled back, pressing their foreheads together. Gimli’s hand settled on Legolas’s hair, and his fingers found the braids. He gasped a laugh, still thick with tears.

“Your braids are terrible,” he said.

Legolas pulled back, looking at him with no little shock, and then a grin split his face and he threw his head back and laughed. “You will have to fix them for me,” Legolas said.

Gimli, feeling lighter than he had since he first woke up in this time, simply nodded.

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Tauriel cursed when Legolas ran, and gave chase as best she could, but Legolas was more nimble than she expected and quickly slipped from her sight. Before she could catch her bearings, one of the dwarves ran across her path, pursued by a spider. She followed him to a small patch of grass, to find him stopped still as another spider dropped in front of him. Tauriel wasted no time, firing her bow and dispatching the first spider.

“A knife!” The dwarf called to her. “Please! Throw me a knife!”

“I would not trust you with a weapon, dwarf,” she retorted, and fired thrice, killing the second spider. “Not when you have already attacked my people, once.” She spun and fired and killed a third spider before it could enter the glen.

“Attack?” the dwarf said, stunned. “We did not attack!”

“Call it what you will,” she said. “You are a prisoner.”

The dwarf opened his mouth, as if to argue, but shut it again, and nodded. He bowed, and held his hands up as if to be tied. Taurel blinked at him; she had not expected such a reaction. Still, she bound his hands, wary for trickery.

“Come,” she said. “There is one I must find before it is too late.”

The dwarf raised an eyebrow, looking between her and the bindings, but followed obediently. She had to move more slowly than she would on her own, but without another to take him back, she could not turn her back on him. Yet, never did he try to escape. What was his game?

Luckily, they did not have to travel far. She saw the pale hair of her prince through the trees, and dragged her prisoner with her.

What she saw, however, made her stop short—and made her prisoner swear.

Legolas was on his knees before a dwarf—an adolescent, judging by his size and bare chin—placing kisses on the dwarf’s face, with his hands woven through the dwarf’s red hair. Said dwarf was laughing, but weakly—he was injured, but Tauriel could not deny that the dwarf held on to Legolas just as tightly.

Then, she registered what her prisoner had said.

“Mahalul zharmur khurûh, Gimli.”

“Gimli,” she repeated. This was Legolas’s husband.

Oh, dear.

“Aye.” Her prisoner shook his head. “Moves quickly, doesn’t he?”

Tauriel gaped at him. What could she say to that?

Her prisoner grinned at her. “Learned it from me,” he said, and winked. She blinked at him, and looked away.

“My prince,” she said, emphasizing his title.

“Tauriel,” Legolas said, pulling back but not looking away. “Te nangen; aníra *nestanir.”

Her prisoner tensed at that, and she wondered, briefly, what their connection was. Gimli, however,
scowled.

“I’m fine,” he said, and tried to wave Legolas away. “I don’t need a healer.”

Her prisoner snorted at that, and when Tauriel looked at him, he rolled his eyes. Tauriel shook her head.

Legolas gave Gimli a look of such exasperation that, if there were any doubt in Tauriel’s mind, this would have allayed it completely. “You cannot stand.”

Gimli’s scowl only deepened, and Legolas sighed, leaning in and whispering something that Tauriel was not meant to hear.

She did, however. “I have lost you once already, meleth-nin. Do not make me lose you again. I could not bear it.” Her prisoner made a gentle sound, and when she looked, he was grinning. He had a brilliant smile.

The scowl faded, and Gimli cupped Legolas’s cheek. “Aye,” he said. “I know. Very well. Take me to your healers.”

Legolas smiled, and kissed Gimli’s forehead. Then he stood, and with little apparent effort, scooped Gimli up into his arm. Her prisoner choked. Legolas smirked at him. “I am stronger than I look.”

“Not hard, considering you look like a stiff wind would snap you in half,” Gimli said. His voice was muffled by Legolas’s shoulder, and bounced when Legolas stepped. “All you elves. No meat on you.”

“You know very well that is not true,” Legolas said, and Gimli sniggered. Tauriel’s prisoner whimpered, and Tauriel was amazed to see the change that had come over her friend.

“Aye, like you knew very well that I have dimples.”

“Oh aye,” Legolas agreed, “On your backside—tell me, has that hair grown in yet as well, or is your arse as bald as your chin.”

Gimli barked a laugh and then coughed, and Tauriel saw Legolas’s teasing grin falter.

“His arse was hairy since the day he was born,” her prisoner said, snorting, and Gimli froze.

“His arse was hairy since the day he was born,” her prisoner said, snorting, and Gimli froze.

“Kíli,” he breathed. “Aw, hell.”

Her pris—Kíli shook his head, but his smile was wickedly smug. “Not yet. But it will be when Uncle finds out. Or your Da.” He looked Legolas over. “At least he’s pretty.”

Gimli snorted. “Aye. Often, it’s his only redeeming feature.” He grunted, and Tauriel realized Legolas must have pinched him. Still, Gimli lifted his head with visible effort, to look at Kíli.

“Cousin,” he said, more serious and had to pause often to breathe. “I will tell you everything, answer any question you have, you and Fíli, but please—do not tell them. Not yet. It is my burden, and my responsibility, but to do so now would help none and hurt many.”

Kíli looked at Gimli and nodded, saying something in the harsh language of the dwarves. Gimli closed his eyes, but nodded, and let his head fall back to Legolas’s shoulder. Over his head, Legolas nodded at Kíli as well.
“Your loyalty does you credit, Prince Kíli,” Legolas said, and Tauriel looked at her prisoner with surprise. Prince?

Kíli narrowed his eyes at Legolas. “Aye,” he said. “Let’s hope it with the right people.”

Chapter End Notes

translations
meleth-nin - my heart
ghivashel - treasure of treasures
kurdûh - my heart
Mahalul zharmur khurûh - Mahal’s hairy balls (used like “Oh, for fuck’s sake”)
Te nangen; anîra *nestanir. - He has been bitten. He needs a healer.
Thorin stood in the middle of the clearing. He remained unbound, but not unwatched; at least a
dozen elven guards stood around him, all pointing their arrows at him. Good, he thought. If they
would not treat him with the respect he deserved, they would treat him with appropriate caution.

He had been captured when the lights first went out, unable to follow his people back into the
woods. (If he were to be honest, he was not sure he could. The spider’s venom had made him
weak, and it had been many days without proper food). Now, a few torches had been relit, and
Thorin waited in the flickering light for his fate to be decided.

The Elvenking was on his woodland throne, a tree that had been shaped as it grew and was now old
and massive. He had paid no attention to Thorin, and Thorin was just as happy to ignore him in
return. The Elvenking’s attention was on the trees.

One by one, Thorin had watched his Company return to the glade, in the custody of the elven
guard. Balin and Bifur had come peacefully, and Bofur had arrived supporting Bombur as he
stumbled along. Dwalin arrived in bonds, red-faced with fury; his accompanying elf had a swelling
nose. Fíli had been brought alone, and one of his guards was weighed down by Fíli’s many
weapons. Dori, Nori, and Ori had arrived in single file. Glóin was the last so far, and had struggled,
and arrived calling for Gimli; Óin was with him when Glóin’s cries slowed and he slumped to the
ground.

No Gimli. No Kíli. Maybe they had gotten away.

The Elvenking leaned forward, and seemed to grow taller.

A redheaded she-elf entered the clearing, pulling Kíli with her. His nephew seemed none the worse
for wear, a cheeky smirk firmly in place, and it gave Thorin not small pleasure to see the sour look
it had given the elf. They were followed by another; even if Thorin didn’t remember him from the
happier days of his youth, there would be no mistaking the resemblance. This elf had the same pale
hair, the same bright eyes— Legolas Thranduilion. The Mad Prince.

Nor, however, was there any mistaking the mass of curling red-hair attached to the khozd in his
arm.

“Gimli!” Glóin cried out, struggling once more against his captors, and even Thorin took a step
forward.

Then, the Prince did something Thorin did not expect.

He stopped, and seeing Glóin, knelt on one knee. Gimli did not stir. “He is very ill,” Thranduilion
said. “The spiders were not kind to him. He needs a healer, but he is strong.”

“I’m a healer,” Óin said, gripping tightly at Glóin’s shoulder. “And family—Let me see to him.”

Thranduilion shook his head, but his expression was open. Kind. “You have not our experience with these—.” He spit out a word in his own tongue, and not one that Thorin was familiar with, though the meaning was clear. “We will care for him.”

“You can’t possibly,” Glóin said, and turned his head. Thranduil’s get looked honestly saddened by Glóin’s reaction, but before he could say anything else, Thranduil stood.

“Legolas,” he said, his deep voice filling the clearing.

The prince looked at his father, and stood. He turned to the redhead who held Kíli’s bonds, and she called out orders to the other guards. They gestured with their weapons, and the Company was ushered down a nearly invisible path, Glóin trying to wake Gimli. Óin was muttering darkly.

Legolas gave a final glance at his father, and followed the rest down the path, Gimli still in his arms. Once they were gone, the guard behind Thorin nudged him with his spear, and Thorin was forced to walk the path as well, out of sight of the others.

Somehow, Thranduil was waiting on his throne when Thorin was finally shoved into the audience chamber. “Why have you attacked my people?” he asked, his voice deep and echoing through the empty space.

Thorin straightened. “We did not attack you! We had been beset by spiders, and were hoping for aid.”

Thranduil narrowed his eyes. “And how did you come to be beset by spiders?”

“We were looking for food,” Thorin said. “Our supplies were dwindling.”

“A convenient story.” The Elvenking did not look appeased. “What are you doing in my woods?”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “Starving.”

Thranduil sneered, eyes bright. After the genteel welcome of Elrond’s house, Thorin had almost forgotten the eldritch temper of the King of the Greenwood.

“Of course,” he said. “A company of dwarves, led by the infamous Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thrain, son of Thror—yes, I know who you are—just happen to wander into my realm, and upon my people’s celebration.” His eyes flashed, and he stood before Thorin, obnoxiously close. Slowly, Thorin tilted his head back to look again at Thranduil’s face. “I do not believe it,” Thranduil hissed.

“Believe what you will,” Thorin said. “I have spoken only the truth.”

Thranduil stepped slowly around Thorin, but Thorin refused to turn his head to look. He wouldn’t give the satisfaction.

“I am sure you have,” Thranduil said. “But there is more than one way to lie, and you have not told me the whole truth.” Thorin forced himself to relax.

“I know your destination,” Thranduil said, “Some may imagine that a noble quest is at hand. A quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a dragon.” He stepped once more in front of Thorin, but
further back. “I myself suspect a more prosaic motive. Attempted burglary. Or something of that ilk.” He cocked his head. “You have found a way in. You seek that which would bestow upon you the right to rule. The King's Jewel.” He stepped closer. “The Arkenstone. It is precious to you beyond measure. I understand that.”

He turned, and walked towards his woodland throne. “There are gems in the mountain that I too desire. White gems of pure starlight. I offer you my help.”

“I am listening,” Thorin said. He had to think of his people first.

“I will let you go,” Thranduil said, and that was a surprised look from his son. Interesting. “If you but return what is mine.” And there it was. The catch. “A favor for a favor,” Thranduil continued. “You have my word. One king to another.” He stopped, bowed his head and touched his hand to his chest in the gesture of the elves.

Thorin huffed a laugh, a smirk twisting his lips. Slowly, he turned to look at the glen, the elves still assembled beyond the treeline. “I would not trust Thranduil,” he raised his voice with every phrase, “the great king…to honor his word…should the end of all days be upon us! You,” Thorin turned, pointing his finger, “who lack all honor!” Thranduil leaned back. “I have seen how you treat your friends,” Thorin snapped, stalking forward. “We came to you once, starving, homeless, seeking your help, but you turned your back!” He stopped, pointing again “You turned away from the suffering of my people, and the inferno that destroyed us!”

Thranduil flew from his throne, bringing his face to inches before Thorin. “Do not talk to me of dragon fire! I know its wrath and ruin.” As he spoke, Thranduil’s face rippled, and the skin of his cheek peeled back as if from a great flame, leaving a charred scar and whitened eye. “I have faced the great serpents of the North. I warned your grandfather of what his greed would summon, but he would not listen.” He pulled back, and the mask was again in place, his countenance smooth and cool as ice. “You are just like him.” He turned and walked back to his throne, flicking his hand. The guards closed in once more. “Stay here, if you will, and rot.” He turned and stood before his throne. “A hundred years is a mere blink in the life of an Elf. I’m patient,” he sneered. “I can wait.”

The guards grabbed Thorin, and he spat. “Ish kakhfa ai-d dur-rugnu!” Thorin growled, and met the King’s eye. “You and all your kin!” Thranduil watched until Thorin was dragged to the dungeons.

Through it all, there had been no sign of Bilbo. That, alone, was enough to give Thorin hope.

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Gimli had closed his eyes before they reached the clearing, and had not opened them since. If not for the feel of their bond, and the continued rasp of Gimli’s breathing, Legolas would have panicked.

It was not the first time Legolas had seen Gimli brought low, but it never became any easier. He hurried his steps, but it was slow going. The Company was weakened as a whole; none escaped the spiders’ venom. Most would shake it off with a hot meal and a night’s sleep, but the large one, Bombur, would need to visit the healers as well.

Glóin was uncannily quiet as they traveled, and it was clear that it was not out of deference to their captors. His face was gray and drawn, and his brother hovered. To see his fiery son so still weighed heavily on him.

“He will be alright, won’t he?” Prince Kíli asked. “I mean, he’s too stubborn to give up now.”
“Aye,” Legolas said. “Strong spirit helps the healers.” *And a judicious application of aethelas,* he thought.

“You worry too much,” Gimli said in quiet Sindarin, and Legolas looked down at him in surprise. Gimli cracked an eye open and peered up at Legolas, lips twitching into a small smile.

“You worry me too much,” Legolas responded in kind. “Now say something to your father; his glaring would soon roast me alive.”

“Aye, my love,” Gimli said, and then in Westron, “Da, stop fretting! I’m fine.”

“Gimli!” Glóin quickened his pace and appeared next to Legolas, and signed quickly in iglishmêk; Gimli rolled his eyes. Legolas hid a smile; he had never mastered the silent language of the dwarves, but he could get the impression, and further, he could hear Gimli’s voice, a memory from their life before. *Honestly. There was the need for secrecy, and then there’s this.* Gimli raised his hand to sign in return, but his fingers tangled without words. He let his hand drop.

“I know I’ve felt worse,” he said, and as he spoke his words started to slur, as if his tongue was thick in his mouth. “But, I cannot remember when.”

It was not a good sign, and Legolas called to Tauriel. “The poison is moving quickly. It is starting to affect his speech.”

“I will run ahead and warn the healers,” Tauriel said, and disappeared quick as light through the trees.

Gimli opened his mouth, the crease in his brow saying all it could about how unhappy Gimli was with this situation, when a commotion from behind them drew Legolas’s attention. His fingers twitched for his bow, but he gripped Gimli closer to his chest, and turned to look.

At the end of their trail, Bombur had fallen to his knees, taking his brother with him. He retched, spitting bile, and slumped to his side. Legolas had seen this before; no amount of urging from Bofur would be able to wake him.

Thus was the poison of the spiders: slowly it froze the body, and if left unchecked, would be the end just as quickly as if they had remained to be eaten. At this point, only the healers could help them.

The dwarves were shouting—calling for Bombur, yelling at the elves. Gimli groaned in his arms and covered his ears. He looked far too pale.

“We must move quickly!” Legolas said. “The poison is spreading too swiftly—he must get to a healer, and fast. Who can carry him?”

From the front of the group, Dwalin and Dori broke off from the rest and ran to Bofur’s side.

“We’ve got him,” Dori said, gently prying Bofur away.

“We need to move quickly,” Legolas cautioned and Dwalin scowled at him.

“We’ll keep up.”

Legolas nodded, and turned to Eredhon, Tauriel’s second. “Get them to the palace in one piece. You know what to do,”
Eredhon nodded, and barked orders. Legolas turned to the others. "Follow me," he said, and took off through the trees. Gimli clung to him a little more tightly, but otherwise made no sign that he knew what was going on.

He heard Dwalin cursing behind him, but soon enough he heard the heavy tread of dwarven feet moving at speed. They were not built for stealth, and they were slow to begin when compared to elves, but dwarves ran like not a force in Arda could stop them, moving over flora and fauna alike.

It was not long before they were within sight of the palace proper, and found Tauriel returning with Lymerian, a healer, who carried with her a healer’s pouch.

Lymerian nearly dropped her bag when she saw them, but rallied quickly.

"How long?" she demanded, skidding to a stop before them. She looked at Gimli first, pulling back an eyelid. Gimli batted at her hand, and she snorted. She pulled a bottle from her bag, uncapped the cork, and held it out until Gimli, incredulous, opened his mouth. She poured the tincture down this throat, and Gimli coughed and shuddered, but then stilled. His presence in Legolas’s mind flexed, as if gaining strength, and settled.

"A few hours from first bite," Legolas said. "I do not know how much venom they have received, but Gimli is young, and Bombur here was favored. Bombur has felt the stomach-sickness. Gimli has been drifting."

Lymerian nodded, and bent over Bombur. She pulled out a sprig of aethelas and cracked it under his nose. A moment later, he stirred, and she stuck the leaf in his mouth. Surprised, he bit down and she nodded at him.

"Good," she said, her Weston more heavily accented that Legolas’s own. "Chew."

Bombur nodded, and she turned to Legolas. "It is not good, but it is in time, I think. Get them to Nestor quickly, but the aethelas is already helping."

Legolas nodded, and said to Tauriel. "The others are not far back."

"I will see to it," she said, and ran off. Legolas, walking quickly, led the way to the healer’s rooms, Saeril walking with Bombur, shaking her head and clucking her tongue in the way shared by every healer Legolas had ever met.

The halls of healing were wide and airy, and smelled of fresh green herbs even in the deep dark of winter. Nestor, who had apprenticed in Doriath long enough ago to claim aid in bringing Legolas’s father into this world, had little patience for mess and instilled this tendency in those under her. She, like Thranduil, believed that the Greenwood did not need the world outside their realm, and in all his years, Legolas had never seen her outside this space.

Needless to say, Nestor did not look pleased at the arrival of five dwarves, two visibly sick, to her halls. Still, Nestor was a healer first, and ordered their placement on the beds with all the rigor of a drill master, though she looked as if she smelled something foul the entire time.

"Put the beardless one here," she said, pointing, and Legolas hurried to lay Gimli on the soft sheets. His love had drifted once more, and he barely stirred as he was lowered down. Legolas’s hand lingered on Gimli’s shoulder. "The fat one will have to go on the birthing bed."

Lymerian nodded, and prodded Dwalin in the right direction. He grit his teeth and growled at her, at which she grit her teeth and growled back. Surprised, Dwalin blinked at her, and lay Bombur on the bed with little fuss. Bofur tried to retain his grip on his brother’s hand, but the guards pulled
him away.

“No,” he cried. “Bombur!” He kicked out with his heavy boot and caught the guard in the shin. Unprepared, the guard loosened his grip, and Bofur was at his brother’s side in an instant, smoothing his hair and whispering in his ear. Bombur, sweating and pale, moaned and shifted.

“Leave him!” Legolas called when the guards moved to pull Bofur back once more. “I will watch him; return the others to their Company.”

The guards hesitated; it was obvious they were unsure if they could follow the orders of their prince. Legolas pulled his father’s airs around himself and raised an eyebrow. The guards bowed, and escorted Dwalin and Dori out of the room.

Nestor gathered her potions with measured movements, not rushing even though the danger was imminent. Gathering her own medicines and returning to Bombur, Saeril reached out to touch Bofur’s shoulder, hesitating a moment to lay her hand on the dirty coat.

“He will heal,” she said, the words stilted. “Cousin?”

“Brother,” Bofur said, dully, and wiped his nose on his sleeve. Lymerian’s hand dropped, her face appalled that she might have touched him.

“Brother,” she said. “Move.”

Bofur looked up at her, betrayed, but she just gestured at the basket in her hand and Bofur backed away. He pulled his hat from his head, twisting the leather between his hands as he stood, looking small and awkward and out of place in the room.

“*If you are going to stand there, you’re going to help,*” Nestor snapped at Legolas. Legolas jumped, face snapping to her. “*I will need to get at his wounds. Undress him.*”

Legolas nodded, and when Nestor turned back to her work, Legolas began to swiftly strip Gimli of his clothing. The dwarven clasps felt familiar to his fingers, and they moved with ease. Spreading open Gimli’s jerkin, he was stopped by Gimli’s hand around his wrist. Gimli’s eyes were glassy, but his voice was steady as he said;

“The Lady’s Gift, keep it safe.”

Legolas nodded, and when he finally spread the cloth covering Gimli’s chest, he saw the jewel twinkling just as brightly as it had in his memory. It was a moments work to palm the gem, to hide it up his sleeve. By then, Gimli’s eyes were closed and he did not open them again.

At length, he was stripped to his smallclothes, and Nestor all but shoved him out of the way. “*Get that one out of my halls,*” she said with a sniff. “*If he’s not sick, he doesn’t belong here.*”

Legolas nodded, and turned to Bofur. “Come, Master Dwarf. It is time you rejoined the others.”

Bofur shook his head. His eyes were red-ringed, though his cheeks were dry. “I’ll not leave my brother.”

Legolas’s face softened. “Your loyalty does you credit, but there is no need to worry. He will be given good medicine and good food, and will soon be himself again.” He tried to smile. “However, if we do not leave, Healer Nestor will be cross with us, and we may never recover.”

Bofur looked at him, frowning a little, as if unsure of the joke, but after a moment, he nodded
“Aye,” he said, and his voice was hoarse. He shoved his hat back onto his head. “Healers,” he offered with a shrug, and Legolas nodded.

“Aye,” he agreed, and held out his hand. “Come.” Bofur nodded, and allowed himself to be steered from the room. As they walked away, Legolas would have to keep his own advice. Gimli would be fine. He would be fine.

Against his forearm, the Lady’s Gift pulsed with warmth.

***

Tauriel paced at the entrance to the cells, and they caught her mid-step. She turned towards them. “There you are,” she said.

“Here we are,” Legolas responded. Taking the hint, Tauriel switched to Westron.

“The two who carried the other just arrived,” she said. “The bald one gave Elros some trouble.”

Bofur snorted. “Good,” he muttered, and Tauriel looked to him with some surprise. Bofur met her gaze with a glare. “We caught Lord Elrond by surprise, too, but we didn’t end up in shackles in Rivendell.”

“My father is not Elrond Half-elven,” Legolas said, his face wry. “Nor is this Rivendell.” He looked up at Tauriel, and the tension in his face was clear enough even for the dwarves to read.

“I will take care of things here. He must be waiting for you,” she said, not sure if she meant Thranduil or Legolas’s Husband. Gimli. The dwarf.

Legolas grinned at her quickly and touched his fingertips to his chest before turning and jogging off.

It was a good thing Legolas was happy, because Thranduil’s wrath would make Smaug look like a firecracker.

Tauriel looked down at the dwarf in front of her. He was filthy, not unexpected after running from the spiders. Like the others, he would have to be cleaned before being given a cell. “Come,” she said.

The dwarf looked up at her, sullen, let himself be guided forward. They met with Elros, the warden, who arched his brow at Tauriel, as if to say “another one?” Tauriel met his expression with a bland look, and Elros rolled his eyes.

“Coat,” he said, pointing to a nearby table, where the rest of the coats and overtunics, covered in webs and stinking, had been heaped. The dwarf just glared, and Elros sighed and snapped his fingers.

His helpers, Lethuin and Orelion, stepped forward and stripped the dwarf of his scarf and gloves, his coat and tunic. Orelion reached for his hat, but the dwarf kicked out, catching Orelion in the knee. Orelion dropped, and Lethuin and Tauriel both drew their weapons. The dwarf froze, breathing heavily from where he was crouched.

Tauriel dropped her bow first. “Let him keep the hat, Elros,” she said.
Elros glared at her, not liking it at all, but he nodded. “Very well,” he said. “Search him.” Orelion limped forward while Lethuin kept her bow trained on the dwarf. Patphen came up with nothing but a simple wooden flute, the dwarf’s knife and pick taken when they were first captured. “Put him with the others.”

Lethuin stepped forward, but Tauriel spoke first. “I will take him,” she said, and before Elros could say anything, Tauriel took the dwarf by the shoulder and pushed him from the room and down into the dungeons.

“Why?” the dwarf asked quietly after a moment.

Tauriel considered his question. “My King’s orders were clear,” she said. “But until he speaks with your leader, there is no reason to treat you poorly.”

The dwarf snorted. “I think the dungeons is poor treatment enough.”

“This is no dark prison,” she said. “This is the Woodland Realm. You will be treated well enough, prisoner or no.” The dwarf gave her such a look, that she felt ashamed. “Here,” she said, and opened the gate.

This cell was already occupied by one of the dwarves—the quiet one with the disturbing axe in his head. He would make a good cell mate, she thought, but still she was surprised when the dwarf in her care called out, “Bifur!” and ran into the cell. The other dwarf—Bifur, stood and let himself be embraced. He didn’t say anything, but he tugged on one of the other dwarf’s braids. Tauriel closed the cell door.

On her way out, she passed by the cell of the one she was starting to think of as “her” dwarf, the dark Prince Kíli. He had been jailed with his brother, the blond who had carried an impressive number of knives. He was at the cell door, leaning against the bars.

“You know,” he called out, “they searched my brother, my cousins…but you never searched me past my coat.”

She stopped, and looked down at him, stepping closer. “Are you saying I should search you, now?”

“Well,” he said, and looked up at her with an expression of such obviously false innocence, “I could have anything down my trousers.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

Tauriel had to force herself not to smile at the obvious ploy. He could really be quite charming. She raised her eyebrows in return. “Or nothing,” she said, and turned on her heel. She had to report to King Thranduil.

“You’re an idiot,” she heard the blond say as she was leaving.

“She’s warming to me,” Prince Kíli said.

Well, she thought. He’s not wrong.

***

Radagast pulled his sled to a halt at the foot of the High Fells of Rhudaur and looked up at their heights. The sky above them was thundercloud grey, and the broken stoneface stood out against it like a broken tooth.
There was nothing green and growing here; nothing good could grow here, in the desolate north.

He whistled, and his rabbits disappeared back into the woods behind him. He wouldn’t wish for them to wait out in the open. Not here. There was no telling what foul things could be in the air above them. No, better for him to go alone. He lifted his hat, and the clever little sparrow flew off to see what it could.

Radagast set his shoulders and began to climb. If he looked closely, he could see the outline of Gandalf’s hat against the stone. He would find out just why Gandalf had brought him here.

The climb was long and treacherous, the path worn away and crumbling. He could tell where Gandalf misstepped, the exposed rock new. It was slow, but he came at last to the entrance to the tomb, sliding down. It was only luck that kept him from falling to an untimely end.

Gandalf was at the other end of the chamber, looking into a darkened hole, burst open from within, with the light of his staff. Radagast moved quickly over to him.

The faster he had his answers, the faster they could leave.

Gandalf stood still, and turned abruptly, staff at the ready and light shining in Radagast’s face. “Oh, it's you!” Gandalf grumbled, dropping his staff.

For all that Gandalf was usually the most happy to see him, especially since Saruman had grown cold as of late, even he was cross with Radagast most of the time. It would bother Radagast more, if he didn’t know the things Gandalf most dreaded were proving to be upsettingly true.

“Why am I here, Gandalf?” he asked.

Gandalf shot him a look. “Trust me, Radagast. I would not have called you here without good reason,” he said, and moved past Radagast back into the main, floorless chamber.

“This is not a nice place to meet,” Radagast said again.

“No,” Gandalf said, distracted as he hefted his staff higher to illuminate the walls. “It is not.”

Gandalf’s half-truths and riddles could confusticate even another wizard. Radagast tried again. “These are dark spells, Gandalf. Old and full of hate. Who's buried here?”

Gandalf looked at Radagast, his face half-shadow. “If he had a name, it's long since been lost. He would have been known only as a servant of evil. One of a number. One of Nine.”

Radagast shuddered, looking away. It couldn’t be. But, it was impossible to deny the darkness spreading through the Greenwood, the spiders, the Prince.

“Why now, Gandalf?” he asked. “I don't understand.”

Gandalf looked up at where, far above, they could see a small square of light. “The Ringwraiths have been summoned to Dol Guldur.” With that, he turned and nearly flew from the tombs.

Radagast caught up with him on the side of the mountain. “But it cannot be the Necromancer,” he called. “A human sorcerer could not summon such evil.”

Gandalf glanced back over his shoulder. “Who said it was human?” he asked. “The Nine only answer to one master. We’ve been blind, Radagast.” He turned back around, chastising himself most of all. “And in our blindness, the Enemy has returned. He is summoning his servants.” He
stopped and turned. Radagast came in close, and Gandalf dropped his voice. “Azog the Defiler is no ordinary hunter. He is a commander; a commander of legions. The Enemy is preparing for war.” He looked up. “It will begin in the East. His mind is set upon that mountain.”

He turned and made as if he would run all the way to the Lonely Mountain. No—if what he said was true, they had their duty here. Radagast loved his forest, and all that dwelled within, but he was not, as Saruman believed, so far gone that he did not remember his duty.

“Where are you going?” Radagast called.

“To rejoin the others,” Gandalf said, picking his way among the rocks.

“Gandalf,” Radagast said.

Gandalf stopped and turned. “I started this. I cannot forsake them. They are in grave danger.”

Radagast closed his eyes for a moment. The pieces were falling into place, and he did not like the picture—and more, there was something missing, something not lining up. Gandalf would be able to see it, but Gandalf wasn’t looking at all the pieces. “If what you say is true, the world is in grave danger,” he said. “The power in that fortress will only grow stronger.”

Gandalf scowled. “You want me to cast my friends aside?” he demanded. “I started this, it is only right that I be there to finish it.”

“And if you are right?” Radagast said. “If the Enemy has regained a foothold in this world, we must root it out before it is too late. You feared the dragon as an ally for the Dark Lord—let’s not give them that chance.”

“Radagast, I have a duty to them—”

“You have a duty to Middle Earth!” Radagast snapped. “If I did not know better, I would think I am the only one who remembers that! Saruman is content to remain locked in the tower, we have heard nothing from Morinehtar and Rómestámo in nearly an age, and you—you are too caught up in your meddling to notice when the world is falling to darkness!” He stopped, breathing heavily. His sparrow alit on his hat, and his fury faded.

Gandalf scowled, his presence growing dark and terrible. “Do not presume to know my mind,” he thundered.

“I do not,” Radagast said wearily. “I know only your action, Gandalf, and my own heart. We have been in this world too long, old friend.”

Gandalf’s ire faded, and he looked over the forest towards the Lonely Mountain.

“Things are changing, Radagast, and quickly. Soon, I fear, we will face such a threat…” he trailed off. “Either way, I do not believe we are long for this world.”

Radagast stepped closer. He knew he wouldn’t sail; even if they were called back to Valinor tomorrow, Radagast couldn’t leave his forest. It had too much of his heart. But Gandalf…Gandalf would sail. He missed his home, and Radagast would not deny his friend that hope. “We thought so before,” he said.

“Yes,” Gandalf said, and nodded. “But the Valar have made themselves known through an unlikely champion. They would not interfere if not necessary, and I fear for the fate of these lands.” He shook his head. “You are right, of course. Come,” he walked back towards Radagast. “We must
return South, and quickly.”

Chapter End Notes

_Ish kakhfa ai-d dur-rugnu!_ - May you burn in Dragon Fire
Here it is, at long last!

Thank you, Livingmeatloaf, for being such an amazing beta.

Gimli woke briefly when the Healer first put her hands on him. He had been stripped of his tunic, and her hands burned where they touched his cold skin. Someone was swearing in khudzul, he could hear it distant to his ears. As the elven magic took hold, and he felt the pain recede, he realized it was his own self, and he gasped.

"Le fael," he choked out, mind dizzy and fading once more. "Le fael," Le fael...

***

Legolas took a deep breath, pausing outside his father’s throneroom. He smoothed his hands over his braids—still his bonding braids. He was getting better, but Gimli was right. They were still a fright. That wouldn’t help his case, he knew, but there was nothing for it.

“Better done quickly,” said the Gimli in his mind. “And quit fretting! He dotes on you and you know it.”

“Aye,” Legolas said quietly. “And I hate to use it. My father deserves better.”

“Legolas,” Thranduil called. “Do not hover so!”

Legolas stepped into the room. His father was still draped over his throne, one leg crossed over the other. He held a glass of wine loosely in one hand, the other pressed long fingers to his forehead. Thranduil’s frustration was palpable.

“Ada?” Legolas asked.

“The Valar save me from Dwarves,” Thranduil said, voice dry. He drained his glass and peered at his son. It was obvious Thranduil had been drinking, and for some time.

“They are known for their stubbornness,” Legolas said, and wished for his husband’s silver tongue. Legolas had never developed the disposition for diplomacy. “And pride, and both are justly deserved.”

Thranduil made an ungraceful sound. “It will lead to the destruction of us all, if it is not stopped.”

“A greater Shadow is rising,” Legolas said, and refused to look away. “If the dragon is not dealt with, it will lead to an even greater doom.” If the enemy had an ally with Smaug—even a small dragon is a dragon, and Mithrandir’s fear was now his own.

Thranduil’s eyes glittered in the darkness. “You are young yet, my son. Though you have only seen the wrath of lesser beasts, it is still terrible. There is no greater doom left in Middle Earth.”
“You do not believe that,” Legolas said, “and have not since the Spiders returned to the forest. The paths of my dreams oft took me to a darkness in the south, an ancient evil with a new face. The Shadow is growing in strength, and Smaug is too great a threat to leave be. The dwarves march at Mithrandir’s prompting—”

“Oh, Mithrandir,” Thranduil snapped, and stood abruptly, stalking down the stairs. “The grey wizard’s fingers are all over this, I should have known. Thorin Oakenshield is too smart to attempt the mountain on his own, but dumb enough to give in when prompted. It reeks of that wizard.”

“He is wise—“

“He is a troublemaker,” Thranduil said. He stopped near Legolas, looking down at him. “And how have you come by this knowledge?”

Legolas stood a little taller. “Gimli told me.”

“Gimli,” Thranduil repeated, face smoothing. “And which is Gimli? The fat one? Angry one? Or the child they brought with them on this foolish quest?” He made a dismissive sound. “That they would endanger the life of a child so—“

“You think they have a choice?” Legolas snapped. “You know as well as I the devastation of Erebor’s fall, how slow they are to recover. Gimli would not be with them if the need was not so dire!”

“You defend them,” Thranduil said, mild, and Legolas fell silent. How much had he given away.

“How strange, that this dwarf should spark such fire in you.” Thranduil began to pace, walking around Legolas, who held himself still.

“He is passionate,” Legolas said. “It is hard to not rise to meet it.”

“Indeed,” Thranduil drawled. “And to what end, I wonder. Still,” he said, and pulled back. “He will soon be in the cells with the others, and we will have time to see just what hold he tries to place on you, my son.”

Legolas glared. “None may hold me that I do not wish.”

“No?” Thranduil asked quietly. “I wonder.” He sipped his wine. “The healer came to see me earlier,” he said. “It seems that this Gimli speaks our language, and with surprising skill for a dwarf, who have never shown love for our ways. Does that not trouble you?”

“Should it?” Legolas asked. His voice was steady, but he could feel his heart quake.

“Not anymore,” Thranduil said. “It is my concern, and soon I will have my answers.” He breathed in sharply and seemed to shift before Legolas’s eyes. In the place of a cold king was a warm father. Thranduil raised his hand to Legolas’s face, and gently touched the backs of his fingertips to Legolas’s temple. “It was good to see you dance, my son. I was so worried that you would be so lost to us, that it did not matter that you moved so strangely.” He smiled, but Legolas could no longer see it as kind. “You must be tired. Rest, now. Tomorrow you resume your duties in the forest.”

It was what he had wanted. It was a test.

Legolas stepped back to bow, his hand crossing his chest to press at his heart. Thranduil’s hand swam through the gesture in return, and turned heel and left.
Tauriel was hurrying down the hallway toward him, and she fell into step as he stalked away.

“He knows,” Legolas said. Tauriel stopped short, and it took her several moments to catch up again.

“What do you mean, ‘he knows’?”

“I mean ‘he knows,’ what else would I mean?” Legolas asked, they came to a crossroads. Left led to Legolas’s rooms, right led to the archery grounds. Legolas went right.

“All of it?” Tauriel pressed “Did you tell him?”

Legolas slowed his speed. “Not in any words,” he said. “None that I meant to, anyway. But he saw me dance, and he saw my care for Gimli and my speech may have been…uncautious. I have not Gimli’s skill for wordplay.” He stopped, and turned to Tauriel, leaning in to speak quietly. “He knows that there is a bond between Gimli and I. He may not know the full extent of that bond, not its type, but he knows it’s there and he will seek to sunder it.”

“Tell him,” Tauriel urged. Legolas turned to leave, and she stopped him with a hand on his arm. “I am being serious, Legolas. Tell him. If he knew, he would not stand in your way. He loves you.”

“And I am sure Luthien’s father loved her as well, but still he prevented her union to Beren. Nay,” Legolas shook his head. “It will not yet help, and it will only hinder. The Dragon takes precedence. Thorin Oakenshield must get to the mountain by Durin’s Day. The fate of Middle Earth depends on it. Where my father is concerned, my love life will have to wait.”

Tauriel looked ready to protest, and Legolas stayed her with a hand. “Do not fret, Tauriel. My love for Gimli is strong and true, and our union was blessed by the Valar. We share a bond not even my father can break, and he cannot stop what has already passed. Yet…” he paused. “It pains me to admit, but I fear what he may do to Gimli in the blindness of his rage. Until Gimli is no longer his prisoner, my father cannot know the full truth. Do you understand?”

Tauriel narrowed her eyes at him. “I understand.”

“Good,” Legolas said. “Now, I am going to shoot my bow until I run out of arrows or out of anger. You may come with me if you wish.” He turned and walked on, and felt Tauriel fall into step behind.

Legolas had been to the training grounds of Men, and had been bewildered by stationary targets. Animals did not stand still when hunted. Orcs certainly did not stand still in battle. Why, then, would one practice with targets that stood still?

Dwarves, at least, understood this. In the depths of Erebor, they had constructed elaborate courses that had been a joy to run, and in Aglarond, Gimli had built Legolas a run like no other.

Too, had Legolas had his run of the courses at Lorien and Rivendell, but none compared to the course Legolas had first trained on, in the Greenwood.

Several targets had been strung to trees, left to twist in the wind, and every hit target made the others spin faster. The course took the runner off the ground and into the trees, dancing along the branches and flying through the air.

Aulas, the weapons keeper, spluttered when Legolas stormed into the room. "My prince," she exclaimed. "What a surprise! Have you come to run the course?"
"I have," Legolas said, short. It was yet another example of how far gone he had been that Aulas was surprised. There was a time when he ran this course every day.

Pushing it from his mind, Legolas picked up a full quiver and bow. He missed his Galadrim bow like a lost limb, but he could find no fault with the bows of his people. Their shorter length was better for the close confines of this forest, anyway. He strapped the quiver to his hip. "And I am in no mood to tarry."

"Of course," Aulas said. "It's free now."

Legolas nodded and pulled three arrows from his quiver. "Good," he said, and took off.

It was a relief to run, to fall into the rhythm of the draw and release, the sing and twump of the arrow loosed to its target, a solid hit every time. Some countless time later, when his ire had cooled and his head leveled once more, Legolas collected his arrows and headed back. He did not return to ground, so much as touch down, alighting as if from flight.

Aulas was speaking with Tauriel, so Legolas took his borrowed equipment back to the rack. The damaged arrows went to a small basket, to be either repaired or recycled, and when Legolas turned, he saw it: the dwarven weapons, collected in a large trunk. It had to be; Legolas had never seen this trunk here before. With a quick glance to make sure Aulas was still preoccupied, Legolas crept over and peered into the trunk.

It was unlocked—who would take them, after all. Few of the elves here would see the value of dwarven weapons, and less still would think to take them. They all appeared to be there; several dwarven swords, Dwalin's axes, and a gracefully curved axe that Legolas recognized from Gimli's hands among them. The only weapon missing was Thorin's blade, Orcrist.

Legolas closed the trunk, thoughtfully. The weapons would be safe here, for now.

***

The second time, Gimli woke to the smell of food. Hearty game meat and fresh bread.

"Here," the healer said in clear Westron. Gimli was surprised. He hadn’t figured this elf would have learned Westron. Though, judging by her accent, northern like Celeborn’s, this Elf may not have had a choice. “Eat slowly.” She handed him a bowl of venison soup and a chunk of heavy bread.

Gimli accepted the bowl with a grateful nod. “Meat?” he heard Bombur say. “There’s meat in this?”

The healer nodded. “You are dwarves,” she said, like she was speaking to a child—or an idiot. Gimli narrowed his eyes: it figured that the elves knew what dwarves ate and deliberately fed them differently. Bombur, however, did not notice—or, more likely, did not care about—the slight, and tore a piece of bread from his loaf. (Gimli noticed that he himself had only gotten a half.) Bombur dunked the bread in the soup, and stuffed it into his mouth, muffling a desperate noise. Overcome, the ginger dwarf started to sob, even as he continued to eat. The healer looked at him askance, and then made herself scarce. Gimli, out of courtesy, pretended not to notice and focused on his own food.

He had barely finished his soup before his eyes grew heavy once more. He slept.

***
In the morning, Legolas dressed once more in his simple leathers and light armor. He slung his bow across his back and his quiver at his hip. On his other hip he wore his long bone-handled knife. It felt like the first warmth of spring, new and familiar and full of promise.

Today, Legolas would not be traveling far. He would return to the glade the dwarves had invaded the night before, along with a small company of others. There, they would search for clues as to the dwarves' true motives (they would find none), and clear out whatever was left of the spider’s nest.

Tauriel met him at the gate with Calen and the twins, Meludir and Merenon, three of his top guards. They all looked glad to see him. He nodded to them. “Let’s go,” he said, and led them off into the woods at a run.

***

The third time Gimli woke, it was slow, as if climbing out of a deep tunnel. Awareness lurked in the distance, like the light of the surface, and when Gimli emerged, blinking, he realized that while he was now aware, he had been awake and staring at the ceiling for some time.

It wasn’t a bad ceiling, as ceilings go. It was hearty stone, though much lighter than any dwarven ceiling. He looked around the room.

The halls, like the rest of the Woodland Realm, was underground—part of a network of shallow and airy caves. It barely felt like they were underground, which, he supposed, was the point. All in all, it was a very Elvish cave, closer to Bilbos smail than a dwarven city.

It must have been night, for the room was dimly lit by only a few, scattered and flickering candles. In the half-light, Gimli could see the dancing shape of a skylight above. At full noon, this room would be dazzling.

There was no sign of the healer, and it didn’t surprise Gimli. She had seemed resigned to their care, but he didn’t expect her to be inclined to sit with them.

Bombur snored happily. His emotional outburst earlier must have drained him, for he seemed nowhere near waking. Bombur, and Gimli himself, were dressed in simple white tunics. A quick peek under the blanket showed simple drawstring trousers as well.

“I had not thought it possible,” said a quiet, familiar, welcome, voice. “But he snores louder than you.”

“I don’t snore,” Gimli said, grinning, and turning his head to face his husband. Legolas was no longer dressed in his festival clothes, but wore instead clothes similar to what he wore on the quest under his leathers. He had been out in the woods today.

“I see,” Legolas said, humming. “Then it is as a rattle to a snake—a warning, for all to fear and stay away.”

“Silly elf, not to hear a warning,” Gimli agreed, nodding his head, lips pressed together to try and keep his face solemn.

“Aye,” Legolas said. “And I have found, once bitten, that your venom leaves me wanting more.”

Gimli rolled his eyes at that; his love was not a poet for all his propensity for poetic illusion. Still,
Legolas placed his cool hand on Gimli’s forehead, smoothing it back over the tangle of Gimli’s hair. “How do you feel, my love?”

“I’ll not lie,” Gimli said, leaning into the touch. “I’ve felt better. But so, too, now, have I felt worse, and I trust in your elvish physic.” Gimli pushed himself up to sit, and Legolas helped him shift his pillows.

“Legolas,” Gimli said once settled, taking his husband’s hand. “I heard tale that you were ill—driven mad by some strange malady.”

Legolas smiled, but it was weary and his strain showed clearly.

“You have heard the truth,” he said. “But not all, for I was mad for a while, though it seems the worst has passed. I fear I will forever bear its scars.”

“But what was it?” Gimli pushed.

“Haven’t you guessed?” Legolas asked, tired and unsurprised. He shook his head. “It was no one thing.” He sat on the edge of Gimli’s bed. Gimli shifted, and gestured between his legs. Legolas shifted over, and tilted his head back, so Gimli could address his braids while he spoke. Gimli unwound his braids, combing through the freed strands with gentle fingers. When the last braid gone, Legolas began to speak.

“I watched you die,” Legolas said, his voice quiet. “I saw the life fade from your eyes and I was lost to my grief.” Gimli’s hands stilled in his hair, and then began to move slowly, steadily “Yet, still I could feel you in my mind. That alone kept me from Fading—but it was close, and my mind was…fragile. It made what happened next all the more difficult to bear.”

Gimli tugged gently, reassuring, and Legolas continued: “The memory of elves never fades,” he said. “It remains forever fresh in our minds. When I awoke here, I was often confused as to when I was: was I truly in my past and only felt that I knew the future, or was I my future self gone back to earlier days. My past often seemed no different than my present, yet I had changed.

“As I lay sick, and the present began to differ from that change, it became easier to stay in the present, to fight. Too, did I feel you getting nearer, though I did not realize that until the feast the day before last.”

“Two days?” Gimli asked. “Never mind that. Go on.”

Legolas smiled. “Once more, my love, I feel the sea calling for me. It is not like before, the ever-consuming tide, but close to what I imagine the Lady Galadriel feels—a strong desire to return home.”

“We will,” Gimli said, tying off the last braid. “One day, we will have our home again.” Smiling, Legolas leaned back and tipped his chin up for a kiss.

“When our task at hand is done,” Legolas said, leaning back against Gimli’s chest. Gimli’s arm wrapped around Legolas’s chest, his fingers running along the stitching on Legolas’s tunic. “Once again, darkness threatens this land—an old evil, one we have already defeated.” Legolas shook his head. “I do not understand. I have seen things in my dreams, but they make little sense.”

“Something must be different this time,” Gimli said. He placed a gentle kiss on Legolas’s neck. “I saw, her, you know,” he said, and propped his chin on Legolas’s shoulder. “The Lady. I still have her favor, though to her this was our first meeting. She spoke to me of this. I proved to her my story with her gift to me.”
“Yes!” Legolas said, “I have it here.” He sat up and took out a velvet cloth and pulled back a corner to show Gimli the Lady’s gift.

“Thank you,” Gimli said, taking the gift and tucking it into his tunic. “I do not want to think about what your father would do if he had found it while I was unable to defend myself.”

Legolas’s face darkened. “Take it as proof of your evil intentions, no doubt,” he muttered. He stood and urged Gimli to move forward, so Legolas could sit behind him. His fingers dug through Gimli’s hair to scratch at his scalp and Gimli’s eyelids drooped in pleasure. With deft movement, Legolas separated out a section and twisted in the bonding braid with quick fingers. “He suspects something between us,” he said as he worked. Gimli snorted at the irony. “To that end, he has set Tauriel to watch my movements. She is to ensure that I do not betray him through some magic of the dwarves.”

Gimli raised an eyebrow. “And you are here?”

Legolas shrugged. “She knows the truth. I told her of you several weeks ago. She believes in your cause, and will be of great help to us.” He tied off Gimli’s braid, and kissed the top of Gimli’s head.

“It will be sore needed,” Gimli said. “Battle must be avoided, if all possible.” He sighed, and turned to face Legolas. “The Lady warned about speaking too much of the future. Some events may not be altered, and I pray that this is not one of them. The Enemy grows stronger in the South, the Ring has been found, and we cannot afford the loss of war. Too much can change in sixty years to believe that the world will work itself out as it did before.”

“Mayhaps our victory is one of the events that cannot be altered,” Legolas said, quietly.

“Mayhaps,” Gimli agreed, but neither believed it. He sighed. “If only we knew why we had returned. A new evil, perhaps, to aid Sauron?”

Legolas’s eyes widened. “Nay, Gimli. Not new. Old. Old, and familiar.” He squeezed Gimli’s hand so tightly that Gimli had to squeeze back for fear of bruising. “Gimli, the same Enemy grows, but he is already stronger than the first time. He is more, like he was at the very last…” He trailed off, but Gimli knew. He knew.

“If we were not the only ones sent back…” he said slowly.

“We were sent back because he came back,” Legolas finished.

“This is not good,” Gimli said, and sighed. “We’ll just have to defeat him again. We’ve done it before, after all.”

The look Legolas gave him was so dry, Gimli longed for an ale.

Legolas sighed and stood. “I cannot stay,” he said. “My father has seen fit to give me my position once more, and in the morning we hunt spiders. We will be gone for most of a fortnight, and there is much preparation to be done. If Master Baggins has freed you by the time I return, I will seek you in Laketown and the Mountain.”

“I shall miss you all the more for seeing you so briefly,” Gimli said, and kissed the back of Legolas’s hand. “But seeing you well has eased my mind, and I will hold my new memories of you close to my heart, to warm me while you are away.”

“Such pretty words,” Legolas whispered, and bent over Gimli for a lingering kiss. “I will see you
when I return.”

“I will hold you to it,” Gimli said, and then Legolas was gone. It took some time for Gimli to fall asleep, even with the comforting drone of Bombur’s snores.

***

In the morning, an elven guard appeared at Gimli’s bedside. Gimli looked up from his simple breakfast of bread, and looked the guard over.

“Time to change rooms, I see,” he said. “Can I finish this, or am I eating on the move?”

The guard didn’t answer, and Bombur slowed his chewing to watch. Gimli sighed. “On the move, then,” he said, and stood. The stone floor was cool under his feet, but they had taken his boots somewhere he did not know. He squared his shoulders and let himself be guided forward. He ate his crust of bread as he walked, the guard a mere half-step behind him, hand on his sword.

“You can relax, lad, I’m not going to fight ye,” Gimli said, brushing his hands together to wipe off the crumbs. “What would I fight you with? Dwarves are doughty, aye, but we do know to pick our battles when we can.”

The guard did not so much as even twitch, and Gimli sighed.

The cells were deeper into the ground than the rest of the hold, but even they were too bright and airy to be called a proper dungeon. The cells had been carved from a natural cave and fitted with bars. An underground stream ran through the lowest level (no doubt this was the same river that fed into Long Lake.)

Most of the cells they passed were empty, and worry began to trickle into the back of Gimli’s mind. Were they taking him to the rest of the Company? Was he, like Thorin, to be kept separate from the rest?

They turned a corner, heading down to a lower level, when Gimli heard the first cry.

“Gimli!” It was Nori. “Gimli, you’re all right! Someone tell his Da!”

Then, the hall was filled with the voices of the dwarves as they all pressed against the bars, trying to see him.

“Aye, I’m fine,” Gimli said. “I’m a dwarf, ain’t I?”

“Good lad,” Dwalin rumbled as he walked by.

Then, from the far end of the row, “My son! Gimli! Inudoy!”

“Da!” Gimli cried out, and ran to him, surprising the guard. His bare feet slapped against stone, and he skittered to a halt outside his father’s cell. “Da!”

Glóin reached out for him, and Gimli met him there, pressing their foreheads together as best they could through the bars. Glóin had his fingers twisted in Gimli’s tunic. Gimli gripped his father’s arms tight.

“They wouldn’t let me,” Glóin sobbed. “I asked, but they wouldn’t say. Oh, my boy, my son.”

“I’m fine, Da,” Gimli said. “Bombur too. Someone should tell Bofur.”
“Aye, we will,” Óin said, and Gimli looked up to smile at him.

The guard loomed, leaning close, and Gimli pulled away. “Sorry,” he said, but it was clear to all that he did not mean it. “I knew my father would worry.”

Something, a shadow of understanding, flitted across the elf’s face. So that was it then? Family? That was their weakness.

“Move,” the guard said, and Gimli wondered just how much Westron this elf could speak.

Gimli nodded, and looked over his shoulder. “I’ll be fine,” he said to Glóin. Glóin looked like he didn’t trust Gimli’s opinion of the situation, but the guard was relentless, and so Gimli found himself descending lower into the dungeons.

They met the warden at the last cell on the left, and he opened the door. Gimli walked through calmly, and turned around as they were locking the door.

“I don’t suppose I could get my boots back?” he asked. The guards did not reply. “Of course not,” Gimli muttered, and turned around. “Why would they.”

Fíli and Kíli stood shoulder-to-shoulder, arms crossed and faces grave.

“It is time for some answers, cousin,” Fíli said, and Kíli’s eyes narrowed.

“Oh,” Gimli said, and his shoulders slumped. "Heh. Right." He sat on the edge of the bed. Did they really expect the three of them to share this one bed? It was large enough, sure, but only just, and only if they lay half on-top of each other. "I don't suppose either of you have a pipe?"

To his surprise, Fíli had managed to hold on to his pipe, and Kíli had some leaf left in his pouch. Soon enough, Gimli was drawing in smoke, and desperately trying to find the words.

“You smoke more than you used to,” Fíli said, breaking into Gimli’s thoughts.

“Do I?” Gimli asked, looking over at Fíli. His cousin had sat next to him on the bed, and while he hadn’t relaxed in the slightest, he did not seem to view Gimli as a threat. He pulled out his comb and gestured for Gimli to shift closer. Gimli did, fully expecting to have his hair pulled, and knew that is served him right. It was unusual for Fíli to groom him again so soon after the last time, but he knew his cousin was more focused when his hands were busy, and it gave him some measure of control when all else had been stripped from him. Even Kíli’s hair was more orderly than usual. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“You laugh less, too,” Fíli said. “But when you do laugh, it’s deeper somehow. You’re less angry, but I wouldn’t say you’re happier. You act as if there is something missing, and you’re the only one who knows what it is.” Fíli put his comb down, and met Gimli’s eyes squarely. “And sometimes, when you look at us, you look as if you’re staring at ghosts, not people.”

Gimli looked away, heart hammering in his chest.

“Not to mention that thing you keep hiding in your tunic,” Kíli said, sitting on the other side of Gimli. “And what's this,” Gimli felt his cousin’s fingers in his hair, tugging gently on his marriage braid, and he twisted away from them both, standing.

“Don’t—” he bit off, and grit his teeth against any other words, breathing heavily through his teeth. "You're an archer, Kíli. You sight is better than most. You know exactly what that is, and more, you know better than to touch it."
Kíli rolled his eyes and crossed his arms. “Then you better start talking.”

Fíli nodded. “It’s been clear to us that you’ve been hiding something, something bigger than these dreams of yours. Kíli tells me you’ve taken up with an elf, with the son of Thranduil, and you come back to us with marriage braids in your hair.” He stood and took Gimli by the shoulders. “You’ve always been smarter than you look, and true-hearted. You haven’t told us for a reason, and I believe that you had good reason for that. But the time for secrets has long passed, and we both know how much you despise untruths.”

“That, and you’re a terrible liar,” Kíli said and grinned.

Gimli snorted. “I am at that,” he said, and felt a weight lift off his shoulders. “And you know me far too well. My silence on this matter has weighed heavily on my mind, and there is little I am able to tell. Still, I would tell you what I can, but,” Gimli looked between them, “what I tell you now, you can tell no one, not even Thorin.” Gimli shook his head. “Especially not Thorin.”

Fíli and Kíli exchanged a look. “Please,” Gimli said, softly. “I would not ask if the need were not dire.”

"Very well," Fíli said. "But you must tell us everything. What is your connection with this elf?"

Gimli snorted. "That is both the most and least strange part of my tale. My connection to Legolas is exactly what it appears to be. He is my husband, and I his. We were wed first in elven fashion, and then went through the full pomp of a dwarvish wedding, at behest of the king, who both wanted to show his acceptance and punish me, I am sure."

Fíli and Kíli boggled. "When?" Fíli asked.

"Oh," Gimli said, wagging his head. "About sixty years from now."

Fili's face fell. "That's not funny."

"I'm not joking," Gimli countered. He sighed. "Here we come to my greatest lie, the one from which all others spring. I have not been dreaming of the future, Fíli. I have no skill at divination, not as my Uncle does. What I have is memory and luck, for what I know I have lived through. The Valar have seen fit to send me, and with me my husband, back through the veil of time, to change the course of future events. The continued existence of the dragon is more than just the bane of dwarves; it is a threat to the future of Middle Earth, for the Shadow that grows in the south is the Enemy of old, and we fear that he, too, has returned from the future and all our plans have been revealed to him, so he is stronger both in might and in knowledge."

Gimli sat, feeling the full weight of his years even in his young frame. "There is a war coming, a total war for the fate of all free peoples, the likes of which have not been seen since the Last Alliance. Nowhere will be spared. Not the north. Not the realms of the elves. Not even the Shire. Already, we are engaged in the first moves of this war, and the first battle will come this year, after Durin's Day, when the orcs of the Misty Mountains join forces with the orcs of Gundabad and lay siege to Erebor, and the forces of men, elves, and dwarves. It will be known as the Battle of Five Armies, and the cost will be likened to Azanulbizar."

Kíli frowned at him. "Not for nothing cousin, but how hard did you hit your head?" He looked to Fíli, but Fíli was pale.

"The king," he said, his voice raspy. "You mentioned married at behest of the king. It was not Thorin, was it?"
Gimli sighed, at last looking away. "It was a Thorin," he said. "Son of Dain."

"Uncle never sees the throne, does he?" Fíli continued. "Nor does Kíli or I? Do we?" Gimli did not answer, and Fíli's voice broke as he thundered, "Do we?!

"Thorin, yes," Gimli said, voice snapping. "For all of a week. The curse on the line of Durin takes him, and he falls under the spell of dragon gold." He softened, and held a hand out to Fíli. "But he shakes free, in the end. He died with his own mind."

Fíli let out a small, broken sound, and Kíli gripped him tight, wrapping his arms around Fíli's shoulders as Fíli let himself fall to the floor.

"That is why I am here," Gimli said, weary. "That is why your mother sent me. I am to see you live through what is to come. So I have vowed, and so I will do. Besides," he bared his teeth, and his voice pulsed with purpose. "No dwarf has ever turned wraith. No dwarf has ever bowed to the will of another master. He had to create dragons to deal with our might, and we will prove to him that the dragons are no match for us. The Shadow will quake before the Line of Durin, and we will send him back to the abyss from whence he came."

The brothers' eyes glittered when they looked at him.

"Aye," Kíli said.

"Aye," Fíli agreed. "Uncle will live."

"You all will live," Gimli said, sure. "True, the Enemy knows our strategy. But what he does not know, is that we know he knows, and that gives us an advantage."

Fíli pulled back from Kíli, his hand firm around his brother's neck. "That's all well and good, but Thorin has put his royal boot in his royal mouth, and pissed off the Elvenking."

Kíli grinned. "He told him to ishk khakfe andu null."

Fíli snorted, "So, we're going to be here for a while."

Gimli sighed. "Aye, that sounds like him. Still, we are not without friends," he said.

"Aye," Kíli said. "There's your elvish sweetheart. Still, we are not without friends," he said.

"You forget," Gimli said. "Legolas has not been himself these past few months. His influence has waned. His father has seen fit to return him to his old position, and so my husband is fighting spiders in the forest. To fight his father would mean a return to his old state, just as imprisoned as we, and we will need him free. No, for now, I am here with the rest of you, but Legolas is not the only friend here."

"Bilbo," Fíli said. "You mean Bilbo."

"Aye," Gimli said. "He followed the Company here, unseen, by means that I hesitate to speak of. The Lady Galadriel advised against speaking too much of the future to come. Already, I feel as if I have told you too much, but my untruths have weighed too much upon my mind. The last time, Bilbo managed the escape of the Company. We must have faith that he will do so again."

Kíli frowned. "You seem very willing to leave things up to chance. Why not keep us from the dungeon in the first place?"
"Do you not remember the state he was in?" Fíli asked. "He could barely walk straight, let alone keep us from this place."

"Thank you, for that," Gimli grumbled. "But that is only part of it." He sighed. "Some events must happen; they are fixed in time, and no matter what I do they will occur. When I have tried to stop them in the past, they have only changed for the worst."

"Then how do you know that our deaths can be changed?" Fíli asked.

Gimli met his look. "I have faith that the universe would not be so cruel."

"I think we are both overlooking the most important thing," Kíli said. He plopped down next to Gimli and slung an arm around his shoulders. "Our little Gimmer's has married a prince. He is moving up in the world."

"Aye, a prince," he said, snorting. "He's about as princely as you lot." Kíli grinned, but Fíli cuffed the back of Gimli's head.

"An elven prince. A prince of Mirkwood," Fíli said. "What were you thinking?"

Gimli sighed. "I have oft asked myself the same question. But, my answer is this: I was thinking that I love him, and the world is too uncertain to let love pass by. I do not care that he is an elf, nor does he care that I am a dwarf. More, I do not love him despite his race, but because of it, for if he was not an elf he would not be Legolas, as if I were not a dwarf I would not be Gimli."

Fíli shook his head. "I cannot help but wonder, how did your father take it? How did his?"

"Not well, not at first," Gimli said. "Da yelled until he was redder than my hair, and grumbled for a good long while. In the end it was your mother that calmed him to see reason; Legolas is not just my love, he is my One, and to turn away Legolas would be to turn away me. The brothers humor faded a bit with the realization of just how deep Legolas was embedded in Gimli's heart. "He was the first to call Legolas 'son,' and the wild thing was moved to near tears. His own father had grown cold at the news, but he came to the wedding in the end, for Legolas did not survive the war unscathed, and he would rather spend what time he could with his son before he sailed West." Gimli shrugged. "We spent a lot of time in Minas Tirith with Aragorn at the beginning, and took advantage of fond-making absence."

Fíli grinned. "You always were wise, when your temper didn't get the best of you."

Gimli smiled.

"So that explains the woods," Kíli said. "And your braid, but that doesn't explain the thing in your tunic. What is it?"

"Ah!" Gimli said. He looked at the door, and stood, stepping out of the direct line of sight. "That is a miracle of beauty. A gift from the Lady Galadriel at our first meeting." He pulled it from his tunic, and pulled back the sides. It shone brightly in the dim cell, and the brothers gathered close. "I was part of a company on a secret quest, where I had met Legolas, in fact. We were barred from traveling over the Misty Mountains, so we made to go under them, through Khazad-dum. A colony from Erebor had made its home there some years before, through of late messages had stopped. We found a tomb, and more, Durin's Bane woken from it's long sleep. We barely escaped, and not all of us did. Tired and weary, we sought shelter in the woods of Lorien. There, when the Lord of that land cursed the dwarves, she spoke against him in front of her people, and spoke to me in kuhdzul. Though her accent was ancient, she spoke the right words. Words she learned when the world was
young, and Durin ruled the Mountain.

"Our days in the wood were golden. We bathed our wounds, fed our spirits. There, did Legolas and I begin our friendship that would lead to our greater bond. The elves there replenished our supplies, and when it came time to leave, to each of the company the Lady gave a gift. A new bow for Legolas, a box of seeds for Sam, a light for Frodo. But me...me she asked."

Gimli looked down at the gift in his hand. "I told her I needed no gift, for it was enough to have seen her beauty." Kíli nudged Fíli.

"What have you done with our Gimli?" Kíli teased.

"Ah, but Kíli," Fíli said, shaking his head. "Our Gimli has always had the heart of a poet. Or have you forgotten the way he talks himself out of trouble all the time."

"You get yourself into that trouble," Gimli said. "It's not my fault you can't get yourself out of it."

"Too true," Kíli said. "But finish your story! What did she say to that?"

Gimli grinned. "She laughed. It is the most beautiful, most joyous sound that I had yet heard. She named me Gimli Silver-tongue and Elf Friend. When I declined a gift again, she asked me a wish--to name a desire. I said that I desired a single strand of her hair, to cherish for it's reminder of its giver. She, in her generosity, gave me three." Gimli frowned. "The elves always go strange at that, but none will tell why. I must remember to ask again. She may tell me."

Fíli and Kíli shared a look, but they both shrugged at him. "Elves are strange," Fíli said.

"Not as strange as they first appear, I assure you," Gimli said. "Either way, when our quest was over and our war won, I returned to Erebor. There, in the Great Forges, I set the hair in crystal, and mounted the crystal in true-silver. The Lady's Gift I call it. It has been an heirloom of my house, and passed to my heir when I...well."

"Gimli Elf-Friend," Fíli said, and shook his head. "Thorin'll have a fit."

"I will handle Thorin Oakenshield," said a wry voice from the door. Gimli and the brothers looked quickly, hiding the gift from view, but there was no one at the gate they could see.

"Bilbo?" Gimli asked, recognizing what was happening first.

Bilbo appeared before their eyes with surprising suddenness, and Gimli saw a flash of gold in his hand before he managed to hide it in his pocket. He felt a sense of dread in his pocket. If the Dark Lord had returned, was the One Ring still sleeping? He doubted it. The Nine would be hunting for it, but where were they?

A sudden thought left him cold. They better not have to fight a dragon and the Nine. If so, then they might already be too late.

"Of course it's me," Bilbo said. "Who else? I see you told them, Gimli."


"You told Bilbo first?"
"That stings, cousin. It really stings."

"Enough," Gimli grumbled. "Bilbo had to know. He knows why."

Bilbo flushed and shifted where he stood. "Yes, well." He cleared his throat. "The good news is that I know where almost everyone is. The bad news, is that Thorin is the one still missing."

"Isn't he in the cell next to Balin?" Fíli asked.

Bilbo shook his head. "Not anymore. I overheard one of the guards. They moved him somewhere deeper, where he couldn't plot with the rest of you."

"That isn't good," Fíli said.

"I'll find him," Bilbo said. "Hobbits are excellent finders."

Gimli snorted at that. "Finding trouble, you mean."

Bilbo tapped his finger to his nose, and looked over his shoulder. "The guard is making rounds. I'll be back when I can." He ducked down, and Gimli was sure he put the ring on as soon as he was out of sight. A moment later, a guard walked by, but gave no sign that he saw Bilbo.

Gimli sincerely hoped that whatever Gandalf was doing proved worth it; they would need the wizard, and soon.

Kíli laid down on the bed, arms folded beneath his head. "Well, Gimmers. You tell quite the tale. Indeed, it is strange, but no stranger that the tales found in our histories, nor so helpless as fourteen dwarves and a hobbit against a dragon. Whichever version of you is here, I am glad you are. With the three of us together, nothing will stand in our way." He yawned, and was soon fast asleep.

Fíli did not go down so easily. He sat for some time, fingers twisting and retwisting a lock of his hair. "Just answer me this, cousin," he said at length, quiet as to not disturb his brother, "and I will not ask again. Was it the dragon?"

"No." Gimli said, his voice heavy. "No, it was not the dragon."

Fíli nodded. "Then if it comes down to it, save my brother. Save Kíli."

Gimli looked up at Fíli, fierce as fire. "I don't intend to lose either of you."

"I am expected to follow Thorin," Fíli said, voice firm. "Mother knows this. Losing Kíli—that would break her."

Gimli met his eyes. "Choosing one of you over the other...I am not sure that is a promise I can keep, but I will promise that I will do all in my power to bring your brother through this safe."

"Then that will have to be enough," Fíli said.

Chapter End Notes

_Le fael_ - thank you (literal: you are generous)

_ishkh khakfe andu null._ - I pour shit (excrement) on your head.
Marking Time

Chapter Notes

AT LAST! The next chapter is here! Thank you so much, livingmeatloaf, for the excellent beta!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tauriel found him in the top boughs of a tree, eyes up to the night sky. “Too fast,” Legolas said, and she stopped. “The darkness is growing far too swiftly. I fear we are already running out of time.”

Tauriel looked at him, and cocked her head. “You think it is related to you and your husband,” she observed.

“I know it is,” Legolas said, and sighed. “Among other things, I fear time lost, and yet know that we must wait to begin. The dwarves cannot enter the mountain before Durin’s Day, and it is just past midsummer. What might the Enemy can gather in these next few months I dread to guess.” He shook his head. “We were supposed to be an advantage, and I fear that, without knowing, we have changed things for the worse.”

“You cannot know that for sure,” Tauriel said, and swung up higher, at last, to sit next to him. “Legolas, you cannot know.”

After a long moment, Legolas looked at her. “Aye,” he said. “You are right, of course. I can not know, and so I must hope.”

Tauriel smiled at him, and looked up at the stars that had captured his attention. Still they shone brightly in the sky. What darkness had taken his attention?

The others were still on the forest floor, preparing their dinner. Hopefully, the cook was Meludir; his brother was too easily distracted and more often burned the food, and Legolas never knew what Calen did, but nothing ever came out right. They would be busy for some time and they could not hear up this high.

“So,” Tauriel said, and Legolas stiffened. “That is your husband.”

“Aye,” Legolas said, warily. “He is.”

Tauriel nodded. “He is…shorter, than I imagined.” Legolas raised an eyebrow at her, and she hurried on. “I mean, his cousin. The Prince. He’s rather tall…for a dwarf,” she hastened to add.

Legolas was grinning, but his eyes were kind. “Tauriel,” he teased. “I could ask Gimli to put in a good word with Kili, if you wish.”

“What?” Tauriel asked, flustered. “I do not know what you mean.”

“Yes, you do,” Legolas said, and Tauriel flushed.

“I do,” she admitted, and sighed. “I do not understand it. “I have seen him not but twice, and yet
each time, my heart raced.” She looked away. “He seems…kind”

“He is,” Legolas said, softly. “If also young and headstrong. Gimli would tell me tales,” he trailed off. “I think he would do you good,” he said.

Tauriel sniffed. “I know not what you are implying.”

Legolas simply laughed, and they watched the stars until they were called down to camp.

***

Time passed slowly in the cells. There was no sign to tell the day from night, but dwarves never needed that to pass the hours. They knew every minute, every second of time slipping away. There was little enough to do to pass the time, however, so the days were long and the nights longer.

Bombur was returned to the cells the day after Gimli. Apparently, there had been more spider poison in his system, and the healer had wanted to keep him an extra night.

Three days later, they were taken in shifts to an empty elven bath and made to wash. Most went gratefully, though some, like Dwalin, put up a fight out of principle. He ended up washing via bucket, as two guards held him still and a third doused him with water.

Still, when they returned from the baths, wrapped in thin robes, they found their under clothes washed and waiting for them. Gimli even found his boots returned, and dressed gratefully in his warmer underthings.

They kept his pipe, and the rest of the contents of his pockets, but the Lady’s Gift remained his and hidden, and much can be forgiven for warm socks.

The days passed in this fashion, with little change and dwindling conversation. Occasionally, Legolas would appear, cloaked in shadow with Tauriel on watch, and greet Gimli with joy. The first time, it had taken Fíli most of a day to lose his pinched look, and Kíli giggled whenever he looked at Gimli. He always was a romantic. More than once, Legolas brought Tauriel with him, and she traded words with Kíli, and one occasion they were joined by Fíli (who had apparently had enough of his usual deliberate unobservance of their conversations. “Two dwarves of Durin twitterpated by elves. Uncle will be having fits for years!”). Then, one night, a little after a month behind these bars, Gimli was awakened by a hissing whisper.

“Gimli! Gimli, you log, wake up!”

“Hmm?” he hummed, half asleep, until he realized the voice came, not from the bed, but from the doors to his cell. “Legolas!” he said, as forcefully as he could whisper, and crawled carefully from the bed to not wake the brothers

Indeed, Legolas knelt by the door to his cell, dressed still in his hunting greens and stained from travel. There were leaves in his hair and mud on his boots. Gimli reached his hand through the bars, and Legolas took it in both his own. “You have been away long,” Gimli said.

“The forest grows ever darker,” Legolas said, and placed a kiss to Gimli’s palm. “How do you fare?”

“Well enough,” Gimli said. “Your father is not an unkind gaoler, if he is a rash one.”

Legolas smiled, impish. “I shall leave that to you to explain to your father,” he said. “For he fairs as you, and well do I remember how long he spoke of his time here.”
Gimli waved his other hand. “My father is not happy with nought of which to complain. Nor would he be happy if he could not tease my husband in the same manner he teases me. That the two are one in the same is a source of joy, and I would be loathe to take it from him.”

Legolas raised an eyebrow. “So now the truth of it. Very well. His words to me before were said after years to ease the memory and with the added growth of wisdom. But now, there is not that time, and I worry that it would add fuel to fire should he decide to stand between us.”

“It is a worry,” Gimli said. “But there is little he can do.”

“That is what I said of my father,” Legolas said. “And yet he manages to work against us. I have just come from him. My time away was not enough, and he sends me from his side again.”

Gimli frowned. “Is he trying to exhaust you?”

“I am not so easily wearied, meleth, and I have rested too long.” Legolas said. “His motives have not changed--ever is his first concern of my health and safety.”

Gimli snorted. “I am hardly more treacherous than that spider-infested dark wood.”

“That depends entirely upon the peril my father fears,” Legolas replied, dry. “I leave tomorrow, but I yet have tonight. I would spend it by your side.”

“I would welcome you,” Gimli said.

Legolas was gone with the dawn, but Gimli remained in the doorway long after Fíli and Kíli woke. The brothers watched their cousin with concern, but did not pry. Perhaps they should have, for instead of breakfast, the Warden himself, Elros, appeared. “You,” he said, pointing to Gimli. “With the fire hair. The King has called for you.”

Gimli looked up at him, head tilted to the side. “Then who am I to disappoint?” he said, and stood. Elros opened the door and Gimli stepped through. “There wouldn’t be any chance of me getting the rest of my clothes back, would there? One doesn’t want to be underdressed before the king, after all.”

But Elros just urged him forward, frowning, and Gimli sighed. “Aye I’m going. No need for dramatics.”

Gimli was led up through the halls, past elves who stared at him as he passed, speaking to each other as if he couldn’t hear. *One of the dwarves that attacked the feast. The prince seems fascinated with him. Is that a female, with no beard? A child? He hardly looks a dwarf at all!* Gimli grit his teeth and told himself they knew not what they said. That he knew they would have not curbed their tongues even if they knew he could hear was little comfort.

Gimli expected to be brought to the Elvenking’s throneroom. He remembered well the height of the throne, the imposing figure that Thranduil made. It was terrifying the last time, when he was entering as the eloped husband of the Prince. This time, he did not have Legolas’s presence at his side.

However, Gimli was brought to a room he had never seen before. From what he remembered, it was close to the throne room, but he couldn’t be sure. Either way, it was warm and inviting. A fire crackled in a hearth along the far wall. A table was set for two, and laid with the bounty of the summer forest.

Gimli stopped just inside the room. He had no idea how to read this. What game was Thranduil
playing? Would he force Gimli to watch while he and another feasted? Would it be Legolas? No, Legolas left this morning for the forest. Behind him, Elros bowed to the empty room and left.

*What mess have you gotten yourself into now, Gimli?*

Gimli folded his hands behind his back and waited. He would not get caught out by touching something he shouldn’t. Nor would he be accused of snooping. He did nothing; there would be nothing they could find against him.

He waited for almost a quarter of an hour; obviously, it was part of Thranduil’s plan. Perhaps he wanted to observe Gimli? Was he being watched right now? He was sure of it.

“You are the one they call Gimli son of Glóin,” said a voice from behind him, and Gimli jumped. He caught himself, grimacing, but there was no hiding the motion. He hadn’t even heard Thranduil enter the room, but that was no surprise. Gimli turned, and bowed.

“King Thranduil,” he said. “I am at your service.”

“Oh, I doubt that very much,” Thranduil said, and Gimli straightened.

Thranduil looked at him with grey eyes like steel. He was without his crown, but he looked no less kingly for it. He was dressed simply in silver-grey, and though his fingers were weighed down by many rings, at last Gimli could see shades of Legolas in his father.

“Are you hungry, Son of Glóin?” Thranduil asked. Gimli looked up at him, but Thranduil gave nothing away. A test?

“I have not suffered from lack of food, nor other ill,” Gimli said. “Your majesty treats his prisoners well.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow. “Well said. Still, I am a father. I remember my son when he was not yet grown. Though it was many years ago, I remember the gnawing hunger of growth. You are not yet fully grown. Your hunger must exceed that of your kin.”

He was not wrong, and Gimli could sense no deceit. He nodded his head. “As you say,” he admitted.

“Then eat with me, Gimli son of Glóin,” Thranduil said, waving at the table. “For we have much to discuss, you and I.”

*Oh, no,* Gimli thought. “You honor me.”

“Yes,” Thranduil said, walking past Gimli and sitting at the table. “I do.” He waved his hand. “Sit.”

Gimli sat.

The chair was of a height for the table, obviously crafted for the long limbs of the elves, but someone had provided several pillows on which Gimli could sit so that he could still see above the table. Thranduil steepled his fingers together, watching as Gimli climbed into the chair.

Dwarven state dinners were different animals than elven dinners, though Gimli never had much patience for either. Still, Dwarves were a practical people, and the manners of court reflected this. However, the traditions of pride and trust were seen as barbaric to elven sensibilities. There was no eating with hands to show comfort, no belching in appreciation. Spilling one’s ale was considered
sloppy, not proof of safety. There were no displays of strength, of virility. No, Elven dinners were precise, and the more one said without directly saying, the better. Elves delighted in the games of politics, not the symbols of survival.

There were no servants in the room, and Gimli felt faint when Thranduil himself served Gimli from the platter before them. The implications were staggering—and varied. Was it an insult? It certainly wasn’t a romantic overture, or a sign of trust. A power play, to remind Gimli exactly of his position? That was the most likely, and Gimli took the food with trembling hands, knowing that nothing escaped the Elvenking’s gaze.

Satisfied, Thranduil began to eat. Taking his cue, Gimli picked up his fork. He was sure the meal was very fine, but it tasted as chalk dust to him. Still, he was careful to not scrape his fork, nor switch his knife from his right hand. He ate small bites, chewed so as to hide his teeth, and wiped his lips before he drank. He had been given wine, though no doubt lesser than that which Thranduil drank. They ate in silence for a minute that lasted an age before Thranduil spoke.

“You have excellent manners,” he said. He did not need to say “for a dwarf.” Gimli heard it clearly, and stiffened. “Where did you learn elven manners?”

Your son. Before he brought me home to announce our wedding. Gimli made sure his mouth was empty before he spoke. “I am of the Line of Durin. A lesser branch, true, but still noble, and cousin to kings. My education has been strictly seen to.” Gimli chanced a glance up. “I am well versed in the formalities of the courts of dwarves, elves, and men, though I do not claim to know all.”

“Spoken like a true diplomat,” Thranduil sneered. “Your exiled king could learn well from you.”

Gimli frowned. He still did not know what game Thranduil was playing, but he would not sit here and be made to endure this. “My king is not known for his tact,” he admitted. “But he is known for his loyalty, his bravery, and his heart. He las led my people more than once to betterment, though all lots seem against us. He leads us now to our home.” Gimli cocked his head, looking at the Elvenking. Thranduil’s cool reserve, his smug air, was suddenly infuriating, and his temper spoke for him. “You, too, have seen the ruin of dragonfire. Would you not do the same, had you not this kingdom to return to?”

Thranduil paled, and leaned back. He had not expected that. Good. Gimli took another bite of his dinner. Behind the venison, he could taste walnuts and a sweet vinegar. It was delicious.

“So, we begin to get to the truth of it,” Thranduil said. “You are not a babe in the wood as you would seem.”

“You have little experience with dwarven bairns,” Gimli said.

“Not as little as you seem to think. I remember the kingdom of Thror, the King of Silver Fountains. I was present at the birth of his son, and his grandson who yet resides in my dungeons.” Thranduil said. “I know they do not speak as you do. You are more than you appear, son of Glóin. And now, we come to the heart of it.” Thranduil loomed over the table, his lovely face growing terrible.

“What have you done to my son?”

Gimli reared back. “I have done naught to your son.”

“Do not take me for a fool,” Thranduil said, tight and quick. “Legolas has paid more than his fair share of attention to you. What sorcery have you? What spell have you cast to ensnare him?”

Gimli carefully kept his hands on the table, in full view. “If you are implying that I have somehow
hurt your son, I have not.”

“I can think of no other reason for my son to defend you as he has.” Thranduil said, at last leaning back and pouring himself a glass of wine. “To visit you on your sick bed. To spend the night outside your cell. I ask again.” He lowered his glass to the table with a sharp thunk. “What hold do you have on my son?”

None that he does not also have on me. Gimli thought, but no--he could not say. There was no half-truth to save him this time. He knew he held Legolas’s heart in his hands, just as Legolas held his; they were imprinted on each other’s very souls, and to deny it seemed obscene. So Gimli said nothing, and met Thranduil’s eyes squarely. Thranduil was sharper than a dragon’s tooth and just as dangerous. He would not forget again.

Thranduil’s lip curved in a sneer, even as his eyes remained steady. “I say, what hold?” he snapped. “Speak!”

“He has my life,” Gimli spat out, and clamped his jaw shut. Let Thranduil think on that. Gimli would say no more.

“A debt?” Thranduil said. Let him think that. Gimli thought. Thranduil barked a harsh laugh, so incongruous with the silken way of the rest of him. “I know what dwarves are like where debts are concerned. I will not let Legolas be treated so cheaply. You will not steal him from me as well.” He snapped his fingers and Elros appeared. “Take him away. Put him with his king. Let the conspirators rot together. They will not get my son, and they will not get their mountain.”

“It will do you no good,” Gimli said. “This is bigger than you or I, Thranduil, King of Mirkwood,” Gimli spat even as Elros dragged him from his chair. “The Shadow of the Enemy is growing again. To stand in our way is to give him aid!”

“Lock him away,” Thranduil called after them. “And lose the key!”

***

They did not return to the cells where the Company was held. Instead, they traveled a deeper path, out of sunlight and starlight, deep below the earth. Were he not a dwarf, Gimli would have despaired. But he was a dwarf, born underground, and raised in darkness. He would endure.

He was tossed unceremoniously into an empty cell, hitting the ground and rolling with the force of it. He jumped up with the roll and rushed the door, but it was tightly latched and would not budge. The steel was dwarf-forged, in the days of the first Thror under the mountain. There was no escape. “Khagun menu penu shirumund!” he cried out. Legolas, Gimli thought. I am sorry!

A bitter chuckle came from the darkness across the way. “Does your father know you speak such?”

“Thorin?” Gimli asked, looking up. He squinted. “Is that you?”

“Aye,” Thorin said. “For what it’s worth.” It was strange to hear Thorin so defeated. Where was his anger? Where was his fire?

“It is worth much,” Gimli said. “Your nephews have been worried. We all have.”

Thorin was quiet for a moment. “It is good to see you well. We have lost too many young ones already.”
Gimli smiled without humor. “They may be regretting healing me so well. I seem to personally offend the Elvenking.”

“You are a dwarf of Erebor,” Thorin said, dry. “That seems to be enough.”

“One would think,” Gimli said, sighing. “Have you seen Bilbo?”

Thorin came alert at that. “Bilbo? He is here?”

Gimli nodded. “Aye. He followed, invisible to the eye, and has been looking for you.”

“He has not yet found me,” Thorin said, and sighed. “You are the first to see me, aside from the guard who brings my food. I fear you will be the last, but...” He paused, and it seemed hopeful. “Bilbo’s continued freedom gives me hope.” He was quiet for a moment longer, then chuckled darkly. “Tell me, Gimli. Did your dreams speak of this?”

Gimli sighed. “My dreams still sing of the Mountain reclaimed,” he said. “But they are quite silent on the how,” he added, dryly.

“That’s because it is my job,” said a voice from the hallway.

“Bilbo!” Thorin cried, and Gimli heard the clanging of the metal door, as if Thorin had thrown his weight against it.

“Yes, it’s me,” Bilbo said. “And I’ve had some luck in finding you. You’re well away from the others, you know, and better guarded besides.”

“Do you have a plan?” Gimli asked.

“Do I have a--? Young sir, would I come to you without one?”

“Yes.”

“Quite right,” Bilbo said, and coughed. “I have half a plan,” he said. “I know where each of you are now. I know who keeps the keys, and I know how to get them. But what to do once I have you all, however, that remains a mystery.”

“You will think of something,” Thorin said. “I have faith.”

Bilbo cleared his throat, clearly flustered, and said, “Thank you. I will do my best. But, if--when the opportunity arises, we may have to move quickly. So please, be prepared.”

“We will be ready,” Thorin promised.

“Good,” Bilbo said, and though Gimli couldn’t see him, he had a feeling that, were he not present, Bilbo and Thorin’s conversation would get a bit more personal.

“Speed be with you,” Thorin said.

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Good luck.”

“I make my own luck,” Bilbo said, and disappeared.

“At last,” Thorin said, almost to himself. “At long last.”

***
They had been a long time away, longer than they had planned. Together, they had traveled far to the north, clearing spiders’ nests and other unpleasantness. It was worse than it had been the last time. Much worse. Evil was growing in these woods nearly unchecked. Something had to be done.

Still, he dismissed his company, and they went thankfully. Even Tauriel had started to slow, in the end. They would not be going out again in the morning. They needed rest. They would remain here through the feast, and go out again if necessary.

He closed his eyes for a moment, listening to the sounds of his home. Familiar were the sound he heard, but he missed the call of the gulls and the crash of the waves, the mutterings of a beloved dwarf going about his day. He opened his eyes and made his way to his father's council room to report.

His father was glad to see him, and listened calmly when Legolas told of the reason for his delay. He seemed assured that no evil would enter his kingdom, and seemed quite convinced that the rest of the world could fend for itself. If the lands held true or not, Eren Lasgalen would remain.

There was no mention of Gimli, or the other dwarves, and when Legolas focused, he could feel his love close by. Bilbo was no closer to getting them free. (Legolas had offered to free them, to see them on their way, but Gimli was insistent that Bilbo be the one to free them. Legolas wasn't sure Bilbo would still be able to. Thranduil had grown more wary of late, and the guards on the cells had tripled.)

Exhausted, Legolas returned to his rooms to wait for Tauriel. Gimli's presence was warm and safe in his mind. He would be fine while Legolas rested. He barely had time to wash before he fell into a deep sleep.

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Bilbo peeked through the keyhole; it did not look like the cells down in the dungeon, but there was clearly someone locked within. Who would be locked thus, held prisoner in such opulence?

A footstep, muted by a soft Elven shoe, sounded in the hall, and Bilbo tucked himself into a cranny. The ring kept him from sight, but that didn't mean they couldn't trip over him. The elf turned the corner; it was the red-haired captain of the guard, Tauriel. She rapped once, gently, on the door, and let herself in. Quickly as he could, Bilbo slipped through the door, tripping in at just the last moment. He paused to collect himself, brushing down the front of his ever-more-tatty coat, and looked about the room.

It was surprisingly bright and airy for an underground room; the sun streamed in from high windows to create a dappled pattern across the floor like Bilbo used to see under the Party Tree in Hobbiton. The room was big too, bigger than any Hobbit room, and not just because it was sized for an Elf. There was an elegant extravagance to the room; unlike the rooms in Rivendell designed for lords, this was a room designed for royalty, with rich fabrics and delicate statuary.

"Legolas?" Tauriel called, and Bilbo looked up to see a pale figure that he had previously thought to be decorated stone look up from where he sat.

"Tauriel," he replied softly; his voice was sweet, like the woods in spring, but there was a grayness to them like oppressive clouds. Legolas stood and joined her in the sunlight. Bilbo crept closer to get a better look.

So this was Gimli’s husband; Bilbo hadn’t a good look at him at the clearing. Legolas certainly was pale - it was no wonder Bilbo had thought him carved from marble - with hair like cornsilk.
His face was kind, if a bit vacant in the manner of all elves, but he certainly didn’t look Mad. Perhaps the whispers around the kingdom were right, and he was healing at last.

Legolas smiled, and his face transformed; still distant, but it was warm, now. Bright like the sun had been above the trees. "Have you been to the dungeons? I know a certain prince has grown quite fond of you as late."

Tauriel just sighed, lips pressed tightly together. "I have."

"Ah," Legolas smiled ruefully. "So that is why you worry," he said. Bilbo crept closer. Whoever this elf was, he was on good terms with the captain. "I saw my father before," Legolas said with careful nonchalance. "He was hiding something from me. Would you tell me what he wouldn't?"

Tauriel tensed. "I am sure my King has reason for his silence."

"I am sure he does," Legolas said, and for the first time his eyes were present and sharp. "Just as I am sure you do not agree with it." Tauriel remained silent, and Legolas cocked his head. "Taurieeeelilll...."

"The king called for Gimli the day we left," she said quickly, walking away. Bilbo felt his eyebrows rise. Does Legolas know who Gimli is? He must. "I know not of which they spoke, but Gimli was taken to the deep dungeon as a result." She turned and looked at him. "Your father has guessed their goal of the Mountain, and suspects that Gimli has placed some sort of spell on you to reach such a goal."

Legolas jumped up. "A spell!" he cried. Bilbo shrunk further back into the shadows. "There is no spell on me!"

"Legolas," Tauriel said, and stopped him with a tight grip on his arm. "Rushing off will help no one. Please."

"It will make me feel better," Legolas retorted, then eased. "Peace, I do not wish to fight." He sighed. "Though I would tear this realm apart with my bare hands if I could, it would not help my husband." He stood. He was dressed much as his father, in flowing clothes of pale grey, though his had a green rather than a silver sheen, and they were cut dramatically low in the front. They had the relaxed air of bedclothes, and Bilbo spared a moment to shake his head over the extravagance of Elves. He looked up at the window. "I wish..." he sighed, and shook his head. "Can you get to him?" he asked. "If Gimli is in the deep dungeon, the guards would not let me pass."

Tauriel looked surprised. "What makes you think I could get by, if you can not?"

Legolas smiled again and took her hands. "I put nothing past you, mellon nin."

Tauriel hesitated for a moment, then pressed a gentle kiss to Legolas's cheek. In a moment, she was gone. As Bilbo watched, Legolas seemed to fade, losing what little color Tauriel's presence had returned, and he drifted about the room. At one point, he passed close to where Bilbo stood, and when Bilbo hurried out of his way, he lost his balance, and his foot slapped against the floor. He froze. Legolas stood quite still, his ears back.

"Time is short." Legolas breathed. "The dwarves of Erebor have stayed too long in my father's dungeons. Gimli, forgive me. If wrong, none are here to hear my error. If right..." he trailed off, and stood straight, looking wild and strong.

"I hear you, Bilbo Baggins. Come, let me see you. I mean you no harm."
To be fair, it was the shock of hearing his name that prompted him to slip the ring off of his finger. Legolas jumped slightly to see Bilbo so close, but, to Bilbo's continued surprise, he bowed upon seeing him. "Well met, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire." He stood. "I am Legolas."

"At your service," Bilbo stammered. "But I must--how do you know my name?"

Legolas smiled and his eyes turned inward. "I know many things, Mr. Baggins."

"If I may, Prince Legolas--"

"Please. Just Legolas."

"As it were," Bilbo said. "I just. Well, you see it." Bilbo sighed. "You don't seem very Mad."

"Mad?" Legolas repeated, eyebrows raised. "Yes, I see how they would say that. They are not wrong. I was Mad. Or, rather, I am out of time, and the present slips around me like silk through water and I have not the strength to hold it. It would take nothing less that the strength of the Dwarves, and even then..."

"Yes, about that," Bilbo said. "You spoke as if you were expecting us."

"Who says I was not?" Legolas said, and stood. "You accompany them on a quest to rescue a mountain and defeat a dragon. Long had the Mountain been the watchtower of the North; the time is coming that it must take up that role again. The Dragon must be defeated, and the sons of Durin must rebuild the great strength of their home."

Bilbo sighed. "To be quite honest, I'm not sure how we'll even get there. Thorin has managed to make your father quite angry, and I don't see your father as the time to forget his anger quickly. Not to mention the tizzy that Gimli has sent him into."

"No, that is true," Legolas said, voice wry. "My husband is a dwarf of many talents, but managing my father has never been one of them."

Bilbo relaxed. "So you do know him," he said. "I was never sure."

Legolas smiled. "Aye. I know him." He crouched down to meet Bilbo on his level. "I am your ally in this, Bilbo Baggins. The dwarves must be freed, and it must be soon."

Bilbo narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms. "Can you whisk fourteen dwarves from their cells, without being seen?"

"I cannot," Legolas said. "But mayhaps the river can."

Bilbo smacked his palm to his forehead. "The barrels! The empty barrels! They’re big enough for the lot of us."

"The Feast of Starlight is in three days time," Legolas said. "Most of the kingdom will be in the wood, and I know Gailon. He will be drunk by midnight. That is when you must make your move. I will cover you as best I can. Gimli knows if he is to escape to wait for me in Laketown. Remind him!"

Bilbo nodded and disappeared with a pop. Legolas twitched, to see the ring used so openly, but there was nothing he could do. He stood and ran to his chest: he had much to prepare.
Khagun menu penu shirumund! - Your mother was an orc!
"The stone in your hand, what is it?"

Kíli looked up from his promise stone, reassuringly heavy in his hand. His redheaded captor, Tauriel, hovered just outside the cell door. He hadn't seen her since they had come for Gimli, and he hadn't expected to see her again. That she would appear without Legolas gave him hope.

Really, he couldn't help himself.

"It is a talisman," he said, voice grave. In the corner, hidden from sight, Fíli snorted and rolled his eyes. "A powerful spell lies upon it. If any but a dwarf reads the runes on this stone, they will be forever cursed." He fairly spat the last word, and it was incredibly hard not to laugh at the wide-eyed look on her face. She backed away, stilted like a new foal, and Kíli hurried to shrug. "Or not," he said, and Tauriel stopped, looked back at him. "Depending on whether you believe in that kind of thing." Still, she just stared at him, and Fíli rolled over, and covered his head with the blanket. Whatever. When Fíli found someone he wanted to impress, Kíli would get his own back. "It's just a token," Kíli admitted, holding it to the light. "A rune stone. My mother gave it to me so I'd remember my promise."

Tauriel stepped closer. "What promise?" she asked, quiet and genuine.

"That I would come back to her," he said, matter of fact. In the corner, Fíli stilled. "She worries," Kíli admitted. "She thinks I'm reckless."

"Are you?" Tauriel asked, stepping even closer. She was nearly against the bars.

"Nah," Kíli denied, shaking his head, but his mind flashed before him an image of Gimli, strange jewel bright in his hands, swearing his life to change the fate of Kíli and Fíli's own. He shook his head, dismissing the image, and flipped the stone in the air. It spun, flashing in the light, but when it came down he fumbled and dropped the stone. He stood to grab it, but it bounced from the cell, out along the path towards the edge, only to be stopped, at the last moment, by Tauriel's boot. Slowly, she bent to pick up the stone, and held it lightly in her palm, running her thumb over the groves of the cirth runes. A moment later, she seemed to realize her preoccupation, and handed the stone back. Her hands were long and pale, graceful, but even Kíli could see the strength in them. "Sounds like quite a party you're having up there."

Tauriel smiled and it was like the first ray of sunlight after a storm; Kíli stared, dazzled, leaning against the bars. "It is Merethen Gilith, the Feast of Starlight." She turned, looking up as she walked. "All light is sacred to the Eldar, but Wood Elves love best the light of the stars."

"I always thought it is a cold light," Kíli admitted. "Remote and far away."

"It is memory," Tauriel said, earnest, looking back at him. "Precious and pure." She cocked her head. "Like your promise." She turned away again, face up. Kíli looked, but he all he could see
was the stone roof. "I have walked there sometimes. Beyond the forest and up into the night. I have
seen the world fall away and the white light of forever fill the air." Kíli rest his forehead against the
bar, recognizing the longing in her voice—a longing that filled his own heart.

"I saw a fire moon once," he said, and Tauriel looked at him, and Kíli thought that this time, she
really saw him. "It rose over the pass near Dunland. Huge. Red and gold, it was. It filled the sky.
We," Kíli jerked his head over his shoulder at his brother, "were an escort for some merchants
from Ered Luin. They were trading in silverwork for furs." Glóin had been with them, and a large
portion of the silverwork was Sunni's, Kíli remembered. "We took the Greenway south, keeping
the mountain to our left. And then it appeared." He paused, letting the breathless moment fill his
heart, and he closed his eyes and continued, hushed. "This huge fire moon, lighting our path. I wish
I could show you..."

Tauriel looked after her shoulder and back. "I must go," she said and backed away.

"Wait," Kíli said, reaching his hand through the bars. Tauriel paused, and her hand twitched, like
she was going to reach for him, too.

"Be ready," she said, and was gone.

"Well," Fíli said, pulling the blanket off of his face. "That's a development, isn't it."

"Yeah," Kíli said, resting his forehead against the bars. "She likes me."

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Bilbo was desperate for a bit of unpilfered food, or more, a smoke, but he knew he would get
neither while they were trapped here. He was just considering sitting down to think when a shadow
passed overhead. He looked, and there was Thranduil's head of household, an elf named Galion,
who, as far as Bilbo could tell, chiefly served as Thranduil's drinking companion.

_A drink of wine, or something stronger, might be exactly what I need_, Bilbo thought, and set to
follow. _Especially if it's to be tonight._

Galion led him down a path Bilbo had not been down before, and it led to Thranduil's wine cellar.
The walls were lined with shelves of wine in green bottles, and Galion hummed as he perused the
shelves. Bilbo wondered if the king had sent him for something specific, or if Galion was simply
helping himself.

While Galion looked, so, too, did Bilbo. In addition to the bottles of wine, there were several
barrels, both full and empty. The barrels were larger than Bilbo by a bit, larger, even than the
dwarves, though in girth Bombur would be a close fit.

A sound of soft, elven footsteps, and Bilbo flattened himself to the wall, though he was wearing his
ring and knew he would not be seen.

"Galion, you old rogue," said the new elf, and Bilbo recognized that elf. It was Elros, the keeper of
the keys. "We're running out of drink. These empty barrels should have been sent back to Esgaroth
hours ago. The bargeman will be waiting for them."

Sent back? Bilbo looked more closely at where Elros had gestured. There was a pile of empty
barrels, all resting on their side, and if he looked closely, Bilbo could see a faint seam in the floor.
A trap door? Yes! There was the lever! Legolas was right!

"The river!" Bilbo whispered, and clapped a hand over his mouth.
“Say what you like about our ill-tempered king.” Galion said, seemingly ignoring Elros’s criticism. “He has excellent taste in wine.” Elros gave Galion a look of such exasperation, Bilbo nearly snickered. “Come, Elros, try it,” Galion cajoled, and pulled two cups from where they had been hidden in the shelves.

Elros narrowed his eyes. “I have the Dwarves in my charge,” he said, folding his arms.

“They're locked up,” Galion said, walking over to Elros. “And you,” he reached out and grabbed Elros’s keyring, “have the keys.” Elros made a swipe for the ring, but Galion hung them from a hook on the nearby wooden pillar. “Where can they go?” He laughed, and after a moment, Elros unbent and laughed as well.

“Very well,” he said. “One drink.”

“Sure, sure,” Galion said, and poured.

Several drinks later, Elros couldn’t stop laughing and Galion’s words were slurring together. Neither noticed when the keys seemingly lifted off their hook by themselves and disappeared without a trace.

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If time passed slowly in the main cells, it passed even slower in the dark pit Gimli had found himself in, and even the…sparkling…personality of Thorin couldn’t keep the days and nights from bleeding into each other. It was a surprise, then, when Gimli heard the sound, like a jangling of keys.

“Do you hear that?” he called to Thorin, who hummed a question in response. A moment later, Gimli’s cell swung open and Bilbo popped into view.

“Come on then!” Bilbo said, jerking his head, and then ran to Thorin’s cell. “Can’t you tell a jailbreak when you see one?”

“Bilbo!” Thorin cried, and Bilbo opened his cell.

“Yes, yes, of course it’s me,” Bilbo said. “Now shut up and hurry. Everyone’s at a party, but that doesn’t mean they won’t come right quick if they realize.”

“Good work, Master Burglar,” Gimli muttered as he passed Bilbo by, and the hobbit humphed and jogged ahead to lead the way.

He took them back down to the main dungeons, and as they neared, Gimli heard Ori say, defeated: “We’re never gonna reach the mountain, are we?”

“Not stuck in here, you're not,” Bilbo said, and held up the keys.

“Bilbo!” Balin cried. “Thorin!”

“Gimli!” Glóin called.

“What?” Óin said, and crowded the bars.

“Shh!” Bilbo hissed. “There are guards nearby.” He began unlocking the cells, beginning with Glóin and Óin. Glóin nearly knocked Bilbo backwards in his haste to get to Gimli. Glóin grabbed him close and pressed their foreheads together, repeating "my son, my son," in a soft, broken voice.
"I'm alright, Da," Gimli said.

"You were gone," Glóin said. "And I thought I'd never see you again. I thought we'd be trapped in these heartless cells and I would never know what became of you."

"Never," Gimli said, squeezing his father's forearms and gently tapped his forehead. "I'm far too stubborn for that."

Glóin chuckled, thick and watery. "Aye. Like your mother."

Gimli cracked a grin. "Of course. Like Mum. Not at all like you."

"Quit hogging the boy," Óin said, far too loud. He had his horn back, miracles of miracles, and it looked as if someone with no little skill had taken tool to it to finally hammer out the damage inflicted by the goblins. He pulled Gimli into a tight hug. "I knew you'd make our way back to us," Óin said. "All the signs point to our victory."

Meanwhile, Bilbo had been busy, and the others started to crowd around. "Close the doors," Bilbo urged, moving on to Bifur and Bofur, Nori and Bombur. "It'll buy us more time." Quickly, Nori and Bofur began shutting all the doors, weaving between the others who were more impossible to herd than cats, and Gimli felt his respect for Bilbo—who was doing exactly that—rise.

In the hustle, Bilbo grabbed Gimli’s arm. “I met your elf,” he said, quietly. “He said he would help, if he could, and to wait for him in Laketown.” Gimli nodded and Bilbo slipped past.

"Is that everyone?" Bilbo asked, counting for a moment on his fingers like Gandalf had done. "Good, now follow me!" He led them up the stairs and out of the dungeon, pausing at every turn. Nori stuck with him, helping his scout the way. When Bilbo went left instead of right, and they started going downward, the whispers began.

"I don't believe it."

"We're in the cellars!"

"You were supposed to be leading us out, not further in!"

Gimli found himself flanked by Fíli and Kíli, the only Dwarves, beside Thorin, who were not saying anything. Before them stood the infamous pile of barrels—well, infamous to Gimli, anyway—and beyond that, Elros and Gailon were at a table, unconscious out from too much wine.

"I know what I'm doing!" Bilbo said, walking through them. "Shh!" He hissed at Óin when he opened his mouth. "This way! This way!" He gestured to the pile. "Everyone climb into the barrels, quickly."

Oh, they didn't like that.

"Are you mad?"

"They'll find us!"

"No, no. They won't," Bilbo said, shaking his head and nearly bouncing with urgency. "I promise you." He gripped his hands together. "Please, please. You must trust me." Gimli, at the end, began to climb into a barrel. There was no point waiting, even if Kíli gave him a betrayed, "are you mad?" look. The others stood their ground. Bilbo looked to Thorin.
"Do as he says," Thorin ordered, and now the rest clambered into barrels, if ungraciously.

"Move your big ginger head."

"Bifur, get in the barrel!"

"Move!"

Thorin was last, and Gimli realized the flaw in the plan. Bilbo was not yet in a barrel.

"Everyone's in." Bofur said. "What do we do now?"

"You wait for your burglar," said a voice behind them, and Kíli's head shot up.

"Tauriel!" he said, breathless.

It was she, and the rest began to struggle from their barrels. "Wait!" she called. "Wait, I am here to help."

"She means it," Kíli urged. "Please." When the rest realized that she was just standing there, they calmed once more.

Tauriel turned to Bilbo. "Into the barrel, Master Hobbit," she said. "I will pull the lever."

"They'll see you," he said.

"Then you'd best hurry," she said, and Thorin clambered from his barrel to help Bilbo into his own.

"Hold your breath." Tauriel said.

"Hold my breath? What do you mean?" Bofur asked, but Tauriel had already pulled the lever and the barrels began to roll, one by one, down into the river below. The last thing Gimli heard before he was momentarily underwater, was Tauriel calling:

"Where is the Keeper of the Keys?"

Gimli rose to the surface spluttering, clinging to the sides of the barrel.

"All right there, Gimmers?" Kíli called out as he was swept past.

"Mahal’s beard and balls," Gimli choked out. This was much worse than those little leaf-like Lorien boats. Much worse.

"Well done, Master Baggins." Thorin said, when Bilbo's barrel bumped his own.

Of course, that was when the first arrow struck and stuck in Gimli's barrel. He flinched away, and looked as he spun 'round. The branches above the river were filled with elves armed with bows, firing them to stop them or kill them—Gimli was not sure they cared which. A horn blew behind them, and before them appeared the great elven gate. The guard on the bridge saw them and startled, rushing to close the gate.

"No, no, no!" Gimli cried, even as Thorin's barrel clanged against the closed bars. They were trapped, again, weaponless and exposed like fish in a barrel. Wonderful.

Then a roar, the choking sounding of someone trying to breathe around an arrow shaft, and Bolg himself appeared on the bridge above them, a pack of orc scouts swarming up behind them.
"We've got to hit that lever," Kíli said, and started to climb from his barrel.

"No, Kíli, wait!" Gimli cried, but it was too late. The elves were distracted by the orcs, and Kíli was able to slip up to the great lever. It was nearly as tall as he was, and half dressed, he looked rather small next to it. Still, he managed to wrap his hands around the handle and pull. Slowly, the gates began to open. Kíli cried out above them.

"Kíli!" Fíli screamed, but Gimli couldn't see. He scrambled with his barrel, but it was already moving him away from the edge. "Kíli!"

Kíli dropped from the bridge into an empty barrel, biting off a cry as the arrow in his thigh broke off, and Gimli winced. That hurt no matter who you were, but what worried him more was the arrow itself. Was it an elf arrow or an orc arrow? Orc arrows were typically poisoned, and they had no access to medicine. Kíli looked pale, but it could be from shock.

The barrels were spinning faster now, the elves and the orcs chasing each other down the banks, and Gimli's barrel would not stop spinning. He tried to keep his head forward, eyes on where they were heading, but everything was moving so fast.

His barrel rocked suddenly and he was knocked back, the spinning slowing. Looking up, he saw two green-slippered feet balanced on either side of the barrel, and a grinning elvish face looking down at him. "Legolas!"

"Once again on a river, my love," Legolas said. "But could you imagine Sam in one of these barrels?"

"I don't want to imagine myself in one, and yet here I am," Gimli retorted. "Have you got my axe?"

Legolas shook his head, regretfully, and fired three times. On the bank, four orcs fell.

"Two for one!" Gimli cried. "Great shot!"

"Thank you, meleth," Legolas said, and laughed. "So exhilarating, this ride! Why have I not done this before?"

"With or without the orcs?" Gimli asked, and struggled to his feet. Legolas, still perfectly balanced, crouched down to be closer to Gimli's face, where it ended up bracketed by his knees. Legolas just grinned at him.

"Why limit myself?"

Ahead of them, the others were catching the weapons the orcs dropped, tossing them between each other. Dwalin managed to grab an orc's axe, headbutting the orc off his barrel and into the rapids, and he swung it at the log-bridge that spanned the river. Ahead of him, first Nori, then Thorin swung their orc-weapons at a spanning log, and Dwalin's blow cut through the log completely, sending the orc archers upon it crashing into the water.

"Ha!" Gimli crowed as they swept past. "Take that!"

An orc spearman sprung from the shadows, leaping down onto Bombur’s barrel, and they went down with a splash. When they surfaced again, the orc had been skewered by his own spear, and the force of it had propelled Bombur, barrel and all, onto the bank where he mowed down several orcs, bouncing off of rocks and once more over the river, before he finally rolled to his feet. Bifur cried out as he swept past, the word lost to the roaring of the river, but Bombur's arms burst from the sides of the barrel, wielding an axe in each, and he attacked, a whirling dervish of destruction,
flinging bits of splintered wood as he went. The last orc dispensed, he ran for the river, tossed his
weapons to Dwalin, and jumped into a new barrel.

“That was most impressive,” Legolas said, hushed, “but I can no longer stay here and watch the
battle. The orcs continue to come, and we have outpaced my guards. Once more I find myself
having to say goodbye, my love, though I wish it were not so.”

“Go,” Gimli said. “We will have our time together when our duties are done. I will meet you in
Laketown!”

Legolas grinned and stood once more, shooting his arrows with a lazy ease that hit every target,
and humming a song under his breath that made Gimli choke when he recognized the tune. That
blasted barrel song!

“Down the wide swift stream we go,” Legolas started, and Gimli pinched his calf.

“None of that!” He grumped, and Legolas laughed, and only sang louder.

“Roll, roll, rolling down the hole!”

Gimli’s barrel peaked and Legolas leapt, crashing down with a dancer’s grace. His bow sang
through the air as he fired, twisting through close-range shots, using the momentum of his enemies
against him. He sprang forward, for the moment keeping pace with the barrels, even using the
body of a fallen orc to speed down a small hill.

His fighting took him to the top of a cliff, and not even Legolas noticed the orc coming up from
behind, focused as he was on the orc before him.

“No!” Gimli cried out, in a vain attempt to warn him, when an axe spun through the air, sinking
into the chest of that same orc just as he would have struck Legolas down. Gimli looked for who
threw that axe, and saw Thorin standing tall in his barrel and watching Gimli as they flowed
downstream and away from danger.

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Tauriel was furious.

These...mutants, these morgul spawn, dared cross their borders and attack their home.

Tauriel was beyond certain, now. These dwarves were part of a bigger plan, a fight that would
concern all free peoples. Their quest must succeed.

The last orc was in her sights. Her arrows were long spent. Her knives lay lightly in her hands, as if
extensions of her will. This orc would not live to see nightfall. She raised her knife--

“Tauriel!” Legolas called to her. She looked up; her prince was standing on the rocky outcropping
above her. The Orc moved, twisting sideways to escape, and Tauriel’s knife came down, pinning
him in place to the tree behind him. The orc howled, and Tauriel kicked it.

“Quiet,” she hissed.

Legolas jumped down to join them. “We shall bring him to my father,” Legolas said. “This orc will
provide the proof we need to convince him to act.”

Tauriel twisted the knife and the orc stopped struggling. ”He would believe the lies of this filth
over the truth of his own son?”

Legolas looked at the orc, his face twisting in a sneer. "He may have to."

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They washed ashore far downstream, past the borders of the Elvenking’s realm. The current had slowed to create a shallow pool, calm enough to land before the current picked up once more.

Still, the dwarves were tired and weak, and they struggled to get to shore. They were all of them soaked through, and while there was still some warmth of late summer left in the day, a mountain wind was blowing and with it a winter’s chill. Gimli shivered at the feel of ice. Poor Bilbo was nearly blue when Thorin pulled him from his barrel.

“That was good thinking, Bilbo,” Thorin said. “We are now well free from Thranduil and his kin.”

“Right,” Bilbo said, and sneezed miserably. “You’re welcome for saving your bacon. Again.”

Thorin patted Bilbo’s shoulder, squeezing gently. Bilbo leaned into Thorin’s side, searching for warmth. Gimli rung out his braid and watched Kíli limp to a rock. His thigh was stained red, even through the water, and Kíli grimaced as he poked at it.

“We need to keep moving,” Thorin called out.

“Kíli’s hurt,” Fíli said.

“I’m fine,” Kíli said, covering quickly--and poorly. “I can go on.”

Fíli looked to Gimli, who shook his head. His father had not mentioned Kíli’s injury. “Athelas,” Gimli murmured, “A king’s hands are the hands of a healer.” He longed for Aragorn as he was, a king of Men. An arrow to the leg was no trifling injury, even for a dwarf.

“Kingsfoil?” Óin said, blowing water from his trumpet “For an arrow wound?”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “For that, and any wound dealt by orcs.” He thought of the nine that had been released; they would need healers who knew how to best use the herb.

“It will help you little against the arrows of men,” said a strange voice, and all turned--a Man, a Bowman with a yew longbow nocked and drawn, stood at the treeline drawn to bear. “Who are you? What is your purpose here?”

Thorin stood tall, and despite his torn clothes and sodden appearance, he looked every inch a king. “I am Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King under the Mountain. I have come back. I wish to see the Master of your town.”

The Bowman paused, the arrow dipping slightly; there was wariness in his face, but it was warring with a faint flicker of hope like flame licked from cooling embers. “And who are these,” he said, gesturing with his bow.

“My Company,” Thorin said, laying a hand on his breast. “Dwarves of Erebor, all, and Mr. Baggins who has traveled with us out of the West; they will be accompanying me into town.” Dwalin stepped forward, ready to brawl, but Thorin held up his hand and Dwalin kept his peace.

“Very well,” said the Bowman at last. He lowered his weapon. “I am Bard, called the Bowman, and I will take you before the Master--he may decide your fate.”
Thorin drew himself up even further. “It is not for a Master of Men to decide the fate of a King of Dwarves, though he no doubt thinks so. Very well. Lead the way.”

Bard nodded to them, and led them to a barge filled with barrels.

“How,” Bard said. “This will take you to town, and keep you safe once within.”

“Not more barrels,” Ori whimpered.

Bard looked at Ori, and to Gimli’s surprise, smiled ever so slightly. It softened his entire face, and Gimli remembered that Bard was a father.

“Not yet,” Bard said. “But we must pass several guards before we reach the Master, and they have instruction to allow no strangers into the town.

“We thank you, Bard the Bowman,” Thorin said. “You will be well rewarded for your efforts.”

Bard looked at Thorin. “I do not do it for reward, though I would welcome it. The desolation of the dragon is one my people still keenly feel, and there are many who go without with little chance of betterment.” Three children. Sigrid, Bain, and little Tilda. “The return of the King of Silver Fountains has long been a dream of hope--for that, I act.”

Thorin inclined his head and after a moment, Bard nodded back.

“Everyone on the boat,” Bard said.

“I will be glad to be done with all this water,” Gimli grumbled. At least this was a proper boat, more like a raft platform and less rocky than even the corsair ships.

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” Bofur said. His hair was a mess, his braids practically indecently loose, but his hat was still firmly on his head and he was grinning. “At least that boat doesn’t smell of apples.”

“Don’t remind me,” Fíli groaned, climbing aboard. He turned to help Kíli, but his brother simply pushed him aside. Fíli frowned, but kept talking. “I don’t want to smell another apple.”

Gimli watched Kíli limp along until he found a place where he could sit without too much strain. That wound would need proper treatment sooner rather than later. Gimli could only hope they found some athelas in Laketown.

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They passed through the checkpoints with a practiced ease and the passage of coin, once more stored away in barrels, though noticeably dryer. Once they were in the city proper, Gimli chanced a peek.

Laketown was exactly that--a town built on Long Lake. Several man-made islands carried curious houses that pitched and tilted with the sway of the water. The roads were waterways, lined with footpaths and crossed by the occasional bridge. The whole town seemed to stink of poverty and fish.

And there, atop the tallest tower, a Dwarvish windlance--a broken memorial to the destruction of the wrath of dragons.

Bilbo stood next to Thorin, arms wrapped around himself “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”
“He has,” Balin said, standing behind him. “The last time we saw such a weapon, the city was on fire. It was the day the dragon came, the day that Smaug destroyed Dale. Girion, the Lord of the City, rallied his bowmen to fire upon the beast, but a dragon’s hide is tough—tougher than the strongest armor.” Balin leaned in, tapping the side of his nose. “Only a Black Arrow fired from a windlance, like that one above in its prime, could have pierced the dragon’s hide, and few of those arrows were ever made.”

Balin looked out to the city, his gaze unfocused for storytelling. “The store was running low when Girion made his last stand. Had the aim of men been true that day, much would have been different.”

Bard had been standing close, still to listen as the old dwarf spoke, but silent until now. “You speak as if you were there,” he said.

“All dwarves know the tale,” Thorin said. “But aye, we were. I was the one to raise the alarm inside the mountain. Balin fought with me on the battlements; we fled to safety together.”

Bard was silent for a moment. “Then you must know the true tale: Girion hit the dragon and loosened a scale under the left wing. One more shot and he would have killed the beast.”

“If that were true, it still would not matter,” Thorin said, low. “The windlance is broken, and we have not the means to forge a black arrow.”

Gimli closed his eyes for a moment. Gloomy bunch. When he opened them again, they were in the center of town.

The lamps were all lit at the Master’s hall, a grander building than all the rest, though even the paint of this building seemed faded and worse for wear, and merry music played within. Here, the smell of fish was supplanted by spices and sweets, and affected laughter toppled from the window to the streets.

“In there,” Bard said, tilting his chin.

“Thank you,” Thorin said, absently. “Pay the man, Glóin.”

“Me!” Glóin protested. “I have already been bled dry by this venture—” Gimli, not so subtly, stomped on his father’s foot. Glóin stopped, huffed, and pulled out his coinpurse. “Here, take it,” he muttered. “What good will it do me, anymore, anyway.”

Thorin took Bilbo, who was starting to look rather miserable, Dori, Dwalin, Balin, Fíli, and almost as an afterthought, Gimli, with him as he ascended the stairs to the hall.

The guards at the door blocked his path. “Who are you, and what do you want?,” they asked, reaching for their weapons. Thorin, clearly weaponless, looked up at them, face impassive.

“Do you not see it?” Dwalin growled. “He is Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror—rightful King under the Mountain.”

“I have returned,” Thorin said in a voice as deep and massive as the caverns of Erebor itself. “I wish to see the Master of this town.”

The sudden appearance of a Legend in their midst set the townspeople into a tizzy, and even the guards looked gobsmacked. Gimli couldn’t help but grin at the way the whispers started. The guard who first spoke, the Captain, looked uneasily at the, admittedly disreputable looking, Company. Thorin simply raised an eyebrow in challenge, and the guard cleared his throat.
“If you come in peace, lay down your arms!” The Captain said, and Gimli had to give him credit, he continued to do his work, and well.

“We have none,” Thorin said, and while it was the simple truth, Gimli could hear the bitterness over losing a weapon such as Orcist. He, himself, missed Peacemaker fiercely. Only Bilbo still had Sting, and out of the corner of his eye, Gimli saw Bilbo adjust his coat to hide his blade. “We have no need of weapons, who return at last to our own as spoken of old. Nor could we fight against so many. Take us to your master!”

“He is at feast,” the Captain said, as if that was a response that would stop them. It might have, if politics and polities were the most pressing concern, but they had nought but elf-food for the past several weeks and there was an actual feast right before them.

“Then all the more reason for taking us to him,” burst in Fili, impatient. “We are worn and famished after our long road, and we have sick comrades. Now make haste and let us have no more words, or your Master may have something to say to you.”

“Very well,” the guard said. “I will take you to him.”

Gimli did not like the look of this place; he remembered how the Master had acted once the dragon was defeated, running away with half a king’s ransom on his back, but Gimli followed his King inside, and hoped things would be different this time.
To Legolas’s surprise, Thranduil was waiting for them at the gate, dressed in his robes of state, though his crown was not upon his head.

They came in at a jog, dragging their prisoner behind them, and stopped before their king, bowing with their hands to their hearts in Elvish fashion. At their feet, the orc hissed and spat.

“Report,” Thranduil said. He seemed to ignore the orc at his feet, though Legolas saw how his eyes flicked downwards.

“We followed the orcs in their pursuit of the dwarves down the river, and have slain all but this one,” Legolas said, and Tauriel kicked the orc in punctuation. “The dwarves have passed beyond our borders, but we may be able to get some information from this filth. Why they dare cross our borders so boldly.” Maybe Legolas thought, if the orc speaks, father will listen and we will no longer be bound to inaction.

Thranduil looked the three of them over, his eyes lingering longest on Legolas, and at length he spoke, eyes flickering down to the orc struggling with his bonds. “Such is the nature of evil,” he said, slowly. “Out there in the vast ignorance of the world it festers and spreads. A shadow that grows in the dark. A sleepless malice as black as the oncoming wall of night.” He paced around the creature, and its eyes followed him. “So it ever was. So will it always be.” He looked up at Legolas. “In time, all foul things come forth.” Thranduil stepped back, and looked down upon the orc. “You were tracking a company of fourteen Dwarves. Why?”

“Not fourteen. Not anymore,” it croaked. “One we stuck him with a Morgul shaft. The poison's in his blood. He'll be choking on it soon, and the others will fall before they reach the mountain.”

“The Mountain!” Tauriel exclaimed. “What business has your masters there?”

The orc spat, the reeking globule landing on the stone at her feet, and Tauriel drew her knives as quick as thought.

“I would not antagonize her,” Legolas warned, even as he held its head back, exposing its throat.

“You like killing things, Orc?” Tauriel hissed. “You like death? Then let me give it to you!” She stepped forward, but Thranduil halted her with a single hand.

“I do not care about one dead Dwarf.” Thranduil said. “But the mountain... Answer the question. You have nothing to fear.” Thranduil’s voice was smooth as silk, and Legolas found himself frowning. He had no patience for such honeyed ways. “Tell us what you know and I will set you free. You had orders to kill them. To stop them from reaching the mountain. Why? What is Thorin Oakenshield to you?”
“The Dwarf runt will never be king,” the orc said with a nasty grin. Legolas tightened his grip. The orc was right, of course, though Legolas knew Gimli meant to change such a fate. Still, the orc’s words rang with the deep resonance of prophecy. Could Gimli actually change that fate, if the powers of the Maiar was against it?

“King?” Thranduil scoffed. He began to walk slowly around the Orc. The creature tried to follow him with his eyes, turning his head and forcing the blade further into his neck. “There is no King Under the Mountain, nor will there ever be. None would dare enter Erebor whilst the dragon lives.”

“None, save Thorin Oakenshield,” said Legolas quietly, without thinking. Thranduil shot him a look, but the orc spoke first.

“You know nothing,” it said. “Your world will burn.” It took dark glee in telling them such, and Legolas remembered the ashes of Laketown, the fire upon the water. He remembered Bard and his children, soaking wet and shivering with cold, smelling still of smoke and ash. Too, he remembered the aftermath of the War in the North, of the burning of the Greenwood and the siege of Erebor, of which he and Gimli only saw the aftermath. All too well could he see his childhood home in flames.

So, too, could Thranduil. “What are you talking about?” he barked, stopping behind the creature. “Speak!”

“Our time has come again,” the orc taunted. “My master serves the One.” Legolas shut his eyes; it was as he feared. “Do you understand now, Elfling? Death is upon you. The flames of war are upon you.”

In one swift motion, Thranduil pulled his sword and spun, slicing cleanly through the orc’s neck. It’s body fell to the floor, twitching, and Legolas was left holding the head by its mangy hair.

“‘The flames of war,’” Legolas repeated, dropping the orc’s head onto its body and brushing off his hands. Dragonfire. The enemy wished to use Smaug in the coming war.

Thranduil, however, took it as a question, and spoke Legolas’s own thoughts. “It means they intend to unleash a weapon so great it will destroy all before it.” He turned to Tauriel. “I want the watch doubled at our borders. All roads, all rivers. Nothing moves, but I hear of it. No one enters this kingdom. And no one leaves it!” Tauriel hesitated for a moment, then bowed stiffly, and left.

“This evil will not pass our borders,” Thranduil said to Legolas. “You have done well.”

Legolas nodded and made to follow Tauriel--they had to get the Dwarves weapons out of the kingdom and to Laketown before the lockdown was complete, but his father held out a hand. “Stay a moment, ion, and walk with me.”

“As you wish,” Legolas said.

There was a little used stair that wound its way around the outside of the keep, leading up to a balcony that was used more in lighter times. In the heat of late summer, the trees were thick and green, leaving most of the balcony in shade. Sunlight played between the bows, and danced along the flagstones. A quick breeze whipped around them, tugging at their hair.

Thranduil leaned against the railing, looking out over the kingdom. After a moment, Legolas joined him at his side, tipping his head back and letting the peace of the moment fill him. Since his illness, he had little chance to sit in peace with his father, and it had been sorely missed.

Legolas opened his eyes to find his father watching him. Legolas raised an eyebrow. “Is there
something on my face?” he asked. He raised a hand to his cheek, but Thranduil shook his head.

“Nay, my son. No more than road dust. Your skills have not faltered in the wake of your long illness.” Thranduil closed his eyes, looking almost pained. “It is good to see you well again.”

“It is good to feel well,” Legolas said. “There is little restorative to match hard work after long idleness.”

Thranduil’s eyes opened, narrow. “A most dwarvish notion,” he said, dry.

“Is it?” Legolas said, feigning innocence. “I had not realized.”

“Did you not?” Thranduil said, softly. “I wonder.” He raised his hand to Legolas’s hair, cupping the side of his head, over an ear. “My son, my little leaf. I do not know what subtle poison they used, nor what magics they worked to wound you so, but they will hurt you no more. Indeed, they are lucky they did not wound you worse, or I would not have been so merciful.”

Legolas felt his heart drop, and he pulled away. “Father, what did you do?”

Thranduil’s eyebrows flew up. “Worry? Fear? The dwarf said they had done naught to you, but I knew better to believe his lies. Why else would you react so?” Thranduil moved, quicker than thought, and clasped Legolas to him. “Oh, that I still had them within my grasp! Tell me, what did they do to you? Why do you act so strangely?”

Legolas pulled free. “It is not I that act strangely, but you, father! Poison? Magic? These are not the words of my father and king, but the ravings of a madman!”

“They are the words of your father and king, and it would do you well to remember it,” Thranduil said, drawing up and growing cold. “I do not blame you, Legolas, for the workings of another. You were right to suspect the workings of evil, but you were wrong about its source! Still,” he said, and softened. “I have protected these lands for centuries, and I will protect them for centuries still, from within and from without. Go. Rest. We will have a feast tonight, to celebrate your successful return.”

Thranduil turned away, clearly dismissive, and Legolas had to force himself not to run, not to draw attention to himself. It lasted until he reached the main doors, and then he sprinted towards his rooms. He needed to find Tauriel. They had to leave immediately.

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“Dol Guldur.” Gandalf said, once Radagast stopped his sled “The Hill of Sorcery.”

In the dim light, it look like no more than a pile of rubble, a ruin long since abandoned. Good not even for the grass and creeping vines that would cover the world without a second thought.

“It looks completely abandoned,” Radagast said.

“As it is meant to,” Gandalf said, as if speaking to a child, or one of those hobbits he was so very fond of. Radagast bit his lip. “A spell of concealment lies over this place, which means our enemy is not yet ready to reveal himself.” Gandalf’s words turned quiet then, meant for only himself. “He has not regained his full strength.” Radagast looked around them. Not a bird nor a beast nor a crawling creature made a sound in this awful place. They, too, knew to stay away. Radagast longed for his cottage, for his herbs and and trees, for Sebastian and his family.

“Radagast,” Gandalf said sharply, “I need you to carry a message to the Lady Galadriel. Tell her
we must force his hand.”

Radagast balked. The Lady Galadriel was kind, and he rather liked her. She listened. But he did not like the tone in Gandalf’s voice. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going in alone,” Gandalf said, looking at the ruins, and Radagast closed his eyes for a long moment. Of course he was. “On no account come after me. Do I have your word?”

Did he? Radagast had never felt his age more than now. “Yes, yes, yes!” he snapped, irritably, and watched Gandalf walk off down the path with a feeling of dread. “Wait, Gandalf!” he called, and Gandalf paused, turning back with an air of irritation. “What if it’s a trap?!”

“Turn around and do not come back!” Gandalf snapped, and in a voice he must have thought too quiet for Radagast to hear, “It’s undoubtedly a trap.”

***

Thorin walked into the Master’s Hall, head held high despite his shabby, waterlogged clothes and unkempt hair—or perhaps because of them. Of everyone present, high-ranking Men and low included, those of the Company clearly had the least means, and just as clearly were the highest born.

The hall was smoky, dim in a way belied by the windows, and filled with many people at low tables. At the far end of the hall, barely visible even after Gimli swatted the smoke from before his face, was the Master of Laketown, seated in a chair larger and more ornate than the rest.

The hall, and everyone in it, glittered more with fool’s gold than with the real thing, and the smoke just obscured the frayed hems and fishy smell of the Master’s court. Here was a town of Men brought low—nearly as low as the dwarves themselves, and Gimli felt a flash of understanding why the families of Dale would follow the thieving Master. Gimli had not yet arrived in Erebor when the Master had fled with more than his fair share, but it was a favored complaint of Balin and Gloin both.

The hall fell silent as Thorin walked the hall, flanked by his retinue. Dwalin marched to his left, Bilbo to his right. Balin and Fili followed behind, and Gimli walked past with Dori, who had his nose lifted in disdain. He had no patience for such affectations and pretense to class. Dori might not have officially born into high society, but he knew how to act like old money.

Ahead of them, the Master stood, reddening at a perceived insult. Thorin stopped, looking the Master up and down. When it was clear the Master was not going to speak, Thorin turned to the tables and spoke in the voice of the Mountain itself.

“I am Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King Under the Mountain! I return!” His voice rang like a hammer to and anvil, and all lept to their feet, speaking at once. More than once voice did not believe their tale, but more still spoke in excited whispers that this was the day they had been waiting for. The King of Silver Fountains had returned!

Thorin turned to the Master, and when the cries and whispers alike had died down, he spoke. “We are the Dwarves of Erebor. We have come to reclaim our homeland.” He paused, nodding his head just a fraction, and turned once again to the people. He began to walk as he spoke, circling around Gimli and the others, seeming to speak to each person individually. “I remember this town in the great days of old. Fleets of boats lay at harbor filled with silks and fine gems. This was no forsaken town on a lake. This was the center of all trade in the North!” he paused, looked out over the crowd. He raised his fist in a promise. “I would see those days return. I would relight the great
forges of the Dwarves and send wealth and riches flowing once more from the Halls of Erebor!”

The crowd cheered, but one voice was heard above them all.

“Death!” it cried. “That is what you will bring upon us! Dragon fire and ruin. If you waken that beast it will destroy us all.” The crowd parted, and there stood Bard in the doorway of the hall, his squadron of bowmen with him. The rest of Thorin’s Company peered to the hall from the darkness behind the archers.

Thorin looked at Bard, assessing, but turned once more to the people of the hall. “You can listen to this naysayer but I promise you this:” His hand was raised like an orator, and Gimli wondered, distantly, if he had picked it up from Balin, or if they had the same tutor long ago. “If we succeed all will share in the wealth of the mountain. You will have enough gold to rebuild Esgaroth ten times over!”

More cheers, and Thorin smiled grimly to himself.

But Bard was not so easily silenced. “All of you! Listen to me! You must listen!” And they did. One by one, the Men of Laketown quieted to listen to him. Gimli raised an eyebrow. He remembered King Bard as a Man of humble power, a man who led, and led well, because there was no one else to lead. A Captain of the Guard made King. Here, Gimli could readily see the natural way he commanded power, and he saw Thorin notice it as well. “Have you forgotten what happened to Dale? Have you forgotten those who died in the firestorm?! Bard demanded, and turned, at last, to Thorin. “And for what purpose?” He asked, and the fire seemed to fade from his countenance, replaced by weariness. “The blind ambition of a Mountain King so driven by greed, he could not see beyond his own desire!”

Thorin reared back, and Dwalin growled low in his throat, but the Master stepped forward at last, with soothing words and a politician’s smile. “Now, now! We must not, any of us be too quick to lay blame,” he said, and turned on Bard with a nasty grin. “Let us not forget that it was Girion, Lord of Dale, your ancestor, who failed to kill the beast!”

Bard swallowed thickly, but he raised his head high. Thorin crossed his arms in victory, but Bilbo was frowning next to him.

“It’s true, sire,” said a nasal voice, and from the shadows beside the Master’s chair came a pale Man, face crusted with boils. For a moment, Gimli saw Grima Wormtongue before his eyes, but this man had never been a great man, as Grima once had. There was a sniveling worm inside of him, deep down, and Gimli sneered. “We all know the story. Arrow after arrow, he shot. Each one missing its mark.”

“Speak not of what you don’t understand, Alfrid,” Bard said, voice tight.

But Alfrid had the upper hand, and he knew it. “Always are you foreboding gloomy things, Bard the Bowman,” he said, and then addressed the room. “Do not listen to his talk of doom; it is merely that. Talk.”

Bard tried a different tactic. He turned to Thorin, and would be pleading if not for his anger. “You have no right. No right to enter that mountain.”

But Thorin stared right back, beating his fist to his chest twice. “I have the only right,” he said to Bard, and after a long moment, Bard nodded and looked away. Turning, he brushed past the others as he left the hall, his bowmen falling into step behind. Thorin turned and faced the Master.
“I speak to the Master of the Men of the Lake. Will you see the prophecy fulfilled?” he asked, and looked around at the people. “Will you share in the great wealth of our people?” he paused, and then asked again, with force. “What say you?”

“I say,” the Master said, drawing it out, and Gimli rolled his eyes at the overplayed teatrics. “Unto you Welcome! Welcome! And thrice welcome King Under the Mountain!” The Hall cheered, and the Master called for food and drink, and within a quarter of an hour, the Dwarves and Bilbo were feasting at the low tables, wrapped in warm blankets with the promise of warm clothes.

Word traveled quickly, and when the feast was done and the Company was led to their lodgings, song followed them, sung by the common folk.

*The King beneath the Mountain.*
*The King of Carven Stone.*
*The Lord of Silver Fountains,*
*Shall come into his own.*

*His crown shall be upholden,*
*His harp shall be restrung,*
*His halls shall echo golden*
*To songs of yore re-sung.*

*The woods shall wave on mountains*
*And grass beneath the sun:*
*His wealth shall flow in fountains*
*And the rivers golden run.*

*The streams shall run in gladness,*
*The lakes shall shine and burn,*
*All sorrow fail and sadness*
*At the Mountain-king's return!*

A large house was given to the Company for their use, and clean clothes and a well-stocked pantry that had Bombur in tears, and Bilbo very nearly as well (though, some of Bilbo’s emotional state could be attributed to his coming down with the first cold of winter; he had gotten progressively worse during the dinner, and the next few days would see him stuffy and miserable, not willing to say more to the men than a grumpy ‘Thag you bery mutch.’)

Days passed and Gimli watched as they were given provisions by the people of Laketown. Women far too thin gave them way cakes and dried meats. Men parted with ancient weapons with longing eyes--heirlooms passed down from their forebears. Children in threadbare clothes, little more than rags, gave them clothes fresh stitched. The citizen of Laketown gave generously on the power of their faith, and with each gift Thorin saw less and less, hardening in such a way that Balin and Oin both looked deeply troubled when they felt none was watching.

Too, did Gimli watch as Kili grew pale and wan. Sweat dampened the hair at his brow and bruises deepened around his eyes. He stumbled more and drifted often. With every day, Gimi's fears of Kili's wound grew deeper. The night before their departure, Kili drank barely a drop and still staggered like a dwarf deep in his cups. Gimli spent the evening watching him--as did Oin.

It was clear to Gimli that, while the people of Laketown believed and believed with abandon, the Master and his cronies did not--if his surprise at Thorin’s plan to continue onto the mountain was any indication. It was clear that The Master had considered Thorin a faker, a charlatan--and one that the Master could expose. But Thorin truly was the King Under The Mountain, and The Master
was stuck. The atmosphere of the feast, therefore, was one of teetering balance, and not the littlest trying to shove them out the door with as little pretence towards politeness and hospitality as possible.

Thorin, eyes and heart too full of the Mountain, saw naught. Bilbo, with his quick and clever eyes, saw everything--and said as much to Gimli during the farewell feast.

Bilbo’s hobbitish appetite never truly waned, though he now regularly made do with less, and it was after his third helping of fish and his second helping of wine, that he leaned into Gimli and said--

“I have been witness to a host attempting to turn out unwanted guests--why my Grandmother, the Old Took’s Wife, could turn an unwanted guest out of her house with such quick ease that the guest often went away thinking it had been their idea to leave in the first place and was all the happier for it--and I have been both guest and host myself.” Here, Bilbo gave Gimli a look that reminded Gimli that this whole business began when a troop of Dwarves were too thick to leave when Bilbo hinted. “But Men have not yet mastered the art the way Hobbits have. It’s painfully obvious, isn’t it?”

Gimli, who still maintained a soldier’s stomach and sensibilities and knew to eat whenever food presented itself, swallowed his bite of--well, he wasn’t quite sure what it was. It looked like mashed potatoes and tasted rather pleasantly of whitefish and spices, so he was happy to eat it regardless. He considered Bilbo for a long moment.

“To us, aye,” he said at last. Gimli looked about the company. “To Dori as well, whose life has made him more sensitive to such attitudes, and Ori, who was not shielded from hardship as well as Dori would have liked.” He nodded to the corner, where Kili sat, to recover his strength. Fili stood between him and the hall, a subtle guard. “To Kili, whose wound poisons his mind with dark thoughts, and to Fili, whose mind is ever turned towards his brother. They see the subtleties of the night. The rest, however, their minds have already been turned towards the mountain, and their eyes are filled with gold.” Gimli shook his head, his beads swaying about his face. “Not even the threat of dragon is enough to deter them anymore.”

Bilbo’s voice dropped to a whisper and he leaned in. “I overheard Lord Elrond. ‘A sickness of the mind,’ he said of Thorin. Is it this? Can it affect the others?”

It was on the tip of Gimli’s tongue to deny, and deny furiously. To speak so casually of his family’s greatest burden--but no. Bilbo had a point, and the curse was broken with Gimli besides. “Perhaps,” Gimli admitted. “The malady Lord Elrond spoke of has been known long to my family. A Gold-sickness: where the substance of craft gains more reverence than the art or the final shape. A sacred text revered more for gold filigree than for the words printed within, understand?” Bilbo nodded; he seemed to be hanging on every word. “The origins are unknown, but we believe it has come from the same darkness that brought forth the dragons, for it is akin to Dragon Sickness--that which comes over all who desire a dragon’s hoard.” Gimli cocked his head. “And, too, do we have a third source: the object within your pocket, that comes from the same dark forges as the dragons and wraiths of this world. They may all be working together, to reach a greater distance than any can reach alone.”

Bilbo reared back, hand flying to cover the pocket where the Ring was tucked safely away. “My--” he broke off, and looked away, face pale. “Accursed thing!” he swore. “I wish it had never come to me!”

There was little, physically, that linked Frodo and Bilbo. Frodo was dark where Bilbo was light, pale where Bilbo was golden, but in an instant, Gimli saw the Ringbearer as he knew him,
bemoaning this same fate on Gimli’s own quest.

“If wishes were diamonds,” Gimli said, with great sympathy. “Still, someone, some force, wanted you to find that ring, and I do believe in my heart that it was not the enemy. That is some little comfort, I would think,” Gimli said. Bilbo shot him a look, like he knew that it was no comfort at all, and not to speak to Bilbo like he was a child, thank you very much. Gimli chuckled.

“In my experience, Bilbo, those who possess the greatest fortitude are those who deny power placed before them, and take it up only for the sake of others.”

Bilbo raised an eyebrow at him, but his eyes flicked over to Thorin, worried.

“Aye,” Gimli said. “He returns home for his people, but his pride. His pride...” Gimli sighed. Gimli never blamed Thorin for his role in the events to come; Gimli knew how insidious the Enemy worked, how terrifying it was to have one’s own mind turned against oneself. So no, he did not blame Thorin, but Thorin’s pride would stop him from seeking the help he so desperately needed—but his pride in his people would win in the end. Thorin died as himself. Gimli must remember that. “In the end, if you wanted this responsibility, I would not trust you with it.” Gimli punctuated his statement with a bite of--whatever it was, and left Bilbo to his thoughts. Across the room Kili turned down the food Fili offered him, and Gimli saw the concern only grow on Fili’s features. He saw Thorin notice, saw his expression ripple as he made to move towards his nephew, but yet another family captured his attention with a gift of thanks and luck for their journey, and he was distracted.

At last only Bombur was still eating, the empty dishes and platters were cleared away, and the wine and ale flowed more freely. The men drew forth their instruments and played the old music of the mountains. The dwarves clapped and sang along with what they knew, cheering on the Men who sang when they did not, and made very merry with themselves.

In the back of the hall, hidden mostly in shadow, stood Bard with a grim look on his face and a single goblet of wine in his hand. For all the time Gimli watched him, Bard never drank from his cup, his eyes ever on Thorin.

“If I didn’t know better, I’d say you wished harm upon our King,” Gimli said, approaching Bard. Bard didn’t twitch, stayed just as he was, but Gimli had the impression he surprised the man, nonetheless.

At length, Bard spoke. “I wish him no ill,” he said, and it sounded like a deep confession, and he finally turned to look down at Gimli. “But neither do I wish him well in this foolishness. What luck does fifteen have against a dragon, when the Mountain in her prime was not enough to stop it? Nought will happen but you will wake the beast, and send its fire down upon our town once again.”

Gimli met Bard’s glare and refused to be cowed. “Aye. I’ll not lie to you, it is likely. It is not what we wish, but then again neither was it our wish to have our homes burnt, our families burnt with it. It was not our wish to wander like beggars and vagabonds while our home became a nest for a dragon. Your people were not the only ones to lose everything, Bard the Bowman.”

“I know that,” Bard said, soft.

“So you?” Gimli asked, calm, and when Bard turned red like he would burst, he said, equally calm, “Yes, I believe you do. That is why you are letting us go, even when every instinct screams against you.”

Bard was not expecting that, and it rather took the wind from his sails. Gimli sighed. “You are a
“What are you?” Bard asked, suspicious. “Some kind of seer?”

“Aye,” Gimli said, and enjoyed the look of surprise on Bard’s face. It made him look like a younger man. “You’re a father, aren’t you?”

“Aye, I am. Two girls and a lad. My eldest is just sixteen summers. My youngest no more than ten. My lad is just thirteen.” Bard spoke of his children with pride and love, and sorrow. His wife, Gimli knew, had passed many years before. Young Tilda never knew her. “Why do you ask?”

Gimli laughed, mostly at himself. “Because my father, him over there—” Gimli pointed to where Gloin had engaged Dwalin in a game of sixpence; Nori hovered. No doubt running a book. “—would never have let me come on this journey were I not able to see what they could not; while I have many years on all your children, as I understand it, I am closest in age with your eldest.”

Bard seemed surprised. “A child!”

“Adolescent!” Gimli huffed. “I’m not a child. I’ll not get taller, and my skill is great. But aye. I won’t reach my majority for another twenty years.” He nodded over to Fili and Kili. “My cousins are much the same. Fili is eighty-three, and has been in his majority for three years. Kili is only seventy-eight, but you’d not convince one to travel without the other.” On the other side of the hall, Kili was waving off Fili’s entreaties to dance, and Fíli’s look was growing ever desperate.

Bard looked at Gimli, his eyes narrowed. “Why are you telling me this?” he asked. “This is not what I know of the secretive nature of the dwarves.” His tone was mocking, skeptical, but deep in his keen eyes, Gimli saw his words resonate.

Gimli stared back. “Because there is a war coming, Bard the Bowman of Laketown. When I look, I see naught but flames: dragon’s breath, aye, but also the flames of war. Campfires. Pyres. A great burning eye in the center of it all. And it begins with a battle at the base of the Mountain.” Gimli sighed. “The Dwarves of Erebor will keep their promise to the Men of Laketown. Dale will prosper once more. When all seems lost, remember that. Erebor will make this region great again, though the cost may be high.”

Gimli turned to leave, and then paused. “Oh. And. Remember. Thorin hates the Elvenking. You will not be able to speak to him rationally while the Elves of Mirkwood are present.”

Bard scowled, but Gimli could tell it was mostly for show. “Under normal circumstances, your king and I would find common ground on the matter of the Elvenking, but if Oakenshield brings the dragon down upon our heads, I would have no wish to speak with him rationally,” Bard said, dry. He turned, thunking his goblet down on the nearest flat surface—a nearby table—and walked off, out of the hall. Gimli watched him go.

“Well, that could have gone better,” he muttered. He moved to drain his own goblet, and paused. If he was to be forced into yet another boat in the morn, he’d best not do it with an aching head and woozy stomach. Gimli set the goblet down with some regret, swearing under his breath, and went in search for some cool water to refresh his head.

***

Legolas did not find Tauriel in the palace. She was not in her rooms, nor was she in his. She was not at the range, nor the hall of healing, nor in the armory. Legolas was beginning to despair, his hair falling from it’s braids where he’d run his hands in his frustration, when he caught a look of
unease on the face of the door warden.

“Where is she?” Legolas hissed, stepping in close and letting his hair fall as it may. He knew how he looked, half-crazed and desperate.

“She left,” the guard said. “Nearly an hour ago.”

“Shit,” Legolas said, in Westron, surprising the guard. He ran back through the palace; there was something he needed, and if she had that much of a head start, he had little time to spare.

When Legolas left the palace, nearly another half an hour later, he slipped from a side-window, disappearing quickly into the trees with his knives, a bow, and fresh quiver on his back. In a special pack, he had Gimli’s *Peacemaker*, and Thorin’s *Orcrist*.

He found Tauriel nearly halfway to Laketown, at the Easternmost border of the kingdom. She stood on an outcropping of rock over a cliff, next to where the river became a falls. Legolas hoped Gimli knew to avoid such an obstacle and took a safer path. Tauriel seemed not to notice his approach, and he worried—he could have shot her, killed her, several times over.

Tauriel spun, bow brought to bear. She sighed when she saw him, and lowered her bow. “Legolas,” she said. “I could have shot you, and you don’t even have the decency to--is that a sword? And an axe? You never use an axe.”

“They’re not mine,” Legolas said. “One belongs to my husband. The other is *Orcrist* It’s a peace offering to Thorin Oakenshield.”

Tauriel frowned. “A weapon of war as an offer of peace?”

Legolas touched *Orcrist*’s hilt. “Returning what is, by rights, his. *Orcrist* was a gift from Lord Elrond when they stopped in Rivendell. It should never have been taken from him.” The weapon had been forged in Gondolin, by Elrond’s kin, and could not possibly have been more Elvish, and its proper place was in the hands of a Dwarven king.

“What hope have they?” Tauriel asked, looking outward once more. “Truly?”

“It has been done before,” Legolas said, stepping up to stand by her side. “And they have more on their side, this time.”

“And more move against them,” Tauriel said. “If the Enemy is truly as powerful as you say--”

“Knowing,” Legolas said. “The Enemy is more knowing and aware, though I do not believe he is more powerful than the first time. Not yet. I feel he would have taken action before now, if that was the case. Still, with his knowledge of the future, he can use what little resources he has to a more drastic effect.”

“Resources like the dragon,” Tauriel said. “The dragon that no one will fight!”

Legolas shook his head. “Not no one. The Dwarves, Thorin’s Company, have claimed that cause as their own.”

“It is still our fight!” Tauriel cried. “All who have faced the wrath and ruin of that dragon, and all the free peoples who would fight the Dark Lord’s return.”

Legolas took her shoulders, gently. “You will get no argument from me. I am on your side, Tauriel. Their side. Remember that.”
“You, yes,” she said. “But not your father.”

Legolas sighed and pulled away. “I do not blame my father for his hesitance. All that he lost in the War of Wrath still weighs heavily upon him--still haunts his thoughts and color his actions.”

Tauriel frowned. “What has happened?” she asked. “What did he do?”

“I do not know,” Legolas said. “But he did something. He speaks not with reason, but with the twisted words of grief and fear.” Legolas sighed. “In the end, he fought with the Dwarves and Men against an army of goblins and wolves. I have to trust that he will do so again.” He shook himself. “Come. Laketown is still a ways away, and I would be reunited with my Gimli as soon as possible.”

Tauriel smiled, sly. “Of course, my Prince. I would never dream of standing in your way.”

“See that you don’t, or I won’t put in your good word with Prince Kili.”

Tauriel started. “Legolas, do not speak of it!” Legolas simply laughed, and leapt off down the path, Tauriel chasing after him. “Legolas! Legolas!”

***

In the depths of the Blue Mountains, Lady Dis sat on her chair in the council meeting chamber, lit by only the barest of fires. Her graceful brow was creased by thought, the lines around her mouth and eyes were deeply creased. To her right, Sunni stood, arms crossed and scowling. “Why doesn’t he answer?” she huffed.

“Patience,” Dis said. If it wasn’t for the way the word echoed in the space, one would never tell that she had moved at all.

Suddenly, a raven, feathers so black as to shine blue, flew into the room, a dispatch tied to its leg with a length of rust-red ribbon. Dis sat up straight as the raven landed to her left, holding out its leg to her. Her breath shook with anticipation, but her nimble fingers never faltered. She removed the parchment and opened it quickly, her eyes scanning the brief missive.

At length, Lady Dis smiled, and threw her head back in a hearty laugh, startling Sunni. “Oh, Cousin,” she said. “You do have a way with words.”

The raven squawked in agreement.
Gandalf looked up, eyes wide before the dark flame, the name of the Evil falling from numb lips. “Sauron.”

He screamed, then, and for a long time.

***

It was already pushing the late side of midmorning when Gimli looked out over the assembled crowd, but he still saw no sign of the Bowman. (Or of Legolas, for that matter. Where is that blasted elf? It did nothing to ease the gnawing pit of worry growing in his gut).

His father was helping the others load their boat, a supposed goodwill gift from the master, with the supplies gifted to them by the people of Laketown. All of the Company was helping load the boat, adding their dwarven sense of space to the lake-men’s sense of boat craft in an effort to fit fourteen in addition to their new gear, weapons, and supplies. Only Thorin stood separate, watching with an odd gleam in his eye. Gimli knew that, were they father from the mountain, Thorin would think nothing of helping them, would have insisted on taking his fair share of the load. That he stood apart now, put Gimli ill at ease. It was worse, still, that nobody seemed to notice.

“You do know we're one short,” Gimli heard, and looked to his side where Bilbo stood. “Where’s Bofur?” Gimli looked around, and sure enough, he could see hide nor hat of Bofur. Well, it looked like Gimli wasn’t the only one still using his eyes.

Nor was he the only one who could hear Bilbo.

“Last I saw, he was sleeping it off under a table,” Glóin said, laughing as if he hadn’t been as deep in his cups the night before.

“If he's not here, we leave him behind,” Thorin said, as he walked past, his voice ringing with royal decree.

“Behind?!” Bilbo said, rearing back. “What’s the point of coming all this way just to leave him at the last?”

“We'll have to,” Thorin said, and Bilbo mouthed it back at him, incredulous. “If we're to find the door before nightfall, we can risk no more delays.” He strode forward, then, and held up his hand to Kíli’s chest, blocking his path to the boat. “Not you,” he said. “We must travel at speed. You will slow us down.”

“What.” Gimli said, flat, but nobody heard him. In fact, except for Fíli, the others in the boat seemed to be suddenly as deaf as his Uncle.

Kíli reared back as if slapped. “What are you talking about? I'm coming with you.”
“Not now,” Thorin said, and Kíli’s pale face darkened.

“I’m going to be there when that door is opened,” Kíli said with some force, but when he stood, he paled and turned pleading as the little strength he had was drained from. “When we first look upon the Halls of our Fathers, Thorin.

“Kíli,” Thorin said, and his voice was softer now, affectionate. If Gimli didn’t know better, he’d say it was honest and fully meant. But Gimli had heard enough liars spin their tales to know that it was an act, a simulacrum of care. He shivered. “Stay here. Rest. Join us when you’re healed.”

Óin sighed and clambered from the boat. “I’ll stay with the lad. My duty lies with the wounded,” he said. As Chastisements go, it was genuine, but not very strong.

“Uncle,” Fíli said from his place on the boat. “We grew up on tales of the mountain. Tales you told us. You cannot take that away from him!”

“Fíli,” Thorin said, and Gimli recognized what he was seeing in Thorin; this was the benevolent tyrant, the King whose twisted words made punishment seems like reward. Was this the madness that took him, in the end? Already? But they hadn’t even made it to the mountain. What could possibly—

Gimli looked at Bilbo, at where his fingers were fiddling with his waistcoat pocket, and the ring within.

Fíli was not about to let his brother remain behind. “I will carry him if I must!”

But Thorin cut him off with a shake of his head, stepping forward as Fíli climbed from the boat and gripping him by the shoulders. “One day you will be king and you will understand. I cannot risk the fate of this quest for the sake of one Dwarf.” He sounded so reasonable, Gimli wanted to be sick. “Not even my own kin.” Fili shot Thorin a disgusted look and pushed past him. “Fíli, don’t be a fool! You belong with the Company.”

“Gimli! Hurry up!” Thorn called, and Gimli trotted to the boat, ignoring the way Thorin seemed to be watching him. He settled in between Glóin and Dori, and closed his eyes against the rocking of the boat. Oh, would Legolas laugh to see him now.

Trumpets sounded, out of tune from long disuse, and the Master of Laketown processed up to a small pulpit. Gimli resisted the urge to spit, it it soured in his mouth; the man had revealed himself to be the worst sort of politician. Gimli never had time for such nonsense.

The Master raised up his hand to wait for silence. Once he had it, he spoke into a small horn. “Go now with our goodwill and good wishes.” Nori and Dwalin cast off, and Thorin stood at the prow of the boat, eyes never wavering from the Mountain looming in the distant fog. “And may your return bring good fortune—“

“Wait!” Cried a small voice, a distinctive accent. Bofur! Gimli looked around, but couldn’t see him
in the crowd.

“Bofur!” Gimli said. “I hear Bofur! We have to wait!” There! In the crowd, people parting for something they couldn’t see, or someone shorter than the rest assembled.

“No stopping it now, lad,” Said Glóin. “He’ll be safe enough with the others.” Gimli turned to him, to deny, but found the words wouldn’t come. After all, Gimli knew what awaited them in the mountain, just as he knew the fate of Laketown. With everything that’s changed, what’s to say that Bofur wasn’t safer in town. Gimli sat back against the side of the boat.

“Good bye.” Called the Master of Laketown, waving with an affected gesture, and the boat carried them swiftly away down the and out of the village. Gimli met Bilbo’s eyes. Not a very auspicious start.

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Fíli felt the urge to cause something real harm. Damn Thorin for being so pigheaded, and damn the rest of them for listening! Damn this quest! Damn the gold and the Dragon, and the whole bloody mountain while he was at it! None of them were worth his brother.

“Out of the way!” Called a familiar lilting voice. Bofur burst through to the dockside “No! No!” He stopped at the edge, hat in his hands, but it was too late. The boat was gone, and the crowd was dispersing. He looked forlorn, sad in a deep, real way that Fíli was surprised to see. Even at their worst, Bofur had managed to find a smile. Bofur looked up, saw them, and found that smile. It even looked like he meant it, though Fíli could see the strain at the edges. “Ha. So you missed the boat as well?” he asked.

Before Fíli could answer, Kíli gave a moan of pain and toppled over. “Kíli?” Fíli cried, catching him before he fell to the ground. Kíli didn’t answer. “Kíli!”

Óin bent over, probing at Kíli’s neck and checking him. Kíli didn’t so much as twitch. He was deathly pale, and his eyes were sunken bruises in his face, and when Óin pulled a lid back, all Fíli could see was white.

“He needs help, and fast,” Óin said. “A safe place where I can look him over properly.”

Fíli looked around, and caught sight of the tip of a longbow disappearing though the crowd. “I know where we can go.”

Bard looked surprised to see them at his door, and Fíli didn’t blame him. If Fíli had been so critical of Bard’s return to his Dragon-infested home, he would be surprised to see him as his door, as well. Still, he did not shut the door in their faces, merely paused in his surprise.

“Please!” Bofur said, “Kíli’s sick. He’s very sick.”

Kíli moaned, and Bard paled, though he kept steady. “I don’t know why you came to me,” Bard said. “And I will not readily turn away those in need, but I have three little ones. Is he catching?”

“Da?” Called a voice from inside. Fíli wasn’t very good about telling Mannish voices apart, but he thought this one sounded young. A girl. He looked behind Bard and saw two girls, a young one still clutching a rag-cloth doll and an older one who looked nearly grown to his eyes. There was a young boy as well, not yet grown into his whiskers. Fíli wished he was better at judging the age of men; how old were these children?

“It’s not that kind of sick,” Óin said. “He’s a dark wound, and it’s become infected. Your little ones
will be quite safe.”

“I don’t wish to be rude,” Bard said as he held the door wider, ushering them inside. “My wife was often employed as a healer; it was that which ultimately took her from us.”

Fíli stopped, looking up at Bard, squarely. “We grieve with you,” he said, and he meant it. It was clear that Bard’s wife had meant much to him, and now that he knew they were there, the lines of grief were clear. Bard’s eyebrows lifted, but nodded back, accepting the sentiment.

“Sigrid,” Bard called to his older daughter, “love, get some water. Bain, help me clear off the table.”

“Yes, Da,” a young boy said and sprang to his feet. He was dressed in sweaters and knits too big for him, patched hand-me downs from his father. Fíli knew it all too well. That would be Bain, then. Sigrid, the young woman already taller than Fíli, grabbed an empty pot to fetch the water. Fíli helped Óin carry Kíli across the room, Bofur training nervously behind.

The second girl child (unless men also occasionally dressed their sons in skirts and braids until they’d reached a certain age), watched them with wide eyes. “Dwarves!” she said, and her voice was pipping high with youth. “Will they bring us luck?” She seemed hopeful at that, and Fíli turned to hide his wince. Lately, it seemed that the only luck his family brought was ill.

“What we can, little miss,” Bofur said, sweeping his hat off his head and bowing.

Kíli moaned again, and he opened his eyes at last, though was no longer seeing this world. He was sweating, though it was frightfully cold in the room, and his hair was limp against his brow. Carefully, Óin pulled back the bandage Kíli had tied around his thigh. Kíli did not so much as twitch, and Fíli’s worry grew and spiked when he saw the blackness seeping, creeping like vines of ore through rock.

“Can you not do something?” Fíli asked.

Óin closed his eyes, stepping back. “This is some dark poison,” he said. “And I’ve need of more medicine then I have. I need herbs. Something to bring down his fever.”

Bard ran to the table and the shelves hanging above it. “We have have some things,” he said, pulling jars and pouches down. “For fever and for pain. Nightshade. I have feverfew.”

But Óin shook his head. “It won’t be enough I fear.” He licked his lips. “Have you any athelas?”

Bard shook his head. “I don’t know what that is.”

“It’s what the elves call it,” Óin said, to Fíli’s surprise. Then again, he shouldn’t be surprised. Óin put his craft above all else, even blood feuds. “I’ve heard it called Kingsfoil as well.”

“Kingsfoil,” Bard said, stopping to think. “It’s a weed. We feed it to the pigs.”


***

Snow clouds hung low and grey in the sky, and they had been sailing though steady flurry for some time, out the other side of Long Lake and up the River Running. The water was cold, and fractured like volcanic obsidian, sharp and dark. Thorn stood still at the prow of the boat, more a statue of a
noble king than the great Dwarf Gimli had come to know. Around him, what was left of the Company spoke in fevered whispers as they rowed about the treasure horde before them. If it weren’t for the fact of their faces, Gimli would believe himself among strangers.

“I hear the very walls are inlaid with gold, it is so plentiful.”

“A library, filled with the histories of our people, preserved in silver and crystal.”

“Untapped mines,” grumbled Glóin, “with more untouched gold for the taking. We’re going to be rich, lads. Rich beyond imagining.”

“I’ll take that bet,” Nori said, leaning in. “I got quite the imagination.”

Only Bilbo remained familiar, and he remained curled away from the rest, looking miserable wrapped in an oversized velvet tunic, the fur grey at the collar and wrists. He had a red coat, only slightly eaten by moths, wrapped around him and tucked over his toes. Someone had plopped a helmet on his head, and it was big enough to hide his eyes from view when he wanted it to. With the point skywards, he looked more like an onion than a hobbit, and a miserable one at that.

None of this was right! He was sure Fíli and Kíli were with them the first time. Thorn would not have left any behind!

(Gimli remembered seeing Laketown for the first time, little more than a charred pile of timbers in the summer-swollen lake. He remembered thinking he could still see it smoking in the distance, even though it was three years cold. How any could have escaped the dragon’s wrath…he would have to trust in Fíli.)

“You’re awfully quiet, m’lad,” Glóin said with undeserved cheer. “What’s troubling you? We’re nearly there!”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Maybe that’s it, then.”

Glóin’s bright eyebrows rose to disappear into his hair. “No, you’re not scared, are you?”

Gimli blinked at him. “Aye, and what if I am?” he asked. “There’s a great bloody dragon at the end of this, or have you forgotten? I’d be a fool to not be scared.”

“Ahh,” Glóin said, and waved away Gimli’s concerns. “Courage, son! Don’t lose faith.”

Gimli’s eyes narrowed. “You need not talk to me of faith, father. I do not turn when the road darkens.” Even when I should, Gimli thought, bitterly. With the Company sundered, did they have any chance at all? He looked away and saw Bilbo watching him with old eyes. Gimli held his gaze until Balin cried out;

“Land!”

They had arrived at the base of the Mountain.

They landed their boats on a low strip of rocky beach that was as grey and desolate as the sky above them. The sun was setting behind them, and the mountain glowed like an amethyst in the golden light, the snow sparkling down her flanks. The others jumped from the boat, heedless of the water they splashed up onto their boots. As night fell, they would be scraping away ice sure enough.

Bilbo hesitated at the edge of the boat, looking distrustfully at the water. It was no deeper than
what he used when they bathed in the stream, but it was icy cold, and Gimli didn’t wonder that it
gave him pause.

“Come, Bilbo,” Gimli said, and clambered from the boat. The water came to just above his ankles,
but his boots, the much abused gifts of his cousin Dis, kept his toes dry in his socks. “Climb on my
shoulders. I do not doubt the fortitude of hobbit feet, but no need to freeze your toes if your don’t
have to, eh?”

Bilbo shot him a sardonic look, but accepted the hand Gimli offered. He was lighter than he had
been at the beginning of their journey, and compared to the weight of the pack Gimli had worn on
his own quest, Bilbo weighed next to nothing. His fingers clung to Gimli’s over tunic, and his
heels dug into the tops of Gimli’s thighs, but it was no real chore to carry Bilbo over to a dry patch
of beach. Gimli arched back and Bilbo stepped down.

Brushing himself off, Bilbo nodded his head. “Thank you, Gimli,” he said.

“No problem,” Gimli said, and grinned. “Though you’re on your own with the snow.”

Bilbo snorted. “Thanks,” he said, dry. He looked up at the snow-covered mountain. “Maybe I
should invest in a pair of dwarven boots, do you think? I fear Dwarvish winters are much harsher
than the Shire winters I’m used to.”

There was an image: Bilbo tottering around in Thorin’s iron-shod boots. The Bilbo in his minds
eye lifted a foot, nearly falling off balance, arms pinwheeling. He dropped the boot back down to
the ground, and overbalanced forwards. “That would be a sight,” Gimli said. “A hobbit in boots.”

“It’s been known to happen,” Bilbo countered, half testy, and Gimli held out his hands for peace.

“We will camp here for the night,” Thorin said. “Glóin, Gimli, get the fire going.” He looked
down at Bilbo, a queer light in his eye. Gimli narrowed his eyes. “We must keep our Burglar warm,
after all.” Bilbo looked up to meet Thorin’s eye. Thorin nodded, and stalked off once more. Bilbo
watched him go, his brow furrowed.

They camped there for a long, watchful night. Gimli spent most of it on watch, tending the fire. He
missed his uncle, would would make him try to see things in the flames. He missed Fíli, would
would have kept him company, and Kíli, who would try to convince them both to go to bed. He
missed Bofur, who would have sung to him, or played his flute, to pass the cold hours. He fell
asleep at some point, however, as he seemed to blink and the sun was visible at the horizon and the
fire had burned down to embers.

There was just enough time to eat a quick, cold breakfast before Thorin was urging them on, up a
winding path that would take them through the foothills. Gimli looked around as he did, noting the
way the white snow gave the earth a clean quality it otherwise lacked. The land was covered, still,
in fine soot and char. Desolation, indeed.

The path crested at a peak still a good day’s march from the mountain. The setting sun had turned
most of the valley before them to night, and they were staining in the last patch of twilight.

Bilbo reached out a hand and and traced a pattern along what appeared to be a jagged piece of rock.
“What is this place?” he asked.

Balin answered. “It was once the city of Dale,” he said, and walked over to stand by Bilbo. “The
Mountain’s sides were green with woods and all the sheltered valley rich and pleasant in the days
when the bells rang in the town.” He pointed ahead to the burned and snow-covered remains of
what used to be a city. “Now it is a ruin. The desolation of Smaug.” Balin lower his hand. “Most
who survived went on to live in Laketown. Before, it was simply a trading outpost, a place to stop
and resupply or change lanes of travel.” Bilbo nodded, but his eyes were distant.

“The sun will soon reach midday.” Thorn said. “We must find the hidden door into the mountain
before it sets. This way.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to speak of trusting Thorin with directions, but Gimli had to admit
that Thorin hadn’t lead them down a single dead end since they had left Mirkwood. Was he
remembering old stomping grounds? Had the travel of decades worn direction from his mind as,
after all, what did it matter when you had nowhere to return to?

“Wait,” Bilbo said, shaking his head. “Is this the overlook? Gandalf said to meet him here. On no
account were we to—“

“Do you see him?” Thorin demanded, interrupting Bilbo. “We have no time to wait upon the
Wizard. We’re on our own. Come!”

Bilbo grumbled and fell into step with Gimli. “I do not appreciate the way he barks orders,” Bilbo
muttered. “I”m not a dog for him to call to heel.”

“It may simply be bad memories returning,” Gimli offered, and Bilbo met his eyes. Bilbo looked
away first, not saying anything. What was there to say, after all.

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“Anything?”

“Nothing!”

“If the map is true then the hidden door lies directly above us,” Thorin said, looking between the
map and the rock face. Gimli searched with Bilbo. Today was Durin’s day, and they were running
out of time.

(Of course, Gimli knew where the hidden stair was. Every member of the royal household knew, in
case any disaster like Smaug ever happened again. But Thorin had been watching Gimli with
increasing mistrust since they had left Laketown, and Gimli didn’t think that even his “true-
dreaming” could explain his knowledge of the hidden door. So, he walked with Bilbo, and
pretended to search, and hoped someone else would find it soon).

“Up here!” Bilbo called, and pointed. Gimli didn’t have to look to know he’d found the stair
hidden within the tunic of Thror, and he breathed a quick sigh of relief.

If it all happens like it did before, they were less than a week away from battle. It made his heart
heavy to wish for the day to come sooner, but only then would he be able to be himself once more.

“You have keen eyes, Master Baggins,” Thorin said, with genuine warmth. He shoved the map
back into his tunic, and lead the way as they climbed up the stair.

It was rough going. Not every step was easy to get to, and Bombur especially struggled with the
distance, for all that he was surprisingly nimble for his size.

The stair led to a small platform just behind the ear of Thror. “This must be it,” Thorin said,
reverent. “The hidden door. Let all those who doubted us rue this day!” He clenched his fist,
looking for the instant like the same dwarf who had roused their spirits in Bag End, and even Gimli
had to cheer. His mirth was short lived, however, as the old light in Thorin’s eyes faded back to that ill gleam.

“Right, then.” Balin said. “We have a key. Which means that somewhere there is a key-hole.”

Gimli looked side-eyed at Balin. Apparently, Fíli had inherited his occasional declaration of the obvious. No one else seemed to notice, however, as Thorin pulled the key from around his neck, still attached to the leather thong on which it hung.

“The last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole,” he said, with the cadence of an incantation. Then, with the authority of a foreman, “Nori. We're losing the light.”

Nori sprung forward, then, his thievers’s ear pressed against the stone as he tapped, looking for the hollow sound that would indicate a doorway. Gimli shook his head. It wouldn’t work; Dwarf doors were invisible when closed, and not even Gandalf could force them open.

Gandalf. Gimli looked out over the distance, towards the southern tip of Mirkwood. Gandalf had told him, in the days after Pelinor, when Frodo and Sam were recovering in the houses of the healing, what had befallen him when he had left Thorin’s company. Gimli wondered if the knowledge that he would be facing not a mortal man but Sauron himself would change the outcome of that battle. Gimli feared it would, and the lack of the Wizard on the outlook sat ill in his gut.

Dwalin had taken to kicking the rock, as if he could burst through on the strength of his fury. If it would be anyone, it would be Dwalin, but Gimli knew it was hopeless. “Come on” Dwalin growled.

“Be quiet!” Nori snapped. “I can't hear when you're thumping.”

Gimli cross his arms over his chest. “You need to wait for the light,” he said, but it was no use. They weren’t listening to him. “It will come, if you wait.”

“It's no good.” Balin cried out. “The door's sealed. Can't be opened by force.” Now they stood back, stooped in defeat. “There's a powerful magic on it.” He sighed. “Perhaps it’s for the best,” he said, then added, dryly, “The halls must be filled with that beast’s foul reek.”

“No!” Thorin cried. ‘‘The last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole.’ That is what it says.” He looked about him, wildly. “What did we miss? Balin?”

“We've lost the light,” Balin said, his voice and head heavy. “There's no more to be done. We had but one chance. Come away, lads.” His voice was gentle as he ushered them back to the stair.

"It's over," Glóin said. Gimli frowned at him.

"So you're just giving up," he demanded, as Bilbo shook his head:

"Wait a minute--""

"We're too late," Thorin said with an air of finality, and let the key slip from his hands. It fell with a clatter to the mossy rock beneath their feet.

Glóin sighed, and put his hand on Gimli's shoulder. "We're too late, son," he said, and Gimli had to stare at him. "Sometimes, it happens. Not every quest will be a success, and Mahal knows this family has seen their fair share of that truth." Gimli shook his head. No, he could not believe that.
Behind them, Bilbo was demands for answers fell on deaf ears. Thorin turned away, and the others made their way back to the stair.

"Where are you going?" Bilbo asked, in confuddlement. He turned to Gimli. "They listen to you! Make them listen!" Without waiting, Bilbo turned back to Thorin, pleading to his back. "You can't give up now! Thorin. You can't give up now."

"Come along, Bilbo," Balin said. "There's nothing to be done."

"No!" Bilbo cried. "No, and no again! I have not come this far, dragged from my comfortable little hole, though goblin infested mountains and spider-filled woods, pulled you lot from the Elvenking's dungeon and damn near frozen my toes off, just to stop here!"

Gimli felt his eyebrows rise; he'd never heard Bilbo use such language, nor be so visibly angry. His face was red, wind-chapped and flushed angry, and he practically quivered—though he could have been shivering. It was quite cold on their ledge, and Bilbo was standing in a pile of snow.

"Now," Bilbo said, crossing his arms. There was the hobbit who had faced down goblins and spiders, who had brought them all from the Elvenking. "There is a way into this mountain, and I, for one, refuse to move until we have figured it out! Who stays with me?"

"I will," Gimli said, and pulled away from his father to stand next to Bilbo. He pulled off his cloak and draped it around the Hobbit's shoulders. Bilbo patted his hand, gratefully, and when Gimli looked up, he saw Thorin's stare boring into him.

"We all will," Thorin said. "Once more you have proven to be the best of us, Bilbo. You are right. It is foolish to despair so quickly. Start a fire," Thorin said. "And keep it lit!" He stepped over, took the cloak from Bilbo, who squawked with protest, and tossed it at Gimli. Gimli caught it, just in time for Thorin to replace the cloak with his own. Bilbo watched him, thin lipped and wide-eyed, and Thorin never looked away from his face.

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Legolas stopped at the outer edge of Laketown, settling in to lay against an outcropping of rock for shelter; there was something off, something out of place. Tauriel stopped next to him, lowering herself into a crouch.

"What is it?" she asked, quietly breathless.

"Yrch," Legolas sneered. There were orcs in Laketown, the same odd breed they had chased at the river, meaning it wasn’t an isolated attack. Someone wanted Thorin’s company dead, and they were hunting. "Quickly," he said, and vaulted himself off the rock to the path below, springing off on nimble feet.

They lucked upon the little dock, no more than a peg and a shallow boat. It would have been difficult for a full grown man to use, let alone two, but neither Legolas nor Tauriel were Men, and it was a simple enough matter to guide it silently across the icy waters.

It was full on night, now, and the town was as quiet as the water. Tauriel steered them through the pathways and around pillars, under bridges and walkways, while Legolas searched the rooftops.

There—the roof of a small house on stilts, three orcs sat crouched. As Legolas watched, they dropped down through the windows, and the screams from inside woke the night. Lights were lit in the surrounded houses, and Legolas saw the shapes of more orcs crouching back into the darkness.
“Tauriel!” he cried, already springing from the boat to the platform.

“I saw,” she called back, short on his heels, and they raced off to the fight.

Precious moments it took to get to the house, to climb the stairs, but that was all it took. Legolas wrenched open the door, and with one swift moment, cut the head from the orc that stood in the doorway. He stepped over the fallen body into the home.

Bard’s children (for they were Bard’s children. He remembered them from they days after Five Armies, when the new King of Men and King Dain met in negotiation after negotiation with his father), were around the table, facing off with an Orc with a wicked and crooked blade. Little Tilda was under the table, smashing at its feet with a pot, and Sigrid was throwing the crockery. Little Bain (Bain the Just, they would call him), had a sword far too big for him, and too heavy to boot. Still, he held his own.

Legolas shot the orc in the back of his head with an arrow, pulling it free before it fell, and fired again at an orc just coming through the broken window. The children whirled to greet this new threat, and he saw their faces blank with shock when they saw him.

Tauriel had flanked him through the door, and was engaged with the orcs that were attacking Kili where he lay on a table, barely sensate. Fill and Óin were holding them off, throwing the furniture and charging straight for the enemy, willing to use brute force if it was all they had. Tuareg swept in, her knives dancing, and between her blades and the young Prince Fili’s dedicated use of a table bench, the Orc that was coming for Kili perished.

Prince Kili had either fallen, or been thrown from the table in the scuffle, and he struggled to stand and fight, knowing through his fevered delirium that his brother was in danger, but in no way able to fight the real threat.

More orcs appeared at the windows, and the next few minutes were filled with blades and blood.

Then, in the doorway appeared an Orc so big that, for a moment, Legolas thought he was fighting an Uruk Hai, and barked something in their harsh language that was, apparently, a retreat. The Orcs, those left living, fled in an instant, and Legolas was about to give chase. He turned to call Gimli to him, to rejoin, once more, two of the three hunters, and saw, instead, Prince Fili, watching him with guarded eyes.

Legolas blinked. They were not Uruk Hai, not yet. Saruman, if he had yet fallen, had not yet turned his mind to his own army.

“Bolg,” he said, aloud. “That was Bolg.” He saw Fili’s eyes widen; he knew the name then.

He called out to Tauriel. “Stay with them!” and ran out the door to give chase. Why was Bolg in Laketown? What did he want?

Legolas would find out.
Whoo hoo! Another chapter up before the start of my semester! Things are going to be hectic for a while, but funnily enough, I seem to write more when I'm working. Go figure.

Many thanks to living_meatloaf for being the most excellent Beta.

And if you haven't heard it yet, the.dragongirl is recording the podfic! Ahh! 4 chapters are out so far, and it's absolutely breathtaking. Go listen and tell her how awesome it is!

It was a strange camp that night, stranger than any Gimli had yet had with the company. When the Fellowship had lost Gandalf, Gimli had been too lost to grief to pay that night’s camp any attention, and it is hard to feel that kind of sorrow in the Land of Lorien. And then, when his own fellowship had splintered, the Three Hunters had given chase to Merry and Pippin with no camp, and Gimli had not had to make camp again until the strangeness of their new party had faded.

Here, however, the second night with nearly a third of their company left behind, and the rest refusing to see how very wrong that was—Gimli sat and tended the fire, staring into the flames as if they held the answers.

Bilbo sat with Thorin, Thorin’s cloak wrapped tightly around Bilbo’s thin shoulders and tucked around his arms to keep them free as he poured over Thror’s map. He muttered to himself as he looked, looking up occasionally and peering into the darkness. Thorin, on the other hand, never looked away from Bilbo.

Someone sat next to Gimli and he started. Bifur. The older dwarf nodded at him, and pulled out a piece of wood and a small knife. Gimli returned the nod and watched as the block of wood swiftly took shape in Bifur’s skilled hands. The fire snapped and crackled as Bifur fed to it the small shavings of wood.

The block grew a head and shoulders, and long legs that were braced in graceful boots. Broad shoulders were flexed as the figure drew back a bow and its hair was caught in an unseen wind. Its face, his face, was rendered in exquisite detail, and when Gimli turned back from adding another log to the fire, it was done.

Bifur held it out to him, the delicate image of his husband and One love. *For you, on a lonely night,* Bifur signed.

Gimli took the figure gently, and turned it over in his hands. “Thank you, Bifur,” he said, and looked up into eyes that were only mostly there. He wondered, not for the first time, what exactly it was Bifur saw when his eyes didn’t see the here and now. It wasn’t always war. “How did you know?”

*I lost my Westron,* Bifur signed. *Not my ears. Not deaf like your uncle.*
“Aye,” Gimli said with a small laugh. He signed back, *Were we that obvious?*

Bifur shrugged. *Only to those who know to look.*

Gimli nodded, and Bifur clapped Gimli on the shoulders and then patted his own forearm with his hand. Gimli returned the gesture for respect.

“‘Stand by the grey stone,’” Bilbo said, musingly like he was reading aloud. Gimli and Bifur turned to look. Bilbo grunted in frustration, speaking quickly to himself. “We are, and it’s there, to be sure. But what help does that bring on a night like this? At least there isn’t snow.” He shook his head. “‘When the thrush knocks, and the last light of the setting sun of Durin’s day will shine upon the keyhole.’” Bilbo growled. “That’s what we did! What am I missing?!”

*That Durin’s Day is tomorrow* Bifur signed. Gimli blinked at him, then, more tired than he’d been an ages, and he began to laugh.

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Kili groaned, all sense of place lost to fever.

“Please,” Fíli said, nearly begged, and Tauriel could only look at him. “Isn’t there anything you can do? Elves are supposed to be grand healers.”

“I—“ Tauriel said, and froze.

The door burst in, startling everyone inside. Tauriel had spun, her knives at the ready, but it was only Bofur, weatherbeaten hat falling over one eye, and holding a fistful of green aloft. “I’ve got it!” he cried, and shook his hand. The green look wilted, half chewed, but there were still tiny white flowers sticking to the green. “I found it!”

”Athelas,” Tauriel breathed, and grabbed the plant. ”Athelas.”. She brought it to her nose and breathed deeply. “You're in luck,” she said. “With this, I can try what you wish. I will heal him.”

“Excellent!” Óin cried out behind them, finally lowering the footstool he had grabbed. “I’ve always wanted to see elvish medicine.”

***

Legolas followed Bolg across Laketown, ignoring, for now, the faces that peered out to stare at him, the elven prince running headlong past their doors, for seemingly no reason. Bolg stuck to the roofs when he could, the shadows when he couldn’t, and much faster than any orc should have been able to run. Legolas alit on a small bridge and fired an arrow at Bolg’s head. Bolg swatted it away with his hand, never slowing, and Legolas growled. He should have caught up to him by now.

He stopped by an open doorway, looking about him; Bolg was gone. He growled, low in his throat, but before he could turn and return to the others, he was struck from behind.

Legolas had his knives up before he had regained his balance, and he turned swinging. Bolg swatted his strikes aside like flies and Legolas kicked out. Bolg staggered back and unslung his bludgeon from his hip. Legolas sprang at him, not wanting to give him a chance, but Bolg had other ideas. His bludgeon caught Legolas in the chin and Legolas fell back, stunned. When he finally cleared the stars from his eyes, cursing at his inattention, Bolg was gone.

Legolas followed his trail to the edge of Laketown, and saw, on the far shore, Bolg making his
way north. There was only one place he could be going in that direction.

“Gundabad,” Legolas said to the wind. He had to be sure; if the enemy had managed to resurrect Gundabad, then Gimli would need to know.

“Is that where he’s going?” Bard said from behind, and Legolas spun. He hadn’t heard the Bowman come behind, but he must have followed him from the house. That meant those inside were safe; Bard would not leave his children in danger.

“Aye,” Legolas said, softly. “That is my fear. Tauriel and I will travel to Gundabad, once Prince Kíli is healed.”

Bard nodded, and eyed the dark shape of the mountain in the distance. “Why bother, then?” he mused. “Why would Bolg bother with Laketown?” He shook his head, and turned back towards his home.

Legolas watched him go. Because they were here for you, he realized. Kíli was an excuse, a bystander. To save the dragon, kill the dragonslayer. But Bolg had failed, and Bard still lived. What new devilry awaited them?

“Meleth nin, I pray I am wrong,” Legolas said, and went to follow Bard.

***

“Hold him down.” Óin ordered, grabbing Kíli’s legs, and Fíli braced his brother’s shoulders against the table. They’d lost the pillow in the scuffle, and his brother’s hard head was now pillowed on a bag of walnuts. If—when Kíli lived through his, Fíli would never let him hear the end of it.

Tauriel began to chant over her kingsfoil poultice, the words dripping off her tongue like molten silver—no, he thought, like river water—icemelt on the first hot day, sharp and soothing at the same time.

Kíli seemed equally enraptured, though Fíli did not think Kíli saw truly. His eyes were open, staring with wonder. His dark eyes were pinpricks, and Fíli wondered what light he saw.

At length, Kíli gave a small cry and slumped back against the bed. Tauriel stepped back, off balance and a bit glassy eyed. Whatever it was, it was over. Fíli brushed Kíli’s hair from his sweaty forehead. Already, color was returning to his brother’s cheeks, though he still looked far from hale (and carried with him the stink of illness and rot. His brother needed a bath, and soon.)

“I’ve done what I can,” Tauriel said. “The poison no longer spreads, but his wound may yet plague him as the years pass.”

Fíli looked up to meet Tauriel’s eyes. “But he will have those years,” he said. “Thank you.”

Tauriel nodded at him, ducking her head in a way that, if she wasn’t so tired, she may have flushed. She seemed reluctant to leave Kíli’s side and, after a moment, Fíli stepped back.

Óin was at the table, packing away the supplies he could, with the help of Sigrid. “I’ve heard tell of the wonders of Elvish medicine. That was a privilege to witness.”

“Tauriel,” Kíli said, his voice barely a breath of air, and Tauriel placed a hand on his arm.
“Lie still,” she said, but Fíli could have told her it was useless trying to tell his brother to do anything when he was well, let alone when he was drifting on a fever.

“You cannot be her,” Kíli said, looking away. Fill felt his heart ache for the longing in Kíli’s voice. “She is far away—She is far far away from me. She walks in starlight in another world. It was just a dream.” He closed his eyes. “Do you think she could’ve loved me?” He asked, breathless and plaintive, and Tauriel was looking at him with stone-struck shock – but not disgust. Confusion, maybe, and a bit turned inwards, and Fíli had to close his eyes. It was bad enough that his damn fool cousin was married to an elf – must he really witness his brother's courtship of one?

(For he knew his brother, and had been ignoring the signs for too long. Kíli had fallen for the fire-haired elf, and if Fíli was any judge, it seemed Tauriel was realizing she had fallen as well.)

Mahal's balls and beard, he needed an ale.

Where ale was not available, however, busy hands could quiet busy minds. The eldest daughter, Sigrid, was beginning to pick up the pieces of their home. Her brother seemed to be keeping watch at the wall, and she seemed disinclined to ask him to stop. Little Tilda was with Bofur, laughing as the kindly dwarf "pulled" a coin from her ear. He was good with children, Fíli knew, and with Bombur's get he certainly had the practice. He seemed to genuinely like children, too – even the ones that were as tall as he.

A corner of blanket slipped from Sigrid’s hands for a third time, and she stopped, breathing through her nose in frustration. She looked near tears, her knuckles white with the strength of her grip.

Fíli was by her side in an instant, picking up the fallen corner. She opened her eyes, clearly expecting to see her sister when she startled, and nearly dropped the rest of the blanket.

“Easy,” Fíli said. “I’m sorry, I did not mean to frighten you.”

“I’m not frightened,” Sigrid said, but she hadn’t moved more than an inch. Behind him, Fíli knew he had the attention of her brother. “Those orcs were frightening, and you, Master Dwarf, are no orc.”

Fíli flashed a quick smile. “Thank the Maker for that, eh?” He said, and after a moment, Sigrid returned his smile, however hesitant. She tried to take the blanket back from him then. “Please,” he said, before she could speak. “Let me help?”

“I—” Sigrid said. Poor girl, she was clearly out of her element, though she rallied quickly. “Yes. Thank you.”

Fíli grinned, and together they folded that blanket and the rest, putting them back on the shelf from which they had been pulled. Sigrid began next collecting a basket of thread and other small tools—her sewing kit. Fíli began righting what furniture that was still intact. They had lost a chair and one of the table-benches, though the table itself stood firm under Kíli. There were broken bits of pottery, Man-hewn earthenware and wood, from where Tilda had mounted her assault.

He was considering some quick fixes, not ideal, but they would hold until something better could be made, when Bard returned, Legolas in his wake.

Bain sprung from his position at the window. “What news?” he asked, eager, and Bard pushed him back, laughing. The sound was rusty, as if from disuse.

“Enough,” Bard said with grim humor, clamping a hand down on Bain’s shoulder. “You’ll get
your fair share of fighting soon enough, no reason to go running to meet it." He looked up at the
others. "The orcs have fled north, to Gundabad." The room stilled: even the night noises outside
felt more quiet than before.

"Gundabad?" Fíli said, surprised. Gimli had mentioned nothing about Gundabad.

"Aye," Legolas said. "I know. Ill tidings, to be sure." He met Tauriel's eyes for brief moment, and
then Fíli's – they were dark, filled with thoughts of dark things. "It will be no mere siege of
mountain goblins this time. I fear the might of the Enemy is set upon the mountain."

"Impossible," Óin said. "The Enemy was defeated long ago."

"He has returned," Legolas snapped. "His darkness is insidious, and it spreads, filling the cracks of
this world with his foulness. Already, his evil has been at work, or did you think my father not
capable of keeping Spiders from his kingdom? My father, who has kept the Greenwood clear and
safe without the crutch of rings of power, for centuries. My father, who feels the coming darkness
like a creeping terror, and who clings, then, all the tighter to what he holds dear? Has there been
nothing on your quest that has made you wonder?"

"Gimli," Fíli said, and Legolas's eyes snapped to him. Óin turned, as if betrayed. "Gimli spoke of a
darkness coming. He said that he returned because evil had."

Legolas nodded. "Aye, and I with him."

Óin shook his head. "What do you mean, returned?" The Healer looked old, tired.

Legolas shook his head. "The Valar have seen fit to return him, and by him me, to this time." He
looked between them. "This is not the first time the dragon Smaug has been defeated, nor the first
time battle was waged on Erebor in it's aftermath. I fear, this time, the Enemy will not let the
opportunity of battle pass him by."

Fíli sat, heavily. In the corner, his brother slept, unaware. What he would give to keep him thus,
and happy. What he would give to have him awake. "Is there no escaping it, then? War?"

Legolas looked weary. "I fear it is not. My father's mind is full of fear and shadows, and every
minute that passes draws Thorin Oakenshield further under the spell of dragon-gold. No, Prince
Fíli. War is coming, and it is exactly what the Enemy wants."

***

It was a grim company in Bard’s house that evening. Kill remained deeply asleep and Legolas
could sense that it bothered Tauriel—she had been around so few mortals in her life, she was
unused to the depth of their repose, particularly dwarves who slept still as stone themselves. There
had been many nights with the Fellowship where the only sign that Gimli still lived was his
raucous snoring.

Tauriel had allowed herself to be coaxed away from her patient for a late-night supper. It had been
well past dinner time when the orcs had attacked, but between the arrival of the dwarves and the
skirmish in their kitchen, they were all quite hungry.

Dinner had been a simple soup, a staple of winter life in Laketown, and one that could easily be fed
to Kíli as well, were he to wake. Sigrid had done the cooking, aided by Óin, who seemed to want
as little to do with the rest of them as possible. Sigrid seemed a bit taken aback by the older dwarf,
but took his suggestions readily. “I’m no Bombur lass,” he had said, “But I know herbs, and it’s a sad bachelor who cannot feed themselves.”

There were no longer enough seats at the table, and Legolas easily gave up his seat to little Tilda. Tauriel stood, as well, to better watch over her patient.

It was good soup, though the broth was thinner than Legolas preferred, and rich in flavor. He raised the bowl to his lips to more easily drink it down.

“So,” Bard said, between mouthfuls. “The Dragon lives.”

Legolas paused, and slowly lowered the bowl once more. He licked his lips. “Aye. Smaug lives, yet.”

Bard nodded. “Laketown will burn.”

“It did the first time,” Legolas said. “But I have hope that Gimli will—“

“Will do what?” Óin snapped. “He’s just a lad! Even if all this is true, even if he’s not the Gimli I remember, it doesn’t change the fact that he’s sixty-four, and a single dwarf besides!”

Before Legolas could say anything, Fíli spoke in Gimli’s defense. “Gimli isn’t just anything,” he said. “You should know that—you campaigned harder than anyone to get him on this quest.”

Óin scowled. “Well, that was before I knew, wasn’t it? True dreaming—that’s one thing. But memory? Memory fades, warps like wet wood. Even Gimli’s!”

“That may be true,” Legolas said. “But Elven memory does not fade, nor warp. I remember everything—especially Gimli. I would not underestimate him. He has proven himself canny enough more than once.”

“How did the beast die the first time?” Bard asked, drawing attention to himself.

Legolas stepped back—he hadn’t realized he’d stepped in close, as if to physically guard against a threat. “A black arrow to the heart,” he said. “Your black arrow.”

Bard paled, even as his children turned on him.

“You have a black arrow?!”

“Da!”

“Daddy’s going to kill the dragon!”

Bard held up his hands. “Wait, wait!” he cried. “How?” he asked. “A dragon’s hide is impenetrable.”

Legolas shook his head. “I do not know. I,” he blushed, then. “I’m afraid I never asked. The tales all tell of a weakness, but I know not where nor what kind. I am sorry.”

Bard raised an eyebrow. “So I’m supposed to kill a Dragon with a weakness that no one knows about?”

“Sounds about right,” came a weak voice from the bed.

Everyone turned. “Kíli!” Fíli cried, and sprang from the table to his brother’s bedside. Kíli smiled
weakly at him, gripping back as best he could when Fíli took his forearm, and let his eyes slipped closed when Fíli gently knocked their heads together. “Brother,” Fíli said, nearly whispered.

“Brother,” Kíli answered. “I’m alright, now. I’m alright.”

Fíli pulled back, and Legolas lowered his eyes at the sight of something shining in Fíli’s eyes. “Don’t you ever scare me like that, again,” he said. “I don’t know if I could survive losing you, and I know I don’t want to try.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Kíli said.

“Well, you’re right about that,” Óin said, and pushed his way, though. Kíli submitted to Óin’s poking and prodding just long enough for Óin to declare that Kíli wouldn’t be going anywhere for a least a week, if they had the time, which they didn’t, so three, maybe two, days until he could move enough to ride.

“What?!” Kill exclaimed.

Óin grunted. “You took a Morgul arrow to the knee lad, Elvish healing aside. That takes time to heal, Dwarf or no.”

Kíli’s face set like he would growl, but his eyes flickered over to Legolas nonetheless. Legolas raised his eyebrows and looked significantly at Tauriel, who stood still and staring. Watching. Kíli’s own eyes widened, and he sat back in the bed, staring back. Fíli looked between them, and rolled his eyes.

“Try to get some sleep tonight, brother?” he said as he stood.

Kíli nodded. “I’ve slept enough,” he said, however his voice was distant—a token protest at best. Fíli shook his head and came over to stand with Legolas as Tauriel went to join Óin at Kíli’s bedside.

“I need a smoke, an ale, and a long bath,” Fíli said, weary. “I don’t care what order they come in.”

Sigrid coughed. “I can’t help with the first two,” she said, “but we’ve a bathing room, and fire to heat the water.”

“Bless you,” Fíli said, with feeling, and ran a hand over his hair. His golden locks were mussed, his braids awry and the hair flyaway. Legolas remembered Gimli speak about his golden cousin’s vanity, and thought to himself that Fíli must feel quite horrified at his own appearance. Legolas ran a hand over his own hair. His braids were coming loose again, he was sure.

There was a hand at his elbow, and Legolas jerked to look—but it was only Fíli, looking at him and assessing. “He always braided your hair didn’t he?” he asked, quietly.

Legolas felt the tips of his ears flush, and he nodded, unable to speak. It was always a joy between them, to braid each other’s hair. An intimacy beyond intimacies, to be so tender with each other when they were so wild in the eyes of the world.

“You’re smeared with orc,” Fíli said. “Come wash with me. After, we shall see about your braids, hm? If you wish, I will braid yours as I braid my brother’s, and Gimli’s.” He raised a questioning eyebrow, and Legolas was sure he was staring in surprise. He nodded, stunned, and followed Fíli to the back of the house.

There was a little room, and from the way the wind sounded it must stick out over nothing—a later
addition to the building. It was colder in the room, but there was a large tin tub and a pump for water. Next to the tub was a small fireplace—no, it was the back of the kitchen fireplace. Legolas could hear the low tones of the others in conversation. Hooked to a wench and rod was a bucket that could be moved with ease from the fire to the pump.

Sigrid showed Fíli how to pump the water to the bucket, how to move the bucket to the fire, and how to pour the hot water into the tub without burning his hands. Fíli thanked her, and Sigrid took her leave, with only a hurried glance at Legolas as she left.

Fíli worked efficiently, filling the buckets quickly and heating what he could. He did not need the gloves provided for the bucket, touching the hot metal with his bare hands.

“Gimli does not need protection from fire, either;” Legolas said, for lack of anything else. Fíli seemed to move with ease in the silence, but to Legolas it felt uncomfortable and he disliked being wrong-footed.

Fíli nodded, not looking away from his work. “We call it the Fire Touch,” Fíli said. “I was born with the ability. Some, like Gimli, can learn over time. Others, like my brother, will never have the ability.” He looked up. “It took Kíli several years of blisters, and the threat of no longer being able to draw his bow, before he finally learned.”

“Why did you offer?” Legolas asked. Fill did not seemed surprised by the sudden change in subject, and instead answered in an the same tone as he offered the story of Kíli’s hands.

“Because you are my Cousin’s Husband, and that makes you kin,” Fíli said. Legolas knew from his talks with Gimli that dwarves’ modesty with their braids stopped at close kin, but was surprised to hear Fíli call him thus. The dwarf hadn’t seemed to like him much. “Kin is important to any Dwarf, and the we Durins treasure it dearly, for fate has a way of taking us early in life.” He poured the last bucket and began to strip himself of his tunics. He glanced up at Legolas, his fingers in the ties. “I will think nothing of your staring,” he said, “but would others?”

Legolas shook himself and looked away. “My apologies,” he said. “I was lost in thought.”

“Hmm,” Fíli said. “If you say. I am an attractive dwarf—I am aware enough of myself to know this. I would not fault you for looking—as long as you only look.”

“You—!” Legolas bit himself off, turning to glare at the blond—who was now fully immersed and hidden in the water. “You doubt my loyalty to your cousin? I love him with all of my being—he is more to me than myself! I have followed him though shadow and flame, back through time itself and you think a pretty face is enough to make me stray?”

Fíli raised an eyebrow. “You think I’m pretty?” he said, and then held up a hand. “I apologize. I am only teasing you, Legolas, for you seemed lost in your own head, and I went to far. I do not doubt your loyalty to Gimli. In truth, you have nothing to fear. My life is dedicated to my craft. I will take neither husband nor wife.” He ducked under the water and stayed for a long moment, giving Legolas time to compose himself. When he came back up, his hair had darkened with water, and was slicked back from his face.

“I have been lost much as of late, and I tire of it.” Legolas said. “I will be better when I have my Gimli with me.”

“So will we all,” Fíli said, and grabbed his comb from the floor, working the knots from his braids. “I have heard his side of the tale,” he said. “Will you tell me yours?”
Legolas leaned back against the wall, settling in. “The tale of us, you mean?”

Fíli nodded. “Aye,” he said.

Legolas thought for a long moment. “I have spent many centuries in the Greenwood,” he said, at length. “But only in the Greenwood. I remember the rise of Erebor, the bountiful reign of Thror, King Under the Mountain. I remember her fall—but for all that I had watched dwarves, and treated with dwarves, I do not think I knew one until I met Gimli. He seemed to me, then, pigheaded, stubborn and slow—but even from the first, never stupid. Rash, yes, but steadfast as well. We…did not get on at first,” Legolas said, delicately, and Fíli laughed.

“I can imagine. You weren’t wrong about him, you know? He is all of those things.”

“I know,” Legolas said, dryly. “But he is also wise and kind, thoughtful and big-hearted. He is a poet, and a romantic, and funny. He is brave—near fearless—and though quick to anger, he is quick to forgive.”

Fíli ducked under again, and when he rose, he said. “It’s odd to hear you speak of him, thus. He is still my baby cousin.”

“And Tauriel is my little sister,” Legolas said. “Yet that does not seem to stop Kíli.”

Fíli snorted. “Aye,” he said, and sighed. There was more he seemed to want to say on the matter, but instead he nodded at Legolas. “Go on?”

Legolas pressed his lips together. “We did not see eye to eye until the long walk through Moria. I pulled him from his darkness, there, but it wasn’t until we reached peace in Lorien that we were able to speak of it. I realized, then, that everything I knew of dwarves had been twisted through old fears and conflict, and in Gimli I saw truly for the first time. We walked together, often, and I delighted in his joy—seeing the world as if for the first time through his eyes. I fell in love with him then,” he said, and Fíli’s eyes widened, as if he had not expected Legolas to admit it. “Though, of course, I would not realize this until much later. We were besieged—three nights at terrible odds. Gimli and I were separated. When I couldn’t find him—” Legolas stopped. Gimli had been well. They had their centuries together. Gimli was still well, there was no need for him to react thus.

“You realized just what you had to lose,” Fíli said, and Legolas nodded.

“Aye. I had much to lose. I told him thus, in the quiet aftermath. He looked at me, and there was such love in his eyes! ‘Fool elf,’ he said. ‘I have loved you ever—you were written on my heart from my very first breath. Forgive these eyes that were too slow to see.’”

“‘My love,’ I said. ‘There is nothing to forgive.’” Legolas smiled softly to himself. “It seemed nearly obscene, at time, to be fighting such a dark war and to be so in love. But I wonder, now, if that wasn’t the point—if we didn’t need such brightness to get us through the dark times.” He looked up, and Fíli was staring at him. “What?” he asked.

Fíli shook his head. “If any doubt your love for my cousin, I will set them straight. There is no doubt that you are his One, nor he yours.”

Legolas nodded. “Aye,” he said. “And I thank the Valar every day.” He looked up, out the tiny window to where the moon hung low over the mountain. “I would give anything to be with him, once more.”

“You will be,” Fíli said, and unstopped the drain to let the water fall. “Here—I’ll not make you
bathe in what I have just scrubbed from me. It won’t take long to get hot again.” He stood to get a
towel, and Legolas stood as well.

“Cold would be fine for me,” Legolas said. “It would be most refreshing.”

Fíli wiped the towel down his face and stopped, looking at Legolas overtop. “I cannot see Gimli
getting used to cold baths,” he said.

Legolas grinned. “He did not,” he said, and Fíli threw his head back to laugh. He clapped Legolas
in the shoulder. “I like you, cousin,” he said. “You’re good for him.”

Legolas had to close his eyes for a moment. Cousin. Such a simple thing, and yet so much. “And
he for me,” he said.

“Aye,” Fíli said. “Now get that filth off of you. I’ve been itching to straighten your braids since the
damned dungeon!”

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Dawn broke gently, and found Gimli looking out across the lake. He could just make out the night-
fires in distant Laketown, and he found himself wondering how his cousins faired. Had his uncle
listened to his warning? Did he find the kingsfoil for Kíli’s leg? Had Legolas yet arrived? He had
many questions, and no method to answer them.

The camp stirred awake, and Gimli set about making a pot of morning kafé. It had been months
since he had woken to the bitter aromatics of the brewed drink, but the men of Laketown still
traded for the bean, and had kept the tradition where the rest of the lands seemed to rely on teas
alone. Still, he had gone longer. There was no kafé in the undying lands, after all.

Bilbo was the last up, reluctant to remove himself from the nest of furs and blanket that he and
Thorin had cocooned themselves in at some point late the night before. It did not help that Thorin
held him fast to his chest, pinning Bilbo with a thick arm. Bilbo, for his part, didn’t seem to mind
as long as the map was within reach.

By the time breakfast had been eaten, the others were beginning to get restless, and they began
exploring along the ledges.

Contrary to popular opinion, Dwarves were quite decent climbers—if they were climbing on good,
steady, sensible rock, rather than flimsy tree branches. Legolas had once likened them to the
cliffside goats—the same goats Dain trained for his army—quite nimble even on near sheer rock
face, even though the looked at all times quite peculiar and precarious.

There was no other way in from up here, if even that was what they were looking for. Gimli did not
know, nor did he wish to stray too far from Thorin and Bilbo.

So, around Mid-morning, when there was nothing left to clean from the morning and it was not yet
time for mid-day meal, Gimli sat on the ledge overlooking the valley and Laketown beyond, and
pulled his pipe from his pocket.

Here they were, at Erebor. The Dragon lay sleeping inside. Fíli, Kíli, Óin, and Bofur had been left
behind in Laketown, and Kíli was sick with a morgul wound. Legolas was quite possibly trapped
in his father’s realm because Thranduil had given in to his paranoia, and Thorin…

Thorin had taken to eyeing Gimli with active distrust, for no reason that Gimli could see other than
that Gimli would talk to Bilbo—coveting his attention. Now, he was trying to get Bilbo to pay
attention to him, in return.

And what was Gimli doing? Nothing. He was sitting here, smoking his pipe, because there was not a damn thing he could do! This was not a problem he could swing an axe at, or even talk his way through.

Suddenly, Bilbo snapped. “You said sitting on the doorstep and thinking would be my job, not to mention getting inside, so I am sitting and thinking.” In truth, it appeared to Gimli that Bilbo was thinking of little save for the snails that seemed to crawl over the rocks. Once, ages ago now, it seemed, but it was only a few weeks before, Bilbo had told Gimli of a Hobbit delicacy, snails cooked in butter with herbs, that he had tried once in his youth. “I’m afraid the dish is quite out of fashion, now, but it was quite tasty.” They had no butter, and less herbs, but Gimli didn’t think that mattered much to Bilbo at the moment.

No, Bilbo wasn’t the only one who needed to think. Gimli needed to figure out his next course of action—and soon.

The door would open at sundown, and then would be the Dragon.
Insider Information

Chapter Notes

Thank you all for your patience!

All props and honor to livingmeatloaf for being my wonderful beta!

Check out the-dragongirl's podfic!

Though the Morgul stuff was cleared from his leg, Kíli still slept through much of the following day. He woke a few times, briefly, to eat and use the necessary, but would soon fall back to sleep. By the second day he was awake more than he was asleep, though he still felt far weaker than he would care to admit.

It was weird, when he was awake. The house was tense, neither elf nor dwarf willing to risk being seen in the daylight. It was cramped, and two separate camps seemed to be developing. The elves and Bard against the Dwarves. Bofur and Bard’s girls, however, seemed to occupy a neutral space, and would pass between both “camps” with ease.

Kíli was fond of the littlest one—Tilda. She seemed the least bothered by events, and was often laughing at Bofur. She had sat with him early in the afternoon, showing him her rag doll and telling him stories of the town. Kíli listened—children were precious, and Tilda was no exception.

Fíli was over-attentive. (He drew the line at being helped to the toilet—he was a grown dwarf, dammit, he could manage!). Öin seemed to ignore his input, seemed to ignore Kíli completely, paying attention solely to his wound. Kill wasn’t sure what had thrown Öin into such a tizzy, but he could guess.

Fíli confirmed it that night for him, handing him yet another damn bowl of broth. “It was quite the declaration. Those two saps were meant for each other.”

“So, you’ve come ‘round to the idea, then?” Kíli asked, and ignored the way his heart stuttered and fluttered in his chest. Must be all this broth. How was he supposed to get better if he had no real meat?

Fíli hummed, and ran an assessing hand through Kíli’s hair. “I fixed his braids,” he said. Kill choked on his soup.

“What, really?” He asked. He grinned. “Good for you, Fíli. You’ve grown.”

Fíli rolled his eyes. “Well, it seemed like I had better, since I’d soon be surrounded.” He looked significantly at Kíli, who shrugged. Why deny it? His heart had recognized its One in Tauriel—whether she recognized him in return or not. He wouldn’t blame her if she didn’t. She was a creature of starlight, and he a dwarf of the mountains. (But if Legolas could love Gimli…) said a voice in his head. Fíli rolled his eyes again. “Stop that,” he said. “You look ridiculous when you go all mooney.”

“I’m not all mooney!” Kíli said, and resumed eating his soup. “I’m hungry,” he said between bites. “When can I have solid food?”
“When I say you can, and not a moment sooner!” Óin called from across the room. Fíli and Kíli shared a look. What Óin could and couldn’t hear…

Fíli took Kíli’s now empty bowl. “I’ll see if I can’t snag you some bread from dinner.”

Dinner brought more soup, but this time it had chunks of fish and potato, and a small hunk of bread. It was the best thing Kíli had ever tasted.

He drowsed.

When he woke again, Bofur was asleep in a chair by the fire, hand protectively around little Tilda, as she slept curled into him. Bain sat on his other side, slumped against him. Sigrid wasn’t to be seen, nor were Bard, Legolas, or Óin. Kíli wondered just how late it was.

“You’re awake,” Tauriel said, and Kíli turned to look. She was seated nearby, mostly in shadow from the low firelight.

“I am,” he said. She looked at him, studying his face as if she would need to commit it to memory. What did she see when she looked at him? Did she see a youth, like his mother and his Uncle? Or did she see him as he saw himself—a dwarf just entering his prime? Did she see, still, an invalid mortal, breakable and quick to die? “I can not believe you’re here,” he said.

She looked startled, then a small, genuine smile curved her lip. “Neither can I,” she said. “The events that lead to this all seem quite impossible.”

“Aye, they do,” Kíli said. “Still, I cannot be sad that they happened, or I would never have met you, Tauriel.”

She flushed, and looked away, her face oddly blank. She was, he thought, trying not to smile too broadly. “I am glad to have met you as well,” she said, and Kíli beamed. He held out his hand, and after a minute, Tauriel took it.

***

Legolas stood on Bard’s front stair, watching the moon. How much did Sauron know about the battle to come? They had to assume he knew everything—so why was Bard still alive? It was common knowledge, Bard the Dragon Slayer. Why not attack here first? Be rid of the man who rids the land of Dragons, and there would be none to defeat Smaug.

Why did Bolg run?

More and more Legolas worried about Bolg’s presence in Laketown, and more about the ease of his flight away. Soon, they would need to part ways, and he and Tauriel would need to go north to confirm. Right now, however, Legolas would not leave Kíli—would not leave Gimli’s cousin—while he was still threatened by his wound, and the coming Dragon.

And where was the Dragon?

"So why you?"

Legolas turned: Óin had stepped out onto the platform – Legolas must have been lost in thought, because he hadn’t heard the old healer come near. “Pardon?”
“You said you came back because of Gimli – why you? Couldnae let a dwarf save the world?”

Legolas blinked, struck. He hadn’t expected that much bitterness, particularly from one who hadn’t seem to have the same knee-jerk hatred as his kin. "Not in the least!" Legolas said. "I was not given a choice, though I would have gladly have done the same if asked.” He paused, considering. "I love your nephew, Óin son of Gróin, and he, me. It is a love so strong, that Gimli followed me to Varda, when I could no longer cling to the shores. A love strong enough that I followed him here, to help when I can.”

Óin looked rather like someone had whacked him in the back of the head. "When you say love--“

Legolas sided, frustrated. "I mean he is my husband, and I his One! We are bonded in the ways of my people and married in the eyes of yours. He is my other half, the best of me, and I him.”

The news most of scrambled the poor dwarf, for all he said next was – "He's sixty-four!"

"Physically. For now,” Legolas said. "His body will change as time goes by. I waited over two-thousand years for him the first time. What are a few decades when I have his mind – his words and his laughter?"

Óin sighed, shook his head. He looked chagrined, at his words and his anger. Legolas knew from Gimli that his uncle prided himself on his level head in times of crisis, and he could hear Gimli’s voice in his mind. Aye, and there’s no bigger crisis to a dwarf than their kin has married an elf. I’m sure. Óin’s voice was softer, an apology, when he spoke. "I didnae think it possible.”

Legolas shrugged. "Neither did we, until we did it.”

Óin nodded, and wiped a hand over his face "Who knows?”

Legolas raise an eyebrow. "Besides those here? Only Bilbo, I believe.” Óin’s expression didn't get any happier. "I don't believe Gimli plans on keeping it a secret much longer. We were quite open the first time, and have no desire to live our lives in secret.”

"What will you face, though?” Óin asked shaking his head. "No one will like this.”

"They managed fine the last time!” Legolas added hotly. “They wouldn’t like it, no, but they will deal with it.”

“Aye, they will,” Bofur said poking his head at the door. Legolas closed his eyes, chastising himself. The host of Mordor could walk up behind him in this state, and he wouldn’t know it. Óin looked ready to pop, but Bofur just shrugged his shoulders. “We’re dwarves—not much we can’t get used to, if we’ve a mind to do it.”

Óin growled. “This is not hardship and toil!” He snapped. “This is completely different!”

“Aye,” Bofur said, for the first time, short. “It’s more than that. Gimli has found his One, and instead of being happy for his joy, you turn his One aside with suspicion!”

Legolas didn’t expect Bofur to get through to the old dwarf, but surprisingly, Óin looked quite sheepish. “Bofur,” he said, “I—I’m sorry, I didn’t realize.”

Bofur softened, and he shook his head. “I know you didn’t. I didn’t rightly want you to, but it seems you needed to.” He looked between the two of them. “But I came out here because your patient,” he nodded at Óin, “is awake and making starry eyes at your captain,” he nodded at Legolas.
“Right,” Óin said. “To my duty.” He paused, however, and turned to Legolas. “I am sorry,” he said. “If Gimli chose you, then I have no right to be sore. I will try to remember that in the future.” Legolas nodded, and Óin disappeared back inside. Bofur remained outside, however, fixing a pipe.

“You must be curious,” he said, not looking up.

Legolas cocked his head. “I am,” he said. “But I would not pry where I’m not wanted.”

Bofur nodded. “And I thank you for that.” He lit his pipe and took a long drag. “I lost my One, you know. In a mine collapse. The same one that took the prince’s father.” He sniffed. “I’m a dwarf of Craft now, and I’ve mostly come to peace with that. I have Bifur to take care of, and I Bombur’s kids to coddle.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” Legolas said. “I was present for Gimli’s passing. It—” he stopped, and bowed his head. “Grief can be deadly for elves,” he said. “Had Gimli not woken here, I would have followed him into death. I will, one day. The next time…” Legolas trailed off. Gimli would not be so lucky as to get a third chance at life. If Gimli died, he would remain dead, and so, too, Legolas.

Bofur touched his arm. “It must be strange; to be married and a widower at the same time.”

Legolas smiled, soft. “Yes. It is very strange,” he said. “But I still feel him, through our bond. I know he is well. He is worried, and cold, but strong.” He sighed. “We both know that what we do is more important than either of us, and so I can’t help but feel selfish for wanting Gimli to keep himself safe.”

“It’s only natural to not want pain,” Bofur said. “Especially when you know how bad that pain goes. I miss my Krar every day, and I would give anything to have him back, but would give even more to never go through losing him again.” He finished his pipe. “Come on, then. Bard should be back, soon.”

Legolas nodded, and followed Bofur back inside.

***

The sun was setting, and the air on the mountain was tense. One by one, each dwarf fell silent, until the only sound was Bilbo muttering under his breath.

Glóin stood next to Gimli, his hand a heavy weight on his shoulder as they watched the winter sun shine on the rock face. Gimli thought back to the other secret door, the door to Khazad-dum. He remembered the silver-starlight shine of the mithril writing. He had never seen this door. Was there writing on this as well? Would Gimli see, once more, the hidden runes of his people? Or would there be another sign?

“What about the bloody thrush?” Bilbo swore, and Gimli looked away from the door. Bilbo had his hands fisted in his hair, his face pinched. Bilbo looked up in desperation. “It doesn’t make sense! The setting sun, the time of year, I can understand planning for it, but a thrush? How can you plan on the actions of birds?”

Gimli opened his mouth, but before he could speak, a knocking sounded at the edge of the ledge. They turned, and there, was a small thrush, knocking snail shells against the rock. At that moment, the last light of the day pierced the cloud, hitting the rock face like a precision instrument. There, in the tiny round glow, was a keyhole.

“Thorin!” Bilbo cried, voice strangled. “Quickly! Before it disappears!”
Thorin pulled the key from his shirt with a shaking hand, and just as the sun slipped below the horizon, sunk the key into the keyhole. Gimli let out a deep breath, and felt the excitement bubble up in his chest. Dragon or no, he was here, now, at the moment when the rightful King Under the Mountain returned to his Kingdom.

Thorin raised his hands and pressed his fingertips against the stone. His face was rapt as he stared at his own hands. He pushed, arms flexing as the stone slowly pushed free, for the first time in decades, silent save for the faint grinding of stone against stone.

The door opened.

A wind blew, like a great exhale, from inside the pitch darkness, reeking of dragon and death, and the dwarves, who had been leaning forward eagerly, leaned back.

“Well,” Balin said, quietly. “Here we are.”

Aye, Gimli thought. At long last.

Thorin raised his head, and took that first step. He walked slowly, the walk of one lost in memories from long ago.

“Erebor,” he said, his voice a barely heard rumble. Balin stepped up quickly and stood behind his king.

“Thorin,” he said, and his voice, too, was choked with memory. At last, the others crowded forward. Gimli pushed Bilbo in front of him, making sure the hobbit was not crushed in the thoughtless press of Dwarves.

“I know these walls,” Thorin said, reaching out a hand to run his fingers across the smooth stone. “These halls. This stone.” He glanced back, and Gimli could see the light dancing in his eyes. The fire of his passion. “You remember it, Balin. Chambers filled with golden light.”

“I remember,” Balin said, and Gimli was suddenly worried for the older dwarf. He looked faint, like he would keel over any minute.

"Herein lies the Seventh Kingdom of Durin's Folk,” Glóin said, reading aloud the inscription above the door. “May the Heart of the Mountain unite all Dwarves in defense of this home.”

Gimli pressed his own bare hand to the stone walls; they were warm, even in the cold of the coming winter. The mountain thrummed, pulsed as if with her own heartbeat, and something inside Gimli, something a lot like homesickness, settled. He had spent nearly half his life in Middle Earth in Erebor, and it was good to be home.

He could only imagine how Thorin felt. Much like Gimli would feel to return to Aglarond, he suspected, or the shore home he shared in Legolas across the Great Sea—Like he had recovered some vital piece of him that had been left behind.

Bilbo was staring at the mantle above the door, at the picture beneath the inscription Glóin recited.

“The Throne of the King,” Gimli said, sotto voice, to Bilbo.

“Ah,” Bilbo said, and nodded. “And what's that above it?”

“The Arkenstone,” Balin said, reverent.
Bilbo looked at Balin in confusion. “Arkenstone? And what's that?”

“That, Master Burglar,” Thorin said, his voice a deep rumble of thunder, “is why you are here.

Bilbo narrowed his eyes. “If you mean you think it is my job to go into the secret passage first, O Thorin, Thrain’s son Oakenshield, may your beard grow ever longer,” he snapped. Thorin didn’t react, save to raise his eyebrows, but it mattered not--Bilbo was not done. “Say it quick! I’ve half a mind to say no! I’ve saved your skins twice now, above and beyond our contract, which can I suspect, benefit from some revision. I have already earned my fair share.”

Bilbo paused then, some of his ire leaving him. “But I will go all the same. I have come to trust my luck more now than in the old days.” He looked away from a melancholy moment. “And who will come with me?” he asked, gently, as if not expecting an answer.

Indeed, no one stepped forward, and even Thorin averted his eyes. Bilbo sighed, and Gimli was suddenly, incandescently furious.

Gimli stepped forward. “I will go with ye,” he said, proud, head held high.

Glóin gasped, “Gimli, no!” and grabbed at his arm. Gimli shook himself free.

"Gimli, yes!" Gimli snapped, entirely fed up with all this blathering about. "For all Bilbo has done for us, you would let him face a dragon alone? Have your travels made you spineless!"

That caused a reaction, and the others snarled and snapped at him, more like hungry wolves than dwarves, and Gimli wondered if Thorin wasn't the only one already snared by the gold within. Still, Gimli set his jaw. The Lady had promised, over him gold would have no sway and so it was up to him to keep his kin on track. Even if he had to teach them lessons with his axe.

Thorin rumbled, face dark and storming, and stepped closer. "You go too far."

"You do not go far enough!" Gimli spat.

"Stop! Please!" Bilbo cried, and they all fell silent. "All of this would be pointless if it wakes the dragon!" He sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers.

"Gimli," he began. "I am honored that you would come--your loyalty does you credit, but you cannot come." Gimli opened his mouth to protest, but Bilbo held up a hand. He tilted his head at Gimli, his expression saying 'you know why,' and Gimli backed down. Gimli had a mission, and he could not let his fondness for Bilbo endanger that quest.

Bilbo sighed again. "It was unfair of me to ask," he said. "Gandalf was clear that while no dwarf would be safe from the dragon's nose, I might just be."

He was, Gimli knew. Bilbo would wake Smaug, and the dragon would die thinking the thief had been a disguised lakeman. But, he had survived last time, and might still again.

"So," Bilbo said, rubbing his hands together. "You want me to find a jewel?" He looked between the dwarves, waiting for an explanation.

Balin cleared his throat. "A large, white jewel. Yes."

Bilbo raised his eyebrows, lips pressed together, when no more information came. "That's it? Only, I imagine there's quite a few down there." Gimli looked away to hide a grin. Bilbo had a hobbit's gift for understatement, that's for sure, but from what Gimli had heard, there was no mistaking the
Arkenstone. Balin confirmed that a moment later.

"There is only one Arkenstone," he said, voice deep and serious. "And you'll know it when you see it.

"Right," Bilbo said, flatly unbelieving.

Balin reached out a hand and lay it on Bilbo's shoulder, turning him and leading him down the tunnel. Gimli listened as best he could, standing back. The others let him, still sore at him for the blows to their pride, it seemed. Oh well. They would get over it.

These tunnels, it seemed, were made to dampen sound. It was good for them--the dragon was not likely to have heard them after all, but it made eavesdropping much more difficult. "In truth, lad," Balin said, sounding not much like Gimli's tutor, or the seneschal to the king. He sounded like Gimli's old cousin, and it brought a flicker of hope to Gimli; they were affected, aye, but not lost. Not yet.

"I do not know what you will find down there," Balin said. "It was an impressive speech, lad, but you truly needn't go if you don't want to. There's no dishonor in turning back."

Gimli could just imagine Bilbo shaking his head. "No, Balin. I promised I would do this and I think I must try." Gimli closed his eyes. Oh, Bilbo.

"It never ceases to amaze me," Balin said, warm, and Gimli bit his lip to keep from smiling. It seemed Balin felt the same. Hobbits truly were remarkable creatures, particularly the Tooks (and Gamgees).

"What's that?" Bilbo asked.

Balin chuckled. "The courage of Hobbits," he said, and sighed. "Go now with as much luck as you can muster." A moment passed, and then Balin called out.

"Oh, Bilbo? If there is, in fact a live dragon down there...don't waken it."

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"Well, thief! I smell you and feel your air. I hear your breath. Come along! Help yourself again, there is plenty and to spare."

"No thank you, O Smaug the Tremendous! I did not come for presents. I only wished to have a look at you and see if you were truly as great as tales say. I did not believe them."

"Do you now?"

"Truly the songs and tales fall utterly short of the reality, O Smaug the Chiefest and Greatest of Calamities."

"You have nice manners for a thief and a liar."

***

It had been an age since Gandalf had seen the sun; some black patch of evil blotted out the sky like the inky smoke of a thousand brushfires. There were no days, no nights, just the long slow march of minutes.

He hurt, like he had never known hurt, and Gandalf could feel the despair creeping in at the edges
of his being. No one could help him now.

The cage creaked as it spun, so very slowly, in the wind that smelled of rotting flesh and blood. When the touch came, it was so gentle and Gandalf did not notice at first the feather-light feet of the moth that settled on his cheek.

His hand snapped up, catching and cradling the moth with surprising swiftness, and he poured his message out through cracked and bleeding lips in a voice more brittle than charred wood. He set the moth free, and watched from the corner of his eye as it flew away to cleaner skies.

Deep in his heart, Gandalf began to hope.

***

“Where do you come from, may I ask?”

“You may indeed! I come from under the hill, and under the hills and over the hills my paths led. And through the air. I am he who walks unseen. I am the clue-finder, the web-cutter, the stinging fly. I was chosen for the lucky number!”

“Lovely titles.”

“I am he that buries his friends alive and drowns them and draws them alive again from the water. I came from the end of a bag, but no bag went over me.”

“Those don’t sound so credible.”

“I am the friend of bears and the guest of eagles. I walk with the true-dreamers and future seers. I am Ringwinner and Luckwearer; and I am Barrel-rider.”

“Ahh,” Smaug rumbled. “Ring-bearer. I have been told of your coming. The Dark Lord has been looking for you, and here you are. In my lair. It must be my...birthday.”

Bilbo swallowed thickly.

***

Thorn was staring at him. Gimli could feel it like a brand on the back of his neck, and he held himself still. He refused to give Thorin the satisfaction. King or no, Gimli's mission was more important.

Gimli closed his eyes and looked down. More important, he scoffed to himself; who did he think he was? A dwarf's devotion to his kin was what made him a dwarf! To cast his king aside...

He’s sick, a voice whispered in his mind. Sick and a danger to everyone. It would be a boon to be rid of him, so much easier to get things done without him there. Best to stop it now. The only way to avoid this war is to be rid of Thorin Oakenshield!

“No!” Gimli cried out, and the voice disappeared like so much mist. He blinked, only now realizing how his vision had darkened and felt icy fingers unwrap from his heart. He looked over and saw the eyes of the company on him.

“Gimli?” Glóin asked, his concern plain on his face. “Are ye alright, son?”

“We stand above the Dragon horde,” Gimli said. “None of us are alright.”
“Ridiculous,” Thorin said. “This is our home. No dragon spell can snare us!”

“Like it couldn't snare King Thror?” Gimli countered, nearly growling, and the company gasped a near silent breath. Thorin stopped and turned slowly back around.

“Watch your tongue, boy,” he snapped and stepped in close, looming. He was not so far gone to draw his sword, but Gimli knew that if he had been, Gimli would not be long for this world. Still he stood firm. “You have no right to speak of him when your own gifts have been less than impressive of late.”

“I do not need my gifts to see your future, Thorin Oakenshield,” Gimli growled. “You--” Gimli never said what Thorin would be, for at that moment, the mountain shook and a roar like a hurricane sounded deep below.

The dragon was awake.

“Bilbo,” Thorin breathed, and turned from Gimli to watch the entrance of the cave. Now he cares, Gimli thought, but he too watched the darkness for answers.

In came in a scream. Bilbo’s scream.

“THORIN!”
“Bilbo!” Thorin cried, and ran headlong down the tunnel. Gimli was fast at his heels and it was quickly nearly too dark to see. The others raced with them, Gimli could hear them all around them, could feel their running steps. *If I can feel them, so can Smaug*, Gimli thought. The dragon roared again, a great crash sounding. *Though, I doubt he's paying much attention at the moment.*

They rounded a corner; Bilbo cried out once more, a sound of surprise as if he had fallen. There was a steady roaring in Gimli's ears, but it had a strange tinkling quality to it. *Gold. The Hoard of Thror*, he thought suddenly. *That's the sound of coin flowing like water.*

Smaug's growling crashed into words as the light before them grew steadily brighter; it was the light of torches reflected off gold. "The King Under the Mountain is dead. I took his throne. I ate his people like a wolf among sheep. I kill where I wish, when I wish. My armor is iron. No blade can pierce me!"

"Unless it's a sodding black arrow," Gimli huffed to himself, getting him an odd look from Dori.

"Save your breath, lad," Dwalin grunted as he passed; he had steadily made his way to the front of the company. "You'll need your strength."

There was no time to reply, for then they burst through to the dragon's lair. Gimli was momentarily staggered, though long training kept his feet moving one in front of the other. There was so much *Gold*; he had never realized just how large the hoard had been. By the time Gimli had made it to the mountain, large portions had already been paid as reparations, and more still had been hidden away in the royal coffers.

But there was no time to stand there, dazzled. Smaug bellowed once more and stomped into view, crouched low, as if chasing something on the ground.

Smaug was massive, and behind him, Gimli heard Ori whimper. Or maybe that was Bombur. Either way, Gimli felt like whimpering himself. No wonder this dragon had taken the mountain.

*And he wasn't even the biggest*, Gimli thought, surprisingly distant. *A mere baby in comparison.*

"That's not a comfort," he muttered under his breath, and forced himself to look away. "There!" he cried, spotting it; a shifting patch of gold, like the coins were scattered by slipping, running feet, though no one could be seen. "Bilbo's over there!"
"Where?" Thorin cried. "I don't see him!"

"Smaug's nearly on him!" Gimli cried. "We have to distract him."

Smug taunted Bilbo as he hunted, his voice rumbling through the cavern. "You were only ever a means to an end. The coward Oakenshield has weighed the value of your life and found it worth nothing," he hissed. "What did he promise you? A share of the treasure?" He tisked, and it set Gimli's teeth on edge. "As if it was his to give. I will not part with a single coin. Not one piece of it!"

"Right," Thorin said, and clambered to the top of a teetering pile of gold. He stood tall, feet braced, and raised his sword high.

"It is not yours to keep!" Thorin cried, in a voice that echoed through the room like a sounding drum. Smaug's head swung towards Thorin, and he slowed. "I did not look to see you so easily outwitted. You have grown slow and fat in your dotage," Thorin taunted. Smug rumbled and smoke billowed towards the dark shadows of the ceiling. He took a step towards Thorin, and Thorin sneered. "Slug!

Smaug roared and belched fire. Thorin jumped, and slid down the pile back towards them.

"Scatter! Take cover. Go!"

Gimli wasted no time, and was off like a shot towards where he had last seen Bilbo. Smaug continued to snarl, clearly unhappy to see so many dwarves appear. The others were not silent, either, no. They all seemed to take a page from Thorin's book, shouting their defiant taunts to the already enraged dragon.

This plan is either brilliant, Gimli thought, or the stupidest plan I have ever heard.

Just then, Gimli's boot caught on nothing, and heard a sound like a winded Hobbit, and he tumbled, head first, into a pile of rubies. Gimli struggled upright as quick as he could, and looked back at where he had tripped. After a moment, Bilbo appeared from thin air, quickly pocketing the ring, and pressing his other hand to his side.

"Do you have steel in your boots?" Bilbo wheezed.

"Yes," Gimli said, blinking. "Of course. Are you all right?"

"Bruised, I think," Bilbo said. "Gimli. I knew there was a dragon, but there is a bloody dragon!"

"I know," Gimli said, and staggered to his feet. "We have to keep moving. The others will only be able to hold him off for so long." He reached out a hand and grabbed Bilbo's own, tugging him to his feet. He pulled a little too hard, however, and Bilbo flew upwards, staggering. As he caught his balance, the front of his tattered Laketown clothes billowed and gapped, and a stone—the most brilliant of stones, tumbled from his shirt front.

Gimli stared at it with wide eyes, frozen to the spot, even as Bilbo scrambled to hide it once more, shoving it deep within his tunic.

"The Arkenstone," Gimli whispered. "You found it."

"Please, Gimli," Bilbo started. "I—""

Smaug roared, and his thundering footsteps turned towards them.
“Later,” Gimli snapped. “Run, now! Go to Thorin! He will keep you safe. You,” he grabbed Bilbo’s arm. “Keep it safe. Understand?”

Bilbo nodded once and Gimli let him go. Within moments, Bilbo had disappeared once more, and Gimli ran out to taunt the Dragon.

Gimli ran straight up the side of a pile—they were beginning to blend together, these piles. There were so many—so much wealth, it still dazzled Gimli's eyes. He itched to sort, to organize, to take stock. It was the work of generations.

Generations that would not have the chance if Smaug still lived. Gimli came to the top of the mound.

“Here!” He cried. “Come get me, you witless wretch!”

That certainly got Smaug's attention, and he spun to head for Gimli, wings out at half-span, as wide as they could go. He flapped once, for speed or balance, and the resulting wind was like a gust of pure storm, sending even the heaviest objects flying.

The pile shifted and Gimli toppled backward, end over end, to land, stunned, at the bottom. There was a dull glow to the edges of his vision, one that did not clear as he shook his head. It reminded him of Legolas and they he shone in the darkness of the caverns that would become Aglarond. There was a terrible, thundering crash, and from beyond the peak of the hill came Smaug.

“Dwafling snack,” Smaug hissed. “More tender, more juicy, but so little of you.” He grinned and smoke curled from between his teeth. “I gobbled up your kind first.”

“You’ll find me more than a stomach-ache, worm!” Gimli cried. He tried to stand, but the gems and coins shifted beneath his feet, and he couldn’t find purchase. Smaug laughed, and it was enough to get Gimli to his feet. He lifted his axe before him, even as Smaug reared back. His sides and scales began to glow like molten rock (like Balrog fire!) and Gimli focused all of his love on the warm spot of Legolas in his mind.

*I have failed, my love. Be strong! Know I love you!*

Gimli!

Smaug roared his fire, and Gimli couldn’t help but squeeze his eyes shut. Such heat! He couldn’t—

White—

He—

Bright light—

He breathed. Gimli was unharmed, and he opened his eyes in disbelief, patting himself down, to feel that he was still really there.

How? He had felt the flames lick his skin. The coin around him warped and ran with the heat of it, but he was quite cool.

Smaug roared with pain and rage, staggering back.

Gimli’s hand patted down his chest, and he felt skin where he should have found leather, chain where he should have found wool, and then, so cold as to burn, he felt the Lady’s gift, and knew
from where the glow came.

“That jewel,” Smaug rumbled, and he crouched low like a dog ready to strike. “I must have it. It will be mine!”

“Go suck an egg!” Gimli called back, and with all the grace and dignity he could muster, he ran away.

Gimli clutched the edges of his clothes as he ran, pulling them together and tucking them into his belt as best he could. They didn’t reach all the way to his neck, not the way they had, but there was enough left to cover his middle, and hide the bright light of the Gift, even if the chain now peeked out where it lay.

He saw his father and Bifur ahead of him, weaving around the piles, and skittering over uneven patches of coin. Dwalin was far ahead, waving his arm above his head—the meeting place!

The dragon’s footsteps were after him now, however, and Gimli banked hard left, away from the meeting and deeper into the vaults and towards Erebor proper.

Smaug still chased him, slower now, as the ceiling began to lower and the pillars came closer together, and he bellowed his flame. Gimli dropped just in time, rolling to the side and down, keeping himself tightly rolled and prayed he would not smash his head open on something that would break even his skull.

He needn’t have worried. He hit the bottom with little force, and was up on his feet in an instant. Ahead, he saw a pile of armor, still standing intact, and had an idea.

A few minutes later, a suit of armor, weighed down by whatever he could grab, slid down the gold and away on a full infantry shield and Smaug ran after while Gimli stayed as quiet as he could behind a pillar. He waited a count of three, and quickly ran back to the others.

***

A crack sounded like thunder, and the bench on which Fíli sat, shook. He and Tauriel were sitting with Kíli, who did look much better, even if he wasn’t yet back to his full strength. There was color to his cheeks again, and his eyes sparkled with mirth rather than fever. Óin had been helping Sigrid with the washing up and Bofur had been showing Tilda how to play the little pipe he had carved for her that morning. Both looked up at the sound, and Óin paled.

“Thunder?” Kíli asked. “Doesn’t feel like rain.”

“No,” Óin said, but said nothing more.

“Da?” Bain asked. He was at the window, looking out; it seemed to be a favorite spot of his. Fill had noticed the windowsill was worn smooth, as if from a fretting hand. Bard looked up; he was sitting with Legolas, bent low over a plate of Sigrid’s fish stew and speaking in intent whispers. Legolas was already standing. “It’s coming from the mountain.”

Legolas peered through the window with Bain, and spat something with much venom. While Fíli didn’t speak the elvish tongue, he certainly recognized a curse when he heard one.

“Smaug is awake,” he said, needlessly. The cries of the citizens of Laketown were already loud enough.

“You should leave us.” Tauriel said to Bard. She held fast to Kíli’s hand. “Take your children. Get
out of here.”

“And go where?” Bard said wryly as he stood. “There is nowhere to go.”

Little Tilda sniffed. “Are we going to die, Da?”

Bard turned to her and smiled, saying softly, “No, darling.”

“The dragon,” Legolas said. “It's going to kill us.” Fill rolled his eyes; for a prince, Legolas was sure missing tact. Then again, he was Gimli’s husband, after all.

Bard stepped onto the table bench like a step and reached high above the table. He grabbed something and tugged hard. When he stepped back, he had a large black arrow in his hand.

He looked at the arrow, determination glinting in his eyes. “Not if I kill it first.

***

Gimli found the others in the West Guardroom.

Glóin saw him first, and pulled him in close without a word. Gimli squeezed tightly—they had faced the dragon, and so far had survived.

“There,” Dwalin said. "That is all of us.” His voices was rough, even for him, and Gimli looked over to him—and saw behind. Amidst the rubble were bodies, dozens of them, all dressed in cobwebbed finery and rotted silks and velvets. The Court of Erebor—those who did not make it out of the mountain.

“Sweet Merciful Mahal,” Gimli swore softly, and bowed his head. He had known that they'd found—they had never said, but he had known all the same. His mind's eye flickered back to Moria, to a dusty book held in bone hands, and he found himself looking at Ori as he stared at the dead. Did he know, somehow, impossibly, that he would suffer the same fate? Is that why Ori was so pale? A large, tattooed hand settled softly on Ori’s shoulder, Dwalin's hand, and Gimli looked away at last.

It would not happen, if Gimli had to carry Ori from Moria himself, Ori would not again become an unburied Dwarf.

"All of us, aye,” Balin said with a sigh after a long moment. “And for what?” He shook his head and refused to look at any of them. There was a cobweb stuck in his hair, and it fluttered with the movement. Gimli wanted to tear it from him. “There’s no way out, not with an angry dragon behind us.”

“Kill the dragon,” Bilbo said, and they all turned to look at him. He shifted his feet and lifted his chin, so different from the little fellow that had fainted away at the mention of the dragon—not actually so long ago, in the grand scheme of things. Travel had changed them all, but none so visibly as Bilbo. “He’s too dangerous to let live, anyway.”

The others looked at each other. “Bilbo, it were that easy, the ol’ bastard’d be dead already,” Nori said.

“And it's not as if we didn’t try,” Dori added, and Gimli looked at him with some surprise. Dori was known to have a sour look, a criticism for everything he considered not “proper” by some ancient algorithm (He was trained, initially, as a courtesan, Gimli remembered suddenly, and had great promise as a young beauty. The dragon took that from him, as well), and had much to say about the minor discomforts of their journey, but it wasn’t like Dori to speak out against the actual
quest. “I was young yet, but I remember it well enough. Volley after volley of arrows, until he burnt away our archers. Ranks and ranks of infantry, and he just stepped on them. What can we do with eleven dwarves and one hobbit?”

Bilbo was already shaking his head. “There’s a weak spot in his armor,” Bilbo said. “There's a missing scale in the hollow of his left breast, I saw it earlier. If we can pierce him there, we can kill him dead.”

There was much disgruntled grumbling at that, but Thorin held up his hand. “It's worth a shot,” he said. “We won’t have our home until the beast is dead anyhow. Bilbo,” Thorin turned, and looked at Bilbo with such intensity, it was as if the rest of them did not exist. "If you saw him again, would you be able to hit the spot?"

Bilbo licked his lips, staring back for a long moment. “I could, yes,” Bilbo said at last, his head bobbing with a swift, decisive nod. “But with what? A chestnut?” He shook his head. “I cannot fire a bow, and you left our best archer in Laketown!”

Thorin shook his head, holding up a hand. “I am a decent enough shot myself,” he said, “but my eyes are not Hobbit eyes. If you guide me, I will kill the beast.”

Bilbo searched Thorin’s face, and the rest of them waited to breathe. “I will,” Bilbo said, quiet. Thorin nodded, gravely, and turned to look at the rest of them. “We must make for the armory, and with haste!”

***

It was a real trick, getting to the armory. They had to cross several great halls, large enough for Smaug to chase them at speed if he caught sight of them. Still, for all the harrowing dashes, and one perfectly still, breathless moment when Smaug had walked over and past them, gems and coin raining down on their heads, they made it unseen and unscathed.

And there, against the far wall, was Gimli’s axe.

Gimli gave a little sigh when he saw it, and his fingers itched to clasp it once more. There was the axe that had traveled with him across Middle Earth again and again, had protected him in Khazad-dum and Helms Deep, had won him victory in Pelenor Fields and at the Black Gates. This was the axe he carried as Lord of Aglarond, and carried with him across the waters to Valinor. It was to be buried with him. Had been, for all Gimli knew—if his past was still moving forward. Did time carry on in that other life? Could it, when he was now here? If Sauron was once again a threat, did that mean the entire of his other life was now gone, save for that which had traveled with him?

Gimli sighed, and shook away those thoughts. They’d only serve to give him a headache.

He stepped forward, to reclaim his axe, but before he could, Glóin reached out and took it. Gimli stopped, felt his face twist into a hard frown. That’s right. It was his father’s first. Glóin had first used that axe to carry him safely through the Battle of Five Armies. Gimli could not begrudge him that. He forced himself to turn away. He would find another, and if his thoughts drifted wistfully towards Peacemaker, well. No one would have to know.

He picked up another great axe, an infantry model—mass produced but sturdy as steel make no mistake. That was three axes he had loved and lost. He wasn’t sure his heart could take another loss.

(He was also sure, somehow, somewhere, Legolas was laughing at him.)
Ultimately, it was a simple plan, of the kind that are so simple something has to go wrong. Still, it was the only plan they had, so it would have to suffice.

It was to be a forward attack, centered around the main forges. Balin had grabbed Ori and Dori, and taken them to the alchemical rooms, to mix the volatile agents into explosive compounds: flashfire, which would dazzle the eyes and ears, and dragonspit, a substance that burned like oil and stuck like jelly.

Dwalin grabbed Nori, and Glóin grabbed Bifur. They were all of them armed to the teeth. They had the most dangerous jobs. They were to lure the dragon to the throne room, where Thorin and Bilbo were waiting with a massive ratcheting crossbow that Ori had literally tripped over.

Bombur was tasked with helping the king brace the bow. Gimli, the youngest and with the best eyes save for Bilbo, was to be the lookout.

It was agonizing, waiting. Gimli heard the booming crashes of the flashfire, saw the green flames that meant burning dragonspit. He heard the voices of his kin, distant and echoing through the halls. He heard the anger to Smaug as he tried (in vain, please, in vain!) to catch the dwarves that ran underfoot.

“Steady, Bilbo,” Thorin said, quietly. Gimli strained his ears to hear.

“I’m alright,” Bilbo said, quietly, but his voice trembled. Gimli glanced over his shoulder and saw Bilbo looking quite pale, though he held his chin high.

“You are,” Thorin said, and it was nearly gentle. He put his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder, a familiar gesture, and Bilbo leaned into it for a moment, before he seemed to come back to himself and cough, looking downward. Thorin didn’t move, however, just watched Bilbo with hungry eyes. Something uneasy shifted in Gimli’s gut.

He looked back out into the hall, and saw at the very end, two small figures racing his way. He recognized Dwalin’s size, Nori’s vain hair, and whistled twice like a thrush. Gimli saw Dwalin notice him, saw the subtle correction of course that would take him and Nori straight past where Gimli stood, and saw Smaug, red fire glowing brightly in his chest and neck, green dragonspit still burning alone his left flank. Gimli stepped back to signal Thorin, and then stayed back as first Nori and then Dwalin raced past. Nori spun, a hard change in course, and pressed himself against the wall next to Gimli. It took Dwalin a half step more to change course, and his back slammed to the wall just as Smaug burst through the entryway, sending boulders of rock crashing down. Gimli pressed back, and squeezed his eyes shut to block out the billowing dust.

“There!” Bilbo cried. “Now!”

Gimli heard a great twang, and then a bright clatter as the arrow glanced uselessly off of Smaug’s armor.

“Reload, quickly! Do you see it!”

“I see it,” Thorin grumbled.

Balin, Ori, and Dori arrived next, panting and carrying several vials of the explosive compounds. Almost casually, Balin lobbed a vial of flashfire over to land before Smaug’s feet, and Gimli quickly shut his eyes. Even with his eyes shut, he still had to blink away blue spots. Smaug roared, his great wings flapping, and Gimli was thrown back against the stone.

There was a sound of a second arrow, fired and missing, and Smaug started to laugh.
“Is that all you have?” he taunted. “Was this your great plan? You came all this way, and for what? Nothing! You have nothing!”

“Not nothing,” Bilbo called, and Gimli could feel the fear and anger that warred in his voice. “We came over hill and under hill, by wave and wind, for Revenge!”

“Revenge!” Smaug cried. Gimli had expected him to laugh, still, at the feebleness of the attempt, but it appeared the dragon’s ego was too great. “Revenge! The true King under the Mountain is dead! Where are his kin that dare seek revenge? You, Oakenshield? You pathetic lot? Ha!” Smaug growled, and it made Gimli’s skin crawl. “Girion Lord of Dale is dead, and I have eaten his people like a wolf among sheep, and where are his sons’ sons that dare approach me? I kill where I wish and none dare resist. I laid low the warriors of old and their like is not in the world today. Then I was but young and tender. Now I am old and strong, strong strong, Thief in the Shadows! My armor is like tenfold shields, my teeth are swords, my claws spears, the shock of my tail a thunderbolt, my wings a hurricane, and my breath death!”

He roared his flame once more, and Gimli turned his head to shield his face. It was almost comical, Smaug’s pride. The past of Gimli that had seen victory in the darkest battles, wanted to laugh at his posturing, but any dwarf with any sense knew better than to laugh for even the smallest of dragons can still cause great suffering.

“Barrel-rider, indeed,” Smaug snorted. “Your feet came from the waterside and up the water you came without a doubt. I did not know your smell, Hobbit, but the Dark Lord told me you would come, of the doom that lies in wait for me at Laketown.” Gimli felt his heart sink.

Oh, Bilbo. The Dark Lord remembered Gollum’s words too well, it would seem, and Gimli’s head felt heavy. How would they defeat Sauron if he knew what was coming?

Of course, it would all be pointless if they didn’t manage to escape the dragon.

In the back of his mind, Gimli had counted on Bard to kill the dragon. If Smaug had been warned and would not leave the mountain, what chance would they have? They would all be eaten, and the Lands would fall to darkness. He closed his eyes tight, and felt a tear form in the corner of his eye. At his breast, his Lady’s Gift grew hot.

“I say Smaug is not so easily tricked!” Smaug continued, and tiny spark of hope rekindled in Gimli’s breast. “I fear no doom in Laketown! You may not be one of those Men of the Lake, but you certainly had their help! I fear no man’s arrow. I am armored above and below by iron scales and hard gems! No blade can pierce me! I would have the men of the Lake see me, and remember who is the real King under the Mountain!”

With another roar, Smaug ran for the front gate, bursting through the rubble like they were so many soap bubbles, and took to the night sky, a lick of flame against the black curtain.

“What have we done,” Bilbo breathed into the echoing silence.

***

Legolas ran a hand over his braids. For two days he had worn them, and they still looked as pristine as when Fili had first plaited them. Elves liked their braids, to be sure, but none could compare to the skill of Dwarves fingers. Still, Legolas could feel the difference between the work of Fili’s hand, and that of his husband, and while running his fingertips along the weft and weave brought him comfort, the differences stood out, and set him right back on edge.
Before them, Bain and Sigrid were confronting their father.

“A Black Arrow, Da?” Bain asked. “You’ve had proof this whole time?”

“Why did you never tell me?” Sigrid asked, and in her question Legolas saw the woman Sigrid would grow to be. She had always been kind to him, Lady Sigrid, and wise. She had married a guildmaster, if he remembered correctly, and had been a driving force behind much of the reform for the laborers of Dale.

“Because you did not need to know,” Bard replied. He had put the black arrow down and was gathering together his gear. “Listen to me carefully. I need to speak with my guards. If the dragon is coming, we must be ready. At the first sign of fire, head for shore, do you hear me? Do not wait for me.

“Da,” Bain said, and Bard stopped him with a hand.

“Stay with your sisters, Bain,” he said. “When I return, I want to see the three of you together.”

Bain looked at his father, the understanding that his father might not actually return clear on his face, but he nodded and stepped back.

“I’m coming with you,” Legolas said. “My bow is yours tonight. Tauriel will stay here, and protect those who cannot fight.”

“I can fight!” Kill protested, standing. He paled dramatically, but he kept his feet.

Legolas turned, raising his hand. “My apologies,” he said. “I did not mean you, Prince Kíli. I have seen your skill with a bow; I do not count you defenseless.”

Kíli seemed appeased at that, and while Bain looked sour at the implication that he couldn’t protect himself, he remained quiet on the matter. Little Tilda nearly flew as she flung herself across the room, headlong into her father’s legs. He caught her easily, and scooped her up to hug her tightly.

“Papa, I’m scared,” she said. “I don’t want to be eaten by a dragon.”

“You won’t be, little miss,” Bofur said. “I can promise you that.” Bard looked at Bofur, standing there with his hat in his hands and dressed in dirty castoffs, but Legolas knew Bard saw the sincerity in Bofur’s words. Bofur would lay down his life for these children, as would they all. Children were too precious to lose to dragon fire.

Bard kissed little Tilda on the crown of her head, hugged Sigrid and Bain, and then Bard and Legolas were off to rouse the guard.

Bard moved quickly across the town, jumping from post to pillion to walk to path with the nimbleness of any elf, and though Legolas was surprised at Bard’s grace, he was able to keep pace easily.

First, Bard led them to the signal tower. “Sound the bell!” Bard cried. “The Dragon is awakened!”

The guard in the tower startled, as if he had been asleep. Legolas cocked his head at him; the Mountain was alive with flame. How did this man sleep. For his credit, the guard took one look at the Mountain and rang the bell at once, the strike of hammer to brass sounding deep across the town.
The people of Laketown flowed out into the streets, gawking and gossiping as to why they were being warned. The first screams happened moments later, when the people began to see what Bain had seen from his window: the Mountain burned.

“Don’t panic!” Bard was shouting. “Return to your homes and gather your things. Prepare to leave, but do not panic! Guards, to arms! To arms!”

"Captain," cried a voice, and Legolas turned to look--but they weren't looking for him or for Tauriel.


Dulcan was a tall man, lean and grey, though Legolas was not sure if it was from years or hardship. Gimli would know. He was better at mortal ages than Legolas, even if he, too, was often surprised by the swiftness of Men. Dulcan came to attention before Bard, but did not salute. Bard did not appear offended--maybe simply a permissible familiarity?

Men were strange, and even his long friendship with Aragorn and the men of Rohan had given him no clearer understanding.

"The City's panicked, Captain," Dulcan said, and Bard raised an eyebrow.

"I can see that," Bard said, dry. Dulcan grinned. His cheeks dimpled, and he looked younger.

"Never hurts to be thorough," Dulcan said, but sobered quickly. "No one's been hurt, but it's only a matter of time. If we evacuate now, we might get everyone to land before the dragon flies. If we wait, they'll be like fish in a barrel, floating on the lake--if they get that far."

"Many would be loathe to leave their homes," Bard said, soft. "They've struggled so much for what little they have." He frowned, and his voice came more clearly. "What of the Master? It's his business to call for evacuation, not us. Where is he, now?"

Dulcan snorted. "With his gold, no doubt. The Fat Prig's as bad as any dragon."

Legolas remembered the Master, with his beady, greedy eyes, and found the description quite apt. He laughed, and it rang clearly across the way, an odd contrast to the chaos around them. Dulcan looked at Legolas at last and started hard.

"You're an elf!" Dulcan said, and flushed. "My apologies, I--"

"They are not needed," Legolas said, and nodded his head. "The dragon threatens all, and my bow is in Bard's service, same as yours. I am Legolas of the Greenwood."

Dulcan still looked stuck, and Bard had to prompt him. "Dulcan!"

The Captain shook himself, and focused once more on Bard. "The Master has not been seen, nor that sneak either. We cannot count on him now."

Bard sighed long through his nose. "Then do it. Get all who cannot fight to safety. Any who are willing and able at bowcraft may stay, but stop none who try to leave." Dulcan nodded, and Bard added, "Establish a perimeter, but thicken the line at the North Edge of the city. If the dragon comes, he'll come from there."

Dulcan saluted, at last, and ran off. Bard seemed lost in thought for a long moment and Legolas gently touched his arm. "Come," he said. "We must find the high ground."
"Aye," Bard said, and led Legolas deeper into the City.
Legolas ran after Bard, dodging Men and their possessions, spinning around children as they ran by, and once leaping over the strange, squished dogs these Men seemed to favor.

The crowd split before Bard as he moved, clearing the way out of some instinct. For whatever reason, this instinct did not seem to include Legolas, and they closed behind Bard again, leaving Legolas further and further behind. He seemed unaware of the way Legolas danced along behind him and, fed up, Legolas sprang onto one of the pillions that lined the walk. He leaped from one to the next, moving with speed at last, for the way was not unlike the tree-paths of the Greenwood, nor the grove that would become his home in Ithillien.

They were headed for the direct center of town, the highest tower, taller even than the bell-tower: The Master’s—well, to call it a house would be incorrect, Legolas thought. It looked little like the houses of men he had known. If he had to, he would say it looked more like the imitation of a palace, of the Citadel of Gondor, then a home, a poor imitation at that. The building was made of wood, like the rest of Laketown, with many levels and overhangs, and while paint and flashing had, at one point, made the building a splendor, time and weather had stripped it nearly bare. Gimli, Legolas thought, would have a word or three to say about “shoddy craftwork, pah! I have done better as an apprentice, let alone a master craftsman. This is what happens when you cut corners.”

Rarely could Gimli reach back across their link, and Legolas had accepted as much, so it simply may have been because he was thinking of him that Legolas heard, then, with hauntingly crystal clarity:

I have failed, my love. Be strong! Know I love you!

Gimli! He called back, faltering in his step and nearly falling, but there were no more words.

In his heart, Legolas ached for his love, and reached out frantically across their bond. Gimli was frightened, dreadfully so, But still there, thank all the stars in the sky. He is still there.

Bard had stopped and was looking at him curiously. “Are you alright?” he asked.

“Fine,” Legolas said, voice thick. “We’re running out of time. The dragon will not be content to stay in the Mountain much longer.”

“Aye,” Bard agreed. He looked up the building to the tallest tower. There was a balcony, off of what was presumably the Master’s bedroom. It would be a good vantage point, or easy access to the roof. “Come,” Bard said. “Let us pay a visit to the Master, hmm?”
Legolas nodded, shaking off his unease as best he could, and followed Bard up the steps.

Bard didn’t even slow at the door, simply hit it as if he expected to go right through, but he was stopped short when the wood wouldn’t budge. Bard shook the door and tried again, ramming at the center with his shoulder.

“He’s barred the door,” he said. “Barricaded himself in, the fool. Is his gold so important that he’d die for it?” Bard hit the door again. “You can’t take it with you, you selfish bastard!”

Legolas looked for another way in. Most houses, he had seen, had a door at the front entry, and a door around the back that led to the water and the privy. The Master, he was sure, would have something similar.

“Around the back,” Legolas said, leapt up onto the low cover over a front window, and then up onto the lower level roof. In a flash he was over the other side and sliding down towards the water. He let himself fly out, using his momentum to spin and grab the edge of the roof, swinging down onto the lower platform that just skimmed the top of the water. It stank, and Legolas covered his nose with his sleeve and tried the door. It, too, was locked, but one swift kick splintered it open, as it had been barred but not barricaded like the front.

Legolas climbed over the splintered wood, remembering the early days after the end of the war, when he and Gimli had helped Gondor begin to rebuild by digging out the homes that had been crushed by the onslaught. It was slow, morbid work, and Legolas had found himself reaching for Gimli whenever he could, to feel the vibrancy of his love’s life and remind himself that there was more left than death. Gimli, dear sweet Gimli, had held him back just as tightly.

Now, Legolas ran up the stairs, looking for a way to the front door. The building was a labyrinth of halls and stairs, twisting and dark and close. It smelled of old dust and mold and decay, and Legolas took a moment to smash a window as he passed, simply for the fresher air. (It smelled of smoke and fish and salt, but it was better than the stale air inside.)

After his third turn, Legolas stumbled across a door, hastily barred by a toppled cabinet and a settee covered with threadbare velvet. It was the work of minutes to pull them from the door, even as the settee puffed up spores and coated his hands with a musty film. Legolas nearly gagged, and hurried to open the door.

“This house is a nightmare,” Legolas said. The door had only opened part of the way, and Legolas couldn’t figure out why. He didn’t really want to dig any further, however. “And I have faced the beasts of Mordor.”

Bard gave him a wry look as he shouldered through the door. “This way,” he said, and led Legolas further into the house. They had gotten no more than a few steps when Legolas stopped, hearing voices.

“There!” Legolas cried, pointing to a panel on the wall. “Voices, and footsteps heavied with carried weight.

“How do we get through?” Bard asked. “It’s just a wall.”

“There is a panel,” Legolas said, and began feeling along the edges. “Not nearly as cunning as a secret dwarf door, but a similar idea and construction.” But there were no secret keys, no passwords to open the way. All Legolas could find was a simple seam, too narrow to grab.

In frustration, Legolas hit the panel with the palm of his hand. It echoed into the space beyond, and
the voices went quiet.

“Someone is in the house,” someone said. His voice was sniveling, and brought to mind Grima Wormtongue.

“So what?” Another voice. This one Legolas recognized; the Master. He had been with the party that had renewed the trade agreement when the Master had been elected, and had been present when the Master, grown fat in the years between, had negotiated a portion of the dragon gold, only to run off into the night, never to be seen again. “They can’t get through the panel if they don’t pull the sconce, and they certainly don’t know that, do they?”

Well.

Legolas turned to Bard. “That man is incompetent,” he said.

“Worse,” Bard said. “He’s a politician.”

Bard reached out and grabbed the sconce, pulling it forward. The section of the wall swung inward to a darkened stairway. Below, Legolas could see torchlight and heard the sound of metal on metal, and he led the way down.

“Hurry, hurry,” The Master called as they rounded the corner. He was standing at the back of a long boat, the front of which was heavily loaded with gold coin and gems and jewelry. There were several men in the livery of the guard carrying small chests to the boat from the coiffures. A pale, simpering man stood at the Master’s side, and lashed out at any he felt weren’t moving fast enough. The Master ignored him; his eyes were only on the gold. “The dragon must be nearly upon us. It cannot take my gold!”

“Your gold?” Bard cried out. “That gold belongs to the people!”

The Master looked up in surprise and nearly lost his footing on the slippery surface of the boat. "Bard!" The Master called. "You meddler! What are you doing here?"

"I've come to find out why our leader has disappeared in our hour of need," Bard said. "Why he stuff his pockets with coin in the dark rather than guide our people to safety."

"There is no safety with a dragon on the loose!" The Master cried. "The people will fend for themselves, they always do. And when it's all done, I'll have the money to rebuild."

"Money can't replace lost loved ones," Bard answered. "Money can't replace family!"

"It can if you have enough of it," cried the weasel man. "Master, we must move quickly if we are to make it to shore."

"Right you are," the Master said. "Quickly! Quickly now!" The guards began to push the boat out from it's dock and into the tunnel that would take it to the lake beyond.

Bard moved to go after him, but Legolas stopped him. "The dragon first," Legolas said. "There will be time enough to deal with his kind later."

Bard looked one more time after the Master, and turned away. "To the roof," he said.

***

"Evacuate! Evacuate the city! Head for the nearest shore and take cover!"
Fíli looked up and joined Bain at the window. Below, a guardsman with a longbow ran past, sounding the call. The windows of the houses around them had been thrown open, and the beginnings of panic were rumbling through the streets.

“We must leave,” Tauriel said. “Now.”

“Tilda, luv, come help me gather the things,” Sigrid said. “Bain, get the boat ready.”

Bain nodded, face pale, and ran down the stairs to the barge out back. Fíli went to Sigrid. “I can help,” he said.

Sigrid smiled at him. “Thank you. Grab whatever you can carry, and bring it downstairs.”

Fíli nodded, and looked over his shoulder at Óin. “Go on, lad,” Óin said. “We’ll get this one sorted.” He nodded at Kíli.

“Oi!” Kíli protested. “I can walk!”

“Aye, but stairs are another matter yet,” Óin said. “Tauriel, my dear, would you give me a hand.”

Tauriel blinked at him in surprise, but nodded. Kíli looked up at her, starry-eyed, and Fíli shook his head as he filled a pack with all the food that could travel. It was smart of Óin. Kíli would be too preoccupied by Tauriel to put up much of a fuss.

By the time they made it to the boat, the waterways were jammed full, and they waited, stuck, for the boats ahead of them to move.

“Come on,” Bain said. “What’s the hold up?”

Tilda saw it first, and she screamed. Fíli started, and turned to look. Her little hand was pointed to the sky, and she clutched her rag doll tightly.

There, in the sky like a tongue of flame, flew Smaug. The dragon had come.

“We’ll be no good here,” Bofur said. “No cover, we’re sitting ducks!”

“Turn us around,” Bain said. “We can get out the other way.”

“You mean towards the dragon?” Bofur asked.

“It’s better than staying here,” Fíli said, and helped Tauriel spin the boat around.

They sailed back the way they came, north towards the mountain. They could hug the outside of the city if they needed to, to provide more cover, and Fíli just hoped Smaug didn’t see them.

Fíli needn’t have worried. Smaug was too angry to pick out single dwarves from among the rabble. He swept down upon the town, releasing a single stream of fire, and set the town ablaze just like that. Arrows from the archers bounced uselessly off of his hide as he came around for another pass. The cried of the men of the town were harsher now, more desperate, and Fíli and the others now had to dodge falling debris as well.

Please, Fíli thought. Please just let us get through this alive.

“Gangway! Gangway!” A voice cried, and Tauriel was forced to sharply turn the boat, nearly overturning them, to avoid a barge, laden with gold, that swept down the narrow pass that would lead them free of the city.
“Tis’ the Master!” Sigrid said, and Bain spat.

True enough, there he was, astride the boat like a parody of some grand statue, and he passed them by without ever once looking at them.

“Greedy, craven…” Fíli muttered to himself, and helped Tauriel right the boat once more.

“Hurry,” Tauriel urged, and they set out again through the blazing waterways.

***

Bard and Legolas burst out into the balcony just in time to see Smaug destroy the bell tower.

Legolas looked around in despair: the city was aflame before them. The heat of it was immense, and above them, Smaug roamed the sky like an ill omen.

“How are we to kill that?” Bard asked, shouted, thought it sounded barely a whisper over the roaring of the fire.

“With luck and skill!” Legolas answered. “Come, we must get higher.”

Legolas leapt up onto the roof, and pulled Bard up behind him. They had to take cover, pressing themselves against the shingles, as Smaug roared past. Legolas shielded his face with his arm, but even as he did so, he saw it—

“There!” he cried, pointing. “A weakness, I see it!”

“Where?” Bard cried. “I don’t see it.”

“Look, just in the hollow of his left breast. There is hole, a space in his armor no bigger than a man’s fist. Your black arrow would fit there rather neatly.”

They had to wait for Smaug to pass over again. Bard squinted up against the glare. The space yawned before Legolas’s eyes, and he longed to take the shot—but he couldn’t, Bard killed Smaug. Bard killed Smaug and became King and made the people of Laketown once again the Men of Dale. It had to happen; Legolas could not interfere.

“I see it!” Bard cried. He drew his longbow and steadied it fast. Smug circled back, and the light of the moon turned his wings silver even as the fire beneath him turned his belly gold.

“Arrow,” he said, and Legolas looked away from this private moment. “Black arrow! I have saved you for this last. I had you from my father and he from of old. If you ever came from the forges of the true king under the Mountain, go now and speed well!”

Smaug drooped low—he had seen them! Legolas saw the hate in his eyes as he headed his fire once more. The great bow of Bard twanged. The black arrow sped, straight and true, and disappeared into the breast of the beast.

Smaug shrieked, and Legolas was forced to cover his ears lest he be deafened. He fell, blasting his fire as he went, and landed full on the center of town. The wood cracked and splintered beneath him, from the weight and the fire, and the lake roared in. It covered the flames, filling the night with steam. There was a gushing whirl, and the house they were on cracked near the base and began to topple. Legolas grabbed Bard around the chest and leapt from the roof. Together they crashed into the lake, deep under the water.
Legolas lost Bard in the tumult of the icy water, and he could feel the sharpness of the cold in his need to breathe, but when he kicked his way to the surface, there he was, watching as his city, his home, sunk in ashes under the waves.

Without a word, Bard turned and swam for shore.

***

In Erebor, they watched from Ravenhill.

In the moments after Smaug’s escape, the room had been still. The dust was still swirling to the ground when, one by one, they began to move. All were present, save for Glóin and Bifur, but it was easy enough for Gimli and Bombur to retrace their steps. They had made it as far as the conveyor line, and had sought protection in the bins that would normally carry mined rock away from the dig site. It had taken both Gimli and Bombur to begin the wind-crank that would bring Glóin and Bifur back to solid ground.

Once reunited, it had taken them long enough to climb over the damage to the front door that, by the time they had crested the peak, it was already too late for Laketown. They huddled at the top edge to watch anyway; only Thorin stayed back, and the one time Gimli saw Bilbo look, Thorin’s eyes were cast on Erebor. Bilbo did not look again.

Bilbo chewed his thumbnail as he watched the dragon fly, reflected in the burning city below him.

“I hope they’re alright,” Bilbo muttered.

“They will be,” Gimli said, and Bilbo twitched.

“More of your ‘visions’?” Bilbo asked, his voice oddly flat.

Gimli shook his head. If he was stung by Bilbo’s tone, he didn’t show it. “No,” he said. “But Legolas is with them, and I still feel him.” He paused, licked his lips, and when he spoke again his voice was hoarse. “I would know if he fell.”

Bilbo nodded, and looked away, not quite chastised, but feeling it all the same. “I’m sorry, Gimli. I don’t know what—“

“Yes, you do,” Gimli said. “And it’s all right, Bilbo. I understand how hard it is to watch.”

Bilbo looked over at Gimli, and wondered once more just how much of the tale had Gimli omitted.

“Look!” Ori cried, suddenly. “The Dragon is falling!”

Sure enough, in the distance Smaug gave one last great bellow of flame and fell onto the rubble of Laketown. As they watched he sunk into the icy water, and disappeared from view. One by one the fires went out as they, too, fell victim to the water.

“Dwarves are made of stern stuff,” Bombur said, quietly. “They’ll be at our doorstep in no time.”

“Aye,” Balin agreed. “And we best be ready for them. We have much to do.”

Thorin said nothing. When Bilbo turned away, Thorin was already halfway back to the Mountain.

***

The tower was empty. It had emptied days ago, it seemed, though it might have been hours. There
was no time for Gandalf, not anymore. In rank and file, the orcs and goblins had marched through the gates, a dark army ready for war.

Gandalf had heard no word.

The wind rustled the dead leaves on the ground. The world was winter grey, and the sky had been dark for weeks. Years. Centuries.

He was cold. It had burned, at first, the cold. Now he was numb, and he worried that he was no longer able to move. He had gone past hunger and thirst, and was left with only the dread in his heart and mind.

In his delirium, Gandalf muttered spells and believed, sometimes, that he heard Radagast mutter with him.

It all ended when he was pulled roughly from his cage. He was stiff as a corpse and weak as a babe, and for long moments he could do little more than lay in the dirt and try to breathe the foul air, but the orc who pulled at him was impatient. He kicked at Gandalf, and spat at him in the dark speech.

“Spells will not save you old man.” The Orc taunted. “You have something my master wants.” He grabbed Gandalf by the hair, and Gandalf cried out. The skin around his eyes prickled where there should have been tears. He was too dry for tears. The orc shook him roughly. “Where is it? One of the three elven rings,” it hissed, and tossed Gandalf to the ground. Gandalf rolled half onto his side, his fingers finding what they were looking for with surprising ease.

The orc came in once more, and Gandalf swung with speed he had rarely matched in his great age. The branch he had grabbed stuck the orc clean across the face, and it staggered back. Gandalf wished he could cheer, but even that one act of defiance was enough to drain him of his strength. He could only lay there as the orc recovered, hit him again. “The Ring of Fire!” the orc snapped. It felt heavy on Gandalf’s finger, and he knew, just knew, that if anyone were to truly look, they would see it plain as day. “Where are the others?”

The creak of a hinge was nothing in the cacophony of sounds that filled Gandalf’s ears, but still he heard it anyway, with the crystal clarity of a ringing bell. It was the same gate that his tormentors would use, but the sound no longer filled him with dread. For a brief moment, Gandalf wondered if he had simply accepted his death.

But no, death was not yet ready for Gandalf the Grey.

A pale hand, delicate and graceful, rested gently on the gate. A pale foot, bare and sure, stepped through. The leaves did not crunch beneath its heel, but swirled up and around, tugging at the silver-white skirts as she stepped through and entered the Necromancer’s domain.

Gandalf opened his eye to see, even as the orc pulled him forward, stretching his hand out across a block, and his head struggled to rise. His breath clawed at his chest like he had been drowning and was now gasping for air on the shore. Once more, the cold burned, and it lit a fire within him. Hope flared brightly and shone in his eyes.

The orc raised his wicked sword high, and stopped, the blade hovering at the apex of the arc, and looked over his shoulder.

The Lady Galadriel looked back. “I come for Mithrandir,” she said in a low tone that brooked no argument. “And I will leave with him.” The Orc snorted and adjusted his grip on his sword. He
turned, letting his grin on Gandalf’s arm go lax.

“If you try to stop me,” she continued, as if discussing tea, “I will destroy you.”

The orc stepped forward.

Lady Galadriel raised her hand.

The resulting blast of light carried far out over the plain, and what little remained of the orc fell to earth like so many scraps.

Gandalf blinked, and must have lost a few moments, for between one breath and the next, the Lady was before him, kneeling over him and pressing cool cloth to his face. He was aware, far too aware, but could not force himself to move, no matter how he strained or struggled.

She did not strain when she picked him up in her arms; she always had more than one kind of strength. With even steps, she began to carry him from this cursed place.

They were nearly to the gate when the whisper began, like every nightmare creeping into the world at night, and the Lady Galadriel froze.

“Three rings for the elven kings under the sky, seven for the dwarf-lords in their halls of stone,” intoned the whisper in the black speech.

“Nine for mortal men doomed to die,” the Lady said, and Gandalf could hear the whisper of a tremor in her voice. She turned, and when Gandalf opened his eyes, he saw them—pale wraiths in the shadows, dressed in ancient armor and filled with wrath. The nine.

The Nazgul.

“You cannot fight the shadow,” spat the voice. “I know all, and even now you fade.” The voice turned slick, mocking in a parody of charm. “One light alone in the darkness.”

Galadriel stood taller, and Gandalf could feel the way she was rooted to the ground. “I am not alone,” she said, and hope flared in Gandalf like a sudden flame from embers.

To his great surprise, Círdain the Shipwright appeared, his ageless eyes bright in his long-bearded face, and bearing a wicked trident. “Are you in need of assistance?” he asked, with wry humor.

Lord Elrond strode in proudly, filled with righteous anger, his sword already bared and dressed in his autumn-hued armor. “You should have stayed dead.”

Last came Glorfindel, burning golden bright and splendid in his armor. He alone remained quiet in the face of the shadow, but the darkness in his face spoke volumes.

Only Saruman was missing, and his absence struck a chord of dread deeper within Gandalf than he thought possible, but still he was filled with hope.

Her fingers were gentle, and her lips soft when Galadriel kissed his brow. He could feel life, cool like spring water, flowing through him, soothing his parched soul. “Mithrandir! Come back!” she called, and Gandalf could do no less than to answer.

His breath came suddenly, and in great gasps. It took several tries for him to get out the words that had been burning on the tip of his tongue.

“He knows,” he croaked.
“Yes,” The Lady said. “It is as we were warned, just as we feared.”

Radagast careened in on his sled and came to a frantic halt at Gandalf’s side.

“Quickly, Gandalf,” Radagast hissed. “Get on the sled.”

“He is too weak to move,” Lady Galadriel said. “We’ll have to help him.” Radagast scurried around the sled, helping the Lady to move Gandalf’s stiffened limbs.

"There is no help for him” echoed the voice that filled Gandalf’s waking nightmares. "There is no help for any of you. You have come now to your doom.”

Galadriel settled Gandalf with one last touch to his hair. “Go, now,” she said aloud, and then in the quiet of their minds, “Take him to Thranduil. He will find protection and healing there.”

Radagast nodded and called to his rabbits. Gandalf reached out for the Lady, to tell her to follow, to not fight in this dark trap, but his reach was not enough, and too soon they were gone.

***

Galadriel turned to face the Enemy. He stood, the center of an eye of flame. She would have flinched, but she had long ago resolved to not flinch from the servants of evil.

Glorfindel flanked her left, swords at the ready. For three ages, he had fought the evil of Sauron and his Master. He would fight for another three, if that was what it took.

Elrond swung his sword with a restlessness that nearly screamed of impatience. The wisdom of the Eldar could yet be tempered by anger at old wounds and the failures of hindsight.

Cirdan, alone, stood back, observing. They were at a cusp, a moment from where all future action could be decided. The outcome of this battle would inform the fate of all of middle earth.

“*It has begun,*” crowed the shadow. "*The East will fall to dragon fire! So shall the kingdom of Angmar Rise.*” The Witch King, standing at Sauron’s feet like a loyal hound, swung his weapon. “*The time of the elves is over. The age of the orc has come.*”

With his last hissed words, the Nagul attacked. The air was filled with the sounds of steel, and it echoed across the vacant lands. Sparks flew, and flames flickered. Below, the wargs howled, desperate for blood.

The Witch King came for Galadriel, but even as she readied herself, Glorfindel stood for her, a champion. His twinned swords danced as the struck and dodged the Witch King’s mace, and Galadriel stepped away. Her task was not the King of Angmar that was.

The Wrath that was once Khamûl, King of the Easterlings, came for Cirdan, as if with personal affront. He wielded his glave with great skill, but Cirdan, too, wielded his trident with great skill, and so were they matched. In two ways alone was Cirdan greater than the Wraith that was Khamûl; he had the long-sight and could see where the strikes would come, and thus no strike was able to land upon him. Too, he was no wraith, stretched thin into the other world, and as long as the wraith had only half-life, Cirdan had the advantage of life. The battle was fierce, but brief.

Elrond found himself against three at once, and he spun in ever tighter circles to keep atop his foes. They all three wore the armor of Numenor past, and the flashes of the past played like shadows across the mind’s eye of Elrond. He fought fiercely against these three who looked so much like his lost friends of old, and poured all of his regrets and anger into his blows. They fled before his
sword like smoke on the wind.

One came for Galadriel, and she sent him back to the abyss with a flick of her fingers. The wind roared through the fallen fortress, and it pulled at her skirts and hair, but she paid it no mind. It did nothing to slow her progress forward.

The Enemy watched her approach, even as the Witch King fell to Glorfindel’s blades. He snarled, raised his hands. The Nazrul appeared once more before him, and behind her, the others of the council adjusted their grips on their weapons. Sauron moved to strike at her, himself, when he stopped.

Everything stopped.

The Enemy turned his great eye north. “No!” he cried out. ”You fool!”

It was all she needed.

Galadriel raised her hand, and bright white light burst forth from her palm—the light of Elendil. Nenya burned brightly on her finger, and she, herself, was transformed.

No more did her dress pull in the breeze, but it did ebb and flow with the currents of a sea storm. Her hair, once lit with silver light, floated about her head the brilliant silvery-sheen of the deep water creatures. Her eyes were hollowed and the stars in them burned cold. Her voice, when she spoke, had all the depth and power of the sea itself.

“You have no power here, servant of Morgoth,” she intoned like the coming of a great wave. It rumbled, and life fled before it. “You are nameless, faceless, formless!” She declared, and the Nazrul disappeared in a blaze of of light. Galadriel gave one last push.

“Go back to the void from whence you came!”

The light in her hand exploded, blinding all. When the afterimage had faded from their eyes, Sauron was gone, and the Lady Galadriel was herself once more. She took one step and crumpled to the ground.

Glorfindel caught her, just before her head would have crashed against a rock, and picked her up as she had carried Gandalf before. She barely stirred in his arms.

“She has used much of her strength,” he said. “She needs a healer.”

Elrond nodded. “We shall follow Gandalf to Ered Lasgalen. I can help her better there.”

The Aftermath of Fire

Chapter Notes

livingmeatloaf is an amazing beta, who was very gracious to edit so much at once.

the-dragongirl continues to amaze!

Check out gigolasweek 2015 at tumblr, running from Dec 1 though Dec 9!

day 3 of consecutive posting! at least one more day after this!

It was a long, cold swim to shore, cold enough that even Legolas felt stiff by the time he climbed out of the surf. He turned to help Bard ashore, but the man was still burning hot with all that had passed, and he moved with surprising ease.

Far along down the beach, Legolas could see small fires burning in the sand, the desperate play for warmth that might last them through the rest of the night. To his eyes, the sky was beginning to lighten in the East, but it would be hours yet before the Men would see the grey light of dawn.

Between the fires and where they had washed ashore was the sodden detritus that was the last remnants of Laketown. Charred wood shone with moisture in the starlight, bright between the dull forms that, Legolas was sure, were those poor souls that had not made it to shore.

Legolas bowed his head. “Amarth faeg,” he said softly, and his heart went out to their kin.

Voices were calling from the fire, calling for those who had yet to be accounted for. Legolas knew some of them would never be found, but he heard Bard’s name among the rest, and turned to face the man.

Bard had turned back, and was watching the spot where Laketown had stood.

“Come,” Legolas said, touching his arm gently. “Your children call for you.”

Bard he turned and looked at Legolas. His eyes were heavily shadowed in the night, but Legolas did not need to see them to see the pain that lived there. Then, Bard breathed deeply and let it out slowly, closing his eyes for a long moment. The breath re-settled his shoulders, and when he opened his eyes once more, the grief had given way to resolve.

Kíli saw them first; his archer-trained eyes and dwarven dark-vision giving him the advantage. “Here!” he called, waving his arm. “We're over here! Legolas! Bard!”

“Daddy!” Tilda squealed, and jumped up to run to him. Bain and Sigrid followed, and Bard pulled his children tightly to him. For a long moment, he simply held them before allowing Sigrid to tug him closer to the fire.

They were not the only ones to notice him, however, and the murmurs that Bard, “Bard the Dragonslayer,” was alive and well, began almost immediately.

Tauriel was at Legolas’s side with her flask of miruvor, and he drank from it gratefully. The wet
chill that had lingered around his edges finally faded at last. He licked his lips as he recapped the vial. “How do you fare?”

Tauriel shrugged, taking the vial when he offered it back. “We all of us escaped unharmed, though it was a near thing. The Master’s barge nearly capsized us.”

Legolas looked around the hastily made camp. “And where is the Master of Laketown?” he asked, knowing his tone made his derision clear.

Tauriel raised an eyebrow as she looked at him. “If his boat made it ashore, it was not here,” she said.

“Good,” Legolas said. The people of Laketown would need a real leader, one who could lead in peacetime and in war. He looked at her from the corner of his eye. “And how is your Kíli?”

“He is well,” Tauriel said, and then flushed brightly when she realized the whole of his question. “And he is hardly mine!”

Legolas raised his eyebrows, lips pressed into a line to hide his smile. “Oh, I’m sure he would disagree with that,” he said, and then, switching back to Westron. “And how fair you, Cousin Fíli?”

“Well enough. Though just because we can endure the cold, doesn’t mean we like it much. Oil’s skill with a flint has been much appreciated.” Fíli answered from where he had approached behind Tauriel. Tauriel didn’t jump, but she did close her eyes for a long moment. Legolas grinned at her. She had it bad, to be so distracted.

“I can tell,” Legolas said. “I could see the camp fires from far down the beach.”

Fíli frowned. “Too far, do you think? We’ve had too many an orc too close to our tail for us to risk being seen now.”

Legolas shook his head. “I don’t think you need to worry,” he said. “Dawn is nigh, and any orc would be well hidden by now.

Fíli nodded, but he still looked suspiciously at the tree line. “Have you—“ Fíli began to say, but cut himself off when the whisper of Bard’s name behind them gave way to a sudden roar.

“Long Live King Bard, of the line of Girion!” cried one of the Bowmen, though not Dulcan. Legolas had yet to see Bard’s second, and began to grow worried.

Bard, himself, looked absolutely gobsmacked. He was looking from face to face, mouth working like a fish, and his eyes were just as round. “King?” he said, eventually, but nobody seemed to hear him.

Legolas gave a look to Tauriel and she nodded: she would stay with their company as Legolas went to Bard.

It was easy enough to get thru the crowd surrounding Bard as the men parted before him. Bard turned grateful eyes on him, and pulled Legolas in close by a grasping grip on his forearm. The others backed away, then, as if sensing the need to privacy. “Tell them,” he said. “Tell them I’m not their king.”

Legolas cocked his head. “I would, but consider: are you not? You, Bard the Bowman, are of the line of the Lords of Dale, are you not? Descended from Girion, who died defending the town
against the beast you have just bested? What better way for a King to return than by the righting the ills that have befallen his line?"

Bard shook his head, seemingly frantic. “I do not wish to be king,” he whispered, harsh.

Legolas smiled. “Few do,” he said. “And rarely do they make good kings. You cannot want the kingship for kingship’s sake. Do you want to do good for your people?”

Bard blinked at him. “Yes, of course.”

“And are you willing to lead them, when they are in need of guidance?”

Bard nodded, slowly, as if sensing a trick.

“And would you die for them, if your death would save them?”

“Aye,” Bard said, quietly. “I would.”

Legolas nodded his head in a half-bow. “Then you are already their King, Bard of Laketown. For who is a king then one who people look to when they need help, and who would use all their power to give them the hope they need?”

Bard looked at Legolas for a long moment, and Legolas saw the battle raging behind Bard’s eyes. It was one thing to be the captain of the guard, yet another to be crowned king. Did he deserve such an honor? Was he worthy? Would he do well?

“And besides,” Legolas added. “Who else is there?”

Bard sucked his teeth. “That seems a poor reason to crown a man King.”

“And yet, it is often the only reason,” Legolas said with a shrug. “Kings are crowned for their birth more than their merit. These people want you crowned because they trust you, Bard, and you have earned their trust—that is rare enough.”

Bard took a deep breath and nodded. “All right, fine. King it is, and my first kingly decree is to forbid you from ever sounding so damned right again when you’re convincing me of something I don’t want to do, even if I need to do it!”

Legolas threw his head back and laughed, and after a moment, Bard joined in with a low, tired chuckle. Around them, the people picked up the chant, “King Bard! King Bard!”

“Girion was lord of Dale, not King of Esgaroth,” cried a voice from the back of the crowd; it was a voice well used to public speech, and used to being heard. The assembled parted to reveal the Master, flanked by a guardsman and the weasley Alfrid. He was devoid of any appearance of gold, or of water, for that matter. The townspeople nearest to him shifted away, pulling their damp and sodden clothing closer together. “In Laketown we have always elected masters from among the old and wise, and have not endured the rule of mere fighting men. Let ‘King Bard’ go back to his own kingdom! Dale is now freed by his valor, and nothing hinders his return.” The crowd began to shift uneasily. Legolas saw Bain step forward, as if to strike the Master, but Fíli held him back with a hand on his shoulder, though his own face was darkened with anger. Kíli shifted, probably itching for his bow, and Óin was turned away, helping an older woman who still had watered-down blood on her face from a head wound. Only Bofur seemed to be watching without ire, but Legolas did not trust the backwards tilt of his hat, and suspected that the happy-go-lucky dwarf was a lot more angered than he appeared.
The Master looked around, but did not seem to notice that, in his absence, the people seemed to have turned against him. “Any that wish can go with him, if they prefer the cold stones under the shadow of the Mountain to the green shores of the lake. The wise will stay here and hope to rebuild our town, and enjoy again in time it’s peace and riches.”

“You’d like that wouldn’t you,” muttered a woman beside them, whom Legolas had heard Sigrid call Bianca. Bard glanced at her, and Legolas almost thought he was amused. “To have our riches again! Tell us, Master, where is our gold? I saw you on your boat!”

“We will have King Bard!” cried another from nearby.

Bianca took up the call. “We’ve had enough of the old men and money-counters!”

“Up with the Bowman, and down with Moneybags!” cried another.

“I am the last man to undervalue Bard the Bowman,” The Master said, backpedaling quickly. He went so far as to take a step back, away from the angry faces of the men of the lake. The Master was not, actually a stupid man, Legolas realized. He was simply a greedy one, and Legolas thought that might be worse. “He has tonight earned an eminent place in the role of the benefactors of our town; and he is worthy of many imperishable songs.”

“Here, here,” Bofur said, and Legolas heard Kíli snort.

“But why, O people?” the Master turned on his not inconsiderable charm. It was tarnished, however, by the cold, miserable state of his listeners and it held less sway, Legolas believed, than the Master had hoped. “Why do I get all your blame? For what fault am I to be deposed?”

“Because you stole our gold,” Bianca muttered.

“Who aroused the dragon from his slumber, might I ask?” the Master continued, unaware. Out of the corner of his eye, Legolas saw Fíli stiffen. “Who obtained of us rich gifts and ample help, and led us to believe that old songs could come true?”


“Who played on our soft hearts and our pleasant fancies?”

“If I recall, Master,” Fíli called out, his voice echoing like a golden bell above the din of the crowd. “It was you who first believed, when you thought your help might get you into the King’s coffers. We never claimed to be more or less than who we are.”

“We are the heirs of Durin, the people of the Mountain,” Kíli added. “And we keep our promises.”

The Master scoffed. “What sort of gold have you sent down the river to reward us for ridding you of your little dragon problem? We have nothing but Dragon-fire and ruin, for the second time! From whom should we claim the recompense of our damage, and aid for our widows and orphans?”

No, the Master is no fool, Legolas thought again. Here was a true politician, the kind of bureaucrat who won, not because his position was just, but because he knew the loopholes in the law. Legolas was never very fond of those men, but the silence of the Dwarves was, in itself, damning, and he could feel the direction of their ire begin to shift.

“Enough,” Bard cried. “Why waste words, here? The dwarves have been victims of the dragon, the same as we. So little of us remain, how many do you think lasted the night?”
The thought hit Legolas like a blow of the chest, and he fumbled for his link with Gimli. Still there, still vibrant, though Legolas could feel his love’s worry.

Bard turned to the dwarves. “I am sorry,” Bard said. “That was cruel of me.”

Fíli shook his head. “No,” he said. “You’re right to wonder. It is nothing I have not wondered before. And if what you say is true, then by the laws of my people, I am the heir to the throne of Erebor. With Smaug dead, I am to be King under the Mountain.” He turned, then to the Master. “You want promise? Then you may have my word. What you need to rebuild you will have, as payment for the trouble we have caused.”

“Fíli,” Óin protested, grabbing Fíli’s arm, but Fíli shook him free.

“Long ago, there was a union between our people,” Fíli said, and his voice filled the shore. “I would see that union restored, and I would begin with the return of Dale to it’s former glory!”

The people cheered, but Legolas thought Fíli looked terribly sad. Kíli stood to stand with his brother, and Fíli looked at him, gratefully. The Master, his eyes dancing with the rumors of the splendor of Thror’s halls, was finally quiet.

“This is no time for angry words, Master,” Bard said. “Or for considering weighty plans of change. There is work to do. I still serve the men of the lake, and I will not go until I am sure of their safety. Now, I say we go North. Winter is just beginning, and we shall find ready enough shelter there.” He looked at the sky. “We should make the ruins of Dale by nightfall. We will camp there.”

“Huzzah!” said a happy voice behind to them, and they turned to see Dulcan, sodden and with what appeared to be water-weeds in his hair. “When you’re the King, can I be Captain?”

Bard rolled his eyes. “Get them ready, Dulcan.”

“Aye, sir,” Dulcan said, snapping a crisp salute. Bard went to walk past, but pulled Dulcan to him with one arm for a solid beat.

“And get yourself cleaned up before you freeze,” Bard said, and went to rejoin his family.

Legolas looked at the Mountain in the distance. It would a long day.

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Gimli watched as the others crawled over the mountains of gold like goats on the hillside. Every now and then, one would dig like a dog, flinging coin and gems high into the air, but never did they find anything.

*Nor will they*, Gimli thought, thinking of the stone shining brightly in Bilbo’s hand. *The longer the stone is kept from Thorin, the better.*

Thorin was the only other dwarf not looking (even Bilbo was combing over a small pile of gems to keep up appearances), as he was watching their work like a vulture over a dying horse. While Thorin turned his eye to Nori, who seemed to have put on every wearable item he had come across and glittered greatly as he moved, Gimli slid down the back of his pile and out of sight.

Gimli did not like the look in Thorin’s eye as he watched over them. It did not look like Thorin at all.

Though, not much of Thorin looked the same. Balin had been the one to find the Raven Crown,
and he had placed it upon Thorin’s head with much ceremony. (Bilbo had watched the whole thing with his lip bitten between his teeth and his hand fiddling in his pocket). Dori had found the King’s Wardrobe, and in it a fur cloak that trailed the floor for several feet behind him. It was a cloak for high ceremony, not one for digging in dragon-gold, but Thorin wore it like it was not even there.

Gimli’s tunic caught on a golden goblet, and pulled the front pieces apart before he could get to his feet. The Lady’s gift glittered against his chest, and he watched the brilliant reflections for a moment before he pulled his tunic closed once more. They had yet to find clothing, or cloth, save for what was worn by the unburied dead, and none would dare touch that cloth.

Of course, they was no guarantee that there would be clothing anywhere in the mountain: fabric did not tend to have the same lasting power as gold, afterall. Even dwarf-woven cloth would rot eventually.

“My, but he does like to swirl that cape of his dramatically,” Bilbo said quietly from behind Gimli, and Gimli smiled over his shoulder.

“That is its purpose,” he said. He finished tucking his tunic into his belt and turned. Bilbo was frowning at his chest. “What?” Gimli asked. “Is it showing?”

“How?” Bilbo said, and looked up, then looked back down again. “No, no it’s not showing. It will be soon, however. There isn’t much left of that shirt.”

Gimli shrugged. It was not like that was news to him. He took it as a testament to how far the others were lost that not even his father thought to question how Gimli’s clothing had burned, but Gimli had not.

“Has no one a spare for you?” Bilbo asked, and then shook his head. “Of course not. Who packs a spare shirt when you’re going to be eaten by a dragon.” Bilbo clicked his tongue, annoyed with himself, or with the rest of the world for not being as sensible as they were in Hobbiton, and Gimli had to smile. “Why haven’t you gone to look for one, then?”

Gimli gestured to where Thorin stood, hidden by the mound of gold behind him. “Do you really think he’s going to let any of us out of his sight?” he asked. Bilbo gave Gimli a blank look. Gimli shrugged. “Like it or not, Thorin is our King, and we have sworn to obey him.”

“Stuff and Nonsense,” Bilbo huffed, waving his hand. “He’s still Thorin. And besides, I am a Hobbit of the Shire. We answer to one King, and he hasn’t been around for a dog’s age. The closest Hobbits have is the Thain of Tookland, and it’s more of a ceremonial position these days, anyway.”

Bilbo waved his hand, dismissing his ramblings. “Nevermind all that. You need a shirt, and if you won’t go by yourself, I’ll just have to come with you.”

“Bilbo,” Gimli said, but Bilbo simply grabbed Gimli’s wrist and dragged him from the chamber and up the stairs to the upper halls. No one stopped them, but Gimli was sure Thorin watched them leave (not that he looked, however. If he had, he would have had to stop, and he needed that shirt).

They stopped at the next level above, out of sight and sound of the gold-filled lower halls. “Well,” Bilbo said. “You were the one to live here. Which way?”

Gimli looked around. “Much changed by the time I was here,” Gimli said. “And more still while I lived within these walls. Still, the guards were supplied uniforms, so there would have to be a quartermaster station. There was also the market, but there would be less finished clothing and more fabric.
“Right,” Bilbo said. “Guard station it is.” He took three steps forward, still pulling Gimli, before he stopped. “Um, which was that, again?”

Chuckling, Gimli turned left and guided Bilbo down another set of stairs towards the old Guard’s quarters.

The chambers of the City Guard were largely untouched: the way to get them was narrow even for a dwarf, and there would be no way for Smaug to get to them. Not that he would want to get to them, mind, as there was little in the way of gold and gems to be had.

They found the barracks, with rows of beds in a single room. The size of them, and the state of the equipment found within, marked them as trainee barracks.

All dwarves, when apprenticed, would leave home for a time and live with the master from whom they would learn, until they had reached Journeyman status. Then, they were able, if they had the coin, to strike out on their own, although it was expected that they would continue to work with and for their Master until they had achieved their mastery. Most dwarves, Gimli knew, chose to remain with their Master instead, unless they had married and, for whatever reason, the Master was not able to take in both the Journeyman and their spouse. It happened, occasionally. Glóin, Gimli knew, had moved out of his Master’s home as a Journeyman, and Gimli had been born just after he had achieved his mastery.

Apprenticing began around a dwarf’s 50th year, and would continue until sometime around their 70th. One could try for mastery after the centennial year, though few achieved it so quickly. Gimli was, technically, still apprenticed to Dwalin, even though their sparring in Rivendell could easily have graduated him to Journeyman. There had been no time to discuss it, however, and Gimli wondered what would happen once Dwalin knew the truth.

Either way, finding the apprentice guard barracks was a stroke of luck, for the clothing here would be right for Gimli’s current size.

Together, they began to look through the various drawers and chest that lined the walls. It was eerie, and Gimli refused to open any box that looked like it would hold personal possessions. Gimli refused to wear the clothing of ghosts.

In the end, Bilbo found the right door, and opened a closet filled with leather training tunics, stitched to be sturdy and therefore still on the hanger. The cedar chips used to keep the moths away from the woolen under-tunics had long since petrified, but the closed door had done it’s job and the shirts were still in good enough condition to wear.

Quickly, Gimli stripped off his burned tunic and pulled an under-tunic from the shelf. The Lady’s gift bounced against his sternum as he moved, and when he finally pulled the tunic over his head, he felt a bit of warmth leach back into his skin. He had not quite realized how cold he had been in half a shirt. He grabbed a leather tunic and looked it over. The leather was dry, it would need to be oiled before it was worn, but it should come back to life quickly.

A few minutes' further search uncovered a drawer filled with vials of oil and a stack of clean rags.

“I don’t know who the quartermaster was,” Gimli said, “But I like his style.”

Bilbo smiled, rolling his eyes. He had collected Gimli’s Laketown tunic, and peered about the room as Gimli began to work oil into the thirsty leather. It would take several passes before it was where it should be, but they had a moment to spare.
“So, this is a guard room?” Bilbo asked.

“Apprentice barracks,” Gimli corrected, and at Bilbo’s look, Gimli began to explain how the apprentice system worked, how several young dwarrows would be apprenticed to a firm or guild, and as their skill increased they would begin to work with a specific master. That master would see them through to Journeyman status and then oversee their Mastery work. “Ori is technically Balin’s Journeyman. He’s ready for his Mastery, however, though Ori doesn’t quite believe that,” Gimli said. “Fíli and Kíli are technically Journeymen as well, but it’s different for royalty. There’s less emphasis on a technical craft and more on statecraft, though most of our kings have had a technical craft as well.”

“Oh?” Bilbo asked. “What are their crafts?” He paused. “Unless I’m not supposed to ask that?”

Gimli grinned up at him even as he worked at a particularly stubborn spot. “It’s no secret, so there’s no harm in it. Kíli’s an archer partially because he is a bowyer. Fíli, though he is a very skilled fighter and can forge with skill if needed, is first a musician. A composer, even. He wrote the song he and Kíli played in Rivendell.”

“Really?” Bilbo asked, brightening. “That was quite good!”

“Make sure you tell him,” Gimli said. “The Crafts of Arts are no less noble than the Crafts of Guilds, but they are considered of less use in hard times. He’s a bit hesitant about it, though no less passionate about it for that.”

“I will,” Bilbo said, deep in thought. “And you, Gimli? What is your craft?”

Gimli didn’t answer right away, simply held his tunic up and inspected it for dry spots. The leather gleamed in the light. Satisfied, he put it on.

He grinned. “Though, I do have a passion for surveying--I built a city in the Glittering Caves in Rohan, a Masterwork, if ever I had one--it is not my true calling.” He sighed. He loved his Craft, he truly did. No dwarf could not love their Craftwork, that was the nature of it, but it stung that his Craft had aided him so little these past few days, but he could not make them listen. “Words, Bilbo,” Gimli said. “My craft is my words; I am statesman, diplomat, poet. My words brought peace to the conflict between Dwarves and Elves.”

“I thought your marriage did that,” Bilbo commented, dry.

Gimli snorted. “The groundwork was laid long before I married my fool elf,” he said. “I considered many. I have my Mastery as a warrior, an axeman. Dwalin once called me the best axeman in a thousand years. I could have pled my case for Mastery in jewel craft with this,” he said, placing his hand over the Lady’s Gift. “But my most enduring work was done with words, and I am happy for it, for words are the building blocks of peace and I have seen too much war to be happy as a warrior.”

Bilbo shook his head. “I don’t think I understand.”

Gimli sighed, and placed his hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. “War has taught me many thing. The greatest lesson that I had to learn, was that to be a warrior, a true warrior, is to seek the end of war. I have lived that, Bilbo. I have seen the end of warfare, and I would give anything to see it once more.”

Bilbo blinked, looking away. “For all our sakes, Gimli, I hope you do.”

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It was easier, walking back to the others less afraid that his secret would be accidentally exposed. Bilbo seemed lost in thought after what Gimli had told him about Dwarven crafts, and Gimli was happy to let him drift. It created a sense of peaceful companionship that had been missing from his life of late.

Bilbo stopped, staring at the entrance to the gold room, and said, quietly, “I would very much like some fresh air.”

Gimli looked at the hobbit, saw the tightness around his eyes, the trembling of the hand he had shoved deep in his pocket, and nodded. “Aye. A good idea. The battlements are this way.” Carefully, he led Bilbo towards the outer wall of the mountain, and the battlements that rested atop the front door like a mantle.

The day was cold, and the wind whipped at their clothing. Gimli was glad for his new leather tunic, but Bilbo shivered in the wind.

“Cold?” Gimli asked.

Bilbo sniffed once, twice, and then turned his head to look at Gimli. “No, no. I’m fine. It’s a bit chilly, yes, but it was getting a bit close in there.”

“Hmm,” Gimli said. The Halls of the Dwarves of the North were often heavily insulated, and with the forges lit, the lower halls were beginning to regain their cozy heat. Gimli often missed the warmer climate of Rohan, even in the paradise of Aman. That was the thing about paradise—the weather was as unchanging as the immortal beings who lived there, and while there was comfort in always knowing the wind would never be too cold, or the sun too hot, Gimli had begun to long for a sweltering summer day, or the bitterness in the air after a blizzard. Still. “You’re not talking about the heat, are you?”

“Bilbo,” Thorin called, and the hobbit glanced at Gimli before turning to face Thorin. The easy peace of before was gone like smoke in the wind. “There you are. You shouldn’t wander off. It’s easy to get lost if you don’t know your way.”

Bilbo smiled, breathing a short, uneasy laugh. “I appreciate the concern, but I have a better sense of direction than you give me credit for. Besides, I had Gimli with me.” Thorin turned to Gimli, as if seeing him for the first time.

“Yes, but the son of Glóin has not yet had time to learn these halls,” Thorin said, and it sounded so reasonable if not for the way all of Gimli’s senses rang their warning bells. Gimli stood straighter than before and met Thorin’s eyes: they were dark and they glittered.

“Well, if you can’t trust a dwarrow’s sense of direction underground, what can you trust, hmm?” Bilbo asked, the humor in his voice so obviously faked, but Thorin didn't seem to notice.

There was a sudden fluttering of wings, and a large black raven landed on the battlement. He looked between the three of them, head cocked.

“A crow?” Bilbo asked, and the raven squawked at him, ruffling his wings and puffing out his chest.

“A raven,” Thorin corrected. “There used to be great friendship between them and our people; and they often brought us secret news, and were rewarded with such bright things as they coveted to hide in their dwellings.

“They live many a year, and their memories are long, and they hand on their wisdom to their
children.” Here, the raven lifted his head high, and looked awfully smug. “I knew many of the raven of the rocks when when I was a dwarfling. The very height there,” he pointed to the crest that raised up north of the mountain, “was once named Ravenhill, because there was a wise and famous pair, old Carc and hiswife, that lived there above the guard-chamber. But I don’t supposed that any of that ancient breed linger here now.”

The raven looked at Thorin, unimpressed, and gave a loud call that echoed down the side of the mountain. Thorin looked taken aback. “Well, I’m sorry,” he said. “When you were silent, I assumed.”

The raven glared balefully at him, and another raven flew to join them. He was the most decrepit old bird, and barely was able to fly over the battlement. He landed stiffly on the floor, and it was clear to see that he was going bald. It was also easy to see that he was nearly twice the size of the other raven, and when he spread his wings and bobbed in a sort of bow towards Thorin, Gimli had to step back out of the way.

“O Thorin son of Thrain,” the raven croaked in clear if accented Westron. Gimli saw Bilbo’s eyes grow wide; he hadn’t expected the raven to be able to speak. Gimli considered this, and realized that Bilbo couldn’t speak the languages of the birds, which meant that Frodo and his hobbits likely couldn’t either. How very strange, to only realize that now, and that, save for Gandalf, Gimli was the only member of the Company who had heard and understood the mutterings of the birds they had encountered on their path.

Of course, the King of the Eagles had spoken, so Bilbo shouldn’t look quite so surprised.

(“Well, he was a King,” Bilbo would explain later. “And we had Gandalf with us besides. One learns quickly not to question things where there is a wizard involved.”)

“I am Roäc son of Carc. Carc is dead, but he was well known to you once. It is a hundred years and three and fifty since I came out of the egg, but I do not forget what my father told me. Now I am the chief of the great ravens of the Mountain. This is my grandson, Aroc,” The smaller raven bobbed at them. “We are few, but we remember still the king that was of old. Most of my people are abroad, for there are great tidings in the South—some are tidings of joy, and other of great sorrow.

“Behold! the birds are gathering back again to the mountain and to Dale for word has spread that Smaug the Terrible is dead!”

“It is good that they return,” Thorin said. “But the death of Smaug is no news to us. We watched his fall.”

“Yes,” Roäc said, sagely, and narrowed his good eye at Thorin. “So much for joy, Thorin Oakenshield. You may go back to your halls in safety; all the treasure is yours—for the moment. But many are gathering hither beside the birds. The news of the death of the guardian has already gone far and wide, and there are ills ears who are not pleased by such news.”

The Enemy, Gimli thought. We were right; the death of Smaug was a blow to his forces.

“They would less pleased to know the Dwarves of Erebor had returned, and that the gold is not for the taking,” Thorin said.

“There are greater treasures than gold,” Roäc said. “For all that we ravens covet that which shines, even we know that truth.”
Thorin grunted, and Roäc continued. “Already a host of elves is on the way, and carrion birds are with them hoping for battle and slaughter. By the lake, men murmur that their sorrows are due to the dwarves, and the dwarves should be the ones to make amends, alive or dead; for they are homeless and many have died, and Smaug has destroyed their town.

“There own wisdom must decide your course; but thirteen is small remnant of the great folk of Durin that once dwelt here, and now are scattered far.” Thorin’s face darkened, but he did not interrupted the aged raven. “If you will listen to my counsel, you will not trust the Master of Laketown, but rather him that shot the dragon with his bow. Bard is he, of the race of Dale, of the Like of Girion; he is a grim man, but true. We would see peace once more among the dwarves and men and elves after the long desolation, but it may cost you dear in gold. I have spoken!”

Thorin’s countenance had darkened impossibly further as Roäc spoke, and when the raven mentioned elves, Thorin openly sneered.

“Our thanks, Roäc Carc’s son. You and your people shall not be forgotten, but none of our gold shall thieves take or the violent carry off while we are alive. If you would earn our thanks and more, bring us news of any that draw near. Also, I would beg of you to send any who are yet young and strong of wing to our kin and tell them of our plight. Go especially to my cousin Dain of the Iron Hills, for his army will be sorely needed.”

Roäc bobbed. “I do not say if this path is good or ill, but Aroc will go to Dain himself, and I will send other messengers thither.” Off he flew, then, slow and stiff with cold and age.

“Back now, to the Mountain,” Thorin said and wrapped his arm around Bilbo’s shoulders to walk him inside. Bilbo was nearly hidden in the folds of the coat. Gimli watched them go, and felt dread deep in his gut. He turned to Aroc.

“I am not the king,” he said, “but I have a request as well, if you would, to please send a message to the king’s sister, Dis, in the West.”

Aroc bobbed, and squawked, and flew away.
“Cousin,” Fíli called, and Legolas looked up from where he was helping one of Bard’s bowmen pack a hastily made pull-sled. He smiled in greeting.

“You are prepared then?” Legolas asked and Fíli nodded. Fíli, with his brother, Óin, and Bofur, were taking Bard’s boat across the lake. It had been decided that a swift reunion with the Company (“or whatever’s left of it,” Óin had added, loudy and unnecessarily, though not wholly unkindly), would be in everyone’s best interests. That way, Fíli could prepare the dwarves in the Mountain for their unexpected company.

Bilbo, at least, would respect that.

Legolas stepped away from the sled to speak to Fíli in low tones. “I fear what you will find,” he admitted. “Not death—you may take comfort there. Gimli yet lives, and though I do yet feel his discomfort, so do I not feel great grief.”

Fíli breathed, closing his eyes for a moment. “That is heartening,” he said. “Where there’s life, there’s hope.” He reached out to Legolas and pulled him in, knocking their foreheads together with a brotherly familiarity.

“Travel safe,” Fíli said. “We will meet you at the Mountain.” He grinned, boyish and sly. “I will tell Gimli of your coming.”

Legolas grinned, laughing. “Please do,” he said.

In the distance, Tauriel was speaking with Kíli. They stood quite close, and Legolas took a moment to simply observe the picture the two of them made. Kill was tall, for a dwarf, but even he fell short of Tauriel’s shoulders. She looked like a young sapling in fall, her hair the brilliant scarlet of maple leaves and she slender enough to bend with the strong winds. For his part, Kíli looked like part of the earth itself, strongly rooted and too tough to be moved by mere air.

Still, for all their differences, they fit, and where one curved, the other caved, and they seemed almost as one being, together by the shores of long lake.

Was this how he looked with Gimli? He hoped so.

Kíli took Tauriel’s hand, then, and pressed something into her palm. She marveled at it, and tried to
give it back, but Kíli smiled and pressed her hand in closer to her chest. He said something, and Tauriel flushed quite red, though she looked so very happy.

“Oh,” Legolas said, remembering suddenly. “Here.” He unslung Orcrist, and handed it carefully to Fíli, thinking of Gimli’s way with words as he said. “Bring this to your uncle. May it make amends enough for us to work together in the dark days to come, so that firmer foundations of peace and trust may be made.”

Fíli took the sword carefully, and it was good for he was looking at Legolas with some surprise. “If I did not already know,” he said, “I could tell from you now that you were the beloved of Gimli. You sounded just like him.”

Legolas grinned. “I will take the compliment. Tell him I miss him.”

“That and more,” Fíli said. Legolas touched his fingertips to his chest and spread his hand forward, nodding as he would to family. Fill, quite surprising Legolas, returned the gesture. It was a near perfect mimic, and perhaps Legolas shouldn’t be quite so surprised. Fíli would make an excellent King one day.

“We ready?” Bofur called from the boat; Óin was already seated inside, and his disgruntled look was so much like Gimli’s when they first took to the Anduin in the boats of the Galadhrim, that Legolas had to stifle a laugh. Kíli finally managed to pull himself away, and Legolas joined Tauriel as the dwarves took to the water.

"What will they find?” Tauriel asked. "What will we?"

Legolas found that he could give her no answer.

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Not even a dwarf can search forever, and that night (late, past the darkest hour if Gimli’s sense was correct), they finally stopped to eat.

Their rations were slim, but not yet at their slimmest. They would do for several days yet, if they had need. With Laketown gone, there will be much need—for us and for them, Gimli thought. He chewed a piece of stale bread thoughtfully. Where would they get the means to survive the winter? The first time, they had managed only by the grace of the Elvenking, though Dain was able to come through with more supplies from their kin in the lands of the far South near midwinter. He could only hope that Thranduil would be so kind a second time—or that Legolas would somehow have sway where Thorin did not.

Of course it would all be easier if they never fought the battle ahead. Gimli had hopes that it was not yet too late to stop the battle from happening, though he knew the chances of that were growing slimmer. He would have to focus on the ending now, he was sure. If Thorin and his heirs were to fight, then Gimli would have to keep them alive.

“What I wouldn’t give for a nice piece of sharp cheese,” Nori said into the silence between them. They all shared the glassy-eyed dullness of exhaustion that came at the end of a long day when the mind finally realizes that work is done. It is a moment where the mind dozes while the body works on, and it was clear in the way the others took a moment to react to his words.

“I’d rather some jam,” Ori said. “Blackberry jam is my favorite. Or chips.”

“Tea,” Dori said, and Balin nodded his agreement.
“Aye, or Ale.”

“Malt Beer,” Dwalin rumbled, and Gimli would swear that he heard him mutter, “and some more of Bilbo’s scones.”

“Pickles,” Bombur said. “Spicy-sweet pickles and roast goose.”

“Kafe,” Glóin said, and the others all groaned their agreement.

*Goat’s Milk* Bifur signed. *Good for thirst and hunger.*

“Apples,” Gimli said, thinking of Pippin, starting to grey and grinning from the top of an orchard tree as Merry scolded him from the ground that he was ‘not a fauntling, anymore, *Pippin!*’ The apples Pippin had tossed to him had been tart and crunched like lamb bones beneath his teeth. He’d said as much, and Merry had looked askance at him for days.

“Cakes,” Bilbo said, and it was fairly a groan. “My mother’s seed cake. Plum cakes, upside down pear cakes. Lemon cake with a sweet glaze. Pumpkin cake with honey and cream—or pies. Pumpkin pie, apple pie, peach pie in summer, or custard pie. Berry tarts.”

“Cloudberry horns,” Thorin said into a break in the litany, and still everyone stopped to listen. He seemed smaller than he had during the day, more like his old self. He did not eat, and instead his hands held a small gold bracelet, like that for a small child, and he flipped it over and over as he talked. “The southern side of the mountain, along the banks of the River Running, used to be lined by cloudberrries. They’re tart, and we would eat them in summertime, sweetened with whipped cream as filling for wafer horns. My brother loved them, though Dis always found them a bit too sour.”

“I haven’t thought about cloudberrries in ages,” Balin said, and the bracelet stilled in Thorin’s hands.

“We will have cloudberrries again,” he declared, “when I have the Arkenstone, and our people return.”

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Thorin called to Dwalin as he re-entered the chamber, the next morning, climbing up the largest pile of gold. “Any sign of it yet?”

“Nothing yet,” Dwalin called back, pausing in his search.

“Nothing here!” Nori added. He was now wearing even more gems, and was beginning to look more than slightly ridiculous. He opened a ruby-encrusted box, found a supply of pearls, and tossed the whole thing over his shoulder, the pearls raining down like a child’s jacks.

Thorin grunted. “Keep searching!”

“That jewel could be anywhere,” Glóin grumbled, just loud enough for Thorin to hear.

“The Arkenstone is in these halls,” he snapped. “Find it! No one rests until it is found!”

“You heard him, keep looking!” Dwalin ordered.

The company seemed to double their efforts, save for Balin and Dwalin who joined with Thorin. Gimli looked at Bilbo; the hobbit looked even more pale than before. If anything, their trip to the
battlements had made it worse for him, and he watched Thorin with concern in his eyes.

Not willing to move far, just in case, Gimli began to search through the pile before him as Thorin spoke with his cousins and advisors.

“It’s here in these halls, I know it,” Thorin said. He made a fist and shook it before his chest.

Dwalin cleared his throat. “We have searched, and searched—“

“Not well enough!” Thorin snapped.

“We haven’t the time,” Balin said calmly, in attempt to cool the tempers that were beginning to flare. “This much treasure, it could take years.”

Thorin growled. “We don’t have years.”

“Thorin,” Dwalin began. “We would all see the stone returned.”

Thorin whirled on him. “And yet, it is still not found!”

Balin raised his voice a hair, just enough to make sure he would be heard. “Do you doubt the loyalty of anyone here?”

Thorin—Thorin didn’t answer. He simply turned to face Balin, and stared him down. Balin, for his sake, did not back down.

“The Arkenstone is the birthright of our people.”

“It is,” Thorin said, and his voice had taken on a deep rumble that was not his own. “The King’s Jewel.” He looked out over the piles and the members of his company, and cried out, “Am I not the king?!”

Everyone stopped and looked at him, unsure how to react. One by one, they all bowed to him, deeper than they ever had before. Satisfied, Thorin turned away.

“Know this,” he said to Balin, in a low voice that still carried too far to be a whisper. Balin looked straight again. “If anyone should find it and withhold it from me, I will be avenged.” Thorin swept from the room, then, leaving the rest to continue their search.

Balin walked off in the other direction. Gimli followed, concerned. Something told him to wait outside, however, and he was glad he did, for when he paused, he heard the sound of muffled weeping. Balin. Oh, dear Balin. Gimli should not be here, his cousin would not want him listening in to—

Bilbo stopped next to Gimli and looked at him. He could not miss the sounds from inside; hobbit ears were always better than dwarven ones. Bilbo did not say anything, but he stepped inside all the same.

The sniffling and shuddering breaths slowed and stopped. “Dragon-sickness,” Balin said, low and thick with held back tears. “I’ve seen it before. That look. That terrible need. I had my suspicions as far back as Laketown, but I was silent. I—“ He cut himself off, and Bilbo said something too low for Balin to hear. When Balin spoke again it was with renewed resolve. A warning. “It is a fierce and jealous love, Bilbo. It sent his grandfather mad.”

“Balin,” Bilbo said, louder now, as if he wanted to be sure Gimli heard. “If-if Thorin had the
“Arkenstone…” he trailed off, and Gimli could picture Balin’s eyes sharpening as he looked at him, filling with the realization, the implication of Bilbo’s question. “...if it was found - Would it help?”

“That stone crowns all,” Balin said, intently. “It is the summit of this great wealth, bestowing power upon he who bears it. Will it stay his madness?” He paused, and Gimli scarce dared to breathe. “No, lad; I fear it would make it worse. Perhaps it is best that it remains lost.”

*If Thorin will let it, Gimli thought.*

***

It was a long, slow climb up to the front gate of Erebor, and it was clear to see the damage done by the dragon. The once great gates were no more than a pile of rubble, though Fíli could see the grandeur that once was in the scale and the precision of the cut.

They climbed over the stones, their broken pieces creating a bridge over a fast stream of water that Fíli realized had to be the early path of the River Running, or part of it anyway. It was fitting, that the river started here, somehow.

Kíli was healing fast; the *aethelas* had done its work well, and Kíli always did have a talent for healing. He barely slowed as he scrambled over the rocks, a far cry from even two days previous.

They descended into the entry chamber, but heard not a sound of a living creature.

“Hello! Bombur? Bifur? Anybody?” Bofur called. His voice and footsteps echoed off the walls as he began to jog through the rubble. Kíli and Fíli followed, with Óin keeping pace behind him.

Kíli pulled ahead, the showoff, and came to a stop at the top of a large, winding stairway. *Down, then?* he signaled to Fíli, and Fíli sent back the gesture for *with caution*.

They had barely started down the steps when they heard it.

“WAIT! WAIT!”

“It’s Bilbo!” Óin said, perking up. “He’s alive!”

“Bilbo!” Bofur cried, but Bilbo did not seem quite so happy to see them.

“Stop! Stop! Stop!” he protested, and finally joined them on the stair. "You need to leave. We all need to leave.”

Bofur cocked his head, confused. “We only just got here?!”

Bilbo just shook his head, and tried to push them all up the stairs. It didn’t work. No one moves a dwarf when they don’t want to be moved. “He won’t listen to anyone, and the others are just as bad, even if they don’t see it. Gimli and I are at our wits end.”

“What do you mean, laddie?” Óin asked, but there was something in Óin’s voice that made Fíli look at him sharply—something like he already knew.

“THORIN.” Bilbo cried, then continued softer, softer. “Thorin. Thorin. He’s been out there for days. He doesn’t sleep. He barely eats. He’s not been himself. It’s this place. It is not good for him, I fear.” He looked at Fíli. “The gold is not good for him.”

Fíli met Bilbo’s eyes, and looked past him frowning. He heard his brother ask, “What’s wrong with him?” and wondered if it had been such a good idea to shelter Kíli as well as they had, because Fíli
knew, he knew but he had to see for himself. He had to see—

“Fíli!” Bilbo called after him, but Fíli wasn’t stopping. He was racing down the stairs. He had to see. He had to see!

The dark stairway opened to a bright gleaming, golden light, and Fíli stopped to stare. For as far as he could see, the cavern below was filled with gold. There was no stone visible for the floor, no end to the vastness of the wealth before him. It was hard to comprehend, and he could only stare. It was more wealth than Fíli could picture in several lifetimes over. He felt the others join them on the level, and Kíli whistled low, uttering a gobsmacked oath beneath his breath.

As Fíli stared, never sure where to look, trying to see all of it at once and failing, he saw movement in the middle of the room. Thorin, wearing a dark cloak of raven feathers, slowly walked across the pile of gold. He did not seem to notice them watching from above, and his head swayed from side to side like that of a giant serpent.

“Do you see?” Bilbo whispered.

Thorin spoke, his deep voice carrying far. “Gold. Gold beyond measure. Beyond sorrow and grief.” He looked up, then, and Fíli tried to meet his eyes, but they were too far away. (They would be too far away even if they stood together on this very platform.)

“Behold,” Thorin said, inviting them with arms spread wide. “The great treasure hoard of Thror.”

He plucked something from the pile next to him and threw it like one might lob a vial of flashfire. It arched right to them, and Fíli caught it gingerly. It was hard, smooth, and when he opened his hand, he saw a ruby larger than his fist. He looked down at Thorin in surprise.

“Welcome, my sister’s sons,” Thorin said, and held out his arm, “to the kingdom of Erebor.”

***

Gimli was in an anteroom with the others when Bofur sprang through the door. He had never seen Bombur run so fast, not even when chased by orcs, as when he ran to embrace his own brother. Bifur cheered, shaking his fist above his head in silence. Glóin had gone to greet Óin with Balin and Dwalin, and when Gimli saw sight of blonde hair, he was off his feet to greet his cousins.

“You’re all right!” he cried, throwing his arms around Kíli first. “I was worried sick!”

“Aw, you sound like Ma,” Kíli said, though he hugged Gimli fiercely. “It was just a scratch.”

Gimli pinched Kíli sharply on the ear, making his squack. Fíli laughed, sounding relieved and only a touch hysterical. Gimli had seen the effects of morgul poison. He knew just how harrowing it could be. He pulled away from Kíli and pulled Fíli into a tight hug. Fíli was quickly pulled away by Dwalin, who always had a softer than most spot for the young archer, and Fíli took the moment to press his face close to Gimli’s ear.

“You saw him?” he hissed.

“Aye, him and his Captain. She healed Kíli. He was with Bard when he slayed the dragon. The men of the Lake are coming for aid; he is with them.”

Gimli pulled back at that. “The men of the Lake will find no aid here; Thorin will not part with a
tin cent, not for any reason.”

“I know, but what would you have me do?” Fíli asked, and then shrugged. “I gave my word.”

Gimli just frowned at him; he would have done the same, but Gimli could see it all spiraling out before him. The pieces were falling into places like the tumblers in a lock; any one turn of a key and the door to war would open.

“They will be here by nightfall, tomorrow.” Fíli said. “We have until then.” Gimli squeezed more tightly, to show he had heard.

The rest of the afternoon was filled with more backbreaking work; the search for the Arkenstone was put on hold in order to rebuild the entry gate. Since rebuilding the doors would be too much work, and take too long, the Company set out building a wall of interlocking stones. No cracks were to be made, and it was slow enough work to join the pieces together. Occasionally, larger stones had need to be broken down, and Fíli found himself breaking boulders with Gimli more often than not. At another time, Nori would have cracked a joke about the work being familiar, mostly to make Dwalin glower and Ori giggle (even though it made Dori roll his eyes), but there was little mirth to be had. The way had to be barred.

Dinner that night was a more joyous affair. Fíli had been given a pack of food; the men of Laketown had little enough to spare now, but Bianca had pressed the pack into Fíli’s hands anyway. “Men are judged not by what they have, but what they give. You have need of food, as do we. Goodness knows I wouldn’t want to eat anything up in the mountain; it’s all covered in dragon.”

Fíli liked Bianca, particularly when she rounded on Bain for making faces behind her back, making Tilda and Sigrid laugh.

Still, meager rations or no, there was an energy in the air. The Company was reunited, hale and whole. The Dragon was dead, the gold was theirs. They were no longer poor refugees; they were Dwarf Lords of Erebor!

In their great search, Ori had discovered a room of instruments, and several were brought out now (including, Gimli noticed, a plain silver harp that he knew once belonged to Thorin’s mother. Thorin held it gently, but did not play).

Fíli and Kíli picked up a pair of fiddles, but they were too long neglected to play. Time, care, and gentle work could restore them, but their strings would snap before they would sound, and Kíli’s in particular, was in a delicate state.

Still, some were still in good working order, and for the first time in over a century, music filled the halls of Erebor.

Like the previous night, the sounds of his Company seemed to draw back their Thorin, and he nearly smiled as he watched his Company act so carefree.


Fíli blinked at him a moment more. “All right,” he said. “What should I sing?”

Thorin hummed. Orcrist was once more attached to his hip, and he ran his fingers over the pommel absently. That reunion had been a strange one; with sword in hand, Thorin had appeared more his old self than he had in a long time, but he refused to acknowledge where the sword had come from, almost as if he continuously did not hear the words. “A song of victory.”
Fíli nodded slowly. “All right. I think I have one.” He looked around at the others, who were all watching him. He cleared his throat, and began to sing.

*Under the Mountain dark and tall*
*The King has come unto his hall!*
*His foe is dead, the Worm of Dread,*
*And ever so his foes shall fall.*

Thorin leaned back in his seat. He seemed pleased by the choice. Fíli looked to Kíli and gestured with his hand. Kill joined in on the next verse, singing his harmony.

*The sword is sharp, the spear is long*
*The arrow swift, the Gate is strong*
*The heart is bold that looks on gold;*
*The dwarves no more shall suffer wrong.*

Unlike in Bilbo’s home, or in the Fire Hall of Rivendell, no one joined in. It seemed wrong, somehow, even if none but Gimli could voice why. It was a victory, aye, but whose?

*The mountain throne once more is freed!*
*O! wandering folk, the summons heed!*
*Come haste! Come haste! across the waste!*
*The king of friend and kin has need.*

*Now call we over mountains cold,*
”*Come back unto the caverns old!”*
*Here at the Gates the king awaits,*
*His hands are rich with gems and gold.*

*The king is come unto his hall*
*Under the Mountain dark and tall.*
*The Worm of Dread is slain and dead,*
*And ever so our foes shall fall!*

For Gimli, however, the future was even less certain.

Later that night, as the company was bedding down (save for Balin who had drawn first watch), Óin approached Gimli, clearing his throat. Gimli looked up at him in surprise. “Another lesson?” he asked, with a small smile.

“A talk, if you would,” Óin corrected, and Gimli frowned but nodded. He stood, and followed his Uncle out of the room, and down a hall where they would not easily be overheard.

“What is it, Uncle?” Gimli asked.


“Uncle?” Gimli asked. He didn’t like where this was going. “I do not remember.”

“You cracked a geode,” Óin said to himself. “How could you crack a geode?” He shook his head. “How old are you, really?” Óin asked. “Because you certainly aren’t sixty-four. Not if you’ve managed to marry an elf and live to tell the tale.”

Gimli blinked, his blood running cold and then hot. *How did—?* “Legolas told you then?”
“Aye, he did,” Óin confirmed.

Gimli nodded. “Good,” he said, sounding far more certain than he felt. “I was sick of the lies before we left Ered Luin.” That got Óin to turn, to look at him. “And to answer your question, I’m not rightly sure. I was just shy of two-hundred seventy when Legolas and I set sail, and the years have no meaning in that place. I like to think I made it past four-hundred, but I have no way of knowing for sure.”

Óin blinked at him. “Four-hundred—wait, what ‘place’ are you talking about?”

“Aman” Gimli said. “The Undying Lands.”

“Nobody goes there!” Óin protested. “None but the elves, and not even then half the time!”

“Not yet,” Gimli said. “But I know for a fact that there are also several wizards and a few hobbits, though I was the only dwarf, aye. It was because of Legolas, you see, and the Lady Galadriel. She provided a boon for her Champion, and I thank her every day for it.”

Óin’s mouth opened and closed, and looked away. “I didn’t want to believe,” he said. “I had to, for the sake of peace, but I never truly…” he trailed off, and when he looked back up again, his eyes were damp. “Is my Gimli truly lost, then? That wee lad?”

Gimli stepped forward and lay his hand on Óin’s arm; Óin stared dully back.

“I am your Gimli, Uncle,” he said. “I grew old, is all. That was always going to happen. Only now, I have the grace of wisdom while I have the energy to enjoy it. It’s not so bad.” He paused, and frowned. “I do miss my beard, however. It was longer even than Da’s.”

Óin snorted. “I bet he loved that.”

“Proud as a Lion, he was. And Pleased as Punch,” Gimli agreed, and sighed. “Uncle, I know it’s impossible, but I was sent back for a reason, one that’s fast coming. There are dark days ahead, the mayhems the darkest this world has ever seen. I need to know if you believe in me, and I fear that my deception, though necessary, would keep your trust from me.”

Óin groaned, and looked at Gimli, his anger waning as his look turned rueful. “You are a diplomat, aren’t you. Bet that made Balin happy.” Gimli winced, but didn’t comment. He was happy enough that his uncle no longer seemed quite so angry.

“Gimli Silvertongue,” Gimli admitted, with good humor, and bowed. “At your service.” He straightened, and wagged his head back and forth. “Well, I have collected several names in my lifetime, but Silvertongue was given to me by King Thorin--” Gimli stopped there. He was named such by Thorin III, the Stonehelm, not Oakenshield. Luckily, however, it did not appear that Óin notices his slip.

“Well,” Óin said after a moment. “Out with it then. What else are you called, nephew mine?”

“Elf-friend,” Gimli said, and Óin snorted.

“Oh, I think you’re more a friend with that one, lad.”

Gimli chuckled. “Aye, him. But I was named friend by the Lady Galadriel, and her champion. I am a Dwarf Lord of Erebor, true, but also Lord of Aglarond, a city west of Gondor in the mountains of Rohan, that does not yet exist. Too, I am one of the Nine Walkers, of the Company of Frodo Baggins,” here Óin startled, “And the Three Hunters, both of which Legolas was also a part.”
Óin sighed. “You never became a seer,” he said. “Did you ever really see?”

Gimli thought of the Geode, its sicky yellow hue. He thought of the fire at the Carrock, and how its flames looked more like dragonfire than woodfire. “Aye,” Gimli said. “I think I have. None have been a good omen.” He sighed. “Still, I know what came before, and I know better than most what powers move in this world now. I have to believe, uncle.”

“Aye,” Óin said. “So do we all.”

***

The weight of the mountain seemed to be pressing down on him, closing in around him, cutting off his air, and crushing him under a hobnailed boot.

Thorin’s boot.

The changes in the dwarf Bilbo had come to call his friend were stark, and now impossible to ignore. (Oh, face it, you fool. You’ve cared for him as more than a friend for some time now. he thought, and had to bit his lip until the thought faded). If Bilbo was honest with himself (Ha!), it had been obvious for weeks.

Where Thorin was once brisk from worry, he was brisk with impatience. Where once his anger came from fear, it now flared from imagined threats and loss. Where he once desired for others, he now demanded in greed. Where once he was warm, if slow to show it, he now burned, singeing all who came to close.

His eyes no longer saw reality as it was, and Bilbo felt his stomach clench every time Thorin looked at him.

So, Bilbo climbed.

He picked a stair, any stair—it did not matter, and went up, and up. He was reminded, as he passed yet another landing, of the great trees of Mirkwood forest. He wondered if he would breach this canopy of stone, and if he did, he would find as miraculous sight as the blue-black butterflies.

The torches were only lit so high; there was no need to spend fuel if there was no one about, but while the stair dimmed at first, it soon began to grow lighter with a different quality of light. Bilbo wanted to quicken his pace, wanted to run towards the pale, wintry light, but he had climbed so far his feet felt like weights at the ends of his legs. Still, he kept going and came, at last, to a small balcony lightly dusted with snow.

I must be near the summit, he thought, but when he looked up, he saw the mountain stretch on above him. No—not near the summit. It had simply snowed in the night and dusted the mountain like he dusted his lemon cake with sugar.

The snow crunched underfoot, cold and wet, but not terribly so. Back in the Shire this sort of snowfall was common, and a treat for young fauntlings. While Bilbo had lost his taste for the larger storms, he had always kept his affection for the lighter snowfalls. He liked the way it always seemed a little bit warmer after the snow fell, when the world was quiet save for the far off tinkling of ice.

He brushed snow off a stone bench with his hand, shaking it out when the snow melted against his palm, and sat down gratefully to look out over the valley. Long Lake was a sparkling strip of grey-
blue in the distance, and—Bilbo squinted. He could have sworn he saw movement on the path to Erebor, but whatever it was must be gone now, for he saw nothing else.

Bilbo places his hand absently against his chest, feeling the hardness of the Arkenstone beneath his fingers, and absently slipped them into the front crossing, caressing the stone lightly, before reaching into his inner pocket and pulling out the treasure within. He held it tightly in his fist, gaining comfort from its hardness.

He heard footsteps first, though not fast enough for him to move. That was Thorin’s tread—he’d recognize it anywhere, even in his sleep by now. “What is that?!” he snapped, striding onto the balcony. Bilbo boggled at him.

“Did you follow me?”

“In your hand!” Thorn demanded, ignoring what Bilbo said. “What is that?”

Bilbo squeezed it more tightly. “It—it’s nothing,” he said, taken aback.

Thorn stepped closer, close enough to grab Bilbo. “Show me.”

“It…” Bilbo started, but then stopped. It would be easier to show him, and nothing else would ease Thorin’s troubled mind. Slowly, he held out his hand and uncurled his fingers. There, in the center of his palm, was a large green and brown acorn.

“I picked it up in Beorn’s garden,” he said, quietly embarrassed. It had seemed such a natural thing at the time: and he didn’t stop to think why he had done it. He simply had. Now, of course, he planned on taking it all the way back to the Shire. If he lived that long.

Thorn softened, and for a brief moment, he looked like his old self—the King Bilbo had fallen for on their long journey. Bilbo hated it; it was so much worse when Thorin was gone again. “You’ve carried it all this way.”

Bilbo nodded. “I’m gonna plant it in my garden, in Bag End,” he said. If he ever made it back, that was.

“That’s a poor price to take back to the Shire,” Thorin said. Bilbo’s first reaction was to tease. Not everything is gems and precious metals, but the thought sickened him, now. Anything might bring that shadow back.

Bilbo considered his words carefully, his heart slowly breaking. “One day it’ll grow,” he said, and only a lifetime of proper “manners” kept the tears from sounding as close as they were. “And everytime I look at it, I’ll remember—you, as you were. The King I could follow. The Dwarf I love. “Remember everything that happened, the good, the bad.” So very bad. He said the last, a near whisper. “And how lucky I am that I made it home.”

Bilbo shook himself, and forced a smile. “Thorin, I…”

Thundering boots on the stair, and the mood was broken. Before Bilbo’s eyes, Thorin shuttered once more, and turned to glare at Dwalin, who appeared in the doorway a second later.

“Thorin, survivors.” His breath was quick, like he had run up all those stairs. “From Laketown. They are streaming into Dale. There’s hundreds of them.”

Thorin’s face turned to stone. “Call everyone to the gate,” he ordered, striding past.
“Wait, Thorin,” Bilbo called, and scrambled to follow.

“To the gate!” Thorn repeated. “Now!”
In the deep, shadowed corners of this world, the horns began to sound. The sound of tramping feet, hundreds of thousands of feet, echoed between them as they were pulled into step. Teeth gnashed. Weapons waved. Claws flashed out to dig into tender flesh, and all nearby were caught in the fray.

The horn sounded again, and the orcs doubled their speed, all but running across the distance. The armies of Mordor were on the march and all fled before them.

***

Gimli sat in comfortable silence between Fíli and Kíli. To his left, Fíli examined his knives, one by one, whetting them against a stone. To his right, Kíli was repairing the fletching on some of his arrows. If the arrows looked far more woodland than dwarven, Gimli wasn’t going to comment—but it would make Kíli’s near-inaudible swearing at the maker’s ‘ridiculous fussiness’ more appropriate. Gimli has his new axe in his lap, and was struggling to make the handle better fit his hands. It was slow work, and he didn’t have the proper tools, and he missed Peacemaker with a passion.

“Ach! It’s no use!” Gimli grumbled, and tossed the axe from his lap. It clattered to the stone in front of him, and all around him the others paused to look. None looked long, however, and Kíli never looked at all.

“What’s wrong?” Fíli asked, mild.

“Everything,” Gimli muttered, and resisted the urge to kick the axe. He knew better than to take his boot to a weapon thus, and it wasn’t like he was actually sixty-four. He did not need to act like it.

“The men should be here soon,” Kíli added, the words slightly muffled around the wire he held in his mouth. “That will help, I think.”

Just then, Thorin thundered past, Dwalin right behind him, and Bilbo running after, out of breath. “Come!” Thorn ordered. “To the gates!”

Gimli exchanged looks with his cousins; Kíli waggled his eyebrows, and jumped up after Thorin. “Kíli, no!” Fíli hissed, “Wait!” and ran after him. Gimli looked at his axe, looked at the wall of stone, the narrow stair that had been built into the side of it, and climbed after the others.

It was windy, atop the wall, and Gimli’s hair whipped about his head like a candle flame in the breeze. Hastily, he pushed it back out of his face and looked around.

Across the plain, the ruins of Esgaroth were slowly filling with the displaced people of Laketown. Small fires were already lit, and more were joining them against the coming chill of night. There were many of them—and still, Gimli knew, few compared to what their number had been before.
On the road between Dale and Erebor, walked a small company, all carrying bows. Their leader was a dark and familiar man—Bard. *I guess he is the Dragonslayer now,* Gimli thought. His company must be those remaining of his guard, and another—blond of hair and moving with the effortless grace of a woodland hart. Legolas. He saw no sign of Tauriel, however, and neither did Kíli from the way he slumped.

Thorin had seen Legolas, however, and he was tense with anger. He waited until the small company had crested the last hill to call out to them. “Who are you that come armed to the gates of Thorin son of Thrain, King Under the Mountain?”

The company stopped, and Bard looked up to them, shielding his eyes with his hand.

“Hail Thorin!” Bard called back, with guarded familiarity. Legolas stood next to him, impassive, yet Gimli knew him well enough to read his nervousness. “Why do you fence yourself like a robber in his hold? We are not yet foes, and we rejoice that you are alive beyond our hope. We came expecting to find none living here;” he said, and paused, looking them over as if counting their number. “And we are glad that you all yet live, though now that we are met there is matter for a parlay and a council.”

“Who are you,” Thorin repeated, and Balin and Dwalin both looked at him, though neither moved to interfere. “Of what would you parlay?”

Bard frowned, and one of the archers leaned forward to whisper something in his ear. Bard shook his head sharply, once, and called up once more.

“Does that crown obscure your sight, that you not know friend nor foe? I am Bard, and by my hand was the dragon slain and your treasure delivered. Is that not a matter that concerns you?” Here, his voice was dry, but the humor was lost on Thorin, whose ire grew with every word. “Moreover, I am by right descent the heir of Girion of Dale, and in your hoard is mingled much of the wealth of his halls and towns, which of old Smaug stole. Is not that a matter of which we may speak?” Thorin simply raised his chin, looking down on the men. Fíli looked between his uncle and Bard, clearly unsure where he was supposed to stand. Bard’s face darkened, and what little good humor and familiarity he had faded fast. “Further in his last battle, Smaug destroyed the dwellings of the Men of the Lake. Have you no thought for the sorrow of the misery of these people, they who aided you in your distress, who you promised prosperity, and in recompense you have thus far brought ruin only, though doubtless undesigned?”

"He did promise," Bifur said, but the others paid him no mind.

“You put your worst cause last and in the chief place,” Thorin spat. “To the treasure of my people no man has a claim, because Smaug who stole it from us also robbed life, lore, and home. The treasure was not his that his evil deeds should be amended with a share of it. The price of the goods and the assistance that we received of the Lakemen we will fairly pay—" here, Fíli closed his eyes, “-in due time.” And Fíli squeezed them shut and turned away—from shame or anger Gimli could not tell, and likely both. “But nothing we will give, not even a loaf’s worth, under threat of force.”

“What threat of force?” Bard demanded. “We come to you with nothing, begging for you to make good on your promise. You gave us your word, Thorin! Your heir gave us his Word!”

Thorin’s head snapped around to look at Fíli, who stared back, impassive. He looked carved from stone, he was so still, and Thorin sneered once more.

“My heir had no right to make such promises,” Thorin said. “And it is not the King’s place to honor false promises. He will be dealt with.” Gimli stepped forward at that, though he got no
farther. What did he mean, dealt with? Were his cousin’s deaths so set in stone that they would kill each other to make it happen? He would not allow it! He could get no closer to Thorin, however, as Bomber grabbed the back of his tunic and held him still. Gimli turned to glare, but Bomber just shook his head. Gimli turned back around. Dwalin and Balin both had moved to stand between Thorin and Fili, and Gimli was glad of it.

Thorn began to pace the wall. “It is in my mind,” he began, “to ask what share of their inheritance you would have paid to our kindred, had you found the hoard unguarded and us slain.”

“A just question,” Bard admitted, begrudgingly. He, too, didn’t appear to like what Thorin had implied, and Legolas was staring intently at them, so still as to look lifeless. “But you are not dead, and we are not robbers,” Bard concluded, turning away for a moment. He seemed disinclined to push, and his anger seemed to have left in the face of his concern. “Moreover, the wealthy may have pity beyond right on the needy that befriended them when they were in want. And still my other claims remain unanswered.”

“I will not parley, as I have said, with armed men at my gate,” Thorin snapped. He flung out his arm, pointing to Legolas. “Not at all with the people of the Elvenking, whom I remember with small kindness. In this debate they have no place.”

Legolas spoke then, his voice clear as a bell across the distance. “I am not here in my father’s name, nor am I here as part of his people. I am here as Legolas, nothing more.”

“Then you will leave here just the same,” Thorin snapped. “There will be no parley!” He turned then, and strode from the top of the wall. “Fili, to me,” he snapped, and Fili looked at the pale faces of the company and followed.

Gimli never would find out what transpired between Thorin and Fili, but Fili walked away from the meeting alive and whole, if not entirely well; as of that moment, Fili was no longer the heir to Erebor.

***

Thranduil had been gone not yet a full day, taking Lymerian with him and the rest of his army, when the messenger arrived for Nestor.


Nestor was on her feet and running before the messenger had finished speaking. She had not run such in an age, but her feet remembered their tread and in moments she was at the front gate. Sure enough, there was the White Council, Shining Glorfindel and Cirdain—whom she had never met but would never mistake—and Lord Elrond, whom she remembered from her youth. They had trained together for a time, and she had, before, discussed methods of healing through letters over the distance between them. He nodded at her.

In his arms was the Lady Galadriel.

She was not insensate; she moved as if swimming through water, and would whimper every so often. Her face was flushed and her skin looked clammy.

It was not the first time she had seen the Lady, either. Nestor had lived in Doriath with Oropher, had followed him to the Greenwood, loyal to him and his line. She had seen the Lady there often, though she did not yet use that name. She had been a shining star of a presence, quick to laugh and quick to fight. Nestor found she quite liked her, despite herself.
“Inside,” Nestor said. “There are beds waiting.” Elrond nodded, and followed her inside. “What has happened to her?”

“Her strength is spent,” Elrond said. “We faced the shadow of Mordor, and won. This was the cost.”

They arrived at the healing room, and Nestor waved him to a bed. “The Lady is strong,” she said. Gently, Elrond lay Galadriel on the bed. “I do not need to be told of her strength. I have seen it often enough,” Elrond said, but his words were kind.

Then, there was no time for chatter. There was much to be done, and Nestor was the only one left to do it.

Time passed. It may have been hours. It may have been days. At last, however, the Lady ceased her fretting and fell into a restful, healing sleep.

“She will recover,” Elrond said. Nestor nodded, and Elrond looked at her. “Rest,” he offered. “I wish to sit with her a bit longer, but then I will do the same.”

Nestor gestured. “You are welcome to any bed. Or the steward will see you to rooms.” Elrond nodded, and touched his fingertips to his forehead. Nestor returned the gesture, and made her way to her rooms.

As chief healer, she held rooms in the halls of healing, close enough if she was needed, and separate enough for privacy. She took her time washing, and changing out of her healer’s robes. Rest seemed like a good idea. She was looking forward to walking the dream paths once more.

She drifted, walking her dreams, but not far enough not to wake when she heard the voices from the other room. It took her a moment to focus, and she found herself listening to the conversation without really planning to as she dressed for the day.

“We were deceived,” Elrond said.

Galadriel spoke next, and it was a relief to hear her voice, though her words chilled Nestor to the core. “The spirit of Sauron endured.”

“And has been banished,” Glorfindel added, wryly. It had to be him; even his voice shone. “Again.”

Galadriel hummed. “He will flee into the east.”

“Gondor should be warned.” Elrond said. “The must set a watch on the walls of Mordor.”

“The whole of Middle Earth should be warned,” said Glorfindel. “This is a battle bigger than the likes of Men.”

“Yet, with Men it will end,” said the last voice. Cirdain. “Our age here is ending.”

“It is not yet over,” Galadriel said. “And I will be damned again if I leave this earth before he is destroyed for good.”

“Agreed,” Elrond said. “But there is time yet, and more pressing matters to the East. Erebor must stand.”

Erebor. Nestor cleared her throat, and the White Council turned to look at them. None seemed
surprised to see her, particularly the Lady Galadriel, whom Nester watched with a flush of her old warmth.

"My King now marches on Erebor," she said. "He believes the dwarves have taken his son."

Of all the reactions Nestor was expecting to that statement, the Lady Galadriel looking skyward and saying, quite emphatically, “Thranduil!” was the last on the list.

***

Gimli wasn’t scheduled for watch that evening, but it was easy enough to walk quietly from their camp to join Ori on the wall.

“‘ello Gimli,” Ori greeted, and covered a great yawn with his hand. “You’re up late.”

“Couldn’t sleep,” Gimli said, shrugging. Honestly, even if he wasn’t expecting his husband, he would hardly have slept. The ramifications of Thorin’s declaration would be wide, and Gimli did not like the implications one bit. The Mountain would not last a long siege, not with the battle so close. (He could feel it, the tension building in his bones like the air before a thunderstorm, or a mine collapse. It put pressure on his joints and he felt much older than he was).

“I wish that was true for me,” Ori said, fighting off what appeared to be another yawn. “I hate second-shift. I’m useless the next day.”

Gimli nodded. “I know that well,” he said. “Staying late, or waking early are fine, but interrupted sleep…” Gimli shook his head. He looked out over the wall to the ruins of Dale beyond. “So that’s them,” he said.

“Aye,” Ori agreed. “All that’s left of Laketown. They have such little fires. It’s a wonder they keep warm at all.”

“I don’t know if those fires keep them warm, Ori,” he said. “They’ve simply not a dwarf’s skill with flame.”

“Oh,” Ori said, and cocked his head. “I guess that’s true.” He yawned again, and blinked sleepily. “It’s pretty, though. Looks like the stars above, glittering like diamonds in a sunbeam.”

“Pretty,” Gimli agreed. “But I see more fireflies on a moonless night.”

Ori hummed, and they watched the Man’s camp for a long moment. Gimli wondered when Legolas would be making his way across the space between. Was he already on his way? Gimli scanned the darkness, but could see no sign of his fair-haired lover.

Ori’s head dipped, and he shook himself to wake. As Gimli watched, it happened again, and a third time—each to less effect. Gimli touched Ori’s shoulder, and he startled, wide-eyed for a moment before drooping with heavier lids even than before.

“Go to bed, Ori,” Gimli prodded, gently. “You’re no good as a guard like this. I’m awake. I’ll take this watch, aye?”

“No, I—“ Ori began, but a jaw-cracking yawn interrupted his words. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, I’ll go to sleep. Stay sharp, Gimli.”

“Sharp to split hairs,” Gimli agreed, and watched as Ori stumbled off, back to camp.
“You do him kindness. I would have sent him to bed, if I could.” said Legolas from the shadows, and Gimli turned, startled, and cried out, wordless, in joy. He ran to him, and Legolas met him halfway, taking Gimli’s hands tightly in his own, ducking down and pulling him in for a loving kiss. Legolas pulled away, and Gimli pressed their foreheads together, wishing to be closer to his One. “It is still strange to me, to kiss you without your wool,” Legolas said.

“For me also,” Gimli said, and finally pulled away far enough to look at his love’s face. “Soon enough, I hope. I expect to break stubble within the year, and then you will be complaining about the rasp against your face as it turns your skin a raw pink.”

“I welcome it,” Legolas said and he sat on a low rock. Gimli sat next to him; seated, they were nearly of a height, though Legolas often struggled to find room for his long legs. Still, Legolas refused to let go of Gimli’s hand, and Gimli was content to grip him back, just as tightly.

“It was good, what you did,” Gimli said. “With Orcrist. He does not yet recognize it yet, but I feel it will go a long way when he finally comes back to himself.” If he did not say. He would never.

Legolas nodded. “It should not have been taken from him in the first place,” he said. “Although—how does he fair?”

“You saw,” Gimli admitted, and his voice dropped. “He is less himself everyday, and I fear for our future. Nothing seems certain any longer; I cannot say that what has happened will happen again.” He sighed. “Fili is no longer heir. He has not named a new one, and while we all know Kili is next, it is not official and it makes the whole issue worrisome. Balin, I think, is looking for a loophole, but there’s hardly precedent for going against the word of the king.” He sighed. “Fili has taken it hard; though he knows enough to not take it personally, I fear he still is.”

“That is troubling,” Legolas said. “I have grown quite fond of Fili. In Laketown, he fixed my braids and called me cousin.”

“What?” Gimli asked, surprised, and pulled back. He ran his fingertips over Legolas’s hair, and there indeed were Fili’s familiar braids. “Well, I’ll be. Cousin, you say?”

“Aye,” Legolas said. “He has a large heart, your cousin, and no little wisdom, even for one so young. He will make a good king someday.” He smiled, softly, and Gimli was lost for a long moment in the starlight in his love’s eyes.

“Take comfort, if you will.” Legolas reached out a hand and smoothed it over Gimli’s hair, fingertips unerringly finding Gimli’s hidden braid. “Not all is lost. Thorin was himself in the end; he can become himself once more.”

“I hope,” Gimli said. “Oh, my love, do I hope.”

Legolas wrapped his arms around Gimli’s shoulders and held him tightly. Gimli clung to him, though he did not cry, nor did he loosen his grip for many minutes.

At length, Gimli’s fingers stopped clutching, and Legolas said, “I have your axe. Don’t forget to take it back.”

“What are you doing to my son!”

Legolas and Gimli pulled apart; Glóin was standing in the doorway, flushed with anger, a flask dangling forgotten from his hand. Ori must have woken him when returning to bed, and he had come to keep Gimli company while on watch. Of late, Glóin had been more and more determined to keep Gimli in his sight, and while Gimli had found it a bit too close, he had never anticipated
“Da!” Gimli said, but it was too late. Glóin stormed in, hollering about “filthy tree-shagger,” and “pale-faced weed-eaters,” and “Stay away from my Son!”

Gimli did his best to keep between Glóin and Legolas, but Glóin in his temper was a force to see, and his bellows were enough of a siren cry that the entire company stormed in minutes later.

Fíli and Kíli, the fastest by far, were there first, and managed to keep the others back, with the help of Bofur and Bifur. Óin pushed through, determined to calm his brother, but succeeding only in riling himself up as well.

All of this meant, that when Thorin arrives, a Bilbo pale and worried beside him, he found Óin and Glóin screaming at each other while Gimli stood protectively in front of Legolas.

The company, which had been hollering encouragement and calling odds at Nori, grew silent just as Óin cried out, “Saved Kíli’s life!” and then everything stopped.

Gimli felt his heart pound in his chest, felt it aching, but he stood firm as Thorin stepped forward.

The fire had fallen from Glóin, and he opened his mouth to say something, to soothe the king, but no words came out. He only stepped out of the way, and gripped Óin’s arm; Óin gripped him back just as tightly.

“Gimli son of Glóin,” Thorin said. “What are you doing?”

Gimli squared his shoulders and looked back at Thorin. His jaw clenched, and he hoped he looked as defiant as he wished, for the truth was, he would not be able to speak if he tried.

Thorin looked up at Legolas. “Spawn of Thranduil, have you come to surrender?”

Legolas remained silent, but his hand on Gimli’s shoulder squeezed more tightly. If Gimli looked, he was sure Legolas’s knuckles were white.

“No pretty words?” Thorn asked. “No more lies, Gimli Glóin’s son? Fine, then tell the truth.” In a single step he lurched forward, bellowing. “You are a traitor, and conspire against me!”

“No!” Gimli barked. “You are my king, and I remain faithful!”

Thorin grimaced. “Lies,” he hissed. “You have been caught with the enemy, and you lie to my face.”

“There is only one Enemy,” Legolas said, unflinching as Thorin turned his wrath on him. “And He is not here, though already his influence creeps over this mountain.”

“Nonsense,” Thorin scoffed. “You are a spy for your father, who wants nothing more than our gold, would see us dead if it meant he got his hands on even a fraction of our treasure.” He cocked his head, mocking. “Or maybe you speak the truth, and you are not working for your father. You work for your own greed, yes. With the treasure of Erebor, you could become King of the Woodland Realm.”

Legolas was pale, and Gimli could feel his revulsion in the way his hand twitched. “I have no desire to be king, nor do I desire your gold.”

“Everyone desires our gold,” Thorin said, his voice low and bitter.
“Uncle,” Fíli tried, but Thorin just snapped over his shoulder.

“Silence! This does not concern you.” He turned back around, and gestured for Dwalin to remove Legolas. Dwalin, face blank, gripped Legolas’s elbow and pulled him away from Gimli. Legolas went easily enough, and he did not try to break free, but ever he strained to be closer to Gimli. “I have long suspected a plot, and it does not surprise me that you are tied up in it, Glóin’s son. But you are discovered now, and can go no further. I would know, when did this plot begin?”

Gimli shook his head. “There is no plot. My king, this Mountain is about to be besieged on all sides. Ever do we strive to prevent such a happening. We are but fifteen, and out supplies are low. If we are attacked now, we cannot hold the Mountain.”

“We are not without allies,” Thorin said, cold. “Erebor will stand, without you there to weaken her.” His hand shot out, and grabbed Gimli by the hair, gripping tightly and causing Gimli to fall to his knees. Gimli grit his teeth: he would not cry out, though tears pricked his eyes. It was an insult, and overstepping of personal boundaries that he had not thought Thorin capable of, though it was within his rights as king.

Now, did Legolas struggle to be free, as did Glóin, who needed to be held back by Dori, who did so with such a pained look on his face, as if it was Ori in Gimli’s place.

Thorin adjusted his grip, and stopped, fingers flexing. Gimli was thrown to the floor, and then pulled up by the back of his tunic, exposing his neck. Gimli knew, then, why Thorin had frozen. He had felt the braids hidden at Gimli’s nape.

Gimli peeked from between the locks of his hair, and saw Thorin stare at Legolas. Dwalin tugged, and Legolas went smoothly to one knee, bowing his head. Gimli felt a surge of affection despite everything. The bastard was showing off!

Thorin dropped Gimli to the floor again, and Gimli scrambled to his feet, pulling Legolas up from where he knelt. He gripped Legolas tightly about his waist, and felt Legolas’s hands firm on his shoulders.

“Explain yourself,” Thorin grit.

Gimli stood tall; all eyes were upon him. The Lady's gift, still hidden, lay heavy at his breast, like the weight of the moment hung from it. "Far have I walked in dreams," he said slowly. “It seems a lifetime spent, that stretches far from the now, but never have I said I walked alone.”

“But Married!” Glóin burst out. “How?”

“It matters not,” Thorin said, finally standing, and wrapping his cloak about himself. Glóin looked like he has just swallowed his tongue. “For their actions amount to treason, all the same,” and in one smooth motion, he pulled Orcrist from its sheath. “And the punishment is death.”

“No!” Bilbo cried out, and grabbed Thorin’s arm. “You cannot kill them!”

“No,” Bilbo said, firm, shaking his head. “Legolas saved Kíli’s life, your nephew’s life. Surely that has earned him clemency? And Gimli is your cousin, he is kin, and young besides. Would you begin your reign a kinslayer?”

Thorin glared at Bilbo, but Bilbo met him, just as hot, and after a moment, Thorin nodded. “Very well. On your word, they will not die by my sword.” He sheathed Orcrist, and Gimli felt his knees
“Gimli Glóin’s son, you are hereby banished from the Mountain, never to return. You must be gone within the hour. Take your elf with you.” Thorin turned, calling, “Dwalin, cover the watch. See to it that they’re gone. The rest of you, back to bed,” over his shoulder as he swept away.

Gimli looked up and met Fíli’s eyes. Fíli was the first to move, coming over to him, only to find his way barred by Dwalin. “You know the rules,” Dwalin rumbled.

“Dwalin, it’s Gimli,” Fíli snapped. “Let me by.”

Dwalin looked over his shoulder at Gimli, and he made his best effort to meet Dwalin’s eyes. He saw conflict there, sorrow, and enough understanding that he was not surprised when Dwalin acquiesced. Fíli pulled Gimli into a tight hug.

“He will see reason,” Fíli said.

“No until the curse is broken,” Gimli said. “And even then.” He pulled away, and Fíli surprised everyone, by turning and pulling Legolas into the same hug.

“I am sorry, Cousin, that your welcome was not a warm one,” Fíli said.

Legolas smiled, tiredly. “It is not the first cold reception I have received.”

“Aye, but usually you’re armed and they’re trying to kill you,” Gimli muttered. “That could have gone better.”

“Better,” Glóin repeated. “Married?!”

“Aye,” Gimli huffed, balling his hands to fists and bracing them on his hips. “Married. In my ‘dreams’ granted, but no less real for that.”

“You’ve bedded ‘em?” Nori asked, and the Company, nearly one, turned to chastise the thief. “What?” he protested. “That’s how elves do it, innit it?”

Legolas chuckled. “It’s a bit more complicated than that, and not in this world until his beard grows in.”

“Oi,” Gimli grumbled.

“Oh, hush,” Legolas soothed. “It’s a fine beard, and well the worth the wait.” Gimli humphed, but knew the banter could only be a distraction. It was time to leave.

He looked to his father, and found Glóin staring back at him, as if he was staring at a stranger—no, a stranger wearing a familiar face.

“Da,” he said, and Glóin flinched. Gimli’s breath came sharp, and he realized his chest felt tight. Still, Glóin didn’t move until Óin kicked him sharply in the shin. It was enough to break whatever was holding Glóin tight in his head, and he stepped forward a single step.

“Are ye’ really by lad? My own sweet Gimli?”

Gimli reared back, struck. “Aye, of course!”

Glóin shook his head. “They why don’t I recognize ye’ anymore?”
“Don’t blame the lad for growing up,” Óin said, surprising Gimli. He nodded at Gimli. “‘Tis a burden, knowing the future, and it can change any dwarf.” He came forward, and hugged Gimli tightly. “This can’t last,” Óin said, close to Gimli’s ear. “Thorin will change his mind, once he has it again.”

Gimli nodded, and Óin stepped back. Once by one, the other dwarves came forward to wish him their goodbyes. Not a one refrained from hugging him close, as if he was close kin to them all. He might as well be, he realized. The bonds formed on a quest were not easily broken.

Even Dwalin embraced him, pounding on his back and causing Gimli to brace himself against the onslaught. Balin pressed a scrap of parchment into his hand, in case he needed to send a message. Ori slipped his mittens into Gimli’s belt, and Nori added a knife. Dori passed over a handkerchief, and Bombur a piece of cram. Bofur clucked his chin and winked at Legolas, and Bifur had gripped his arm in a warrior’s greeting older than Thror, tucking a flower (where had he gotten a flower?) behind Gimli’s ear. Kíli assured him he would sing his song in praises and Gimli laughed. And Glóin—

Glóin waited until last, when Bofur was saying good-bye to Legolas, and the others had at least backed away from Gimli.

“I have no pack to give,” Glóin said. “No beads, no weapons—naught save for this.” He held out his hand, and passed Gimli a small purse. Gimli upended the contents of the leather into his palm, and fourteen gold pieces stared back at him.

“Da,” Gimli said. This was his father’s personal wallet—he couldn’t take this! But Glóin pushed it back when Gimli tried to return it.

“Óin is right,” Glóin said. “You’re growing, and far too fast for me to see how. I cannot keep you safe here, but the least I can do is keep you in some coin on the road.”

Gimli closed the purse again, and hugged his father. Glóin hugged him tightly. “Farewell, my son,” He said into Gimli’s hair. “May the road be kind, wherever you fare. Mukhuh Mahal bakhuž murukhzu!’ ” (TK May Mahal’s Hammer Shield You)

After a long moment, Dwalin cleared his throat. “Thorin will be waiting,” he said. “It’s bad enough we’ve taken the time we have.”

“Right,” Gimli said, and turned to Legolas. “I don’t suppose you came here any way I could follow down?” he asked. Legolas turned a sheepish smile on him. “Of course. Does anybody have any rope?”

They did.

Once firmly on the ground, Legolas and Gimli headed south, towards Dale. They walked in silence until they crested the first hill on the path.

“What now?” Legolas asked.

Gimli sighed. He had been thinking the same question, and did not like any of the answers he came with. “I must head East, I believe,” he said at length. “Dain and his army are closing in; I can meet them before they arrive if I hurry, and maybe I can warning him of what is to come. He may very well be our last hope.”

Legolas nodded. “Very well,” he said. “I must turn my eyes South, I’m afraid. Mithrandir has been missing for far too long, and I would find him and bring him here. Besides,” he smiled self-
deprecatingly at Gimli. “If my father is on the march, he will be here by dawn, and I cannot yet have him find me.”

“No,” Gimli agreed. “It would not do to have two disownings in one evening.” Legolas just smiled back, sadly.

Gimli pulled Legolas to him, held him tightly for a long time. By the time the moon had passed its zenith, a small, shadowed figure of a dwarf was heading East across the desolation, twirling his axe in his hand, and the whip-like shadow of the elf was headed South.
Legolas moved through the ruins of Dale like a whisper on the wind, his feet leaving no mark in the new-fallen snow. Around him, the men huddled together beneath whatever blankets they could find, in feeble shelters against the wind. In Legolas’s mind, he walked rain-soaked ramparts, the impression of Gimli at his side and the smell of horse in his nose.

He came to a small square and the jumbled remains of a child’s ride: four fantastical animals set as seats on a round swing, the chains long rusted, the tower long since fallen. He stared at the miniature Oliphant for a long time.

Someone touched his shoulder, and Legolas spun, bringing his bow to bear, arrow notched.

Tauriel stood before him. “Legolas?” she asked, and Legolas blinked, dropping his bow.

“Tauriel,” he said. “I’m—“ he cleared his throat. “I came to find you. We must leave, immediately. My father’s armies are on the march, and we should not be here when he arrives.” He began to walk away, meaning to pass through the city, and Tauriel followed.

“Where will we go?” she asked.

“We seek Mithrandir,” he said. “We may need a Wizard in the days ahead. I just hope we can find him before it is too late.”

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Bard watched two elven figures disappear into the darkness beyond the moonlight, and sat in thought for a long time, his children sleeping by his side.

***

Gimli walked long though the night, once again deeply thankful of the boots the Lady Dis had gifted him. They had worn well, and now fit him like a second skin. It was just as well, for new boots do not bend, and do not travel well over snow nor ice, and Gimli found himself doing both as he climbed out of the valley.

The land fell away past the ridge, and in the darkness, Gimli could see for miles, nearly as far as Legolas at a clear noon. There, in the far distance, just at the line of the horizon, something glinted in the moonlight. What it was, Gimli could not tell, but he would find out; his path took him straight to it.

So Gimli walked, and walked, and walked. Midnight gave way to early morning, and the sky began to grey at the edges. Soon, blue began to creep in as the rising sun returned color to the world. By the time the sun had risen and Gimli’s eyes lost some of their crystal clarity, he had realized two
things.

The shining thing was farther away than he recognized and was even larger than he had previously believed, shining even more in the sunlight.

It was headed straight for him.

By his calculations, he would meet this thing by early afternoon, if he kept his pace. As long as the thing did not slow down as well.

By eleven of the clock, Gimli started to feel it, a rumbling like the stomping of many feet, intercut by the rolling of wheels and clomping of hooves. When Gimli realized what it was he was feeling, he nearly cried with relief. He knew what he was facing.

The armies of King Dain had come!

Gimli kept up, running when he could. It was easier, now, unencumbered by heavy armor, even if he had proved that he could run with it at speed for days. He paused only when the ground grew too rocky for his footing. He could stop for food, he had Bombur’s cram, but he had no water to wash it down, and cram without water was no fun thing.

There would be potable water when he reached the army, or mayhaps even good, malt beer or a strong dwarven ale!

He ran through luncheon, and was was halfway to tea when the scouts first caught sight of him.

“Mahitdin!” (Halt! TK) cried the forward guard, and Gimli came to a quick stop. “Ku ganag yom?” (Who goes there? TK)

“I am Gimli, son of Glóin, of the Line of Durin,” he called back. “I seek audience with King Dain; I bring news of Erebor.”

There was silence as the scouts conferred with each other. The Iglishmêk of the Iron Hills had shifted over the years, and it had taken some time for the dwarves who chose to resettle in Erebor to learn each other’s motions. If Gimli was correct, they were wondering why such a young dwarf had been sent as a messenger when they had perfectly good ravens.

A new dwarf was approaching, rolling with the sway of his mount, and Gimli realized the sway was much greater than with a pony, or even a battle ram.

It was Dain, atop his Boar, and he called out to the scouts. “What’s the hold-up lads? There’s a battle waiting! You don’t want them to start without us, do ye?”

“My Lord,” one of the scouts called. “We’ve encountered a messenger from Erebor.”

“Oh, have ye now?” Dain said, voice full thick of the steel-wool burr of the Iron Hills, finally coming close enough to see. Gimli was taken aback by the sheer vital presence of the dwarf—he had forgotten quite how massive Dain was. Dain saw Gimli, and raised both of this bushy red eyebrows in surprise.

“Why it’s wee little Gimli, or I’ll eat my Iron foot!”

Gimli flushed—he hadn’t been “wee” in some time, though Gimli supposed the last time Dain had seen him, Gimli had not yet been out of nappies. Travel between the kingdoms was rough, and the visit had actually been to celebrate the birth of Fíli, though it had ended up being for both princes.
Dain had delighted in the little ones, his own son only a few years older than Fíli, and had spent most of the visit in the royal nursery, covered in toddling dwarflings, letting them chew his mustache and blowing raspberries on their little tummys.

(It was a quirk Dain had never grown out of, and any wee bairn nearby was fair game for the king, who would bounce them on his knee in council meetings as they cooed. Woe be to the councilman or ambassador who did not show due respect for the “chief advisor.”)

Dain narrowed his eyes and looked Gimli over, noticing, Gimli was sure, his lack of pack and the age of his clothes. He cocked his head.

“Surely you weren’t with Thorin’s Company, lad?”

Gimli nodded his head. “Aye, I was, my Lord.”

Dain snorted. “Oi, that’s ‘cousin’ to you.” He looked around, and whistled once, long and sharp. “Come ride with me,” he said. “I’ve got more questions than answers, and we’ve less time than either.”

A battle-ram rider came forward, leading a ram over to Gimli by its leather reins.

Ram Riders were the most skilled warriors in a dwarven army, and therefore they held a special place. Dwarves were creatures of the earth, and so prefer to fight with their feet on the ground. Ram Riders were warriors of such skill that they were able to be fierce fighters with both feet off the ground. The bond between rider and mount was strong, for a rider must trust their mount’s footing, and a mount must trust its rider’s guidance.

The Rider who brought forth Gimli’s Ram must be a skilled warrior, indeed. Their armor was old, well tended but also well used. It bore its scars proudly, like Gimli was sure it’s wearer did, and they rode their mount with a near-careless ease.

There was something off, however, something Gimli could not quite put his finger on. It wasn’t the age of the armor, but there was something familiar that Gimli couldn’t stop looking for.

He bowed when the rider hand him the reins, thanking them deeply before climbing onto the ram’s back. It was easier than climbing aboard Arod, and smelled a fair sight better. It seemed as well that this mount took his weight a fair sight better, though that might be simply because Gimli wasn’t fully dressed in dwarven mail.

“Settled?” Dain asked, and Gimli nodded. “Good. Let’s get this beast moving, aye?” he cried, pointing forward with Barazantathul, his great red axe. Another dwarf, halfway down the line, barked “Move out!”, and the army of Dain was once more on the move.

“Now,” Dain said, pulling his battle boar up next to Gimli’s ram as they rode, the Ram Rider flanking his other side. “I have some questions.”

“So do I,” said the Ram Rider, at last pushing back her helmet. Gimli looked at her and started so violently he nearly swallowed his tongue. That nose, those eyes—

“Lady Dis!” Gimli said, stuttering. And it was Lady Dis, of course. Now that he knew, he didn’t know how he had missed it before. The armor looked old because it was old. It had belonged to her mother, Gimli knew from several hours playing near it with Fíli and Kíli as a child. “How did you get here?”

Lady Dis raised her eyebrow at him. “I walked some. I rode some—the same as you, I suspect.”
Dain laughed good and hard at that, slapping his knee.

“Aye,” Gimli agreed, dryly. “Though it got a little more complicated than that.”

Dain laughed. “Aye, of course it fucking did! You were traveling with Thorin Feckin’ Oaksenthield! Never met and easy way good enough when there was a hard way to be found.”

Lady Dis hummed. “Of course, you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you Dain?”

“He got lost three fucking times between Erebor and the Iron Hills when he came for my Centennial,” Dain said. “Three. Fucking. Times.” Gimli hid a smile. It was good to see Dain swearing; Gimli knew his cousin well enough to know that he had a quiet kind of temper, that he could shout and rage with the the best of them, but it was when Dain stopped talking blue that one should worry. Now, Dain looked at Gimli through the corner of his eye. “Tell me, lad. How many times did Thorin get you poor sods lost.”

“Only once,” Gimli said. “In Mirkwood, and it was not his fault. We had been beset by spiders and poisoned, and the path was well and truly overgrown.”

“Well fuck me, I’m impressed,” Dain said, scratching his forehead with a thumb. The motion pushed his helmet back, and Gimli was reminded of the miners in Ered Luin, taking their much-deserved rest-breaks. He remembered, suddenly, the huffing among the other nobles in the early days of Erebor, when Dain would end meetings with a well timed, “Now, off you can fuck,” with a little wave of his fingers. It never failed to make Balin sigh or Dwalin grin meanly at the busybodies in council, and Gimli was sure that was why Dain had done it.

“We did get captured. Twice,” Gimli admitted.

“There it is!” Dain hooted. “Cousin Thorin’s not going to hear the end of that one quickly.” He whistled a jaunty tune, and tossed his axe high in the air, catching it again on an easy downswing.

Lady Dis turned to Gimli, then. “But I have a more pressing question.” she asked. “How fare my sons?”

“They are well,” Gimli replied instantly, and bit his lip. “Physically. Now. They live.”

Dis’s features darkened, and even Dain lost a bit of his spring to listen. “What do you mean?”

“Kíli was wounded first,” Gimli said. He kept his eyes on the Lady, knowing it wasn’t entirely the done thing to ignore the King, but knowing that King Dain wouldn’t care about that, for the sake of his cousin. “He took an arrow to the knee as we were leaving the Elvenking’s dungeons.”

Dain groaned. “Oh, bugger me. That pompous turd-pile’s involved?”

Gimli nodded. “He marches on the Mountain as we speak,” he said. “But!” He called out, over Dain’s grumbled, ‘O, he can fuck right off!’ “He must not be engaged!”

Dain and Lady Dis both looked at him as if he had begun spouting elvish poetry. “What do ye mean, ‘not engaged?’” Dain cried out. “You’d have me play second-fiddle to that willow-wasted jackrabbit?”

Gimli blinked at Dain, and mouthed “willow-wasted jackrabbit?” But Dain continued uninterrupted.

“If Thranduil wishes to go forth to die on our axes, what concern is it of ours? I say, we do him the
favor and give him the honor!” Dain sniffed.

“It is well known to all that there is no love lost between our kingdoms,” Dis added, with just enough of a threat to make Gimli twitch. “But if Thranduil threatens our people with war, we will respond in kind. We are in no position to appear weak.”

Gimli covered his face with his hand, pressing his fingers into his eyes until he saw spots. It didn’t help his growing headache any, but he still felt better. “Tis not weakness to leave the Elvenking be,” Gimli said. “There are greater threats to the mountain than he, and we will need his aid before the end. That’s the message I carry,” he said, and finally looked up. Lady Dis was watching him, her chin raised and her expression cold. Still, Gimli had faced colder. Dain certainly didn’t look happy, but he also looked like he was listening, which was something. “The mountain is under threat from more than elves. Two armies of Orcs make for the mountain, the first will come from the south, from the old fortress of Dol Goldur. The other will come from the North, from Gundabad.”

“That is dire news,” Dis said. She narrowed her eyes at Gimli. “You mean for both armies, elf and dwarf, to fight off these orc invaders.”

“I do,” Gimli said. “And others will come, when they are needed. It hasn’t all been elven dungeons. We did make some allies, and the Ravens have returned, as you know. The Mountain is well informed.”

Lady Dis hummed. “So why, then, did he not send us a raven? Why send you, Gimli? Surely you would be safer in the mountain.”

Gimli looked away. “No one is safer in the mountain,” he said, quietly. “Thorin has lost his mind to the Dragon Sickness.” Dain breathed in sharply and Lady Dis closed her eyes as Gimli continued. “It happened much more quickly, and far more completely than any of us could see, and for that I blame myself. What good is foresight if it cannot save—” He cut himself off, hands fisted at his sides. “So, Thorin no longer knows friend from foe. He has gone against his word of aid for the men of Laketown. He has disinherited Fíli.” He stopped himself from adding the final piece, ”I myself am banished.” There were more questions in that statement than answers, and there would be time later to explain.

He would explain everything, tell all to any who would listed, any who survived the coming days. The time for secrecy was over.

“Disinherited!” Dis exclaimed. “But Thorin dotes on Fíli—he would not have made him his heir in the first place if he did not trust him.”

“Aye, but it’s no longer Thorin making that call,” Gimli said. “Thorin knows, and would be horrified at what he had done, but his mind is overrun, besieged by the cruelty of Morgoth. Fíli spoke out against Thorin, promised aid to the Men of the Lake, who bore the worst of Smaug’s rage, and Thorin called him traitor.”

Dis’s face was pale, set still as marble, though her eyes glittered overbright.

“Easy now, cousin,” Dain said, voice softer than Gimli had yet heard it. “You can kick his sorry arse from here to the Halls of Mahal and back after we save the Mountain.”

“I am fine,” Dis said, but her voice was so hard as to be brittle. “I must rejoin my unit.” Without another word, she peeled off, and led her battle ram back through the lines of infantry to the mounted cavalry that came behind.
“Fine, aye,” Dain muttered. “But woe be to any that come to cross her axe.” Gimli couldn’t help but agree.

***

There are few in Middle Earth faster than an elf at speed, and Legolas led Tariel back to the Greenwood at a punishing pace. Still, Tauriel followed with no complaint, keeping easily apace. They reached the tree-line well before the dawn began to turn the sky grey, and Tauriel whistled for them to stop and hide.

Legolas came to a sudden halt, dropping down in the tree-line bramble, and the reason for her call became quickly apparent; the trees around them rustled with the sound of marching boots, scores upon scores, in perfect unison. Ahead of them all came the uneven step of a mount, larger than a horse, and Legolas knew at once that it was his father’s Stag.

Tauriel appeared behind Legolas, and they exchanged quiet looks. They would have to stay where they were, and hope that his father’s host would pass by without catching sight of them.

The Elk appeared first, dressed in shining silver plate, and sure enough, Thranduil sat atop his back, dressed as well in shining silver armor, a cloak of bird feather fell from his shoulders, and his crown of woodland branches was exchanged for a woven silver circlet with a single shining gem centered in his forehead. He passed them by without a second glance. Feren rode just behind him, as his first Lieutenant, and behind them came the host of soldiers, streaming past.

It was a sight to behold, and the elves before them shined even in the darkness in their armor, each carrying a bow and a deadly, curved sword. The stream continued for what seemed like an age as they passed first Legolas and Tauriel, and then Thranduil and Feren.

Thranduil watched his army pass, and then looked out over the valley beyond. "We head for the Men of the Lake. We will offer them aid, for they have been faithful to us these past decades. We will approach the Mountain from the ruins of Dale."

Feren nodded, and rode off to carry out Thranduil’s instructions. Thranduil looked around him again, his gaze lingering in the direction of Legolas and Tauriel’s hiding spot, and she tightened her grip on Legolas’s arm. Yet, Thranduil did not see them, and led his Elk down into the valley. It was several long, agonizing minutes for the rest of the army to pass, and Legolas insisting on staying still for several more after, beside.

"Eren Lasgalen is empty," Legolas said. "We start our search there."

Tauriel nodded, and the two of them slipped off into the woods once more.

***

It was tense in the Mountain after Gimli left. Thorn retreated to his chambers, high above the rest of them, and was barely seen. He sat upon his throne, brooding, or walking the balconies in the treasure room late in the night, when he thought no one was watching. Through it all, Bilbo watched this new Thorin.

It would be worse, he thought, if I couldn't still see old Thorin at times. For a time, Bilbo would say or do something, and Thorin would smile like he had that day at the Carrock, like he had no worries in the world (like Bilbo was something precious to him—No, Bilbo shuddered. Not that word!), and Bilbo’s heart would break every time, for when the smile fell, and it would fall, Thorin’s face twisted into someone wholly unfamiliar.
It had been some time since Thorin had last looked like himself. Not long enough for Bilbo to despair of ever seeing him again, but enough that Bilbo worried about what Thorin would do in the meantime. Bilbo didn’t think Thorin would want war, and yet here he was—here they were, readying for a battle they could not win.

Bilbo hung back to the shadows, and hoped to get through all of this unnoticed.

(He had a plan, you see. A plan that might just end this madness, but Thorin couldn’t know. Nobody could know, and the secrecy was making Bilbo twitch.)

“Master Baggins,” Thorin called, his voice echoing in the chamber. “Come here!”

Bilbo closed his eyes, his fingers brushing the warm band of metal in his vest pocket, and he had the overwhelming urge to put the ring on, to disappear and leave this mountain—leave them all to their fate. He would travel south, to a warm land where his toes weren’t always frozen and his nose wasn’t always red, and then—

Bilbo pulled his hand away and stepped into the light from the lit torches on the wall. Thorin stood at the end of the hallway, between Bilbo and the rest of the Company. Thorin was resplendent in a suit of golden armor, covered from neck to toes in full plate. Only his head was uncovered, and his silver-streaked dark hair spilled over his shoulders.

In his hands, he held a shining jacket of silver rings.

Thorin looked Bilbo over. “You are going to need this. Put it on.”

Bilbo blinked at him. *Who are you to give me orders?* said a voice inside him. *You haven’t made a good decision since before the Mountain was reclaimed. Why should I listen?* But Bilbo had grown quite used to ignoring that particular voice, and he started to strip his jacket.

“This vest is made of silver steel,” Thorin said. “‘Mithril’ it was called by my forebears.” As if by magic, the mere mention of that word was enough to make the Company stop their bickering and pay attention to what was happening in the hall. Bilbo could feel their eyes on him as he dropped his coat to the floor.

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“No blade can pierce it,” Thorin said. “It was made for an elf-prince long, long ago. The reason why the prize was never delivered has been lost to time and exile, but it is just as well.”

The mail was light, much lighter than the chain-link the others wore, and Bilbo settled it more securely on his shoulders, smoothing his hands down the front of it. (He really needed to start eating more meals; he was practically wasting away!)

“It fits you like it was made for you,” Thorin said, and there was that smile, that warm Thorin-smile, and Bilbo felt the pain deep inside, even if the rest of him softened in it’s warmth.

But Bilbo shook his head. “I look absurd. I’m not a warrior; I’m a Hobbit.” *And I’m not sure I should be accepting gifts from you right now, Thorin.*

*Bilbo made to take it off, but Thorin stopped him with a gentle hand on his own. The armor was cool to the touch, but not as gold as Bilbo would have suspected, and the touch was truly feather-light. “It is a gift. A token of our friendship. True friends are hard to come by.”*

*Thorin’s smile faded, and he pulled Bilbo to the side of the hallway, pressing him up close to the*
wall. He leaned in, and Bilbo could see the veins in his eyes, the shine to his skin. Thorin was not well.

Thorin leaned in close to whisper in Bilbo’s ear. “I have been blind. Now I begin to see. Already, they turn on me.” He must mean Gimli, and Bilbo wondered if that was truly how Thorin had seen it. “Already, I am betrayed!”

Bilbo blinked, shaking his head. “Betrayed?”


Bilbo froze, still as a stoat in the eyes of a wolf, but Thorin was no longer seeing him.

“One of them has taken it,” Thorin said, like a secret, a confession. It was hard for Bilbo not to sigh in relief. His secret was safe; his plan was still possible.

But Thorin was not done. “One of them is false.”

Bilbo knew he had little hope of getting through but he had to try. “Thorin, the quest is fulfilled. You’ve won the mountain.” His eyes met Thorin’s, searching. “Is that not enough?”

Thorin would not keep his gaze, looking away once more towards the floor—not, the gold that lay far beneath it. “Betrayed by my own kin.”

Bilbo closed his eyes. “No Thorin,” he said, and when he opened them, Thorin was looking at him once more. This may be his last chance. “You—you made a promise to the people of Laketown. You’re nephew made a promise! Is this treasure truly worth more than your honor? Your family’s honor?” Bilbo shook just a little as he said, “Our honor, Thorin. I was also there, I gave my word!”

Thorin inclined his head, and Bilbo was suddenly furious. If Thorin thanked him, he would—would—would accept it, because Bilbo was nothing if not a sap when Thorin looked at him like that.

Sure enough, Thorin did thank him. “For your actions, I’m grateful. It was nobly done.” And here it was, once more back to the dark expression for dark thoughts. “The treasure in this mountain does not belong to the people of Laketown! This gold is ours and ours alone!” He thumped his chest. “By my life I will not part with a single coin!” He backed away then his eyes never leaving Bilbo’s face. Between them, the others began to stream past. “Not one piece of it!”

Bilbo watched Thorin return to the shadows he loved so much these days and felt his heart sink farther than it never had before. Bilbo wasn’t sure if there was a coming back from this one. The plan must go forward. The plan must work.

***

Dawn rose colder than the night before, and Bard rubbed his hands together as he walked. He checked in with each of his bowmen, and they all had the same tale: a peaceful night, nothing to report.

The citizens of the lake parted for him as he passed, shifting tired bodies stiff with cold, and Bard tried to tell them that they owed him no difference. It was Bianca that set him straight on the matter, like always.

“You killed the bloody dragon,” she said, as she scooped a meager portion of thin porridge into a rough bowl. “Would be before, you’d not have to cook for a year, with all the food you’d be gifted
—nor make clothing for that matter, especially your little ones. But we’ve no food extra to give, no cloth to sew, so they give you difference.” She handed him the bowl. “So take the compliment, and move on. There’s more mouths to feed.”

Bard had chuckled, mostly at himself, and nodded, moving on down the line. The porridge had been thin, yes, but hot, and he was grateful for it, even if he ended up more hungry than he had started. That would change, he knew, as food grew evermore scarce.

He was grateful for it now, as he walked up to the Northern wall of Dale, where Dulcan had pulled third watch. The hall was quiet, and Bard frowned. He should at least hear Dulcan’s footsteps as he paced. The thin man was always complaining of the cold and often moved about to keep it from sinking into his bones.

The reason for the silence became clear when he turned the corner and found Dulcan leaning against the wall, clearly asleep on his feet, and wrapped in one of Bianca’s spare blankets. The bags under his eyes were dark, and Bard wondered just how much rest Dulcan had gotten these past few days. He knew Dulcan was nearing the end of his shift, if not already off for the night, when the Dragon attacked. He had swum the long way to shore, and marched with them to help keep order. There was little rest for the Bowmen even after they had settled here, and Dulcan had been there for most of it.

It was no wonder he had fallen asleep. He probably hadn’t even noticed dropping off.

Still.

Bard leaned in close to Dulcan’s ear, the bowman snoring softly, oblivious. Bard took a deep breath, and…

“WHAT NEWS OF THE WATCH!” he called out, and Dulcan sprang forward, the blanket falling to the ground. Bard had to step back quickly, or risk a fist to his nose. He couldn’t help but chuckle at Dulcan’s wide-eyed expression. Duncan took a moment to realize where he was, and he shivered as the wind whipped around the corner.

“Oh, you right bastard!” Duncan said, with little heat, as he pressed a hand over his heart. “Nearly gave me a fit right there, and then where will you be?” He grabbed the blanket from the ground, shaking off the snow. Bard noticed his skin grow red, and not from the cold. Dulcan, for all his teasing, was a damned good bowman, and he prided himself on his ability. To have been caught asleep on the job must be a sore blow to his pride.

“I would be lost, Dulcan,” Bard said, more serious than he had intended. “As would be Bianca, I’m sure.”

Dulcan sniffed. “I have no idea what you mean,” he said, but his shoulders lost a bit of their tension. Bianca had been a young widow and had taken over her late husband’s trade with a brisk confidence that came from no little skill. Duncan had never married, but Bard had found him gossiping with Bianca on more than one occasion. Dulcan knew that if Bard was teasing him about Bianca, then Bard wasn’t really angry.

“When did you sleep last?” Bard asked, and Dulcan gave him a dry look that said, ‘You know that, you just caught me,’ but Bard waved it away. Dulcan sighed.

“I don’t really remember,” he said. “It’s all a blur since the dragon, really.”

“Then you have more than earned some rest. Go get some food while it lasts, and then get ye to
“Yeah, alright,” Dulcan said with a jaw-popping yawn. “It’s all quiet up here anyway,” he said as Bard stepped past him and up the final steps to look over the valley between them and the mountain, and froze. “Not a thing moved all night.”

“No?” Bard asked. “Then how do you explain the army of Elves?”

“What army?” Dulcan asked, and quickly joined Bard. “Oh, bugger me.”

Before them where they stood, filling the courtyard below and stretching back out of the city itself, was the army of King Thranduil. As Bard watched, the Elvenking himself appeared, looking cold and fey upon his elk, and slowly the people of the Lake came to look.

Bard stepped forward, calling out. “My lord Thranduil; we did not look to see you here.” It was not a lie. Bard had expected the elven army to make directly for the mountain; what use had he for a ruined town of refugees?

But King Thranduil turned his head to face Bard as he approached, piercing him with those pale grey eyes. “I heard you needed aid.”

He waves his hand, and as if by magic, a cart was driven into the square, filled with foods of all kinds. There were greens, to be sure, and winter-fruits, but also grains and smoked meats and food that would last. A cheer rose up, a cry taken on by many, and the elf driving the cart started unloading its payload, tossing food to those who could carry.

Bard turned back to the King. “You have saved us! I do not how to thank you.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow, just a fraction, but it was all that was needed. “Your gratitude is misplaced. I did not come on your behalf.” The King’s voice was cold, nearly void save for the flicker of something darker.

“I came to reclaim something of mine.”

***

“Thorin,” Bilbo called, walking fast to keep up with the taller dwarf. After leaving the armory, Thorin had gone straight to his throne room, and Bilbo had to get to him before they go to the catwalk walkway. ”Thorin! Stop this! There’s no need for—Thorin!” He jogged forward a few steps and grabbed Thorin’s arm.

The world spun. Bilbo was yanked forward, and slammed against a wall. He blinked, and Thorin was looming in his space, his breath hot against his face. Bilbo’s arms were trapped at his sides by Thorin’s grip, and he clutched his pocket where his ring was kept hidden.

“Thorin?” Bilbo asked, but there was nothing of his Thorin in those cold eyes, and their once summer-sky blue was the washed out grey of winter clouds. Thorin’s hands tightened, and Bilbo winced. “Thorin, you’re hurting me.”

“I’m hurting you?” Thorin asked, his voice that dragon-deep rasp. “You have caused me nothing but pain; you torment me.”

“What?” Bilbo whispered, and he felt a cold trickle of fear shiver down his back.

“You are mine,” Thorin growled. “And you persist in—“ He cut himself off, and Bilbo didn’t know
what he persisted in, and he didn’t want to find out.

Bilbo stood as straight as he could, though it wasn’t much. Thorin’s grip was like iron, hot immovable brands, and Bilbo knew he would have finger-mark bruises on his arms for weeks. “Thorin, let me go,” he said, fairly ordered, with the same resolve that got out of the goblin tunnels, that helped him slay the spiders in the forest—that aided him in saving Thorin’s miserable life time and time again.

Thorin shook his head, no, but Bilbo did not want to give him that chance. “Thorin Oakenshield, you will unhand me this instant,” he snapped, and like some magic charm, it worked. Thorin’s hands opened, and he stepped away. There was a glimmer of something in Thorin’s eye, something Bilbo could not parse, but it was too late for that, now.

“You are changed, Thorin!” Bilbo cried out, and Thorin stood there, glittering. “The dwarf I met in Bag End would never have gone back on his word! Would never have doubted the loyalty of his kin!” The emotion crept up on Bilbo, taking him quite by surprise, and he had to stop for a moment to swallow back thick tears. When he spoke, his voice shook. “I am not yours, Thorin. I am my own hobbit, and right now I cannot stand the sight of you.”

“You are mine!” Thorin snarled.

“No, Thorin. I’m not,” Bilbo said, and it wasn’t any easier the second time. It was like denying a limb, something vital to himself, and when had Thorin grown so much inside his heart?”

Thorin roared and charged forward, “You will be mine, or no one’s!”

Bilbo hopped back, foot slipping, and he fell backward. As he hit the ground, his hand slipped into his pocket, and he disappeared.

Thorin stopped short, spinning and gnashing like a rabid animal, and Bilbo crept on silent feet backwards to press against the wall. If Thorin stormed past, he didn’t want to get tripped over.

The chamber was silent save for the harsh echo of Thorin’s panting breath, but even that began to quiet. His movements smoothed, slowed, and his eyes searched but did not see. “Bilbo?” he asked, and Bilbo nearly pulled the ring from his finger. That was Thorin’s voice—his Thorin’s voice! “Bilbo!”

Frantic, Thorin pushed himself to the edge of the platform, and looked over. “Bilbo!” He called, and his voice echoed back to them, mocking. “Bilbo…bilbo… ilbo… bo…”

“What have I done?” Thorin asked, slumping back and covering his face with his hands.

Bilbo nearly went to him, but he knew what he had to do. Still, it was a long time before Bilbo could make himself move.
Thorin had retired to the Throne room some hours before, in the wake of Gimli's expulsion, taking a pale Bilbo with him. Bilbo had emerged, some time after, shaking his head and not speaking to anyone. He had scurried off and no one had seen him since. Dwalin couldn't rightly blame him; Dwalin was having a hard enough time seeing his best friend thus, and Mahal knows Bilbo's relationship with Thorin was greater than that, even if neither of the idiots had made any formal declarations, to each other or the rest of them.

Dwalin growled, and Balin looked up at him. His brother was wearing a pair of spectacles he had found in the powders room, and from the way he handled them, Dwalin was sure he had known the previous owner. Still, Balin's had been lost to the Elvenking, and it was good to see his brother wearing the glass he now needed.

"Easy, brother," Balin said. He was looking over a piece of dusty parchment, the writing faded to a point where, if Dwalin didn't know it was there, he would have said it was blank. "Growling won't help."

"Aye, maybe not," Dwalin muttered. "But it makes me feel better."

Balin smiled tightly and turned back to the parchment.

The company had all been thus subdued since the scene on the battlements. Poor Glóin had sat at a table, openly weeping even as Óin and Bofur tried to get through to him. It was no good. Fíli had said little as well, instead turning to sharpening his weapons with a single-minded focus. His jaw clenched rhythmically, and it made the braids of his mustache sway. Kíli fletched his arrows on autopilot.

It was as if their youngest member had taken all the life with him.

"There," Dori said, placing a cup of something hot next to Glóin's elbow. "Drink that, now. Things will look better in the morning. Maybe King Thorin will--"

"Do nothing," Fíli snapped. "King Thorin will do nothing, because that dwarf," he pointed with his knife, "is no longer my uncle!"

"Fíli!" Balin snapped.

"Oh, come off it, Balin," Kíli said, sneering. "He's right and you know it."

"Thorin would not abandon his word," Fíli said. "Thorin would not turn away when there were those in need. Thorin would not banish his own cousin, and certainly not so young!"

"That's enough!" Balin cried out, and everyone stopped to look at him. "This is not easy, I know. This is not the first time I've had to watch my King succumb to the sickness. I had prayed that Thorin would be spared, but. Well." Balin closed his eyes for a moment. When he opened them...
again, they were hard. "None of it matters now. He is the king, and we must follow his lead until we no longer can."

"But what's the point, Balin, if this is his lead!" Fili said. "I understand, Balin, I do. Better than most. But at what point do we recognize the danger? When the elves overrun the mountain? When their blockade starves us out? We cannot survive this way."

"Then we do not survive," Balin said.

"Bugger that," Dwalin said, and stood, and stalked off to the Throne room "Thorin will see reason."

"Brother!" Balin called after him, but Dwalin did not turn.

Thorin was indeed in the throne room, seated at the far end of the long walk. He was slouched down in the throne, as if he was weighed down by a far many more years than he had. His eyes glittered in the the darkness, as with fever. Dwalin fairly stomped down the walk, his gait not changing even as his resolve began to waver.

The Dwarf on the throne did not look like the Thorin he had grown with, fought for. He was muttering to himself, and did not seem to even notice Dwalin’s presence.

Dwalin stopped before the dias, and when he wasn’t acknowledged, he knelt. “My king,” he said, and paused. He did not know how to speak to this Thorin. “We’ve news of the ravens. Thranduil has lead his army of Mirkwood, and they make camp with the men in Dale, and have cut off any means of trade. We are blockaded, and can expect a parley come dawn.”

Thorin glanced at him, but he hardly saw what was before his own eyes. “There are halls beneath halls within this mountain,” Thorin said. “Places we can fortify.” He nodded, and his head looked like a child’s toy on a spring. “Shore up, make safe. Yes…Yes, that is it. We must move the gold further underground - to safety!”

Thorin stood, and walked from his throne, still muttering to himself.

Dwalin stood, and called after his king. “Did you not hear me?! We are surrounded! We’ve no food, no supplied, and there are less of us today than yesterday. We will die, Thorin.”

Thorin paused, but did not so much as turn the full way around. “Many die in war,” he said. “Life is cheap.” He stood a bit taller then, and turned, slowly pacing back towards Dwalin. “But a treasure such as this cannot be counted in lives lost. It is worth all the blood we can spend!” He made a fist and shook it, and all at once he looked, not a King filled with resolve, but a drunk in a bar, lost to whiskey-vapor dreams.

“You sit here in these vast halls, with a crown upon your head, and yet you are lesser now than you have ever been,” Dwalin said, shaking his head, and he knew there were tears in his eyes, but they did not yet fall. He would not care if they did; his cousin, his best friend, was gone.

Thorin’s face darkened. “Do not speak to me as if I was some lowly dwarf lord,” he said, but the darkness would not hold. His face twitched, there was no other word to describe it, and his words stuttered, and pinched with loss. “As-As if I were still…Thorin…Oakenshield.” He turned away, and Dwalin stepped to him. This pain, this turmoil—

Thorn roared, suddenly, spinning and pulling Orcrist from its sheath, “I AM YOUR KING!”

He stepped, but overbalanced, and staggered, nearly falling. The sword looked heavy in Thorin’s hands, and seemed to nearly glow to Dwalin’s eyes—not like it had in the goblin tunnels, but the
way bleached bone brightens near darkness.

But Dwalin just shook his head. “You were always my king,” he said. “You used to know that once.” He breathed out, heavy, against the pain in his chest. “You cannot see what you have become.”

Thorin started and stared hard at Dwalin. “Go!” he said at last, his voice thick. “Get out. Before I kill you, too.”

Dwalin blinked at that, and looked at the naked sword still in Thorin’s hands. He would Dwalin realized. Thorin, when he was not Thorin, would kill him without a thought, and whatever little was left of the Thorin he was before would fade farther away. Fíli was right. Without another word, Dwalin turned and left the chamber, leaving Thorin alone on the dias.

The rest of the company was waiting when Dwalin re-entered the room. Dwalin walked past his brother, past the others, to stop in front of Fíli. He bowed, and felt Fíli’s shock.

“You were right,” Dwalin said roughly. “I am sorry.”

“Mister Dwalin,” Fíli said, and placed a hand on Dwalin’s shoulder.

***

Legolas and Tauriel made good time back to their home. Like all good fortresses, it was easier to get out than get in, but Legolas had been going in and out for centuries, and knew what ways would be open with so many away.

Still, it was a surprise to turn a corner and run straight into Lord Elrond. Tauriel, moving quickly behind him, bumped into this back when he stopped short, and the two of them stared at Elrond, who stared back at them with near equal surprise.

“Prince Legolas,” Elrond said at last. “This is a surprise. Nestor said you were being held captive by the dwarves of Erebor.” Elrond looked him over. “Clearly, someone was mistaken.”


Slowly, Lord Elrond nodded. Legolas closed his eyes. ”Rhaich!”” Legolas spat. He looked back at Lord Elrond. “I have just come from the Mountain. I can quite easily say that Thorin Oakenshield had no desire to keep me in the Mountain. But I have come in search of Mithrandir—We have need of his council.”

“Mithrandir was very badly hurt, and may not be able to give council to any for a long time.” said a voice like the deep, cool waters of the Anduin. Legolas looked past Lord Elrond to see Lady Galadriel, escorted by none other than Glorfindel. The Balrog-Slayer looked even larger next to Lady Galadriel, who was herself nearly seven feet tall. He winked at Legolas, and then stared for a long time at Tauriel’s hair.

“Lady,” Legolas said, and bowed. The Lady’s steps were easy as she walked, clearly Glorfindel was an escort, though he hovered as if, at one time, he was more support.

“Prince Legolas,” she said, and then she paused, and smiled widely, chuckling to herself. “Ah,” she said. “So you are the secret still kept.” Legolas looked up, then, and met her starlit eyes. My Champion misses you dearly, Greenleaf, she said directly into his mind. I could feel his longing, even if he did not reveal your connection.
My husband is strong willed, Legolas responded, and the Lady’s grin widened. And much more secretive than I, though far more open than his kin.

“I do not criticize,” the Lady said aloud. “Your devotion does you both credit.” You have my blessing, young prince. May you and your Gimli find your peace once again.

For that Legolas could only bow.

Glorfindel looked at Elrond. “Isn’t it wonderful to only hear half of a conversation?”

Elrond shot Glorfindel a quelling look, but he looked more amused than not. Luckily, so did Lady Galadriel.

“You say you came looking for council,” she said. “In the absence of Mithrandir, I will have to suffice.”

“My lady!” Elrond said, as Glorfindel shook his head. “After all that, you want to go to war?”

“The shadow has returned,” The Lady said, a snap to her tone that made the others fall silence. “We have banished his spirit, aye, but only because the death of Smaug served to distract him. He is stronger, now, and will regroup faster. Middle Earth cannot afford for Erebor to be over run, and if that means I go to war, then I go to war.” She looked back at Legolas and asked, “Does your father keep horses?”

***

Bard, somehow, impossibly, found himself sitting in King Thranduil’s personal tent as the King himself poured Bard a glass of wine. Some perverse part of Bard’s mind wondered if this was the same type of wine that allowed Thorin Oakenshield and his company their escape. He didn’t know quite how to think about it if it was.

King Thranduil did not look like he was there for war, not anymore. Since he had entered the tent, attendants had stripped him of his leathers (an eye-opening experience; did elves have no modesty?), and redressed him in robes of amber silk. He wore no crown, no even the diadem he wore before, and his hair spilled about his shoulders with effortless grace.

(Bard remembered the stories his mother had passed on about the fair folk in the Greenwood. She had said they danced in the wood, naked and drunk on fairy wine, were seducers and creatures of appetites. Bard remembered when he had first met the trading delegation when he had become part of the city guard. These elves had not seemed like creatures with an appetite for anything, save wine, and his mother’s stories had faded with other childhood fantasy. But here, now, Bard thought these stories may have held more than a sprinkling of truth.)

Thranduil passed Bard his glass of wine, and Bard took it with a nod and a thankful smile. Thranduil’s hands were clean, with neat nails, and his fingers were adorned with rings as heavy as any dwarf’s. Thranduil smiled, though it was mostly in his eyes, and Bard found himself bewildered all over again. Just what was going on here?

“The people call you King, Bard the Dragonslayer,” Thranduil said. His voice was much deeper than Bard had expected, but Bard could not say it sounded odd. It suited him, and Bard sipped his wine to give him more time to think. The wine was sweet, nearly syrupy, and Bard forced himself to sip sparingly. His mother’s stories had warned particularly against getting drunk on elvish wine.

“The people say many things,” Bard said. If Thranduil wanted to discuss policy, he’d be better off talking to the Master, though, if Bard was being honest with himself, he knew why Thranduil had
avoided inviting the Master. As far as Bard knew, the Master had curled into himself in the corner of the room housing the sick and elderly and refused to move, claiming that he was afflicted with a deadly fever. Dulcan seemed to think that the Master was simply unused to any sort of strenuous work. “We have more to worry about right now than political process,” Bard continued. “My title, if any any, can be decided after it is certain that we will survive the coming winter.”

“Wise words,” Thranduil said. “It seems these people would be lucky to call you their king.”

Bard didn’t know what to say to that, so he didn’t say anything. He merely sipped from his glass once more. Thranduil watched him for a moment, before smiling again and sipping from his own glass.

“I am making you uncomfortable,” Thranduil said. “Forgive me.”

“It’s fine,” Bard said. “Really.”

“I insist,” Thranduil said, and finally moved away to sit on his own chair. Bard had never seen a chair quite like it; it was almost a throne in and of itself. It was made from antlers and stretched hide, but it looked as regal as any gold chair. “You seem quite forgiving to the dwarves in the mountain, being that their action brought the dragon upon your town.”

There it is, Bard thought. “I have no quarrel with them, dragon or no. The men of the lake were not alone in their loss, and we remembered that when Thorin asked for help. Now, we simply wish that he remember that not that we are in need of aid.”

Thranduil hummed. “When you have lived as long as I, have been king as long as I, you too will learn to distrust the promises of dwarves. Ever are their memories for all but gold filled with fault and fantasy.”

“I still have no wish for war,” Bard said.

Thranduil opened his mouth, as if to respond to that, when a commotion outside grabbed their attention. Bard recognized Dulcan’s voice as he tried to stop someone from getting any closer to the tent. The other voice Bard did not recognize; male, old, and certainly frustrated with Dulcan’s calm yet steadfast refusal. Bard stood and peered out from the tent, and sure enough Dulcan stood in the way of an old man, dressed all in grey with a tall blue hat. He carried a staff of wood with a blue crystal fixed to the end, and Bard eyed the staff with some suspicion.

“Out of my way!” The old man cried. “I must speak to whomever is in charge, here!”

Bard could see the way Dulcan swallowed back a crack about the Master, though it did not seem like the old man noticed. Thranduil appeared like a specter at Bard’s side, and Bard realized just how tall Thranduil was. Bard was not a small man, but he barely came to Thranduil’s ear.

“Mithrandir,” Thranduil said, and he did not sound pleased. “Of course you’d come.”

“King Thranduil,” this Mithrandir said, and bowed. He looked at Bard, and Bard cleared his throat to speak. Before he could, however, Thranduil introduced him.

“Meet Bard the Dragonslayer, he who the people call King Bard,” Thranduil said, with a wry twist that Bard was pretty sure was his version of teasing. Bard would never be rid of the title of King now, not so endorsed. Bard nodded his head, and Thranduil continued, this time to him. “This is Gandalf the Grey. Remember his face; it brings nothing but trouble.”

Gandalf—Bard did know that name—harumphed at that, but neither did he deny it.
“Why are you here?” Thranduil asked.

“King Thranduil, you must not go to war with that Mountain!” Gandalf urged, and Bard was not at all surprised when Thranduil simply sighed, and turned back to the tent.

“I need more wine. Bard, may I offer you some more?”

“King—Oh, out of my way!” Gandalf snapped, and Bard cleared his throat.

“It’s alright, Dulcan. Let him pass,” Bard said, and Dulcan stepped aside neatly. Gandalf gave him a disgruntled look, but passed him by quickly. It was then that Bard saw the sword, a long blade of elvish design, hanging from his hip. Bard wondered if Dulcan didn’t have the right of it, after all. Still, he gave Dulcan a look, as if to ask why he was not yet abed. Dulcan pretended he hadn’t seen, and leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms and lowering his head.

“Save me from stubborn friends,” Bard muttered under his breath, and turned around to follow Gandalf into the tent.

Gandalf pulled his hat from his head, and Bard noticed that his hair—long and as grey as his clothes, was limp and dirty. There was a smudge of something like blood at his temple, and he was easily several shades darker from soot and dirt. It seemed odd to Bard that a Wizard would be so—so worn. It didn’t seem very wizardly.

“You’re wasting your time,” Thranduil said, gesturing for Bard to sit and pouring him more wine. “Oakenshield is holding something very precious of mine in that mountain. I will not leave here without it, if I have to turn the mountain into rubble to do it!”

Gandalf looked between them. “Since when has my council counted for so little?” he sounded utterly baffled that someone would ignore his words. “What do you think I’m trying to do?!”

Thranduil handed Bard the wine with a gentle smile. Bard returned it, hesitantly. “I think you’re trying to save your dwarvish friends,” Thranduil said, walking behind Bard’s chair back towards the entrance to his tent. “And I admire your loyalty to them, but it does not dissuade me from my course. You started this, Mithrandir. You will forgive me if I finish it.”

Thranduil called out in the Sylvan tongue, and his Lieutenant appeared, startling Dulcan out of his half-sleep. Bard had to get that idiot to actually lie down, preferably before he fell down.

“Are the archers in position?” Thranduil asked, and Bard knew it was no coincidence that he spoke once more in the common tongue.

“Yes, my Lord,” the elf answered, following his King’s lead. Unlike his king, however, this elf’s accent was thick, and it took a moment for Bard to understand what he had said.

Thranduil nodded. “Good. Give the order. If anything moves on that mountain, kill it!” Bard blinked, but the lieutenant nodded with a sharp bow, and disappeared back into the early morning darkness.

Thranduil turned back to face them once more. “The dwarves are out of time.”

At the Main Gate of Erebor, a rope unfurls from atop the battlement. A figure, nearly hidden to shadow and smaller than any dwarf, slowly made it’s way down, nearly falling twice. Not a sound was heard to even elvish ears, however, as the figure landed at the bottom, and clambered it’s way over the rubble and to the desolation beyond. As the sky before him began its turn to grey with early morning, he raced on towards the ruins of Dale.
Gandalf turned to Bard, and he blinked to find himself at the mercy of such scrutiny. “You, Bard who is called King! Do you agree with this?” He gestured with his hand towards the mountain. “Is gold so important to you? Would you buy it with the blood of dwarves?!”

Bard stiffened. “I wish to buy nothing with blood, dwarf or otherwise, but we are owed a debt by the King Under the Mountain—one we need desperately if we are to survive.” He looked between them. Gandalf looked a bit smug, but still not entirely convinced. Thranduil was frowning, ever so slightly, as if Bard had insulted his hospitality. Bard spoke quickly, but firmly. “It will not come to that, however. This is a fight they cannot win.”

“That won’t stop them,” said a voice at the entrance to the tent, no higher than Sigrid. They all turned, to see Bilbo Baggins standing there, a bit leaner, a bit paler, but there all the same. “You think the dwarves will surrender,” he shook his head. “They won’t. They will fight to the death to defend their own.”

Gandalf, to Bard’s great surprise, smiled with relief. “Bilbo Baggins!”

Bilbo grinned at him, and Bard had the feeling he was only getting half of the story.

Thranduil sat once more in his chair, gracefully crossing one leg over the other. His elbow rested on the arm of his chair, and he gestured expansively with the hand. He held his wine glass loosely, and Bard saw the wine shift like a gentle tide in the cup, though it never overflowed. “If I’m not mistaken,” he said in that deceptively mild voice, “this is the halfling who stole the keys to my dungeons from under the nose of my guards.”

Bilbo froze, looking for all the world like Sigrid as a child, her hand caught in the basket of sweet biscuits. His face screwed up, and he spoke through the twist in his mouth. “Yesh,” he coughed, and looked less apologetic than he might ought to have. “Sorry about that.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow, unconvinced, but, Bard believed, charmed rather despite himself. Bilbo looked between them, some decision clearly weighing upon his mind. He fairly flung himself forward, pulling something wrapped in a scrap of heavy velvet from his jacket.

“I came,” he said, placing the thing on the table, and flinging back the edges, “to give you this.”

There, on the table, glittered the largest, most beautiful gem that Bard had ever seen. It glowed as if with its own inner light in swirling, shimmering hues of blue and silver, white and gold. As Bard watched, the colors shifted and deepened, catching all the colors of a rainbow.

Out of the corner of his eye, Bard saw Thranduil stand, face pale and eyes wide.


“Thorin called it The King’s Jewel,” Bilbo said, his voice quiet and sad enough that Bard shot him a quick look. There was something sad in his voice, something that reminded Bard of his own voice in the months after his Ina died. Still, Bard found his eyes once more drawn to the stone, and he stepped closer for a better look. On the other side of the table, Gandalf did the same.

“It must be worth a king’s ransom,” Bard said. “How is this yours to give?” He looked once more at Bilbo, and the hobbit’s eyes were still far away as he answered.

“I took it as my fourteenth share of the treasure.” Bilbo ducked his head, so he missed the way Gandalf smiled slightly at him. Bard looked once more at the gem. Either Bilbo had an unclear
estimate of the worth of gems, or there was a lot more treasure in that mountain than Bard anticipated.

"And you would part with it so easily?" Thranduil murmured. He reached out a hand to touch the stone, and halted at the last second, his long fingers twitching.

Bilbo shook his head. "Easy is not the word I would use."

Bard shook his head. "Why would you do this?" he asked. "You owe us no loyalty."

Bilbo looked up, then, a bit of fire flashing in his eyes. "I’m not doing it for you. I know that dwarves can be obstinate and pigheaded and difficult, suspicious and secretive," he looked at Gandalf with such a flat look, that Bard found his mouth twitching once more, "with the worst manners you can possibly imagine." He paused then, his eyes turning inward and his voice warming, "but they also brave and kind," and here his voice cracked, and Bard knew, knew, that Bilbo was taking a bigger risk than any of them might ever fully know, "and loyal to a fault." Bilbo's fingers twisted together, and he pulled them apart with a sharp gesture, and his left hand crept down to tuck his fingers into his pocket. "I've grown very fond of them, and I would save them if I can."

Bilbo sighed, and focused on them once more. "Thorin values this stone above all else. In exchange for its return, I believe he will give you what you are owed." Bilbo looked between them and urged, "There will be no need for war!"

"There is need for war, as long as Oakenshield has what's mine," Thranduil said, and Bard turned to him in surprise. Even Gandalf looked at him.

"The white gems?" Bilbo asked, hesitant. "I heard mention of them."

"What I desire is more precious—" Thranduil cut himself off, standing and stalking to the tent opening, where he could watch the mountain. "There is no longer a need to play coy, master hobbit. Oakenshield has my son in that mountain, bewitched by that little—"

"Your highness," Bilbo interrupted. "Your son is not in that mountain."

Thranduil snorted. "Of course you would say that."

"I speak the truth!" Bilbo protested, and Bard cleared his throat.

"He does," Bard said, and all eyes turned to him. "I saw Legolas during the first watch last night, heading South from the city."

Thranduil looked at Bard for a long moment, breathing heavily through his nose. "Very well," he said at last, and turned back to his wine. "I will not be responsible for the first strike. But if they strike at me, I will end them. And quickly."

Bard shared a glance with Gandalf and looked over at Thranduil. He did not think that Thranduil would be very forgiving in his parley.

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Fíli had drawn third watch, so he was already long at the battlements when the first of the ravens flew in and past, headed for Thorin. He watched as the camp fires, one by one, were doused. The dawn broke red, and it glittered off the armor of Thranduil’s army.
Fíli was not surprised when Thorin stormed up the steps, nor when the rest of the Company followed. Neither was he surprised to note that Bilbo was missing. It simply confirmed his suspicions, and he was glad that he had taken care to remove the rope that had been tied to the wall and left dangling over the side.

Thorin stopped when he saw Fíli, and shook his head like a dog. Fíli bowed, careful to be extra formal, and stepped back to let Thorin pace the length of the battlements. Across the plane, Thranduil’s army marched closer. At their head rode Thranduil on his elk, and Bard on a white horse. The army stopped before the last ridge, but Thranduil and Bard continued forward in parlay.

"Hail, Thorin, King Under the Mountain," Bard called, Thranduil’s face twisted. Fíli rolled his eyes. The condescension was clear for all to see, and he was encouraged when he saw Bard glance at Thranduil with a small frown.

Thorin grabbed Kíli’s bow and shot an arrow between the feet of Thranduil’s Elk. The Elk backed away a step, and even from this distance, Fíli could see the anger in the Elvenking’s countenance.

“Begone now ere more our arrows fly! And if you would speak with me again, first dismiss the elvish host to the woods where it belongs, and then return, laying down your arms before you approach the threshold,” Thorin called down.

Fill had little hope of Bard agreeing, and to his unsurprised dismay, Bard shook his head. “The Elvenking is my friend, and he has succored the people of the Lake in their need, though they had no claim but friendship on him.”

“Thranduil is no friend of mine!” Thorin called back. “I remember well his dungeons, the deep holes where not even a dwarf would live.” He grunted, and spat. “While an armed host lies before our doors, we look on you as foes and thieves.”

Thranduil’s face darkened, and Fíli closed his eyes for a moment, breathing through his flash of temper. Thorin did not know what he said. Fíli opened his eyes. Even he could not believe that; Thorin had said worse to Thranduil, and from a lesser position besides.

But Thranduil did not let loose of his temper, as Bard stepped forward. “We’ve come to tell you: payment of your debt has been offered,” he paused, and Fíli felt his guts sink. “And accepted.”

“What payment?” Thorin snapped. “I gave you nothing! You have nothing!”

Bard reached into his tunic. “We have this,” he said, and held aloft—the Arkenstone.

Kill gasped, even as Fíli searched the camp for a head of familiar blonde curls. “They have the Arkenstone? Thieves! How came you by the heirloom of our house? That stone belongs to the king!”

Bard turned the jewel and it caught the light, blinding in its flashes. “And the king may have it, in our goodwill.” Bard slipped the stone back into his pocket. “But first he must honor his word.”

“Not like this, Bard,” Fíli whispered. “Not like this.”

Thorin did not hear, however. It did not seem Thorin heard much besides his own voice these days. Even now he was muttering to himself. “They are taking us for fools. This is a ruse, a filthy lie.” Even Balin took a step back at that, and looked at Thorin with such heartbreak in his eyes. “The
Arkenstone is in this mountain! It is a trick!"

From between the two mounts, walked a very familiar hobbit. Bilbo’s face was pinched, and he looked red—with cold or tears, Fíli could not tell. Still, Bilbo held his head high.

“It’s no trick. The stone is real. I gave it to them.”

Thorin staggered back, and Dwalin meant to catch him. Thorin shrugged him off, and lurched forward to lean against the ramparts. “You…” he groaned.

Bilbo stood a little straighter, a little more defiant. “I took it as my fourteenth share.”

That made Thorin stand a bit taller. “You would steal from me?” His voice was practically a growl, a draconian rumble that carried across the plain.

“Steal from you?” Bilbo seemed honestly surprised. Had he not realized…? No, Fíli guessed Bilbo, who had never known a king, would not have known. “No. No. I may be a burglar, but I like to think I’m an honest one. I’m willing to let it stand against my claim.” Oh Bilbo, it’s far too late for that.

Thorin thundered, “Against your claim?! Your claim! You have no claim over me you miserable rat!”

Fíli’s eyes snapped to Thorin. The King’s fingers were white where they gripped the stone. Below, Bilbo continued, oblivious to danger.

“I was going to give it to you,” he said, “Many times I wanted to, but…” Bilbo trailed off for a moment. “But what good is a king when he won’t protect his own people? The people he loves.” Bilbo’s voice broke on the last, and he dashed a quick hand across his eyes.

Thorin gasped, and clutched a hand to his heart, as if in great pain. “Curse you!” he bit out. “Cursed be the Wizard that forced you on this Company!” He grabbed up the bow once more, and made as if to fire.

Suddenly, there was a fourth figure on the plain. A tall figure in a grey cloak and blue hat, who leaned on a wooden staff. Gandalf! The bow sang, but the arrow was cast aside.

“If you don’t like my burglar,” Gandalf thundered, “Then please don’t damage him. He is returned to me!” Thorin stood panting at the display, and Gandalf looked up at him from under his hat. “You’re not making a very splendid figure as King under the Mountain, are you? Thorin son of Thrain!”

Thorin slowly began to back away. “Never again will I have dealings with wizards,” he said. “Or Shire-rats!” he spat out, and Fíli could almost see the tears in his eyes.

“Thorin?” he said, but went unheard.

Bard looked between the two groups. “Are we resolved? The return of the Arkenstone for what was promised?” Thorin refused to look away from Bilbo, however. Fíli wasn’t sure he even heard.

“Give us your answer!” Bard repeated. “Will you have peace or war?”

As Thorin stood, a raven appeared from over the mountain, and cawed in victory as it landed at Thorin’s side. Thorin took a deep breath, and resolved back into what he had become as he shouted,
“I will have war!”

Thranduil seemed unconcerned, however Fíli knew better. “Such is your answer,” he said, as if discussing the prices at market. “I declare the Mountain besieged. You shall not depart from it, until you call on your side for a truce and a parley. We will bear no weapons against you, but we leave you to your gold. You may eat that, if you will.”

Thorin drew another arrow on Kíli’s bow. “I will put the next one between your eyes!”

Fíli stepped forward; Thorin could not fire upon them again! But it was not enough, and Thorin loosed a second arrow—and Kíli cried out a “No!” for Bilbo had stepped forward, as if to stand between Thorin and the Elvenking. But the hobbit was graceful, and jumped back so the arrow stuck in the ground, mere inches from his toes.

Thorin stepped back, the bow falling with a clatter from his hands, his face pale. Sweat glistened at his brow, and Fíli asked, “Uncle?”

Thorin looked to him, eyes, wild, and fled back into the mountain and Fíli turned to run after him.

At that moment, a great horn sounded, making Fíli paused and turn back. A great host of Dwarves, with them Ram Riders and war machines enough to fight the beasts of Moria, crested the far hill.

Dain had come.
“Watch them!” Fíli cried to Balin, and charged off after Thorin, following him down into the depths of Erebor. He went to turn right, towards the treasure rooms, but a single, sparkling shine to the left caught his attention, and he paused.

The Raven Crown, tossed aside like a child’s two-penny trinket, sat where it had fallen in a dusty corner. Fíli walked over slowly and bent to pick up the crown. It had rolled through some unswept cobwebs, picking up strands of spidersilk like a fleecer’s comb, and he brushed them away with absent fingers, shaking the strands off afterwards with perhaps too much force. Fíli wondered if he’d ever be able to stand the feeling of webs on his skin again.

He peered down the hall, his feet taking him forward. There, a glittering golden ring. There, a heavy chain. Piece by piece, Fíli followed the trappings of the king until he came across a heap of fur—more obviously moth-eaten now that it was on the floor and not his uncle.

There was no sign of Thorin.

Fíli looked around. He was far, now, from the treasure hoard, in a part of Erebor he had never been. The royal apartments, he knew, were on the West side of the mountain and they had traveled further East. If they were in *Ered Luin*, they would be in the Guild Halls, but that didn't feel quite right to him.

A sound—a scuff of a boot and a bitten-off cry—echoed towards him, and he turned. There! The door was open a crack.

Slowly, as quietly as he could, Fíli stepped forward and pushed at the door. It opened silently, well oiled still after all these years, and stepped inside where he could barely muffle his gasp.

It was a concert hall; he could tell at a glance that the room was as perfectly balanced as any sword, that any sound made would be heard with crystal clarity anywhere in the room. It made for a difficult evening for the audience, but what it did for the musician--

Rows of seats were clustered around a circular stage and plenty of room had been left for the performers to move about. Fíli could see clearly with his mind's eyes: the stage musician, dressed in sparkling finery, eyes closed in concentration as a trio of dancers—a traditional quartet arrangement—moved about the room in geometric circles, the torchlight playing with their shadows and making them dance. Lost to his vision, he stepped further into the hall.

A harsh breath, perfectly carried, and Fíli turned. There, in a darkened corner, huddled Thorin. His face was hidden in his hands, his hair a wild nest that matched the ratty furs outside.

"Uncle?" Fíli asked softly; this was not the Thorin he had expected to find, and his anger fled in the face of it. Thorin made a broken sound and tried to pull into himself more tightly.
"Go away," Thorin rasped. "I do not deserve to be called your Uncle."

So here it is at last, Fíli thought. The parting of the clouds. Remorse filled every line of Thorin's frame, and self-loathing oozed from him like river-sludge--but there, in the center of it all, was purely Thorin. "Probably not," Fíli agreed, voice mild, and he wanted to feel relief. It was painful to watch Thorin fall further into himself, but this needed to be said. "But that is not your decision to make. I choose to call you Uncle, still."

Thorin rocked back and forth, as if his motion could block out Fíli's voice, his offered forgiveness.

"You shouldn't," Thorin snapped, at last looking up at Fíli. "Not now--it was me! All me, do you understand! I said-- I did-- I nearly--" Thorin broke off, gasping, and he dropped his hands to his lap. They landed palm up, offering all of Thorin's wretchedness to Fíli for him to take.

"I nearly killed Bilbo," Thorin said, softer now. "I loosed the arrow that nearly killed my heart's One. It would have been my fault--he deserves better, one as nimble as he, with a mind not enslaved to cursed gold." He closed his eyes. "He'd be better off to forget about me."

Fíli felt his temper flicker at that and he had to restrain himself when he asked, “Don’t you think that’s his decision?” Thorin looked up at him, and Fíli stepped closer, breathing deep the scent of ancient dust and let his frustrations go.

“To me, it looks like everything Bilbo has done has been out of love for you.” Thorin looked away again, shamed, and Fíli’s boot echoed against the floor when he stomped, gaining his uncle’s eyes once more. “It’d be a poor decision to deny him his choice in this. Let him choose, now.” Thorin didn’t look as if he would try to hide his eyes again; he was listening truly now, and his pain was clear on his face. Fíli knelt before him.

“Let him choose,” he said again. “If he leaves, it would serve you right, and I think it would be a fitting enough punishment for the way you’ve treated him—though I don’t think it would do Bilbo any favors.” Thorin’s eyes widened a bit as he processed what Fíli said. “But if he chooses you, and I truly believe he will, Uncle, know it is because his heart matches yours for true.” He grinned, then. “And knowing Bilbo, he’ll never let you hear the end of it.”

Thorin was looking at Fíli like he had never seen him before. “And I would be glad of it, if it means I could keep him by my side,” he said. He shook his head. “When did you get so wise, my nephew?”

Fíli’s lips twisted in a wry smile, and held out his hand to his uncle. “When my brother and cousin both fell arse over anvil for a pair of Mirkwood elves.” Thorin took his hand and Fíli pulled his uncle to his feet. “I figure a hobbit ought to be easier to explain to the council when they arrive, anyway.”

“Nothing is easy with that council,” Thorin grumbled, dusting himself off. His clothes were travel-stained and hard-worn, like the rest of them, and his hair had frayed where it had tangled in the crown. Thorin made no effort to fix his braids, and that more than anything calmed Fíli. “Something you will come to know well enough, as my heir,” he said, and paused, looking up. “That is, if you are still my heir.”

Fíli grinned. “As soon as you tell Balin, I am,” he said. “That would make him happy; he’s been in a state these past few days, and the others haven’t been kind about it, afraid as they are.” He held out the raven crown. “But first, there are armies at our doorstep, and Dain is about to give Thranduil a right walloping.”
“A sight not to miss,” Thorin said, but he didn’t move to take the crown. Instead, he gently pushed it to the side with a gentle press of his first two fingers. “I’ll not wear that crown again,” he said, when Fíli looked at him. “But I have lead us this far. I can lead us further to peace.”

Fíli’s grin hurt his cheeks, and he bowed. “Welcome back, Uncle.”

Thorin shifted uneasily at Fíli’s respect. Still, he did his best to match Fíli’s smile, though it wasn’t nearly as wide and was a bit sadder. It was also fleeting and it disappeared when, a moment later, a Raven burst through the door, screeching.

Thorin paled and Fíli frowned. “What is it?”

“Orcs,” Thorin spat. “Two armies, from the South and North. They’ll be on us in minutes.” He growled his frustration, and began to stride for the door, to all appearances the same dwarf that faced down terror after terror on their quest. “The others must be warned: Dain and Thranduil must not come to blows!”

“The side door,” Fíli said jogging to catch up. “It’s closer, and we won’t have to break down our front door.”

“Aye,” Thorin said, then paused. “You will come with me? Remind me of who I am, if I am lost?”

“Aye,” Fíli said, and Thorin brought their foreheads together for a brief moment, the last moment of peace before the crush of battle.

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The dwarves on the ramparts began to cheer as the ranks of dwarves fell into formation on the hilltop. Bilbo was surprised when Gandalf nearly sneered the name, “Ironfoot.”

Thranduil cried out to his troops, “Ribo i thangail!”, and the elves marched as one, streaming through and past the assembled men and Bilbo, to create a barrier between the army of Dwarves and the mountain.

At their head was a singular Dwarf; he wore a helm, and what hair shone was a bright red-orange streaked liberally with white. He rode a giant pig that had been armed for battle, and in his hand he carried a great red war-hammer. Looking twice, Bilbo realized that this dwarf was not alone; Gimli rode some distance behind him upon a great horned ram.

“Hey! Thorin!” the helmed-dwarf cried.

The dwarves on the ramparts quieted enough for Bilbo to hear Balin, clearly proclaim, “Ironfoot has come!”

Gandalf strode forward with the elves, his long legs carrying him quickly, and Bilbo had to scurry to keep up. He realized, distantly, that he could, now. When he had started this ridiculous journey, he would never have been able to keep pace with a wizard on a mission. Now, however, Bilbo wasn’t even winded as he hurried along. Maybe there was some merit to this adventure business after all; it would be much easier to avoid the Sackville-Bagginses if he could outpace them.

Still, there were more pressing concerns. “Who is that?” Bilbo asked Gandalf. The Wizard didn’t look at him, his focus on the army ahead. “He doesn’t look very happy.”

Thorin had cousins like hobbits, Bilbo realized with some surprise. He remembered Glóin delighting in embarrassing Gimli when he talked of his pride in his son, and how rare it was to have more than one child. He wondered if it was a royal predilection that made Durin cousins crawl from the woodwork. “Are they alike?” he asked.

Gandalf hummed. “I always found Thorin the more reasonable of the two.”

Bilbo raised his eyebrows at that. “Reasonable? Or simply willing to listen to your advice,” Bilbo muttered, and if Gandalf heard, he didn’t comment.

Riding his pig out to a rocky ledge, Dain looked out over the assembled armies. Bilbo watched him look past Thranduil like he wasn’t even there, and Bilbo didn’t have to look to see that the Elvenking was murderous at the slight.

“Good morning!” said Dain, addressing those assembled. Bilbo started a little at his accent. Somehow, he had assumed that Dain would speak like Thorin, with crisp, cultured consonants and round vowels. Instead, he spoke like a backcountry Stoor. “How are we all?” This Dain was certainly polite, Bilbo would have to give him credit for that. “I have a wee proposition, if you wouldn’t mind giving me a few moments of your time. Would you consider…” And there was his temper. Maybe he wasn’t so polite after all. Bilbo closed his eye in the wake of it, no longer willing to stomach such displays of temper. “Just sodding off!”

The few men still visible to Bilbo shrank back, not willing to challenge this fearsome dwarf. The elves, in the meantime, drew their swords as one.

But Dain was not discouraged. “All of you,” he cried out. “Right now!”

Bard remained still as he people stepped back. “Stand fast!” he cried, and slowly the men stopped to hold their ground. It was a tenuous hold, however. The Men were too tired, too beaten down by the loss wrought by the dragon and the years under the Master's yolk.

Gandalf stepped forward, and Bilbo had to hurry to catch up. He stopped just behind the wizard and felt, not for the first time, like a fauntling clutching at his mother's skirts. It settled ill in him.

Gandalf leaned on his staff, looking like nothing more than an old man. A reasonable old man. He held out a hand towards Dain, placating. “Come now, Lord Dain!”

That brought them the dwarf-lord's attention. “Gandalf the Grey,” he said, but he didn't seem surprised to see Gandalf there. Bilbo wondered if anyone was really surprised to see Gandalf when there was trouble afoot. Dain looked Gandalf over, saw Bilbo, surely, but didn't stop to wonder who Bilbo might be. "Tell this rabble to leave, or I’ll water the ground with their blood!”

Gandalf frowned, dropping his hand. Though nothing outwardly seemed to change, the air around Gandalf few darker, much as it had in Bag End so many months ago. “There is no need for war between dwarves, men, and elves! A legion of orcs march on the mountain. Stand your army down!”

Dain considered Gandalf for a long moment. "So he did speak truth," he said, quietly, and even Bilbo could sense Gandalf's surprise. “That changes things. Still,” and he raised his voice again. "I will not stand down before any elf! Not least this faithless woodland sprite! He wishes nothing but ill upon my people.” Dain narrowed his eyes at Gandalf. "I cannot trust that he would limit his fighting to orcs, if it's dwarves he wants dead, if it's dwarves treasure that he covets." Dain
bellowed the last. "If he chooses to stand between me and my kin, I’ll split his pretty head open. See if he’s still smirking then!"

Bilbo sighed. Well, the first round of negotiations seemed to be going about as well as could be accepted. They were doomed.

***

Up on the hill, Gimli shook his head. Was he the only one left with any sense of diplomacy? This was no way to end a war before it began. He climbed down from his mount, happy to have solid earth beneath his feet once more, and started the long trek down the mountain.

“He’s as mad as his cousin,” Thranduil declared. “Let them advance. See how far they get.”

But Dain was already wheeling his boar around, and called back over his shoulder. “You think I give a dead dog for your threats, you pointy-eared—“

But Dain never finished his threat.

“Stop!” cried a voice, hidden by the crowd. “Stop this!”

Gimli stopped his descent. “Thorin?” he said aloud. He shook his head: if Thorin was on the battlefield, he must make haste.

Dain wheeled around, and searched the crowd. “Thorin?” he asked, confused, and a moment later Thorin broke from the line of Elves, stripped of his armor and holding Orcrist like a lifeline. Fíli appeared behind him, chin held high.

Thorin caught sight of Bilbo, and froze to the spot. Bilbo, for his part, seemed only able to stare back.

Up on the battlements, the Company’s confusion could be heard, and Gimli heard Kíli call to his brother. Fíli waved at them, and Kíli was halfway over the top of the wall before Bofur grabbed him and pulled him back.

Dain rode forward again and pulled up before Thorin. He was off his mount in a flash, pulling Thorin into an exuberant hug. If Fíli’s face was anything to go by, Thorin wasn’t expecting the embrace, and Gimli didn’t bother to fight his grin as he approached the gathered peoples. Good. Thorn could use a bit of Dain’s good-humored vitality.

“Dain, cousin, it is good to see you,” Thorin said.

“Aye, and you,” Dain answered, pulling back to look at Thorin. “But where is your armor?”

“Still in the coffers of the Woodland Realm, I would imagine,” Thorin said, dryly. “We left there with little more than the shirts on our backs.”

Dain raised a bushy eyebrow. “I’m fairly certain there’s at least one suit of armor in that great big Mountain there.”

“Aye,” Thorin said, meeting Dain’s gaze solidly. “But not for me.” He squeezed Dain’s arm, and his face softened, honestly. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” he said.

Dain clapped Thorin on the arm. “Someone had to show you how it’s done, cousin.”

Thorn rolled his eyes, and turned to Bard. He faced the tall man for a long moment, and then
bowed, respectfully. Gimli was close enough to Bilbo, by that point, that he heard his sharp intake of breath. There was a light shining in Bilbo’s eyes, but Gimli could not tell if it was hope or unshed tears. Probably both. He reached out and placed a comforting hand on Bilbo’s shoulder. Bilbo startled, and placed his hand over his breast, closing his eyes while he regained his composure. When Bilbo opened his eyes, he smiled at Gimli. “I’m glad you did not travel far,” he said, quietly.

“As am I,” Gimli answered. “Wouldn’t want to miss this.” Gandalf, if he heard them, did not make it known.

Thorn spoke at last, breaking the silence. “I have heard the men call you King,” he said.

“Aye,” Bard said, warily. “Though I have not looked for the title.”

“Those who seek such titles often make poor kings,” Thorin said, and Dain snorted, kicking Thorin in the shin with his iron foot. Thorin winced, but he did not otherwise react.

“I’m told have fought for your people against immeasurable odds, and won,” Dain said to Bard. “Sounds kingly to me. You don’t need a fancy crown to be a ruler, lad.”

“Aye,” Thorin agreed, almost to himself. “And the need for rulers is great, now.” He shook himself, as if to free himself from lingering melancholy. Gimli know Thorin’s resolve would be tested, once again in close proximity to the ring, but that insidious voice, once defeated, is easier to guard against. If it is truly only a matter of will, Thorin would not succumb again.

Thorin spoke in earnest, saying to Bard, “I say to you now, King Bard, that I have acted a fool in my blindness and my greed. I will honor my word, and that of my nephew. You will have the gold to rebuild Dale and more to spare. It does not excuse my action nor my words, but I hope it may make amends.” He smiled, self-deprecating. “We are neighbors, after all.”

Bard blinked, surprised, and looked at Thranduil. It made Thorin grit his teeth, but he kept his quiet and was rewarded when Bard nodded at him. “Then the Men of the Lake have no quarrel with you.”

“I am pleased, and hope that such arrangements between us are simply the beginning of a new era of partnership between our two peoples.”

Gimli had to say, he wasn’t sure if Thorin could keep a diplomatic tongue; he had seen it so rarely. Even Gandalf seemed surprised at the courtesy, and sincerity, in Thorin’s speech. Fíli seemed ready to burst with pride.

Then Thorin turned to Thranduil. “King Thranduil, neither my heir,” Thorin gestured to Fíli, and Gimli grinned. Good. “Nor I have made you any promises. But I remember the promises of my Grandfather, and a box of gems, white as starlight. They are yours, as soon as they are located. Over a hundred years of dragon has played havoc with our inventory.”

Thranduil nodded, as if taking his due, though he looked as surprised as he ever did, and Gimli had hoped it would be the end of it. He frowned, cocking his head. There was something…

Gimli crouched down and pressed his bare fingers to the dirt. There was something echoing through the rock, something big, and heavy, and with many, many feet. The orcs were near. Gimli looked up, and saw Fíli staring at him, grim understanding in his eyes.

“What comes next?” Bard asked, and it was Thorin who answered him.
“Nothing good, I fear. The Ravens have sent word,” he said. “Two armies of Orcs are approaching; one comes North from Dol Goldur. The other South from Gundabad.”

“Gundabad!” Thranduil scoffed. “That desolate land was emptied long ago.”

“So was Dol Goldur,” Gimli countered. “Didn’t stop Sauron from massing an army there, did it?”

“It certainly did not,” Gandalf said, and stopped. “Gimli! When did you get there?”

“Gimli,” Thorin said, and his voice, capable of such majestic thunder, was cracked. He stepped forward and stopped, as if unsure. His eyes flicked to Bilbo, and back, involuntarily. “Glóin’s son, my little cousin, I—”

“Later, aye?” Gimli said gently, interrupting. “The enemy is nearly upon us. I can feel them.” He gestured towards the ground, flicking his hand for the iglishmêk, many, and close. Thranduil closed his mouth and nodded in agreement.

Gandalf, and to be fair King Thranduil and King Bard as well, were staring at Gimli with some amazement; Gandalf shook his head. “If what you say is true, they would be here—”

A horn sounded, screeching terribly across the valley, and Gimli spun, looking for its source. There, up from the South, a great host of Orcs marched in the shadow of the setting sun. Gimli felt his blood quicken; here was a host like to Helm’s Deep. It would be a long battle.

The Horn sounded again, and Gimli could see, now, where the enemy had set up their command, with great mounted towers and flags. Standing before them was a pale orc, the size of an Uruk-Hai. Azog. The Defiler was leading the army of the Enemy. The great flag dropped its arm, and the host charged, swarming down the hill. Behind him, he heard Thranduil calling his orders, the woodland Elvish warring with Dain’s own Khazadulg.

“They’re here,” Bilbo said, stepping back closer to Gandalf.

Gimli loosened his axe, and swung it in a tight circle. “Let them come.” he sneered. “Peacemaker, here, has a message for them.”

Fíli stepped up next to him, drawing his swords. “I don’t think they’ll like that message, little cousin,” he said, lightly.

“Oh, but I will.” Gimli growled, feeling the fires of battle rising in his blood. Thorin was himself once more. Kíli was safe in the mountain. Their armies were at their peak. It would have to be enough.

Let them come. He would kill them all for his family. He looked at Fíli, and raised an eyebrow. “How about a game?” He grinned with all of his teeth.

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Bofur still had a hold of the back of Kíli’s tunic when the Orcs appeared at the ridge. “Mahal’s sweet bloody hammer,” he swore, stepping back from the parapet. Kíli staggered back a step, and twisted to get himself loose. “Look at them all.”

On the battlefield, Dain mustered his troops, and they sprinted forward in a unit that flowed like a single living thing. They came to a halt between the now charging orc army and the rest of the free peoples in the valley, creating a shield wall with mechanical efficiency.
"Clockwork," Bifur said, and Bofur wasn’t quite sure what he meant, but his tone was appraising.

“Why are they just standing there?” Kíli burst out. “They curse us and cheat us, but when war is on, they’ll sure let us die for them.”

“Men fear death,” Balin said. “Elves do not understand it. Only Dwarves have made their peace, and so we’re often first to act. But look,” he pointed. “Thranduil is not repeating his mistakes.”

The Men in the valley turned to retreat back to Dale. Bofur couldn’t see very well, his eyes were always better in the dark, but it didn’t seem that the men were very well armed. A small squadron of elves flanked the men, offering them protection as they returned to the city.

The rest of Thranduil’s army turned as one, focusing their attention on the orcs, rather than Dain. Thranduil bellowed something in that tongue-maddening language of his, raising his sword high, and the elves all raised their bows at once. Thranduil lowered his blade and the elves loosed their arrows as one.

There were so many arrows, it turned the sky black.

The elves fired true, and the first few lines of orcs fell, all dead or dying, only to be trampled by the orcs behind them. There were many, and their cries echoed terribly off the basin walls. It slowed them down, however, having to crawl through and over their dead comrades.

There were certainly enough of them.

Dwalin was grumbling under his breath about Thranduil taking the fun out of everything. They didn’t need his help, nor his arrows—not when they only seemed to act to prove themselves better than the dwarves.

There is no better in war, Bifur thought, the voice sounding more like the Bifur he remembered as a dwarfling. A quick glance showed his older cousin watching the battle with knowing sadness. Bifur adjusted the grip on his spear, and when he glanced at Bofur, there was determination in his eyes.

At last, the orcs crashed against the shield wall, breaking like a wave against rock, and many orcs were crushed by their own. The dwarves in the shield wall gave a guttural, wordless cry, the sound echoing across the field, and as one, stepped forward to push them back. Slowly, they drove the every-charging army to retreat. It was a sight to see, such a display of dwarves strength, and when Dwalin roared, his words lost to volume, Bofur found himself cheering along.

“We can win this,” Kíli said, his grin stretched across his face and his eyes wild.

“The battle has just begun,” Balin said, and the restraint in his voice was maddening. “It’s too soon to make such predictions.” He bit his lip, a gesture Bofur hadn’t seen before; it made Bofur wonder how much trouble Balin had gotten up to as a youngster. “But my money’s on us.” He winked, and Kíli punched his own fist.

Just then, another horn sounded, and Bofur heard a great thumping. “I don’t like the sound of that,” he muttered. It was heavy, whatever it was, and was building speed.

It crested the ridge and Bofur’s eyes went wide. It was a troll, monstrous enough already, but the orcs had cut off its feet and hands, replacing them with wicked morningstars. A smaller orc sat atop its head, holding reins that—hammer and tongs, went into its eyes. They had blinded the monster, and turned it into a beast of war.
Eyes or no, the troll charged, and it swept through the shield wall like an axe through wood, sending dwarf and orc alike flying through the air. The sound of it was like thunder—no, like a cave-in, with the sounds of screaming and wrenching metal. Around its feet, the orcs swarmed through the breach. Thranduil’s archers traded their bows for swords in a single, fluid motion, and the air quickly grew thick with the sound of metal on metal.

On the Eastern ridge, the Ram Riders charged the field; the light shined off their leader’s gleaming armor, drawing the eye, and Bifur raised his arms over his head, shaking his fists—applauding. The Riders circled round, to flank and come up behind the orcs, to force them to fight on multiple fronts. They cut a swath through the orcs, but the numbers were too great, and their formation was lost far too quickly.

“We need to help them,” Ori said, his voice quiet, yet resolute. Bofur looked over to see Dori staring at Ori with desperate fear on his face, but he said nothing, and a moment later, the expression was gone, replaced by a look of such cold steel that it would not have been out of place on Thorin’s face.

“Right you are, Ori,” Kíli said, but Bofur caught him again before he could move.

“You go down that wall, they’ll stick your caracas full of arrows,” Bofur said. Kíli glared at him, pulling himself free once more.

“How do you plan on getting there, then, hm? There’s no front door!” He stopped, and grinned. “Bofur, you genius! The secret door!”

He spun around, and pulled his sword, holding the weapon high. “Our King has called for us! Once more, we will answer! Du Bekar!”

The Company of Thorin Oakenshield raised their weapons in answer. “Du Bekar!”

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Bilbo hurried along after Gandalf as they raced with the men towards Dale. “Faster Bilbo!” Gandalf cried. “We must make it to Dale before it’s too late!”

“Too late for what?” Bilbo asked, panting heavily. He wasn’t cut out for this, running and fighting. The sounds of battle were very close behind them, and Bilbo had quite enough of war for a lifetime.

Gandalf didn’t slow. “They’ll target the city next,” he said. “To make us split our resources. If we get there before they breach the wall, we may yet have a chance of keeping them out.”

Breach the wall? Bilbo thought, and took a moment, to look. His foot hit a rock and he pitched forward, tumbling and rolling as the world spun around him. There were pounding feet all around him, and he scrambled more than once to get out of the way. He had no idea which direction he was facing, he barely knew which way was up, until a firm hand grabbed him around the arm and pulled him up off the ground and onto horseback.

No, not horseback. He was sitting astride a dwarven Ram. “Are you alright, master hobbit?” the Rider in shining armor asked.

“Quite, thank you,” Bilbo said, out of reflex more than anything, as he patted himself down. There were more than a few bumps and bruises, a few that he was sure would hurt spectacularly later, but at the moment he felt very little pain now that he could breathe.
The Rider was taking them both up the path to Dale, the mount making much quicker work of the steep mountainside than those running up the winding path. There was a crash, and Bilbo had a moment’s panic that Smaug was upon them, the way the air around them shuddered with the sound. He spun to look, and saw the dust settling around a giant hole in Dale’s Northern wall, a troll lying dead or insensate across the rubble. Did they really send a troll to break down a wall over a foot thick? They must have, because the orcs were rushing through the hole like ants to a spilled bowl of sugar.

“They’ve breached the city wall!” Bilbo cried, heart falling as he saw Gandalf and the others still outside.

“Then we shall make them pay,” The Rider said, and Bilbo blinked in surprise. There was something strange about that voice, but he couldn’t place it. The Rider urged them faster, and Bilbo hung on tightly.

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Fíli wiped sweat from his eyes, and speared an orc with his sword one handed. “Twenty-seven,” he said, not quite breathless.

To his right, Thorin spun Orcrist in deadly circles, a dance of violent grace and skill. The orcs fell as they came near, and none came close. Fíli blocked the hooked metal of an orc, stepping in to stab his side, and swung through, slicing the head off another orc as he did so.

To his left, Gimli danced as well, Peacemaker a seeming extension of his arm. Where the axe swung, orcs fell, and Gimli, the braggart, kept a running tally of his kills. “Thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight! Is that all you got, you stinking—thirty-nine!” It was obnoxious, is what it was, but Fíli would not begrudge such skill on their side.

But there was another reason why Fíli’s eye kept catching on his cousin. He would swear, when Gimli fought just at the edges of Fíli’s vision, that he flickered with white light. It had to be a trick, his eye overwhelmed by battle, and Fíli forced himself not to look.

Another orc swung at him. Caught off guard, Fíli knew he wouldn’t get his sword up in time, but the orc stopped mid-motion, and fell dead. Behind him, stood Kíli. He grinned. “Brother.”

Fíli forced himself to smile back, though he felt dread pool in his stomach. “Brother.”

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It was unlike anything Bofur had ever experienced. The closest would be their flight from Goblintown, but even that paled in sheer numbers. Still, he swung his thumper, and Bifur dispatched orcs neatly with his spear, and Bombur barreled through the enemy with his surprising speed.

He could see Dwalin with Thorin, as the two fought back to back as they always did. Ori swung a great warhammer, almost comically large for his size, but it was Dori that truly surprised Bofur. The fussy dwarf’s choice of spiked bolos for his weapon had always baffled Bofur, even after seeing him use them. He was skilled, aye, but how much damage could they really do?

Lots of damage, it would seem. Dori fought with all his great strength, and as Bofur watched, a well-placed swing took a coming orc’s head clean off. He was splattered with black orc blood, but, Bofur noticed, none that came within his reach went near his brother.

There, that great thumping was coming closer. Bofur turned and looked up. Oh, that was one tall
Nori appeared next to him, as if from nowhere, and gestured toward the troll.

“Oh,” Bofur said, and grinned. “Well that’s an idea.”

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The city was in chaos. The orcs flooded through the lower levels, and the remaining guardsmen were hard pressed to keep them contained. Women and children hurried past, moving the wounded and what supplies they could to the great hall in the center of town—the last defendable position.

The Rider came to a stop above what must have been the marketplace. “Here’s where you get off, master hobbit,” the Rider said. “Find Gandalf. Tell him I will find him when I am done here.”

The Rider offered an arm, and Bilbo took it gladly, sliding off the mount’s back. As soon as he was clear, the rider unsheathed a great sword, and charged, shouting her war cry. The orcs closest stopped long enough to see what was coming, and were sliced down.

It was like watching a game of tenpins: where the Rider went, the orcs fell. It was enough to rally the guardsmen, and the tide began to turn.

“We have to plug the hole!” A guard cried, and the Rider whirled about.

There was a harsh breath close to Bilbo’s ear, and he spun, bringing up sting out of instinct, and managed to stab the orc through the chest. It fell, wheezing its last breaths, and Bilbo fled to find Gandalf.

Gandalf was with Bard at the top level of the city. He looked up with relief when Bilbo entered.

“Bilbo!” he said. “You’re all right!”

“A rider picked me up,” Bilbo said. “He’s down in the marketplace; they’re trying to plug the hole.”

Bard nodded. “Lets hope they succeed,” he said. Another rumble shook the floor, and Bilbo looked around him in worry. If the foundation went, they’d all go with it.

***

“Fall back!” cried Dain over the din. “Fall back to the mountain!”

Fíli swung his sword, dispatching an orc who had come up behind Kíli, only to duck so Kíli could do the same for him. It had often been remarked that the Fíli and his brother fought as if they were a single dwarf, and he was glad of it now.

The retreat echoed around them, and Fíli desperately looked for a way out of the crush of orcs they were wading through. They had been separated from Thorin when the Company had rushed the field, and Dwalin had taken his place at Thorin’s side. Gimli was a distant blur of white-flickered red, and a steady count that drifted over to Fíli in patches.

Fíli had lost count of his own kills.
“Come on, Gimmers!” Kíli called. “Stop playing around!”

“You’re just mad I’m winning!” Gimli’s voice called back, and then, “Oh, Mahal’s blessed balls!”

There was a pause, as if the orcs were waiting, and Fíli turned to look.

The enemy had set loose their berserkers—cave trolls tortured past sense. Once set loose, they would smash everything in their path, friend and foe alike, armed with great knotted and spiked clubs. That could explain the call for retreat.

“Come on,” Fíli said, but Kíli grabbed Fíli’s arm.

“We have to get Gimli,” Kíli said. “He’s surrounded—he’ll never get out of the way in time.”

Fíli nodded. “Right. Come on.”

A dwarf’s stamina is unparalleled, but even a young dwarf will tire eventually. Fíli’s arms felt like lead, and they moved just about as gracefully, but still he and Kíli were able to fight their way through to where Gimli still fought.

He fought like wind and fire, flowing from blow to blow, sweeping through his opponents. His chanting count seemed to be keeping his pace, and when orc iron met dwarves steel, there was a flash of pure white light.

“What is that?” Kíli asked, and Fíli shook his head.

The troll roared, and Fíli cried out with Kíli: “Gimli!”

Gimli didn’t pause; he dropped in a roll and came up with a discarded shield. The Troll swung his club, sending orcs flying, and when he brought that club down on Gimli, Gimli was in position.

The shockwave knocked them both off their feet. When Fíli was able to pull himself upright, the troll was dead on the ground.

A dwarf stood at its head, straining to pull an axe free of the troll’s skull, and Fíli knew it was Gimli, but their little cousin didn’t usually glow. This dwarf did, with a white shine like moonlight.

“Gimmers?” Kíli asked, faintly, and the glowing dwarf turned: it was indeed Gimli. Fíli would recognize those eyes, that brow, anywhere, but this was no dwarf of sixty-four. This was a dwarf of at least one-hundred and thirty, his beard full and braided. He had warriors ink above his left eye, and a diplomat’s rings in his lips, but it was the marriage braid in his hair, with an elven plait and green wooden beads, that caught Fíli’s eye. A proud display or a challenge? Knowing Gimli, it was both.

“Of course, they have cave trolls,” Gimli muttered, and noticed Fíli’s expression. “What?”

Fíli opened his mouth to answer, but Kíli managed first. “It’s not fair!” he wailed. “Your beard!”

“My—” Gimli started, and then stopped, raising his hand to his chin. “Ha!” he barked, and grinned. It was certainly Gimli’s grin.

“Come on,” Fíli said. “The battle is not over, and you’re trick won’t keep them off us forever.”

“Very true,” Gimli said, and sprinted over to them. He moved differently, both like he weighed more and carried it more easily. His steps were sure, and when he came closer, Fíli noticed elvish-scrollwork in the details of his clothes.
With a sharp look, Fíli and Kíli let Gimli take point, and he laughed as he cut his way through the few orcs who dared get in his way.

They rejoined the others, and Fíli watched as Gimli steadfastly ignored that he was suddenly the center of attention. Fíli knew Gimli was aware, there was a tightness around his eyes that spoke to Gimli’s self-control.

“Gimli?” Glóin asked, sounding quite fed up. “Oh, what now?!.

Gimli turned to his father, grinning. “Not quite as old as I last remember, but closer to what I expect to see, all the same.”

Fíli expected Glóin to comment, but it was Dain who spoke next. “Mahal’s blessed beard, what on Arda—?”

Thorin stopped Dain with a hand. “Later,” he said. “We all have questions, but first we must live to ask them.”

The hairs the back of Gimli’s neck stood on end, like the charge before a thunderstorm, and Gimli looked out over the battlefield. “Something is coming,” he said. “Powerful. Old power,” he said.

Dain looked at Thorin. “A seer, too?” he asked.

Thorin simply shrugged.

Fíli looked out, trying to see what it was Gimli saw. He saw only the orcs of the enemy, still crawling over the ridge. There were so many of them, and their allies were spread so thin. He could see the bulk of Thranduil’s forces at Dale, helping their new allies. Bofur had crashed his infernal creature into another, and had rejoined their ranks. The berserkers were banked, aimed towards them. All they needed was the word and they would be set loose.

“Steady boys,” Dain called. “There’s plenty for all of us.”

That damned horn sounded again—and was cut off as the blower died with an arrow to its neck.

Up from the southeast rode a host of riders, at their lead was an elven woman, with hair the color of gold and mithril, her gleaming sword held high. Fíli saw Legolas, and the red hair of Kíli’s Captain Tauriel, and—was that Lord Elrond? and Glorfindel the Balrog-Slayer? Behind them were elven riders, dressed in green leathers. The guards of Eren Lasgalen.

The lady’s sword burned with white fire, and she cried out in her elven tongue as they charged the battlefield. The words echoed through Fíli’s heart, and though he did know know their meaning, he understood well enough. He, and those around him, raised their weapon in an answering cry.

“Baruak a Khazad! Khazad ai Menu!”

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Bilbo watched with awe as the newest arrivals took the field. "Who is she?" He asked, stunned.

Gandalf joined him at the railing, placing a hand on his shoulder. "That is the Lady Galadriel."

"Oh," Bilbo said. So this is the Elven Lady Gimli has sworn his service to. "She's beautiful."
"She is," Gandalf said, with such a low, bittersweet ache in his voice, and Bilbo looked to him in surprise. Gandalf smiled sadly. "The Lady has been my dear friend for centuries, Bilbo. She deserves more happiness than this world has given her, and has carved out a hard won peace. I admire her."

You love her, Bilbo thought, but he did not say it out loud. There were some things that did not need to be said. He looked back to the battlefield, his eyebrows rising as she quickly dispatched three orcs with a single swing of her blade. "She certainly knows her way around a sword."

Gandalf laughed, a full richness that seemed out of place in these dragon-burned ruins. The Lady was a shining beacon on the field, rallying the free peoples to her over and again. Where she fought, the others fought harder, more bravely, and the orcs fell and did not get up again.

There was a deliberate tread of shoe on stair, and Bilbo turned to see Thranduil standing at the door to their balcony. The Elvenking was disheveled, his hair awry and tangled in the circle the wore. His armor and face wear blood spattered, and his eyes were very wide and very white in his otherwise impassive face.

"King Thranduil?" Bard asked, quietly, and Thranduil closed his eyes. If he had been a hobbit, he would have shaken himself, and Bilbo got the impression that he was doing just that within the confines of his mind.

"I am well enough," Thranduil said. He stepped forward to join Bilbo at the railing, watching the battle below with his keen Elven eyes. His eyes found Lady Galadriel, and then searched, settling, at last, on his son. Legolas was astride his horse, firing his bow and guiding with his knees. Thranduil gripped the railing before him, knuckles white as if holding on was the only thing keeping him from throwing himself back onto the battlefield once more.

“Good,” Gandalf said, and turned back towards Bard. “That second army cannot be far behind,” he said. “We must prepare for their coming.”

“And how do you intend to do that?” Thranduil asked without turning to look, his voice low and coarse. “What hope have we but to live with the choices we have made, and try to put what pieces together we can in the end?”

Bilbo looked sharply at the Elvenking. “You know,” he said, leaning in as if he was one of cousin Flora’s girls sharing the market gossip. “I have spent the last several months with a dwarf who knew everything that was going to happen. Everything has already played out, had already been written. And yet, he still fights for change.”

The elvenking did not move, but Bilbo knew he had his attention, anyway. “Foolish,” Thranduil said, at last.

“Maybe,” Bilbo said. “But you know, he’s done it?” A beat passed, and Thranduil turned to look at him. Bilbo cleared his throat, but still smiled as warmly as he could. “Already things are changing, because one person decided to not give up hope, because the future’s not done until it’s past.”

Thranduil watched Bilbo for a long moment, and at length, nodded his head. “Tell me, master hobbit, when did halflings surpass the wisdom of the elves?”

Bilbo smiled at him, and tapped his nose with his forefinger.

Thranduil’s lips twitched, though he did not smile, and he turned. “I can recall my squads to the city. We can push outwards with your men from there once the lower levels are cleared.”
“The lower levels are cleared,” said a muffled voice, and Bilbo sighed with relief when he saw the Ram Rider in the doorway, followed by what seemed to be every able-bodied woman in Dale. They were pale, some still streaked and grey with ash, but they were all of them armed with whatever they could find and there was no dismissing the steel in their eyes. One stepped forward, and Bilbo recognized her from town.

“Bianca,” Bard said with some surprise.

Bianca lifted her chin, proudly. “We’ll not cower in the dark when we can fight. We’ve lost too much, Bard,” she said. Bard sighed, relieved.

“We are glad to have you.”

The Ram Rider addressed Gandalf directly. “The breach in the defenses has been sealed. The orcs in the market and lower levels have been killed or driven out.”

“We can hold the city,” Bianca said. “Gather your soldiers if you must, but we will fight to protect our own.” Thranduil blinked, but nodded his head a fraction, acknowledging her words.

“Aye,” said the Ram Rider, and finally, removed the ornate helmet.

Bilbo nearly saw double—the dwarf before him could have been Thorin, with the same proud nose and dark hair, but this dwarf’s beard was longer, braided elaborate with delicate silver clasps, and her eyes were Ólí’s warm brown—and he blinked rapidly. Gandalf, the bastard, simply chuckled.

“Lady Dís, it is an honor.”

Lady Dís. Bilbo closed his mouth with a snap. Thranduil’s sister, Ólí and Kíli’s mother. He never thought that he would meet her, let alone like this.

“It is, isn’t it,” she said to Gandalf, but there was a humor in the twist of her lip that said she saw right through his flattery, and he wasn’t going to fool her.

Oh, Bilbo liked her already.

Dís looked Thranduil over, her face impassive. Thranduil, to Bilbo’s surprise (and Bard’s too, if the look on his face was any judge), bowed his head.

“It has been many years, Granddaughter of Thrain,” he paused. “You have grown much, in the passing years.”

“That will happen in exile, yes,” Dís said, mildly, and Thranduil raised an eyebrow, looking to Bard with an expression that clearly said I’m trying, and you see what happens! But Dís cleared her throat. “Still, that exile is over, and I look forward to our next meeting coming more quickly.” Thranduil blinked, at last caught off guard, but he inclined his head once more, and touched his fingertips to his chest.

“Now,” she said. “What’s the plan?”

Gandalf began to cover his information, when the sound of a horn, not an orc horn, caught his ear. He looked over the battlefield, and saw it at last.

“Gandalf,” he cried. “Look! There!” At the far side of the battle, Thorin had grabbed a Ram mount, and was leading Dwalin, Fíli, and Kíli up around the side of the mountain, headed for where the orc army’s battle flags sounded their orders.
“They headed for Ravenhill,” Gandalf said, with some surprise.

“He aims to kill Azog,” Dís said. “Kill their leader, the army falls.”

Bilbo felt his heart skip. “Um, excuse me, but isn’t that in the direct path of the other army?”

Thorin was leading his family into a slaughter. Gandalf looked grim.

“He must be warned,” Gandalf said.

“I’ll go,” Bilbo said, and everyone stopped to look at him. He resisted the urge to fidget. “I will warn him.”

Gandalf shook his head. “If they see you, they will kill you.”

“They won’t see me,” Bilbo said, and he could feel the weight of the ring in his pocket.

Lady Dís put her armored hand on his shoulder. “Maybe not, but that level of stealth will take time we don’t have. I will take you.” Bilbo smiled at her, gratefully. Still, the ring weighed heavy in his pocket, as if disappointed. Bilbo pushed that thought away. Ridiculous.

Gandalf nodded at them both. “With haste, then. Go, now!”

Lady Dís shoved her helm back on her head, and led Bilbo away to Ravenhill.
It was so good to feel like himself again. Gimli couldn’t help grinning as he swung his axe, and more than one orc paused at seeing that grin—with fatal results.

Still, it was an even greater joy when his next target fell before he could bring his axe to bear, a familiar arrow sticking from its throat.

“Twenty-six,” called Legolas from somewhere.

Gimli laughed.

“Legolas!” he called out. “Ibin abnâmul!” He looked about, but could not see his elf. “Where are you?”

“Here,” called a voice from behind and approaching quickly. Gimli spun, and had just enough time to raise his hand before Legolas, still on horseback, gripped his forearm tightly and pulled him up onto his mount. “It is good to see you again, Meleth,” Legolas said. “I hope it lasts long enough for me to greet you properly.”

Gimli hummed so low it was nearly a purr and Legolas laughed. “Aye,” Gimli agreed. “Let us hope I remain thus long enough for me to win my prize, for my count is now sixty-seven.”

Legolas humphed, and fired his bow once more. How his love could steer their mount without reins, Gimli would never understand. “Twenty-seven,” Legolas said. “And you’ve been in battle for longer than I.”

Gimli grinned and swung his axe, taking out three orcs at once as they passed. “Where are we going?”

It was clear that Legolas was leading them away from the thick of battle. They were aiming for the Mountain—no, next to the Mountain.

“Thorin has taken your cousins to Ravenhill to end Azog and this battle once and for all,” Legolas said. “It is a trap, for Bolg rides from the North and it nearly upon us.”

Gimli felt his blood turn to ice colder than the river itself. “Ravenhill,” he said. “This is the end of it, the moment.” He gripped Legolas tightly around the waist with one arm, keeping his axe arm free. “Swiftly now!” he cried.

It was hard going on a horse, as the terrain was not kind. They had to keep to solid ground, for it was treacherous for even a shod horse to gallop over ice. They were halfway there when they saw the war cart, the dead wargs, and Balin. The white-haired dwarf waved at them from where he sat in the wreckage, idly patting the pelt of a large ram. Legolas pulled up short, letting Gimli slip...
from the saddle and make his way across the ice.

“Cousin Balin!” Gimli called. “Are you all right?”

“I’m old!” Balin called back. “But not so old as to be imminently fatal.”

Gimli laughed as he caught up to the splintered war cart. “Seems like you have an interesting fight.”

Balin grinned, showing his teeth. “It’s been a long time since I drove a war cart. I’ve missed it.”

The Ram bayed, and Balin grinned. “Aye, me too.” He looked back to Gimli, his expression sharp. “Thorin has taken to Ravenhill. My brother and the lads went with him.”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “That is why I cannot dally. They walk into a trap.”

The humor fell from Balin’s face. He looked up at where Legolas waited with the horse. “You’ll never make it up on that beast,” he said, and handed Gimli the reins of the Ram. “Take her. Be swift.” He looked back up at Legolas. “You may have to leave him behind.”

“Never,” Gimli said, but he took no offense. “I’ve learned the weight of an elf is negligible on the back of a beast of burden. You stay safe, cousin.”

“Mahal bless your path,” Balin answered.

Gimli climbed aboard the Ram, and made their way quickly back up the side of the ravine, where Legolas eyed the ram with some trepidation. “My love,” he said. “I’m not sure we will both fit.”

“We have shared tighter accommodations,” Gimli said. “And your horse, as strong as he is, will not have the ease of the climb the way this beauteous beast will.” He held out his hand. “Trust me, my love.”

“Always,” Legolas said, without hesitation, and leapt from the back of the horse, sending her away with a whispered word. Taking Gimli’s proffered hand, he folded himself into the ram in the pillion seat. His long legs were folded tightly, and Legolas’s knees came up to around Gimli’s chest. Gimli pressed his lips together and did his best not to laugh.
"I can feel you mirth, meleth-nin, Legolas said. "Is this payback for the barrels?"

"I would never be so petty," Gimli said, and urged the Ram on with a flick of the reigns. Legolas’s grip tightened around Gimli’s waist, and Gimli knew he was grinning as the Ram lead them across the river and up the path to Ravenhill.

They burst onto the ruins of a small courtyard to find themselves face to face with Thorin and Dwalin. Legolas slid, gratefully and gracefully, from the back of the Ram. Gimli dropped down with more pragmatism, landing with a solid thud.

"Gimli," Thorin said, with surprise. He looked at Legolas. "Thranduillion."

"Legolas," the elf corrected, gently.

Gimli waved his arms. "There’ll be time for that later. The Gundabad army is upon us. We need to
leave now, or we’ll be surrounded.”

“We’re so close,” Dwalin rumbled. “That orc scum is here; I say we push on,”

“No,” Thorin said. “Gimli is right. We must leave.”

“Finally, someone listens to reason,” Gimli said under his breath. Then, louder, “Where are Fíli and Kíli?”

Thorin paled, and in an instant, Gimli knew. “No, no, no,” he said, and looked at the spire beyond. “You didn’t.”

Thorin turned to Dwalin. “Find Fíli and Kíli. Call them back.” Dwalin nodded.

“I will go with you,” Legolas said. “I’m fast on my feet.” Dwalin looked like he would protest, but jerked his head in agreement. They hadn’t taken more than a few steps when the drums sounded.

“Oh, no, no, no,” Gimli said as he spun, but there was no denying the truth before his eyes. He felt his heart fall into his stomach.

Azog had Fíli.

The pale orc lifted him up off the ground with ease, even as Fíli kicked and struggled. Still, he was held fast.

The world around Gimli fell away; he was aware, dimly, of Kíli’s cried for his brother. He knew Legolas had his bow notched and ready to fire. He knew Azog was taunting Thorin, playing with him before he killed—

Before he killed Fíli.

Gimli had failed. Somehow, all the horrors of before were coming to pass again. He couldn’t stop Thorin’s fall. He couldn’t stop the battle. He couldn’t stop the death of his kin. His vision started to white at the edges as the wind whipped around them.

The spell was broken with the sound of an arrow whistling through the air. Azog’s taunts were cut off mid-word in a sickening gurgle as an arrow embedded itself in his nethers. Fíli fell, dropped, from the edge of the ledge, as Agog staggered backwards.

“Fíli!” Kíli cried, and Fíli screamed in pain, but Gimli could hear him swearing. He would live. Fíli would live.

Gimli turned to thank Legolas for doing what he could not, but the elf was not looking at him. His bow was still notched, arrow unfired, and eyes looked South. Gimli followed his gaze and saw the Lady Dís astride her Ram, bow still in hand and Bilbo white-faced behind her.

“Dís,” Thorin said, breathless.

“I will deal with you later, Thorin Oakenshield,” Dís cried, and Gimli felt like wincing even as his heart cheered. “The time has come to end this curse upon our family.” The Ram shifted and Dís rocked with the motion as she raised her eyebrow. “Try to actually kill him this time, yes?”


“Yes!” Dwalin cried, and ran after.
Gimli ran up to the ledge, the need to see overcoming his need to follow Thorin, and he felt Legolas as a tall, warm presence at his back.

Fíli had landed on the ledge in front of another small cave entrance, where Kíli had been watching. That small ledge saved Fíli’s life; another foot forward and Fíli would have fallen into the ravine, miles deep. He had landed, poorly, however, and even without Kíli’s hovering, Gimli would know Fíli’s legs were broken. His left leg lay at a sickeningly odd angle, and his right was bent too far back at the knee. His face was white with pain.

“I will go to him,” Legolas said. “Your king needs you.” He grabbed Gimli by his hair and pulled him in for a searing kiss.

Gimli gasped, and reveled in the scant moment they had together. Legolas pulled away, leaning their foreheads together, their breath mingling. “I have traveled through death and time to be at your side. It would be very ill of you to leave me again, and I would be very cross.”
“I fear not death,” Gimli said, his voice a deep rumble, “But I have no desire to meet her again, so soon. Keep yourself from the halls of your ancestors, and I will do the same.”

Legolas smiled, surprisingly sweet, and gently kissed him again. He pulled back, and stood at the edge of the cliff, prepared to jump.

“And tell my cousin I expect to see him after this—” Gimli cried. “We have a game to settle!”

Legolas flashed him a wild grin, feral and sharp in his blood-flecked face, and left with startling grace to the ledge below.

Gimli watched him disappear, and then turned to follow Thorin.

***

Kíli’s hands shook.

Kíli had been working as a mercenary guard with Fíli since he was in his sixties. He had faced wolves and bandits, orcs and trolls. He had been fighting for his life since he was a young dwarfling, all ears and gap-toothed smile.

Seeing Fíli broken before him, coming so very near death, had rattled something loose, and Kíli could not stop shaking. His vision blurred, and he wiped tears from his eyes, leaving a streak of wetness across his cheek.

There was a soft “thwump”, like the sound of snow falling from a tree branch, and Kíli’s head snapped up, his sword in hand, finally still even as his heart raced like a hare’s, and saw Legolas kneeling in the snow before him.

Kíli opened his mouth to speak, but no words came. Closing his mouth, he swallowed thickly, letting his sword dip. Legolas watched him with luminous eyes, wide and soft with sympathy.

“Danger lurks near,” Legolas said, quietly. “Bolg still hunts, and seeks to avenge his father’s injury. I will stay with your brother, and offer him what little healing I have. He will be safe in my hands.”

Kíli blinked at him, the cadence of his words still so strange in Kíli’s ears. When Tauriel spoke, it was like a strange music, unfamiliar yet already deeply loved. Bolg was here. Legolas could heal Fíli. Kíli could kill Bolg and end the line of Azog. He tightened his grip on his sword.

”Mukhuh Mahal bakhuza murokhzu”, he said, bowing deep. Legolas touched his hand to his chest, bowing his head.

”Galú, Kíli, son of Dís,” Legolas said. “May your blade fall true.”

Kíli nodded, and turned towards where he could now hear the sounds of fighting. Bolg’s time was numbered.

His hands no longer shook.

***

Tauriel landed gently on the top of the rock wall, and took a moment to look back at the battle that raged beneath her. From here it was easy to see the sheer numbers of the orcs; the Free Peoples had rallied, true, and fought with renewed strength of heart, but they were not making the progress they
should, even with Lady Galadriel on the field.

And wasn’t the Lady a sight to behold. She rode like a legend of old, white fire and grace with all the power of the tides. The orcs fled before her, but for every orc she felled, two more took its place. Still, her eyes were lit as if with fever, and Tauriel knew she would fight until Mandos came to claim her, if necessary.

Glorfindel (and Tauriel would never feel quite comfortable leaving his titles aside, not matter how much he insisted), fought much the same, and she could see in him the warrior that had killed the flame of Morgoth.

Such legends come to life; it made Tauriel dizzy when she thought too long on it.

A shadow passed overhead, and Tauriel crouched, head snapping up to judge this new threat. Her heart quickened, but not with fear.

“The Eagles,” she breathed, and she laughed aloud. The sound of it echoed amidst the clang of steel. The Eagles had come.

Tauriel had never met the Great Eagles, though she knew Legolas had in his other life, and she could only watch as a great host of them flew overhead. They were large, large enough to carry even Glorfindel as a rider. In fact, one tawny eagle did carry a rider, a wild-haired man in brown homespun. Radagast the Brown.

Looking closer, Tauriel saw others among the eagles, held in their talons, and as they passed over the battlefield, the eagles let them loose. One by one they fell, and as they fell they shifted taking the form of great beasts, with a great Bear the lead. “Skinwalkers,” she breathed.

And in that moment, the tides were turned. The Skinwalkers let no orc past, and the eagles picked off their prey, to drop them from a great height only to topple a score of others. They might yet win this day.

Tauriel was suddenly aware of harsh breathing behind her, and the stench of unwashed orc filled her nose. She spun, her hair flying out behind her, even as she slashed with one of her wicked long-bladed knives.

Bolg stopped the blow with the metal of his arm guard, and Tauriel cursed her inattention. Her battle was not over yet. With a cry, she leapt at him, her knives flashing.

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Kíli heard Tauriel cry out, and stopped, heart beating fast. He was in the guard tower, and its paths were many. He closed his eyes, and listened, focusing on the sound of her voice, pushing away the rest of the echoes. He put his hand to the stone and tried to quiet his breathing. His left ear twitched.

There! The scuff of an elvish shoe, the heavy tread of iron-shod orcs.

Kíli took off at a run, not bothering to open his eyes, relying on the echo of his own footsteps to tell him the twists and turns of his path. The sounds of the fight grew louder as he grew closer, and as he felt the weak sun on his face, Kíli opened his eyes.

Tauriel spun and sliced Bolg’s throat open, sending her other blade up though his chin into his head, just as Kíli skittered to a stop in the small stone courtyard.
There was silence for a long moment as Kíli stared at Bolg, then at Tauriel, who was watching him, breath heavy. She had obviously seen battle. Her hair was matted with blood, and her face was several shades darker from dirt and blood. Her long skirts were frayed and singed. She looked like a wild creature from the stories Balin told when they were younger. She had never looked more beautiful.

It took Kíli a long moment to find his voice, but when he did, he smiled widely.

“That was amazing!”

Tauriel beamed, and only just remembered to drop her other blade when Kíli pulled her into an exuberant kiss.
“You’ve gotten yourself into quite a mess, cousin,” Legolas chided him gently, and Fíli surprised himself when he had the energy to laugh, choked off as it was.

Mahal’s bloody hammer, tongs, and forge, he had never felt pain like this before. “They’re broken, aren’t they. My legs.” It wasn’t a question. He knew they were broken, he didn’t need Legolas’s gentle nod to tell him so.

“They need to be set,” Legolas said. “Or they won’t heal properly.”

But Fíli shook his head. He remembered visiting Gimli when he had been helping on Óin’s rounds. There had been a patient, once, a miner, whose leg had broken when one of the old ore mines, already stripped nearly bare, had collapsed. It had been a big scandal at the time, in a way that Fíli was only just beginning to be aware of, where the workers had been pushed too hard, too fast. There was a new head of the miner’s guild after that, he remembered.

But the miner, one of three who had survived, had been laid up in bed for weeks, pale and wan, as Óin clucked over his leg. Like Fíli, his leg had snapped sideways halfway down from his knee. It had been nearly a day before he had been pulled from the rubble, and well…

Dwarven bones were hard and their muscles were dense. It was not easy to set dwarf bones. Óin had called him lucky to walk away with both legs, even if his crooked leg meant he would never walk without aid again.

Fíli was under no illusion. He was broken while battle still raged. It would be hours before he was tended to, if he was tended to at all, and his legs were in far worse shape than that miner from long ago.

Legolas raised his eyebrows at him. “Do you not wish your legs to heal?” Legolas asked.

“Yes,” Legolas said, and Fíli looked at him in surprise. Legolas pulled his knife from its sheath and began to cut up the side of Fíli’s left trouser leg. “It was long after the events that connected Gimli and I. All of our fellowship, save for us, had left Arda, so I built a boat and together we sailed to Aman. Gimli was already an old dwarf, then, the red in his hair more an echo than it’s current sounding call.” Legolas’s hands were cool where they brushed Fíli’s inflamed skin, though even the most gentle touch sent fire sizzling up Fíli’s nerves. He grit his teeth, and focused on Legolas’s voice.

“We sailed until the days stretched together and time lost all meaning. I do not know how long our journey was, in truth, but when we arrived at the shores of Aman, greeted by the Lady and Mithrandir, Gimli’s hair was a brilliant white.” Without warning, Legolas braced one hand on Fíli’s knee, and pulled. Fíli’s scream startled the birds before he could bite down on it, his sight greying at the edges.

When at last Fíli settled, the blazing agony falling to a lingering red haze of pain, he realized that his left leg was straight once more. He blinked up at Legolas, who had been silent the whole time; he had not expected his slight-framed cousin to be so strong. The elf looked drained, like that simple act had taken more out of him than he had expected. Fíli places his hand over his cousin’s long-fingers, and Legolas’s mouth quirked.

“Together, we built our home on the shore. Unlike the wooden structures of my kin, grown together of living wood, our home was made of stone, in the dwarves fashion. It would have taken a team of elvish craftsman several years to make; it took Gimli and I two.” He sighed. “It would
have been a year and a half if Gimli hadn’t slipped and fell from the roof. If he had been younger, if I had been faster—but we were no longer used to thinking of dangers in that place, and he fell. His leg was much as yours, and he had to coach me through the setting before he would let me send for the healers. I know how quickly dwarves heal, and even in his age when everything begins to slow, if we had waited his bone would not set."

Fíli hummed. His leg still throbbed, but the pain had lost some of its sickening edge. His other leg, however, still howled horribly at him. Legolas closed his eyes, holding his hand just above Fíli’s knee. He frowned, and Fíli felt the little hope he had grow cold in his breast.

“What is it?” he asked.

Legolas sighed, shaking his head and dropping his hand. “Legs, arms—these are easy things to do. Knees, however…” he let the sentence hang as Fíli closed his eyes. “I am sorry, cousin. There is little I can do.”

Fíli nodded, and lay back, praying for the pain to stop and waiting for the battle to end.

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Gimli found the others in a doorway that opened to the frozen river. No one so much as spared him a glance, which concerned as much as frustrated him. He pushed forward to stand next to Bilbo. His friend was pale, and there was a steely set to his jaw that Gimli had never seen before. Gimli looked past Dwalin—not an easy feat, the old warrior was large—and blew out his breath in exasperation.

Thorin was standing alone on the ice, no armor. No helm. Completely exposed.

“Mahal wept,” Gimli muttered under his breath.

“He’s gone to draw out the Defiler,” Dwalin murmured. Gimli looked at Dwalin, and noticed how tightly he held his war hammer. Past him, Lady Dís was standing in shadow, her bow again nocked and ready in her hand.

“Still,” Gimli muttered. You’d think, if he was handing out mithril shirts, he would have at least found himself some solid plate. Then again, Gimli didn’t blame Thorin for not wanting to wear anything from Erebor at the moment.

Something in the air shifted, and Gimli knew they had spotted Azog. He pushed forward as much as he dared, and finally got a clear view of the river.

At the far end from Thorin, Agog had finally appeared. Dís’s arrow was missing from his loins, and he walked upright, though slow. Gimli would bet hard-earned money that he was hurting something fierce. Good.

“Looks like he wasn’t too keen on your handiwork,” Dwalin muttered. Lady Dís raised her head, looking down her nose at the scene.

“Pity,” she said, dry. “I’ll have to try something different, next time.”

Azog dragged behind him a large block of stone attached to a thick, rusted chain. His footsteps crackled and ran on the ice, even under the constant dissonant scrape of stone.

“Oakenshield,” Azog called out. “You and your miserable line end tonight!”
Thorin didn’t say anything in response. His sword never wavered. Step by step, he advanced on the injured orc.

“No pretty words?” Azog taunted. “You’re getting feeble in your old age.”

Still, Thorin said nothing. Now, however, Dís had her bow raised, Azog clearly in her sights.

With a cry, Azog attacked, swinging the stone on its chain with surprising speed—but not fast enough! Thorin ducked under the swing, bringing him up behind the orc as Agog staggered, unbalanced by his wound and the weight of his weapon. Orcrist flashed, and Thorin drew first blood.

Enraged, Azog swung again, and again Thorin dodged. This time, however, the stone block embedded into the ice, sending out splintering cracks. Thorin pressed forward, but his blade was turned aside last moment by Azog’s blade hand. He danced back, eyes wary as Azog pulled his weapon free.

“What are you waiting for?” Gimli hissed. “Put an arrow in his eye and end it!”

“Not yet,” Lady Dís whispered back through tight teeth.

“This is Thorin’s fight,” Dwalin rumbled. “That beast took much from him; our king deserves the chance to get it back. To avenge his father and grandfather.”

“Even if it gets him dead,” Bilbo said, speaking for the first time, and Gimli wasn’t the least bit surprised by the amount of venom in his voice. Even Dwalin looked at him in surprise.

“We won’t let that happen, Bilbo.” Dwalin promised, and the use of his given name seemed to startle the hobbit. “But look at the way Thorin is fighting. Truly look. Who has the advantage here?” If Gimli closed his eyes, he could almost be back on the training grounds at home, listening to Dwalin instruct the other dwarflings as the princes sparred for them.

Bilbo squinted at the fight, and Gimli turned his own attention back to his cousin. The ice was now breaking readily and the ground beneath the feet of both fighters was treacherous. Still, it was Thorin who moved swiftly, who stepped surely from ice floe to ice floe.

Thorin was dodging with ease, but with the added danger of the broken ice, he had yet gotten close enough to so much as scratch the orc’s armor. “Time to tip those scales a bit, yes?” Gimli asked.

Lady Dís nodded. “I do believe you’re right.” She loosed her arrow, and a moment later it was sticking from Azog’s chest, over where his heart would be, if he had one. Dís dropped her bow. “Damn,” she swore. “I missed.”

Azog, meanwhile, broke the arrow off with his only hand, and Thorin used his distraction to slice at him once more.

But the arrow didn’t slow Azog down as much as they had hoped, and in a moment Thorin was the one on his back. He rolled, falling as the ice tilted, and just barely managed to miss falling into the water. He leapt and landed on solid ice. Azog brought his weapon around, and once again the stone stuck fast in the ice. He tugged, but he couldn’t move far as the ice he was on would overbalance, and the stone wouldn’t budge.

Thorin bared his teeth, grinning, and used all of his strength to pull the rock from the ice and toss it at Azog. Taken by surprise, Azog caught the rock, stepping backwards, and that it was all it took. The ice tipped. Azog scrambled, but he was pulled beneath the surface by the weight of his
The ice righted itself on the surface of the water, and everything was still.

“Go,” Bilbo whispered. “Go to him.”

Gimli didn’t need to be told twice. Before them, Thorin picked up Orcrist, then paused as something under the ice caught his attention. He walked slowly, his sword low at his side.

“Thorin!” Dwalin called out, his tread heavy behind Gimli. There was another set, Lady Dís, though it moved with a lighter tread.

“Uncle!” cried another voice, and when Gimli looked he saw Kíli and Tauriel on the other side of the river, Kíli quickly climbing down the rockface.

The next few moments happened very quickly.

Thorin screamed, head back as his foot was pinned to the ice by the blade sticking through it, and when Thorin could finally stagger back, the ice before him broke and Azog sprang from the hole. Thorin landed on his back, looking up at the white beast before him, and Azog raised his blade arm, blood still dripping from the tip.

Another arrow lodged in Azog’s shoulder, and he didn’t even bother to break it off as he turned—right into Dwalin’s hammer, swung with every bit of his strength.

Azog staggered back, face whipped to the side, and when he looked back, his jaw hung at a strange angle. He knocked Dwalin aside, but Gimli was there, keeping him on the defensive as Gimli’s axes flashed.

Then Kíli was there, back to back with Gimli, and Dwalin was back on his feet, and Lady Dís slashed with a dwarven shortsword, and Azog staggered under their combined attack.

Dwalin shattered Azog’s thigh.

Kíli opened Azog’s arm from elbow to shoulder.

Lady Dís drove her sword through Azog’s other shoulder.

Gimli took Azog’s bladed hand just above the elbow.

Thorin stepped in, and in one clean swing, separated Azog’s head from his shoulders.

The head of Azog the Defiler bounced and rolled away, leaving a black trail on the clear-blue ice.

“It is over,” Thorin said, and fell to one knee.

The others jumped to his side, even Bilbo scrambled from his watching place and ran, so no one was there to catch Gimli when the world went sideways and then blissfully dark.

Chapter End Notes

“Ibin abnâmul!” (Beautiful Gem)
“Mukuh Mahal bakhuz murukhzu” (May Mahal’s hammer shield you)
Bilbo wandered over to the edge of the falls, away from the commotion behind them. Fíli had appeared at the battle's edge, supported by Legolas, and Dís had run to Fíli’s side as soon as Azog stopped breathing, pulling him to her. Kíli had run to him as well, but Tauriel had focused on Legolas when he cried out. Gimli had fallen, fainted dead away, and that white-overlay glow had finally faded, leaving Gimli his younger self once more. Legolas had been beside himself until Tauriel was able to convince him that Gimli still breathed, still lived. He swept Gimli up into his arms once more, and Bilbo had found himself smiling, thinking of the way Gimli would yell when he Discovered that, once again, his husband had carried him from a fight.

It had been when Thorin staggered that Bilbo had turned away, walking to the edge of the ice flow to see the fields below.

There was so much to do.

Bilbo, having never been in a battle before, found himself quite unprepared for the aftermath. As a fauntling, listening to tales of the Battle of Baywater at his Granduncle’s knee, he had never imagined the sheer amount of bloody work involved; nobody ever seemed to speak about that part. That part was never in stories.

When Bilbo was older, and the terrible winter snows melted leaving no lasting marker of his mother, he learned first hand the toll of life lost to violence. He saw the way the adults around him closed rank, how they shielded themselves in euphemism and platitude, how they did not let death touch them except for in their most private moments. (He assumed, anyway. It was only when he was alone, after all, that he could grieve for his parents without some busybody or well-wisher interrupting where they were not wanted, can’t you see that? Leave me alone!.) He began to see the way the story talked around grief, and loss, and death, and he thought himself very cleverly when he began to read between the story-lines and see the darkness dwelling there.

The reality was so much worse. There was grief, there was pain, there was loss. There were also the wounded and the living, and they needed medicine, and healing, and food. The snow had returned, and shelter needed to be found and fires started. There were bits of orc and troll everywhere, and the dragon ruins had gained new battle-scars and even the old safe places were now treacherous.

Bilbo looked out over the battlefield, and saw an elf fall to his knees, keening as he Discovered a fallen comrade. Lord Dain, the bloodied bandage around his head not slowing him down at all, pull a dwarf from beneath a pile of rubble. The Dwarf moved on his own, but even Bilbo could see that he could not stand. Lord Dain waved down a Ram Rider, and tougher they placed the wounded soldier on the back of the ram to ride back to the heating tents that had risen quickly after the last of the orcs had fled. Dain waited until the dwarf was gone before pulling free another dwarf, cradling the dead to his chest, and hauling him off to the West to join the others.

Bilbo turned his head, focusing on the sun shining off the rocky face of the lonely mountain. There
were too many picking their way through the battlefield, finding too few. Bilbo would never understand war.

He felt a presence come up to him, and stop just behind his right shoulder. “Well, you’ve done it,” he said, surprised to find his voice so raw. “You’ve won back your home.”

“Aye,” Thorin said, and stopped. Together, they watched the living tend to the fallen.

Bilbo used to crave silence; he would shut himself away in his home, or walk as far from Hobbiton as he dared, until there was not another living voice around. He found he could not stand the silence, now.

“The King Under the Mountain has returned at last,” Bilbo continued. “That will make a good story, make no mistake, and at least a few tavern songs, I should think. Bofur probably already has three written, or I’ll eat my waistcoat.”

“Bilbo,” Thorin said heavily, like he was actually going to talk about this, and Bilbo closed his eyes, suddenly so furious he he was close to tears.

“No,” Bilbo said. “No, you don’t get to speak to me. Not right now.”

“Very well,” Thorin said, and backed away. Bilbo sighed, raising his face to the heavens. He didn’t have to look to see the way Thorin stood, head bowed and shoulders slumped, like a dog done wrong.

“I didn’t say you could leave,” he snapped, and wonder of wonders, Thorin stopped. Bilbo finally opened his eyes and turned towards the dwarf next to him. He had been right, and it was such a sight that Bilbo felt some of his ire leave him. How could he stay angry, faced with such obvious and heartfelt contrition and guilt? Not to mention the confusion that furrowed Thorin’s noble brow.

And it is noble, isn’t it Bilbo? he thought to himself. There, beneath the dirt and blood and pallor, was the face of the noble, brave, honest, loyal, pigheaded, stubborn ass that Bilbo had gone and fallen for, quite completely. There were the eyes, so very blue, that would dance with amusement at Fíli and Kíli’s antics. There was the mouth that would smile so rarely, but all the more brightly for its scarcity. There were the ears—Bilbo remembered Thorin tucking his hair behind an ear absently in what must have been an old habit long since thought broken, and had found himself lost to staring at its delicate coloring. There the nose, so very handsome, that Thorin would tap in a gesture so reminiscent of Balin that Bilbo couldn’t help but see the history there. This was the dwarf that sang in his living room and inspired Bilbo to seek song and adventure. This was the dwarf that inspired armies, and followers with an ease like breathing. This was Thorin. His Thorin.

And Bilbo had been hurt, yes, that the Dragon Sickness was stronger than Thorin’s resolve, that the dwarf he trusted would be so lost. That Bilbo had been made afraid of Thorin, and not just for Thorin. But there was no madness in his eyes now. There was no anger, no wrath nor greed. There was only sorrow, and shame, and pain.

Bilbo never did like to see others in pain.

He sighed, and the last of his anger fled. He brushed a hand over his eyes, rubbing them with his fingers to hide that he wiped away tears. “Are you needed at the moment?” Bilbo cast his hand towards the battlefield below them, so Thorin could not misinterpret what he was saying. He looked and saw a wry humor twist Thorin’s lips.

“A king is always needed by his people,” Thorin said, and oh there was a wealth of history behind
his words. Bilbo wondered, not for the first time, just how ready for kingship Thorin ever was. “But I have time, yet.”

“Good,” Bilbo said, and sat at the edge of the falls, on an outcropping of rock swept clean of snow by the wind. “Sit with me. I’ll let you know when you can speak.”

Thorin nodded, a bit of his dark mood lessened by what he obviously thought of as Bilbo’s peculiarities, but he sat next to Bilbo none the less. As they watched, the largest of the Eagles, the Great Chieftain, bowed to Gandalf and the other Elves that had arrived when Legolas had rejoined the battle. He launched himself into the air, and in a steady stream, the rest of his people followed. Bilbo saw no sign of Beorn or the other skinchangers, and thought they, too, must have left.

Bilbo looked down and nodded at Thorin’s boot. There was red where there had never been red before, and Bilbo’s sharp eyes saw the steady, if slow, drip of blood that fell to splash against the ice below.

“You should have that looked at,” Bilbo said. “No use in killing that beast only to die of blood loss yourself from something as minor as this.”

Thorin nodded, and cleared his throat, speaking tentatively. “I find I am little hurry to attempt the stairs with it.”

Bilbo blinked at him and started to laugh. A chuckle quickly became all-out laughter, and he had to hold his sides for fear that he would split. There were tears on his cheeks, and he knew he was bright red, gasping for breath, and Thorin just watched, amused and slightly affronted.

“Oh, but it feels good to laugh,” Bilbo said, wiping his eyes with the knuckle do his forefinger. “The Mighty King, brought low by a staircase.”

Thorin snorted, but he did not deny it. Instead, he said. “It is good to hear you laugh. There has been little cause for it lately, I fear.”

“Hmm,” Bilbo agreed, and leaned back on his hands. “Oh, bugger. What I wouldn’t give for some Old Toby.” He cracked his neck. “Through all of it, I managed to hold onto my pipe, but what good is it without any pipeweed?”

“I’m afraid I’m fresh out,” Thorin said, dry. “But if I know my cousin, Dain will have ale.”

Bilbo raised his eyebrows. “That could work.”

Thorin smiled, looking away again as it slipped off his face. Bilbo watched him for a moment longer. “Alright,” he said. “Say it, and be done with it.”

“I’m so sorry, Bilbo,” Thorin said, and the damned fool still wouldn’t look at him. “I have been a weak-minded fool, and my actions nearly damned us all to death.” He swallowed hard. “I beg your forgiveness, though I know it is vain of me to expect it.”

Bilbo ignored the sibilant whispering that it would be good to have a king in his debt, and carefully took one of Thorin’s hands in his own. Thorn looked at him surprised while Bilbo studied the hand. It was larger than his own, broader and thicker, callused from sword and hammer. The nails were broken and dirty. They looked far from a king’s hands. (Bilbo saw them, wrapped around Orcrist. He saw them, holding up mithril with a fevered light in his eyes. He saw them plucking the strings of a harp, braiding the hair of his nephews, curled around his own pipe).

“Silly Dwarf,” Bilbo said, voice thick. “I do not blame you for the poisons of evil. You fought your
way back, and that is what matters.” He looked up at met Thorin’s eyes with a watery smile. “Forgiven, my dear Thorin.”

Thorin closed his eyes, and raised his other hand to Bilbo’s head, cupping his hand over Bilbo’s ear and drawing them together until their foreheads touched. Bilbo had seen the others do this, had touched his own head to Gimli’s one or twice, but then it had felt friendly. Familial. It did not make his heart race, or his face flush. The hand over his ear slid down his neck, coming to rest over his collarbone, Thorin’s thumb resting at the base of his neck.

“Bilbo,” Thorin said, breathless. “I—“

“Thorin!” called Dwalin. “Thorin, and you still up here?! You’re needed!”

Thorin sighed harshly, swearing in that strange tongue of the dwarves, and dropped his hand to pull away.

This would not do.

Bilbo sprang forward, quicker than Thorin was expecting, grabbed him by those maddening, endearing ears, and kissed him. Thorn froze, and Bilbo’s heart thudded loudly with the fear of his mistake, before Thorin melted against him, wrapping his arms around Bilbo and pulling him close. Bilbo found himself hovering, half perched over Thorin’s lap, held aloft by those steel-banded arms, but he could be floating for all he cared. Thorn’s lips were warm, his beard surprisingly soft, and this close Bilbo could feel Thorin’s heart racing just as fast as his own. Finally, his mind said. Finally.
After a long moment, when his head began to spin from lack of breath, Thorin finally eased his grip and Bilbo was able to sit back. “Just…so we’re clear,” Bilbo said, dazed.

Thorin grinned, lopsided, and ran his finger along the point of Bilbo’s ear. He shivered. “Like crystal,” Thorin said.

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Gimli awoke to the gentle, lilting melody of his husband’s voice. He kept his eyes closed, listening. As the bittersweet melody filled his ears, he could almost taste the salt of the sea-spray. He smiled, and after a moment, the singing stopped.

“I know you are awake, meleth-nin,” Legolas said. Quiet amusement drifted through their bond, the closeness of his husband easing the barriers between them.
“Says you,” Gimli said. “I am, in fact, asleep with pleasant dreams of song and our home on far, grey shores.” His voice was rough after his hard sleep, but even roughened it was clear that it had returned to its youthful timbre. Bugger and blast, it was too good to last.

Legolas hummed his amusement, and Gimli forced his eyes to open. It was dim, and Gimli would guess early light over twilight, but it was more than bright enough for dwarven eyes to see. He looked around.

He was in a healer’s tent; a long, easily built and broken canvas tent that bore the patterns of the Iron Hills. One of Dain’s mobile infirmary tents, then. He lay on a simple pallet, one of several he knew would be in the tent, though his sight was limited to where his husband sat on an empty crate and to the next bed over.

The blond hair was all Gimli needed to see to know that Fíli lay in the bed, but it was further confirmed when he saw Kíli slumped next to him, sitting on the floor with his back braced against his brother’s cot, fast asleep. Gimli didn’t know if Kíli meant to guard or comfort, but obviously he had underestimated his own exhaustion.

Fíli was clearly unconscious, but his repose was more uneasy than his brother’s. He was near waxen pale, with an unhealthy bloom of color above his ear, and he shifted restlessly in his sleep.

“How is he?” Gimli asked, jerking his chin at Fíli.

“He will live,” Legolas answered. “I was able to set his leg on the field, and your Uncle and Lord Elrond both believe it will heal like new, so long as he doesn’t overtax himself. His other leg,” Legolas paused, tilting his head in an approximation of Pippin’s head wagging when the young took was about to play with his words to hide the truth of his actions. “It was good Lord Elrond is here,” he said, at last. “But even he admits little knowledge of Dwarf bodies, and his understanding of Dwarf healing, is thus limited. He will keep the leg, but he will always limp, now.”

Gimli nodded. Lord Elrond’s assessment was not unexpected, per se; Gimli had seen Fíli broken. He would have been very surprised indeed there had been no lasting damage, but he was glad the damage was as minimal as it was, and gladder still that Fíli lived to bear his injury. A dwarf with a limp was still a dangerous enemy, and a warrior with a limp was treated with great respect indeed. To survive such an injury proved the strength of the dwarf, and they often made the best warriors. Too often were limping dwarves overlooked by men, elves, and orcs, to their Dismay. Still, it would be an adjustment for Fíli, and Gimli was suddenly, fiercely glad that Dain was here. Fíli would do well to speak to his cousin, when his fever broke.

“Thorin?” Gimli asked, not yet looking away from his cousin.

Legolas snorted. “Your king limps as well, as he has refused to remove his boot to have Óin tend his wound. He claimed he has too much to do, and instead ran from one encampment to the next as if he must clear away the battle all by himself. That is, until Bilbo sat on him to hold him still. I have never seen your king so willing to be chastised by a peeved Hobbit. He stares at Bilbo like Aragorn watched Arwen.”

Good, Gimli thought. He raised a hand to his face, letting the weight of it soothe him. “Why is my king so determined to get himself maimed or killed?” Thought, if I’m right, he may be a bit less determined now.

“Something about kings,” Legolas said, his voice gently amused. “Aragorn had a similar Disposition, in the days after Pelennor, if you remember. He nearly put himself in the healers’ wing, he was there so often. And I remember too, Theoden’s drive to die, glorious in battle.”
Gimli sighed. “He got his wish, at least,” he said. The death of Theoden was decades past, but the ache remained, a small warmth next to the flare of Eomer. He was a good king, and for the short time they knew him, a good friend. “All right, my love. You’ve made your point.”

Legolas nodded. “The others live, also. Your father remains unscathed, and your uncle lost only his horn. Young Ori will have an impressive new scar,” Legolas ran a finger from his left eye down his chin, “and Bifur lost his axe. The others fared just about the same—wounded and healing. They were well armored, and that saved much.”

“Good,” Gimli said. He shifted, preparing to push himself up, and paused. “And me?”

“You fainted,” Legolas said, in a false-light tone that Gimli knew was meant to tease, but Legolas had always been poor in hiding his sorrows. Gimli raised his hand to his husband, and Legolas stood quickly from the crate to perch on the side of Gimli’s cot. He took Gimli’s hand in his own, and pressed it to the side of his face, his eyes fluttering shut. Gimli felt Legolas’s hair tickle his fingers, and he flexed his fingers to play with the strands.

“I am sorry, ghivashel,” Gimli murmured. “I did not mean to frighten you so.”

Legolas’s lips trembled as he fought to hold back tears. “I was like every nightmare all at once. To see you crumble like the ruins around us, still wearing the face you wore when I first met you—to lose you to death once, only to lose you again so soon after I had found you, I…” he stopped, his voice giving way, and Gimli pushed himself upright.

It was hard, one-handed, far harder than it should have been, but Gimli would not be caught lying around while his beloved One was in such pain. “kurduh, amralimê, I am here. I live. I am with you, always.”

Legolas breathed, shallow and shaken, before he could make himself speak. “Always,” he said, ever a promise between them. Gimli brought up his other hand, as he did not see Legolas letting go any time soon, nor did he wish it, and smoothed it over the back of Legolas’s head, resting it, warm and solid and firm, on the back of Legolas’s neck. Legolas tipped his head forward, meeting their foreheads in a gentle touch, and Gimli held him until his fears faded once more.
It was easy enough for Gimli to get cleared by a healer—his wounds were minor, and he seemed to be better off than many. His bed was sorely needed.

Gimli expected the commotion to disturb Kíli, used to watchful sleeping, but his cousin didn’t so much as twitch. Were it not for the steady rise and fall of his breathing, Gimli would fear the worst.

Then again, the past few weeks had been trying on all of them, and Kíli was not yet fully grown. Perhaps his deep slumber wasn’t so much of a surprise.

After stepping from the tent, Gimli watched with some amusement as Legolas bent nearly in half to climb through the dwarf-sized opening, and he nearly ran smack into a flustered Tauriel.
“Oh!” she said, nearly dropping the wrapped parcel she held in her hands. Gimli smelled honey and the sweetness of fresh baking, and recognized the lembas she held. Her ears flushed a bright red as she resettled her parcel and nodded a short bow. “It’s good to see you up, Lord Gimli.”

Gimli waved a hand. “Please, lass. Call me Gimli, as you have been. I’ve never used my title among friends before, and I don’t plan on starting now.”

“Especially not with friends who may soon be family,” Legolas teased, his voice low and warm. Gimli rather thought the poor captain would ignite, she turned so red. Gimli chuckled.

“So that’s the way of it, aye? Good,” he nodded, decisively. He knew how much Kíli cared for the Captain, and it warmed him to think of Kíli finding the same happiness with Tauriel as he himself had found with Legolas. “His highness the younger is asleep inside. I’m sure he wouldn’t mind the company.”

Tauriel’s flush didn’t ease, but her smile was wide and free as she wasted no more time with them and rushed past into the tent.

“Where to now?” Legolas asked, and Gimli blew a stubborn lock of hair from his face as he planted his hands on his hips.

“Now,” he said, “I must speak with my King. My work of the past several months was, I fear, only a part of my—of our—quest in this time. Our secrecy of future events has served its purpose, and I do believe it is time to tell all that we can.” Gimli smiled grimly. “You need information to win a war, after all.”

Legolas sighed. “‘Tis a mixed blessing, this travel backwards, for while we may undo some of the hardships, our hard-won work is also undone.”

“Then it is good Lord Elrond is already here,” Gimli said. “Saves us the trouble.” He sighed, and rolled his neck on his shoulders. “Come. Let us find my king’s tent. First steps must be taken.”

Legolas indicated the direction of his king’s tent, and they set off through the makeshift camp. It was a healer’s camp, and thus the air was dolled with the moans of the pained and the bitter scents of medicinal herbs.

There were many tents erected—the long, squat dwarfish tents abutted the taller, squared elvish ones. There were even a few haphazard tents made of whatever material could be scrounged together for the men who could not get space elsewhere. It was not a set up that could last for long, and Gimli knew as he looked around that alternate shelter would need to be found, and fast. Winter had only just set upon them, and there were many more months of deep snow ahead.

Gimli found the bustle of survivors parting in front of them as they walked; even though Gimli looked again as a callow youth, he was known now as a member of Thorin’s Company, and a veteran of what was now coming to be called the Battle of Five Armies—a name, Gimli now learned from Legolas, that had been coined by Bilbo. Gimli nodded to those who met his eye, returning the respect they offered him.

That is, until they turned a corner and Gimli stopped in shock, and resisted the urge to cover his eyes by smacking himself in the face.

There, in a clear space in front of his tent, stood Dain, naked as the day he was born, save for his Iron Foot, and washing away the grime of battle.

Behind him, Legolas began to laugh, quietly and yet with the fullness that Gimli knew would
quickly leave Legolas breathless.

Contrary to popular belief, Dwarves held little in the way of body-shyness in the way Men tended to have, but in Gimli’s experience, it was limited to bathing chambers. Elves were the ones to go prancing in the nude, not dwarves.

Then again, if any were to use a healer’s tent village as a bathing house, it would be Dain. Gimli had quite forgotten that quirk of his king, but now it was staring him in the face. So to speak.

While Gimli stood, torn and deliberating, Dain spotted him.

“Whee Gimli!” Dain cried, dropping his rag into a bucket of suspiciously murky water and turning to face them fully. He held his arm open in welcome and Gimli thought he heard Legolas choke, just a bit. “It is good to see you, cousin!”
“Aye,” Gimli said, at last, and resigned himself to his cousin’s eccentricities. He returned Dain’s embrace. “It is good to see you, as well. Though,” he added, pulling back. “I hadn’t expected to see quite so much of you, so soon.”

“Bah,” Dain said, brushing away the sentiment and bending over to grab his rag once more. A few elves who had been walking behind Dain, suddenly scurried quickly away, and Legolas lost his tenuous control of his mirth. He reached out with one hand blindly, and only just managed to sit himself on a barrel. Dain winked at Gimli and began scrub in earnest at the black that still stained his arms.

“I’ve fought in many battles, Gimli,” Dain said, leaning in as if taking Gimli into his confidence. “And I’ve killed many orc. If I’ve learned anything from it, it’s that Orc blood will itch like you’ve dipped your danglies in poisoned ivy if you let it linger.” He grinned, leaning back. “Besides, I’ve nothing to be ashamed of.”

He was right about that; Dain’s iron foot was the most visible of his injuries, true, and the most spectacularly healed, but it was not the only injury. Beneath his covering of copper and white hair, his chest, arms, and legs were littered with the scars of battle. Across his shoulders and down his arms and back, his skin was almost fully blue with the size of his mourning marks, the elaborate knot work of his parents. As Dain moved in the light, the eye was caught by the metal in his flesh, his mastery piercings and his warriors metals. Gimli refrained from looking too closely—some sights were better left for one’s spouse.

“Indeed,” said a gentle, musical voice from behind Gimli, and both he and Legolas froze. “It appears that Lord Dain more than lives up to the size of his…reputation.” Gimli turned, and there stood Lady Galadriel, still dressed for battle and with a smear of orc-blood on her cheek. It was strange to see her attired thus; in all his years he had never seen the Lady in other than her flowing dresses, but he could not say she was not suited for this. It was almost as if Gimli was getting a glimpse of a secret kept from long ago.

“Aye,” Dain said, and to Gimli’s horror, he reached between his legs to grab his stones. “And they’re iron, too.”

Lady Galadriel threw back her head and laughed, drawing the awed stares of many around them. “Surely not! For would they not then call you ‘Ironstones?’”

Dain laughed, crossing his arms in mock affront. “And who says they don’t!” Dain flexed his ass, making his “danglies” sway and showing off an impressive collection of metal rings. “Compliments of my wife. She’s her mastery in iron work, you know.” He beamed with pride.

“I’m sure she does,” Galadriel said, dry, and Dain blinked at her. After a moment, he roared with laughter.

“Oh, I didn’t even mean that one! Oh, fuck me, you win, you win.” Dain waved his arm at Galadriel, and the Lady nearly preened.

Legolas leaned over Gimli’s shoulder, whispering in his ear through his mirth. “I wish Aragorn were here; he’d never believe us, otherwise.”

Gimli barked a laugh; Aragorn, for all that he was raised among elves, was too much of a Man, and too afearèd of his wife’s grandmother, to be able to do much but cough and splutter if faced with such a scene.

His mirth easing back to a chuckle, Dain quickly finished scrubbing the last of the grime from his
skin as the Lady Galadriel turned, at last, to Gimli.

“My Lady,” he said, bowing with all his courtly manners.

“My Champion,” the Lady said, and bid him rise with a small gesture of her hand. “I see my gift to you has served you well.”

Gimli nodded, his hand over where the gift lay heavy at his breast. It had been some time since he had been so aware of its presence. Perhaps it, too, was exhausted.

“Aye, My Lady,” Gimli said. “Though its gifts were unexpected, they were far from unwelcome—much as your own presence, if I may be so bold.”

Lady Galadriel smiled. “I find the boldness of the line of Durin refreshing, Gimli Silvertongue.”

“Oh, I like that,” Dain said, coming over. He had donned a pair of trousers, but was still bare chested and damp. “Silvertongue and Ironstones. Not a bad pair of names.” He hooked an arm around Gimli’s shoulder, drawing him in. “And speaking of names, Oakenshield is expecting us.”

“He is?” Gimli asked. Had someone let him know Gimli was up?

Dain’s grin turned sharp. “If he wasn’t before, he fucking is now. I’ve got a bone to pick with my dear kingly cousin, and an army to care for.” He released Gimli and looked up at Lady Galadriel. “Will you join us, lass?” He offered his arm, and to Gimli’s surprise, Lady Galadriel took it.

“I thank you, Lord Dain. I believe I will.” She looked up, and for the first time Gimli saw what must have been Thorin’s tent. “There is much that needs to be decided.”

The four of them found Glóin and Ori sitting outside the entry to Thorin’s tent, obviously meant to act as guards. However, the wound on Ori’s face was still fresh, bound as it was, and he leaned heavily on the handle of his warhammer. Glóin had made no pretense to health, and was sitting heavily on what looked to be a block of rubble from Dale, head forward and eyes closed.

“Gimli!” Ori cried, seeing them first. He held his head at an odd angle, as if trying to keep the bandage from his eyes. It was enough to rouse Glóin, who woke up spluttering.

“What! Gimli? Wha—Gimli!” Glóin called out, standing swiftly. He swayed, a bit, as if swooning, and Gimli darted forward to hold him upright, and pull him into a fierce hug. “Oh, Gimli, my lad, my múnud, you’re alright.”

“Aye, none the worse for wear,” Gimli said into Glóin’s tunic. At some point, he had rid himself of his armor, and if Gimli was to guess, he would assume that few if any of the company continued to wear the armor they had taken from the Mountain. Gimli pulled back and Glóin knocked their foreheads gently together before pulling back to address the others. He bowed to Dain, and more deeply to Lady Galadriel, taken a bit aback by the presence of such a lady of beauty and grace. He looked longest, however, on Legolas, nodding at last.

“If it’s the king you want to see,” he began, addressing the pair of Dain and Lady Galadriel, “I’m afraid he’s in with his healer, now. I don’t know how long—”

“Send them in, Glóin!” called Thorin from inside. “Before—ow! Damnit, Óin!”

“It wouldn’t hurt so much if you’d just keep still!”

Dain held the tent flap open so Lady Galadriel could enter, and gestured for Legolas to do the
same, much to the wood elf’s surprise.

Glóin squeezed Gimli’s shoulder. “Go on, lad. I’ll be here, after.” Gimli nodded, and followed his husband into the tent.

The light was low, lit by a brazier in the corner that also provided much-desired heat, and it took only a moment to adjust. Thorn was on the bed, with Dwalin next to him and Óin at his feet. It wouldn’t have been so remarkable, Gimli knew Thorin had sustained a wound to his foot, save for the fact that Thorin wasn’t sitting so much as being sat on—Bilbo was perched on Thorin’s thighs, ostensibly to keep the king still, while Thorin leaned back, his arms crossed in defeat. His right foot was off the bed, and Óin was very carefully applying an ointment over a row of stitches. It must have hurt something terrible, but Gimli wasn’t sure that Bilbo was keeping Thorin steady from the pain.
“Are you content now?” Thorin hissed, but there wasn’t as much heat as Gimli would have been expecting, and when Bilbo smirked at him, smug, Gimli nearly staggered back. It appeared that the heat of battle had done much to thaw the ice that had grown between Thorin and Bilbo.


“After I—Bilbo!”

Bilbo crossed his legs, and oh did Gimli recognize that expression. Bilbo wasn’t going to budge on that one.

“Don’t you ‘Bilbo’ me! I know exactly how little food there was in that mountain, and that was before you fought a bloody battle! You will eat, you will rest, and you will heal—do you understand me?”

Thorin sucked his incisor, and nodded. “Aye, I understand you. Dwalin?”

Dwalin grunted, his bemusement barely hidden beneath his blue beard, and left to get his king food. He paused only to look at Lady Galadriel with some surprise, bowing to her.

“There,” Óin said, voice too loud and off key, as he finished wrapping Thorin’s foot. “Keep off of it until the morning,” he instructed, and pointed at Bilbo. “You make sure of it.”

“I intend to,” Bilbo said, and Gimli had to credit him; only the tips of his ears had turned a little pink. Óin stood from the bed, bracing a hand in his back as he stretched his older bones. He turned and jumped when he saw Gimli and the others waiting.

“Oh, Hammer and tongs! How long have you been there?”

“Who’s here?” Thorn asked. “Bilbo, I can not see through you. Who is here?”

“Not long,” Dain said, ignoring Thorin at the moment, but Óin wasn’t looking at him. He was staring at the Lady, who was smiling back serenely.

“Eh?” Óin said, Distracted.

“NOT! LONG!” Dain yelled.

“WHERE’S YOUR HORN?” Gimli asked, and Óin turned from the Lady long enough to smile at Gimli.

“Ah! Nephew! Good to see you up! Did you see what happened to my horn?”

Gimli closed his eyes. “No, Uncle!” he said, loudly.

“Shame,” Óin said, shaking his head. “Well, I’ve dawdled here enough. I have real patients to get back to.”

“That’s what I said,” Thorin said as he tried to sit up, but the angle was off and Bilbo shoved him back down. “Bilbo, there’s is simply too much to do—“

“They can do without you for a little while,” Bilbo said, calmly. “We have guests.”

Dain swaggered up, jumping a little to land on Thorin’s bed. It bounced just enough to make Bilbo sway, but instead of pressing his advantage, Thorin steadied the Hobbit.
“Cousin,” Dain said, seriously. “If there’s is one thing I learned from this damned leg, it’s that when the king is injured, the king’s business comes to him.” He gestured at the foot of the bed, and Bilbo finally slid from Thorin’s legs. He bowed his hobbit bow at them, and helped Thorin gather his pillows without a word.

“Indeed it does,” Lady Galadriel said, speaking for the first time. “And we have much to discuss, you and I, Thorin son of Thrain.”
Bard stood at the edge of camp, watching the carrion-birds pick over the dead in the early light. It was a gruesome image, and not one he would have before chosen to focus on, but then again... He had never lived through such a battle before. He ached in ways he hadn't known to ache, and his heart was bruised from the constant fear for his children.

His children were safe. Strong Sigrid. Brave Bain. Sweet little Tilda. All safe.

Such was his preoccupation, however, that he became aware, quite suddenly, that another had joined him without his notice.

Bard would have jumped, but he was too tired for such sudden movement. It wasn't hard to recognize the still and silent figure by his side. He hadn't seen much of the Elvenking since the battle, and he wasn't sure why Thranduil would seek him out now. But seek him he had, and found him he had, and so Bard would wait to see why.

Except Thranduil did not speak. He stood, watched, and waited. After a time, Bard found himself studying the elf instead.

Gone was the armor, and in its place Thranduil wore simple robes the color of mulberry wine. The robes held a high collar and came to a narrow point over Thanduil's breast. His hair, which normally flowed over his shoulders, was split to lie over his chest, and he wore no crown but a thin line of silver. Bard could not see Thanduil's hands, as they were each tucked into the opposite sleeve, but he would bet those elegant hands were missing their heavy rings.

It was strange to see the Elvenking thus. To any who approached, Thranduil would appear as aloof as ever, yet Bard knew differently. After so little time, Bard could see how thin a line connected Thranduil to the now.

"So many dead," Thranduil said suddenly, his deep voice rolling across the misty ground. Bard almost thought he could see the path it took in disturbed fog.

"Aye," Bard said. He did not yet know the full count, but he knew his people. There were faces that should be there, faces that had survived the dragon, that he no longer saw.

"How do you mortals do it?" Thranduil asked. "I have lived ages in my forest, and have lost much in that time. There are moments when I can barely breathe from the weight of it. How do you do it?"

Bard looked out over the field again. "We just do," he said. "What other options do we have? We fall, we break, we get up, we rebuild."

Thranduil didn't respond, but he did not turn to leave until Bard made to go.

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Thorin, it seemed, was quite as enamored with the Lady Galadriel’s presence as Gimli had been. It had been quite gratifying to see his eyes, so long narrowed in grief and anger, concern, and determination, widen so far. Dwalin, who had stiffened at the sight of her, was not quite so smitten, refusing to move from his position by Thorin’s side and greeting her with little more than a harsh grunt. Gimli had closed his eyes and counted to calm his temper at the slight against his Lady, but Galadriel took it in stride easily enough. She bowed to Thorin in the dwarven way, showing him his due respect as a king, and Dwalin’s glare was a slight less sour than before.

“Much have I heard of you, Thorin Oakenshield,” Galadriel said. “Your skill carries your name far.”

Thorin nodded back to her as best he could—poor Bilbo had gone quite starstruck, and seemed disinclined to speak. Dain, meanwhile, had lain next to Thorin, still shirtless and with his great arms folded behind his head, penning him in. His eyes were closed, and if it weren’t for a certain tilt of his head, a tension in his frame, Gimli would have thought him sleeping.

“I am sure it has,” Thorin said. “But I have traveled too far to put much stock in tales that travel such distance.”

“And yet your far-traveling has earned you much wisdom,” Galadriel said, and, to Gimli’s surprise, sat upon the stool Óin vacated. She should have looked awkward, folded in on herself, but she managed to make the position look graceful. Gimli wondered, briefly, if she ever looked anything but—even in her fury on the battlefield, he knew the awesome power she could wield.

Taking his cue, Legolas sat on the ground. With little other option, and Gimli sat next to him, grateful for the musty carpet someone must have dug up and placed hurriedly down. The ground had already frozen, and he did not wish to freeze his arse sitting on frozen ground.

Thorin watched Galadriel for a long moment, and Galadriel seemed content to watch him in return. Gimli knew she was looking into Thorin the way she had looked into the Fellowship upon their first meeting. He wondered what she would see. Would she see his honor and bravery? His dedication to his people and his will to do them right? Or would the taint of Dragon Sickness still darken the corners of his soul, for all that he was (for now) free of the effects?

“What brings the Lady of Lorien to Erebor?” Thorin asked, at last. “Our mountain is not close to your home.”

Galadriel’s lips curved in a gentle smile. “All homes are near when all are threatened,” she said, and to Gimli’s surprise, she sighed. “That is a truth that has been long denied by my people, for as we have lived we have loved this world too fiercely. So have we withdrawn to save ourselves this hurt.” She closed her eyes for a long moment, and Gimli was startled to see the pain tensing around her eyes.

“I remember well the fall of Khazad-dum, the fall of Celebrimbor and the rise of the Balrog,” she spat the word like it was poison in her mouth, and it was enough to make Bilbo jump and Dain open an eye to watch her speak. “I remember, too, the battle at the gates, when a young dwarf prince earned his name.” She sighed, looking away even as her chin remained noble. “The ill in my life comes in threes; when I was called to Rivendell and met my Champion,” here, she smiled at Gimli, who felt his face heat under her regard, “I knew that I faced the third, and that if I let it pass by without action, it would be the last mistake I made.” She sighed. “And I was right; for a misstep now would lead to the ruination of us all.”

Silence fell between them, as nobody knew quite what to say. Thorin seemed struck that she would admit to wrong-thinking, and was surprised by the dire nature of her assertion.
It was Dain who spoke. “That seems like quite the heavy consequence, lass,” he said, his rough voice gentle. There was none of the jocularity of earlier, none of the jolly eccentric he played in court. “Are ye certain?”

“Aye,” she said, and Gimli grinned helplessly at the way Thorin continued to look shocked. It was well known that an elf wouldn’t say “aye” when ten words would say the same, and to have the lady use their way so easily warmed him. “Darkness is coming, Thorin son of Thrain. We will all need to be prepared.” She turned and stared at Bilbo, who turned bright red under her gaze, but did not flinch away. His left hand twitched at his side, by the pocket of his coat, but settled against the outside of his fabric.

Gimli cleared his throat and everyone turned to him. “Last time, there was a council in Rivendell, a meeting of free peoples. It would not be remiss to repeat such a meeting.”

Galadriel nodded. “Indeed, Gimli,” she said, and Gimli felt his heart warm at the sound of his name spoken in her voice. Legolas elbowed him sharply, and Gimli pinched his thigh. “But perhaps with a change in venue. Lord Elrond is here, working his skills in the healers’ tents, as are others who would attend.” Gimli nodded; a good portion of the Council of Elrond was present: Glorfindel and Gandalf, Glóin and Gimli, Legolas and the others from the Greenwood—even Bilbo. The only members who were not in attendance were the representatives from Gondor—and of them, only Aragorn was yet born.

“Then we may have it here,” Thorin said. “Those who are able are already starting work on the mountain, clearing rooms for our people and Bard’s.” At Dain’s noise of surprise, Thorin scowled at him. “They cannot stay in ruins all winter, Dain, and I will not let that pompous—“ he broke off, looking at Legolas.

Legolas smiled wryly. “Pompous is accurate, if you are describing my father,” he said. “And several other words, besides. Still, I thank you that you have not used them here.”

“Quite,” Thorin said, and it was apparently enough to Bilbo. He began to giggle, and it was as if it marked the end of their talk. When Bilbo’s laughter started to turn shrill, Thorin pushed himself upright to run a soothing hand over Bilbo’s back.

Gimli leaned back against Legolas's side, his husband's arms draped possessively over his shoulders and idly playing with a loose lock of his hair. The position had earned them both a look from Thorin, but Galadriel had smiled. Gimli had missed his husband, damnit. If he could be close to him, he was damn well going to be.

Dain hummed. “Do ye think the sprite’ll share his food with us as he did with the men?” he asked, idly rubbing his hand over his abdomen. “I’ve had just about as much cram as I can stomach.”

Thorn side-eyed Dain. “That is certainly a lot of cram, as you have a lot of stomach.”

Dain grinned at nothing. “All the more for my dear, sweet One to hold close,” he said, and slapped his hand to his skin with a meaty thwack. “It’s iron underneath, never fear.”

“Never,” Thorn said, and rolled his eyes. “Where is Balin? It appears we have much to do, and I have need of my seneschal.”

Dain cracked an eye open to glare mildly at Thorin. “Do I look like a bloody mind-reader? I don’t know where he is. I’m surprised he’s not here.”

“Last we saw him, he was sitting on a broken war-cart,” Gimli said. “Surely he can’t still be
Bilbo shook his head. “I saw him in camp earlier, with Thorin’s sister. I believe he was looking for his counterpart among your people,” he said, and nodded at Legolas.

“Galion,” Legolas said, supplying the name. “If he holds true to form, he would be found among the wine barrels,” Legolas added in undertone to Gimli. Gimli bit his lips to keep from laughing.

“He’ll turn up,” Dain said, un concerned. “He always does when he’s needed. He’s always been good like that, Balin. If he’s not here, it means he’s needed elsewhere, and you can bloody well relax for once and let your foot heal.”

Thorin looked as if he was about to argue, but glanced at Bilbo, and instead relaxed back into his pillows.

“Good,” Dain said. “I’m glad you’re seeing sense, Cousin, as I have a more pressing question.” Without so much as opening his eyes, he flung a hand out to point at Gimli and Legolas. “Will someone explain what the buggering fuck this is all about?”

“Well, that’s certainly part of it,” Legolas said, eyes slitted and voice like silk over steel, and Dain’s impressive eyebrows nearly disappeared into his hair, his mouth a perfect “o.”

“And what of it?” Gimli demanded, puffed up in anger and frustration. He was tired of the constant looks and dismissals. They had already lived through this! “I’ve had quite a long few harrowing months away from my husband, not to mention one of the most terrible battles I have ever fought. If I want to be close to my One, I will be close to him, and I’ll thank you to remember that.” Gimli crossed his arms, aware that Legolas was trembling behind him.

No, not trembling. Laughing. The blasted elf was shaking with suppressed laughter.

“And just what is so funny?!” Gimli fairly roared, turning towards Legolas.

“Ah, meleth, I am simply happy,” Legolas said, cupping Gimli’s cheek with his hand. Legolas’s fingers were cool on Gimli’s flushed skin, and he felt his anger leave him like air from a bellows.

“That is well, then,” Gimli grumbled. “You should be always happy.”

Legolas leaned in, kissing Gimli gently. “With you, that is no hard feat.”

“Oh, that is right precious,” Dain cooed, a sardonic tone to his voice. “But I fear you’ve gone and done Mr. Baggins in.”

Gimli pulled back and looked over to Bilbo; the hobbit was an alarming shade of red, and was quite determinedly looking anywhere but at him. “My apologies, Bilbo. We did not mean to make you uncomfortable.”

“No, no, ah—“ Bilbo said waving it off, though he still wouldn’t look at them. “It’s quite all right. I’ll just—“ He slid off of Thorin’s legs at last, but stopped once on his feet. The color quickly drained from his face, and he swayed in place for a long moment.

Thorn frowned. “When was the last time you ate, kurdel?” he asked.

Bilbo looked back at Thorin, a bit wild-eyed. “I…I do not remember,” Bilbo said.

At this, Dain sat up. “That’ll be my cue. Come on, lad. Let’s see about getting food fit for this
motley lot.” He winked at Lady Galadriel. “Especially this one. A right scoundrel if ever I saw.”

The Lady Galadriel simply smiled, serene, but Gimli got the distinct impression that she wasn’t contradicting Dain’s teasing assessment. It made Gimli realize just how little he actually knew of his Lady.

Before following Dain out of the tent, Bilbo nodded at Dain, and pointed a stern finger at Thorin, who held up his hands in a posture that screamed “Who? Me?”. Gimli snickered. His cousin had never looked so much like Kíli.

Thorin cleared his throat. “Gimli,” he said, and paused. Gimli sat up straight; he had never heard Thorin sound so hesitant, and his heart beat in his chest with a sudden rush of apprehension. What could make his king, his noble steadfast king, sound thus?

Thorin closed his eyes and seemed to gather strength. When he looked upon Gimli again, there was a resolve burning bright in his dark eyes. “I say this witnessed, to prove my troth. Gimli, son of Glóin. I am sorry for the hurt that I have caused you—as king, and as cousin.”

Gimli felt his throat thicken, and had to swallow before he could make himself speak. “I require no apology from king or cousin,” Gimli said.

“And yet you have it,” Thorin said. “I have doubted you from the first, when I should have doubted you last.”

Gimli shook his head. “You could not know,” he said. “If anything, it is I who owe you an apology for the secrets I have kept from you.” Gimli’s voice wavered and he paused. “From all of you.”

Thorin’s grim expression of contrition lightened ever so slightly as his mouth curled into a gentle smirk. “I am hardly one to berate you for secrets kept, little cousin,” he said. “If I were Balin, I would be berating you for secrets told.” He nodded at Legolas. Legolas ran his hand in soothing circles on Gimli’s back, and Gimli decided to accept that as the gentle tease it was meant to be, rather than the insult it could have been.

“If you were Balin, you’d be too busy yelling at me for not standing right now,” Gimli said, dryly, and Thorin chuckled.

“Now that is truth,” he muttered. “Still, I would like to know your tale, if you would.”

Gimli looked at Lady Galadriel, but there was no judgement in her gaze. Neither was there an indication of whether he should speak. He resisted the urge to sigh. Some elves just never got over the habit of blank communication. “I would,” he said at last. “But my tale is linked with that of the darkness that comes, and some of it I will not speak of until we have managed to secure the council.”

Thorin looked surprised, but nodded. “Very well,” he said.

“Indeed,” Lady Galadriel said. “I find I much desire to hear your tale.”

And so Gimli told them all he could. He spoke of his last memory before, and clutched Legolas’s hand tightly while he did, to remind the elf that he was here and alive. He told them about how strange it was to wake in his childhood bed and how strange the once-familiar sight had been. He spoke of his mother and his kin, of his half-planned escape to Hobbiton. He spoke of the farmer’s hounds and supper with Bilbo. He told them of Peacemaker and his struggle to reclaim his former skill. He spoke of returning to familiar places that were not yet familiar. He spoke of Legolas and their bond, saying only that the events of his past life had forged a new path of them, and their
union had been blessed by elf and dwarf alike.

Bilbo and Dain returned from their hunt, bearing bowls of the communal stew that fed the camps. Glóin followed them, lending his aid in carrying the bowls. Gimli accepted his bowl, eating carefully under the eye of his father until he was prompted to continue his tale. There was much Gimli had to say to Glóin, but while he was calm, it could wait for a better moment. So he spoke of his meeting with Thranduil, of the growing sickness that he could sense in the Greenwood and in the mountain. He told them of his struggle to keep his past from playing out as they approached the dragon. Thorin had difficulty keeping his eyes on Gimli when he spoke of watching the others fall prey, one by one, to the Dragon Sickness, but he did not call for Gimli to stop.

Gimli admitted that Bilbo had known for some time because of his own journey on their adventure, and that Fíli and Kíli had been brought in on his secrets as well.

“Those two scamps?” Dain had asked.

“Watch it,” Thorin growled, nudging Dain’s arm so he nearly poured stew over his beard. “One of those scamps is my heir.” He turned back to Gimli. “How is he? Fíli? And Kíli?”

“Fíli had not yet woken when we left the healer’s tents,” Gimli said. “His leg will heal well enough. Lord Elrond did all he could for Fíli’s knee, but there was only so much that could be done,” he said. Dain nodded his acceptance of the healer’s assessment, well used to such statements. Thorin was less sanguine, but accepted it all the same. “Kíli sat sentinel, but was sleeping soundly. Tauriel is with them; they are safe.”

Thorin nodded and carefully put his spoon down inside his bowl. Gimli knew it was a trick to avoid his temper.

“Well,” Dain said, brightly. “That’s some tale, lad.” Dain’s tone did not match his features, however, and his brow was beetled in deep thought. “Wonder what it’s all for.”

“Your answers will come soon, Lord Dain,” Lady Galadriel said, and stood. Gimli scrambled to his feet, and those that were able followed suit. “I must be off; if we are to meet, then there are those who need to be spoken to. With your leave,” she said, and bowed to Thorin. Thorin, looking faintly gobsmacked, bowed back as best he could and the Lady was gone in a few graceful steps.

“Is she always like that?” Dwalin grumbled.

Gimli nodded. “Aye,” he said. “The Lady is very old and very wise.” He looked up at Dwalin. “And very powerful.”

“Aye,” Dain agreed.

After the Lady’s departure, the others began to trickle out. There was still much work to be done, and every able bodied Man, Dwarf, and Elf was needed. Gimli found himself and Legolas assisting in the battlefield cleanup. Those who could be healed were already off the field, and those who were too close to death had already been comforted through their last moments. What remained, then, were the fetid corpses of the orc ranks—the trolls, the goblins, the beasts of the world. They were slated to be burned, not on a funeral pyre, but like clearing choking underbrush, a purification through fire.

It was long, tiring, filthy work that lasted past the setting sun, and Gimli was covered with more putrefaction than he cared to admit when Glóin found them to tell them that Fíli had woken. Glóin had carried no torch on his approach, his older eyes better suited for the dark than the light by any
stretch, but Gimli was aware of his father’s approach long before his arrival.

Legolas, his dearheart, his lovely own, tactfully pulled away before Glóin could meet them, allowing Gimli as private a moment as possible with his father.

Gimli stood next to a pile of bodies, arching his back in a stretch before standing tall to watch Glóin’s approach. Glóin looked even more tired than before, and he limped as he walked. An injury? His father had shown no sign of hurt before, save exhaustion, but at one-hundred and fifty-eight, Gimli knew that soreness could enter Glóin’s joints without warning after long use.

“Gimli,” Glóin said as he approached, and Gimli opened his arms, pulling his father into a tight hug. Glóin held him tightly, his nose pressed into Gimli’s hair, and his beard warm and soft on the side of Gimli’s face. His father smelt of healer’s herbs and blood and sweat, but Gimli held on, all the same.

At length, Glóin pulled back to regard his son. “Fíli is awake,” he said. “Awake and aware. The healers suspect he’ll be able to move into the mountain under his own power when the time comes.”

“Good,” Gimli said, and felt a knot of tension release its hold somewhere deep in his chest. “That is very good.”

“Aye,” Glóin agreed, and fell silent once more. Gimli refused to shift where he stood. He was a full-grown dwarf, so to speak. He didn’t need to shift about like a young dwarfling caught with his hand in the biscuit tin.

“I don’t understand you anymore,” Glóin said, and swallowed thickly. Gimli stilled, caught quiet by those words. “I want to; I heard your story. All of it. Ori and I were listening shamelessly, I’ll admit it. But when I think of what you lived through, when I think of how the world has changed for you…” Glóin trailed off, shaking his head. “I see a stranger when I once saw my son.”

Gimli grabbed his father’s hands, leaning in earnestly. “I am not a stranger, Adad, he said. “I am as I have always been, Gimli, son of Glóin, and that will not change even long after you and I cease drawing breath.”

Glóin raised an eyebrow, but when he spoke his tone was mild. “I cannot see myself advising you to marry the prince of Mirkwood.”

“Ah,” Glóin said, and grinned, sheepish. “Well, to be fair, you didn’t know about it until after it was too late to stop. My life carried my travels far and wide, and Legolas and I were too far away to send quick word.”

“Uh huh,” Glóin said. “And what did your mother say when you fed her that line of shit?”

Gimli grinned. “She spluttered fit to bursting, and then took Legolas under her wing because my love had no real understanding of what it was like to be married to a dwarf.”

“And I?” Glóin asked, sounding almost afraid to ask.

“You yelled for thirty minutes and had to be taken to the healers when you nearly fell over from chronic oxygen deprivation, brought on by the fact that you didn’t breathe once in the entire tirade.”

Glóin threw his head back and laughed. “Aye,” he said. “That sounds like me.” He sighed. “It may take some getting used to, having my sixty-four year old son turn into a—how old were you?” he
asked, seemingly surprised that he didn’t know.

“If I am right,” Gimli said. “I was one hundred and thirty-nine, which is the age I was when I received the Lady Galadriel’s gift as we left Lorien.” Gimli smiled, remembering the tranquil beauty of that moment in time, before he shook himself. “I mean, um. One hundred and thirty-nine.”

Glóin mouthed the number back to him, and shook his head. “You were the very vision of what a dwarf should be,” he said, quietly. “And I am so happy that you made it back to me in one piece.”

He looked over at where Legolas stood, so obviously trying to look like he was not listening that it was clear he was doing nothing but—even the orc shield he held in his hands, ready to be added to the pile, was held listlessly. When Glóin looked at him, Legolas’s eyes widened, and he hurried to move.

Glóin raised an eyebrow. “A subtle one, isn’t he?” he asked, dryly.

Gimli smiled at his husband. “There is not a guileful bone in his body,” he said. “He is honest, eager, and true, though he is also prone to fits of mirth and has a trickster’s humor.”

Glóin snorted. “He’d have to, to keep up with you,” he said.

“Oi!” Gimli protested, but he was laughing. It was true, after all. “Legolas,” he said, calling out to his husband. “Come here so I may introduce your properly.”

Legolas was by their side in an instant, his long legs carrying him quickly over the distance. He bowed his head to Glóin, hand open over his heart. “I am Legolas of the Greenwood, at your service,” he said, and Glóin’s eyes widened once more. Gimli had to elbow him in the side when he didn’t move.

“Oh!” Glóin coughed. “Ahem. Yes.” He bowed. “Glóin, son of Groin, at yours and your family’s,” he said. When he straightened, he looked up at Legolas. “Though I suppose we are your family now,” he said, and the amount of disbelief in his voice made Gimli bite the inside of his cheek to keep from laughing hysterically. Narrowing his eyes, Glóin stared at Legolas for a long moment. “I never thought I’d see the day,” he said, “When my son would marry an elf, let alone into the line of the Elvenking.”

“If it helps,” Legolas said, quietly, “My father never foresaw that his son would marry into the royal nobility of Erebor.”

Glóin barked a laugh at that. “No, I supposed he never did.” He pulled a considering face, stroking a hand down his beard. “I have to say, that makes me feel a lot better.”

“Dad,” Gimli said, rolling his eyes.

Glóin waved him off. “You love my son?” he asked, and when Gimli made to speak, Glóin silenced him with a look. “We dwarves only love once, and I still know my son well enough to know that he has lost his heart to love for you. I ask again, you love my son?”

Gimli watched as Legolas met Glóin’s eyes and held them. All at once, his wild, fey husband looked very much like his father, and the strength of his lineage shone through. “Already we are bound, everlasting and eternal in the manner elven bonds. I have followed him through time and death itself, to stand once more with him. I will follow him wherever he will go, through the end of this world and into the next. I love your son, Glóin son of Groin, with all of me.”
“Well,” Glóin said, and Gimli was startled to see his father blinking damp eyes. “You have a way with words when the mood strikes, don’t you?” He shook his head as if to clear it. “Your road will not be an easy one, you know?”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “It is not the first time we have walked it. But we walk it together, and that is what matters.”


Glóin had to cover his mouth when Legolas, unprepared for the greeting, staggered back, reeling. “Oops,” he offered when Gimli shot him a look, and went to steady his husband.

“Come on, then,” Gimli said, and started to lead Legolas away. Glóin cleared his throat.

“Um, my son? You may wish to wash up, first.”

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Fíli returned to awareness slowly. He felt muddled, like his head was stuffed with wool, and he struggled to claw his way out of the darkness. Sound came to him first, voices, familiar voices speaking in low tones. There was Kíli, a somber thread running through his otherwise playful tone. His brother was growing up. There, Oin, loudly advocating for the benefits of his ointments, and Balin, a voice reason in this madness. His mother’s voice, close to his face, and a cool hand pressed to his brow.

A strange voice, elven, and yet—familiar. Tauriel. Kíli’s elf.

“There he is,” his mother said, very clearly indeed. “There is my brave son.”

Fíli opened his eyes, and wished he hadn’t, for with his sight came pain.

Fíli gritted his teeth against a sharp wave of agony, barely hearing as his mother gently shushed him and as the others quieted. The pain receded just as quickly as it had come, fading to a throbbing ache in his knee that drowned out the rest of the lingering pain.

“Try again,” Tauriel said. “The pain will not return.”

Fíli frowned. He wasn’t sure he wanted to.

“Call for him,” Tauriel said. “He will answer.”

“Inudoy,” his mother called.

“Fíli,” Thorin said, and oh—Fíli hadn’t known his uncle was there.

“My son, come back to me,” his mother said. “Come back, so I may give your uncle the proper thrashing he deserves.”

“Oi,” Thorin complained, a knee-jerk reaction that was so very much like him and Kíli that it shocked a laugh out of Fíli. Slowly, he opened his eyes again.

“There you are,” his mother said, cupping his face with her hand.

“Mum?” He asked. He looked around. Dís was sitting next to the bed on his left, with Thorin standing next to her. Balin and Óin were at the foot of the bed, having turned to him from their
argument. Kíli was fairly squeezed onto the bed with him, which was nothing new, and a comfort besides. Behind him, looking surprisingly awkward for an elf, was Tauriel. Awkward or no, Fíli was not one to miss the way she hovered near his brother, or how Kíli’s whole countenance was aglow.

“You’ve been asleep for most of the day,” Dís said. “We were beginning to worry.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Óin insisted. “Injury like that, I’m surprised he’s awake now.”

“My legs,” Fíli said. “What happened to my legs?”

“Well, you have them,” Dain said, and Fíli craned his neck to see Dain sitting on the cot next to his. “Which is a step in the right direction.”

“Was that a pun?” Thorin asked.

Dís shook her head. “You are terrible, Dain.”

Fíli swallowed. “That doesn’t answer my question.”

The news, that he would walk again, but that his knee would never again alone hold his full weight, washed over him like a low wave at the ocean shore. There was a deep darkness ahead. He could feel it pulling at him, knocking him from his feet, but here, at the shore, it was distant still. He was sure, when he felt less like wool, he would be suitably upset. For now, however, he simply nodded to show that he had heard, and cast his eyes over his visitors.

“Thorin?” he asked. “The others?”

“Well,” Thorin said, quick to reassure him. “We lost none from our company, lad. We made it, to a dwarf.”

Fíli had to close his eyes against the sudden welling of emotion. They had made it. Surely that would be enough.

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Nightfall found Thorin at the entrance to Thranduil’s tent, announcing his presence, and for the life of him, he could not figure how he had come to be there.

Bard appeared at the entrance of the tent and looked at Thorin in surprise. Thorin raised an eyebrow, but did not otherwise comment. Bard, now to Thorin’s surprise, rolled his eyes in answer and moved aside to let Thorin into the room.

Thranduil was on his chair. He was not slumped over; that would imply a lack of grace. Instead, Thranduil was draped, and it rankled something essentially dwarven in Thorin to see such a waste of economical movement. Thranduil, who had his head propped up by three fingers, which were in turn supported by an arm on the side of his chair, merely blinked.

Thorin bowed. “I have come to discuss the business between our peoples,” he said.

“And you came alone?” Bard asked, and Thorin glared at him, but there was a rueful humor in Bard’s eyes. “That was either very brave or very stupid.”

“I have often been informed that there is little difference between the two,” Thorin said, thinking of the very hobbit who had said such a radical thing. It made Bard laugh, at least.
Thranduil didn’t so much as blink, watching like a spider in his web, but at the sound of Bard’s laughter, it was as if Thranduil was a clockwork doll suddenly wound. He moved with surprising speed to pour the three a glass of wine. Thorin took his, inclining his head to Thranduil. Wine, a toast, was at the heart of Greenwood politics. He simply wished he remembered enough of those early council meetings with his grandfather to not give undue offense. (Not, of course, that Thorin had much he considered undue—Thranduil had been a right prick).

Once the Elvenking was seated, Thorin began to speak.

“Winter is upon us,” he said. “King Thranduil, you and your army have your woodland home to return to, but King Bard, your people are welcome to stay beyond the aftermath of this battle. Erebor has a roof, and by days’ end tomorrow it will have a door against this winter and the cold, dark creatures that travel within. I officially offer you welcome to Erebor, if you wish to stay within our walls. Either way, if you do or do not, the Dwarves of Erebor offer, too, our aid in rebuilding Dale.”

Thorin looked away for a moment. “I did not misspeak when I called Dale the Jewel of the North. In my youth, I remember a colorful, vibrant city.” he met Bard’s eyes. “I would see Dale returned to such vital splendor.”

Bard’s answering smile was tinted with clear relief. “Thankfully do we accept your offer,” Bard said. “I have despaired of finding shelter for all of my people. To know that one exists, and so close to our home, is welcome news indeed.”

Thorin turned to Thranduil. “I would offer you the same comfort, if not for the way your home remains safe behind the trees. Still, if you wish to be close…” Thorin let the sentence hang. Thranduil regarded him thoughtfully with grey eyes.

“I acknowledge your offer in the spirit it is intended, and it is with that same spirit that I must decline. We will remain here until it is deemed safe to carry our wounded back to my realm.”

Thorin nodded. He hadn’t expected anything else, but it was nice to be right. “Then that brings us to the matter of this treasure.” He paused to drink a little from his wine; he remembered well the lessons of his youth: do not drink too deeply of elven wine. “There are several matters complicating this issue, the first being, of course, a matter of inventory. Decades as the bed of a dragon has put several tons out of place. In addition, at first glance it appears that Smaug has been accumulating wealth, or, at least, he was when he could still easily move in and out of the mountain. Before we can deliver on our promises, we must first be sure of that with which we are working.

“That being said,” Thorin continued. “I promised you, King Thranduil, the white gems that were so long denied to you. Once we have cared for our wounded and our dead, we will begin the search. They are somewhere in this mountain, and they will be found.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow and nodded. If he had been anyone else, Thorin was sure he would have been spluttering with surprise.

“Bard,” Thorin said. “I promised you the wealth to rebuild Dale. I speak now to begin our negotiations. We are in position to offer workers, architects, and stonemasons to help in the reconstruction of the city, with more arriving as more of our people arrive from the Blue Mountains in the West.”

Bard nodded. “That would be most helpful. Much of our skill in stonework has passed beyond, brought with them by those who have passed before us.”
Thorin nodded deeply, in difference to the dead. “So to the treasure: the contract signed by my company could be read as pertaining only to the original treasure hoard of Thror. Therefore, we offer you a portion of the gold seized by Smaug the dragon after the exile of Thror from the mountain, from the amount that is now in excess of the treasury of Erebor as it was under Thror, in the amount needed to rebuild and resettle Dale,” Thorin said and sat back with his arms crossed, as if to watch their reactions.

Bard was in shock. “You—that is a lot of wealth, Thorin!”

“Aye,” Thorin said. “And it is a mere drop compared to the wealth of Thror. A wealth that is needed by her people, who have wandered as beggars.” Thorin’s jaw clenched. “I will not see my people go hungry again.”

Bard was still pale, but he nodded. “I know that feeling well.” Thorin and Bard shared a look of understanding. It felt, at last, like the end of a long ordeal.
It would be the work of months to make the whole of the mountain habitable, and the world of several years to restore what had been damaged to its full glory. Still, working around the clock and with the help of those elves and men who could volunteer, it was only a few days until enough space had been cleared to house the survivors of the battle. All were made welcome in the mountain; Thorin had opened his hand to his friendship to the men and elves, through the latter, Gimli knew, had nearly devolved into another war before terms were settled at last. Of the members of the White Council, Elrond stayed for his patients, Glorfindel stayed because of Elrond, and nobody was sure why the Lady Galadriel stayed, but every morning she was seen walking the line between night and day.

The wounded were moved first, helped along by the able. Gimli and Kíli helped Fíli make his way to the mountain, carrying him between them on a litter. He was more alert, the soporific effects of the healer’s tinctures having worn off, but it also meant he was in more pain. Gimli feared the new lines in his brow would prove permanent. Still, he was himself enough that he teased Kíli mercilessly, playing down his injury to play up his acceptance of their help. He quite effectively played the part of a spoiled princeling, and Gimli laughed outright as Kíli’s frustration with his brother grew.

Gimli himself had managed to remain free of the healer’s clutches, though he had found himself playing assistant on more than one occasion to his uncle, and even to Lord Elrond once or twice. The elven healer, upon seeing Gimli, had smiled wearily, and raised a sardonic eyebrow.

“Foresight, magic, and now healing? You’ll prove yourself an elf yet at this rate, Master Gimli.”

Gimli had spluttered at him before he had seen the humor glinting in Elrond’s tired eyes, and he laughed himself.

“With that type of gallows humor, My Lord, you’d make an admirable dwarf yourself,” Gimli said, and grinned. Elrond’s secretive half-smile had widened, and he had send Gimli to fetch more bandages.

Thorin, as well, was able to move to the mountain under his own power, the wound on his foot healing, though not as quickly as he would have liked. More than once, Óin was seen following Thorin, red faced and yelling for his “idiot king to sit down before his foot infects and rots off!” Threats aside, Thorin’s foot was healing cleanly, and it looked as if there would be no lingering effects. He walked, therefore, though his pace was sedate and kingly, to keep better pace with Bilbo, who walked along at his side, head held high.

“If Bilbo doesn’t have a bead in his hair by the end of the month, I’ll eat my beard,” Gimli muttered, eyeing said hobbit as he talked animatedly at Thorin, while Thorin watched Bilbo like he held the secrets to the universe.
“You need to have a beard before you can make that sort of promise,” Fíli said idly, and Gimli glared down at the back of his head.

“Then maybe I’ll just eat yours,” he snapped.

“You’ll have to,” Fíli said, still mild. “You can’t eat Kíli’s either.”

“Not going to matter,” Gimli said, over Kíli’s squawking protest. “Because I’ll win. Where’s Nori? I want to make this official.”

Kíli jerked his head to the left. “Mothering Ori. He’s down an eye until that bandage can come off, and Dori was near frantic that Ori was going to trip and fall down the mountain. Nori promised to look after him so Dori could help with the heavier lifting.”

Gimli nodded. That made sense; both of the brothers Ri had been shaken by the near-loss of their youngest, though Gimli didn’t give it long before Nori gave in to Ori’s protests that he was fine. He always did coddle his brother in different ways than Dori.

Legolas had been pulled away as well, asked to help with the logistics of breaking down the elven camp. Not all the elves were staying; in fact, many had already left in waves, leaving behind mostly those still too injured to make the trek and those who were staying behind to watch them. To the surprise of many, Thranduil had yet to return to his forest, though it was clear that he longed to be under trees again. He stayed, however, and Gimli was certain it had something to do with his husband, though Legolas seemed dismissive of the idea. (And yet, Thranduil was often seen searching for Legolas with his eyes, and even Legolas had noticed. Gimli knew his husband’s relationship with his father was complicated, but denying the evidence wouldn’t help. Then again, it was not Gimli’s place to interfere.)

Much of the rubble had been cleared from the front entryway, and temporary doors had been erected to keep out the cold and other animals of the north. It was not an easy doorway to cross, however, as the ground was still cracked and broken, but they managed to get across without spilling Fíli to the floor, so Gimli considered it a success.

There wasn’t much to be done about the stale smell of dragon in the air, but Gimli was pretty sure that it was better than it had been. Of course, who knew what other stinks they might uncover as they labored within the mountain?

The temporary chambers were along the Western side of the mountain, and the three of them followed their caravan to where they would stay for the time being. There were enough of them, and few enough chambers, that all were grouping together in pairs or more, often between peoples with different working shifts, so that the rooms were never standing empty and unused. More could be assigned to a room that way.

Fíli and Kíli were to share a suite of rooms with Thorin, Bilbo, Dís, and Dain. Gimli was assigned to the next set over, with Glóin, Óin, Balin, and Dwalin. Gimli did not see Legolas in the assignments, and presumed he was assigned to room with his father. It made the most sense, and would prevent the most arguments, but it rankled. He keenly missed his husband’s presence when he slept, even if Legolas did not often stay in the bed with him.

It seemed they had grouped the Company together, with Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur sharing space with Dori, Ori and Nori next door. It was comforting; after so many months with these dwarves, Gimli appreciated that he would not have to leave their sides so quickly.

Fíli and Kíli’s room was empty when the arrived, Dís and Dain elsewhere, so Gimli and Kíli helped
Fíli settle onto a bed while Bilbo pestered Thorin until he sat to take some of the weight off of his foot.

“I’m fine, Bilbo,” Thorin said, his tone implying just how often he had said those exact words. Bilbo ignored them with the ease of a hobbit who had heard those words the first time, thank you very much, but being that they were wrong, he was going to continue to ignore them; have a lovely day.

“All right!” Thorin said at last, throwing his hands up. “Cease! I will sit, I will sit.” He sat, raising his injured foot when Bilbo indicated.

“Have heart, uncle,” Fíli said, leaning forward so Kíli could adjust the pillows so that Fíli could sit upright. “Together, we will brave these trials.” Thorin raised an eyebrow at him, and Gimli gamely cuffed Fíli on the back of his head. “Oi!” Fíli said, “Careful there. I’m a future king, you know.”

Gimli snorted. “Right. If they can still fit the crown on your fat head,” he said.

Fíli waved his hand. “I’m sure the swelling will have long since gone down by the time it comes that I wear the crown,” he said.

“If Mum doesn’t kill Thorin first,” Kíli said. “Careful, Fíli. You might be king sooner that you think.”

“All right, that’s quite enough of that,” Thorin growled, but Fíli just leveled him a look. Gimli wasn’t sure what had passed between Thorin and Fíli in the mountain after Gimli’s exile, but whatever it was had stripped the fear from Fíli. Gimli was glad; Thorin needed Fíli to tell him when he was being an idiot, and it would do Fíli well to be listened to.

“I’m not sure what you lot are all on about,” Bilbo said. “I’ve met your sister, Thorin, and she seemed perfectly lovely to me.” He paused, blinking. “Of course, she was also in full armor and covered with orc blood at the time.” He shook his head. “Heavens, look at what associating with you lot as done to me; that is not a proper thing for a hobbit to think at all.” He looked less horrified than his words would suggest, however, and Gimli got the impression that Bilbo was less offended by his own change over the last few months than he once would have been.

“Proper’s overrated,” Gimli said, mildly, and Bilbo gave him a look, instead.

Thorin sighed. “If I’ve learned anything about my sister,” he said, “it’s that delaying the inevitable only makes it worse.” He looked at Bilbo. “I would like to go find her.”

“You will,” Bilbo said. “But you just walked all morning. Give your foot a rest. You’ll have more than enough to do after tonight, that’s for sure.”

The need for a council had been a looming pressure the last few days, and with Thranduil growing restless, it had been decided there would be a summit tonight, with all representatives of the free peoples of Middle Earth that were present in attendance. This would be the meeting that would shape the future, for this would be the meeting where Gimli would tell the world about his past.

The threat of the Enemy grew larger with each passing day. They could not afford to run out of time.

Gimli hid a yawn behind his hand; sometimes there were still downsides to being an adolescent. For some reason, Mahal’s will was that Gimli entered his last growing spurt right after the biggest battle his generation had yet seen, when supply was scarce. He was hungry and tired all the time.
“Why don’t you rest as well, Gimli,” Thorin said. “This summit is likely to run late.”

It was not a bad idea, and Gimli nodded. “Very well. If I’m not back beforehand, come get me, yeah?” he asked, and with that assurance, he cross the hall to his own room. It, like the other, was empty, and he fell asleep quickly.

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Legolas approached his father’s tent with mild trepidation; their last meeting still weighed heavily upon his mind, and he had no desire to again see his father lost to his own grief. As such, he found himself hesitating upon the threshold, overcome by his apprehension. The moment did not last long. Legolas had faced the shadows of the first evil during the war of the ring and his father was far from the darkness of the Mouth of Sauron, but it lasted long enough. Crossing into the tent, Legolas found his father sitting at a small table, dressed in wine-colored robes and staring down into his goblet. Legolas could not see how much wine was in the goblet, but there were two bottles on the table, and at least one of them was empty.

“It is not like my son to hover so in the door,” Thranduil said. “Have I truly grown so monstrous?”

Legolas was silent for a moment, but Thranduil did not move. “Have you?” Legolas asked, at last, and his father moved at the sound of his voice. Their eyes met, and Legolas was not surprised to see the depth of pain in that grey, like a darkened storm. Those dark eyes searched his own, finding no trace of the madness that had so plagued Legolas for so many months--with Gimli by his side, many things had finally been made clear, though Legolas knew that time could slip away from him again if he were to lose Gimli’s anchoring presence.

Thranduil looked away, his eyes closed in pain. “I had not believed it so.”

Legolas felt an ache deep in his breast, and stepped forward, only to stop when Thranduil tensed. “Ada,” he said.

Thranduil spoke as if to the ground, but his voice carried clearly all the same. “We Sindar have ever loved the lands of Arda the best, holding them fiercely in our hearts. We refused the light of Aman for our love, and we have been great despite the gifts given to other lines.” He paused. "Fiercely, then, do I love the Greenwood, and long have I fought to keep her safe."

"And well you have," Legolas said, stepping closer once more. He was unsure of where his father’s thoughts led, but would follow them all the same. "The Greenwood has long stood fair."

"Save when they renamed our fair wood Mirkwood." Thanduil said dryly, and he sighed. He swirled his glass once more. “For my love of our home, I have only thought of sailing but twice. The first, when your mother was taken from us. The other, when I thought you lost to me.” Here Thranduil drained his glass.

Legolas stepped forward, taking the now-empty goblet from his father’s hands. Thranduil looked at him in surprise.

"I am here," Legolas said. "Though my path takes me far, I am here. I have been to Aman and beyond, and I am here. One day, I will again sail for those undying lands, to seek the peace and beauty of that place,” he reached out and pressed his palm against Thranduil’s chest. "And still I am here."

“Ion…,” Thranduil said, his voice thick, and he pulled Legolas into a tight embrace. Legless gripped him back in return. "When you fell ill, I feared the worst. It was like I died every day, my
world falling further and further into darkness. In shadow I was, when you fled our home, and in shadow I remained until I found myself at the gates of Erebor."

Legolas frowned, pulling back. “In shadow you may well have been. Know you why we take counsel? What Bilbo Baggins has brought forth from Moria?”

Thranduil frowned, pulling back. “What has he brought forth?” he asked, his voice low. At the edges of Legolas’s vision, Thranduil’s appearance flickered, showing for the briefest of moments a terrible, deep scar.

Legolas braced himself and poured himself and Thranduil a glass of wine. They would have need of it.

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Dís remembered this door.

In the earliest of her memories, she remembered this door. This was their door, and without thinking, she pushed it open. It gave easily, the hinges whispering. It had remained unlocked in their haste to escape.

She stepped across the threshold.

The room was different, yet exactly the same. There was dust, sure, the dust of the ages, and everything was smaller than she remembered, but it was the same down to the last detail.

She walked through their rooms, not touching, afraid to touch lest she stir up the ghosts.

A spot of red lay on the floor, the only color against the green-grey walls. She looked closer, and gasped.

It was a doll, a cloth teething doll in a red dress. Her teething doll.

Her hand shook, her joints feeling weak, but she grabbed the doll with hard-won strength and picked it up from the floor. She, like the rest of their room, was covered in dust and cobwebs, and it took some effort to clean her off. There was still spider-silk still hanging from her dress, strands of grey like the strands in her hair, but it was good enough and she cradled the doll to her chest like she had held her sons.

She had cried for this doll as she had cried for her mother, and Dís took a shuddering breath.

She walked on. Thorin’s room. She paused, hand on the door. A century passed, and still she knew not to open his door. He would get so crabby if they touched his things with their sticky hands.

Her hands were not sticky now, but she moved on all the same.

She did not pause at Frerin’s room. His was an old grief, still too near.

Dís came to her room next, and found the door already open. (She had been inside when the dragon had attacked, and had been grabbed by her father while Thorin ran for their grandfather. Later, she learned that Fris had been overseeing the evacuation, had saved the lives of scores of dwarves, but had herself been lost.)

It was a child’s room. A nursery still, though only just. The furnishings were wood or soft stone, rounded at the edges, with over-stuffed plush cushions in bright brocades. Her bed, almost a crib,
was piled high with soft furs and smoother fabrics. There was a tiny tea-set, turned over on its side. The lid to the teapot had cracked and one of the cups was smashed. A wooden sword lay next to the bed—Frerin’s actually. He must have left it here the last time he played with her. She had a wooden hammer instead, and liked to go for his toes. (Even grown, she had stomped on his feet.)

She did not linger long; she was no longer that dwarfling, and it didn’t do to dwell too long in the past.

Across the hall was their parents’ suite. This door, too, was open, though just a bit, and she gently pushed the door in.

Crawling into the big bed after a bad dream, safe between her fierce parents. Watching Adad fix his beard with the beads of the crown prince. Watching Amad fix her hair in the big mirror, fixing a net of countless pearls until her hair glittered. (A half-remembered teasing from Adad, “an elvish fancy, my dear? Are my gemstones not enough?” Amad humming, amused. “They are not without some taste, my love, and your gemstones are more than enough for me.” She could almost hear Thorin groaning behind them, Amad, and her laughing, clear as her harp-string.)

Her mother’s vanity was still there, still whole, and Dís found herself startled when she looked in the mirror and saw herself as she was—grown and dressed in armor instead of silks. Her hair was starting to grey at her temples (like Thorin, like their father); she had crow’s feet at her eyes and lines around her mouth, no longer hidden by her beard—and not a round dwarf-baby with a shock of tufted hair like their cousins and dimples in each cheek.

She tucked her doll into her elbow and picked up a small jewelry box. It was blue enamel, with arching swirls of white, like waves. She blew across the top, and the dust puffed and billowed out. Carefully, she opened the top, and gasped.

“Mother’s pearls,” Thorin said from behind her, and Dís spun, clutching the box to her chest. Her heart pounded—she hadn’t heard him come in. He stood in the doorway, hands held up. “I am sorry,” he said. “I did not mean to startle you.”

“It’s all right,” Dís said, automatically, and Thorin gave her a smile she knew meant he knew it, too.

Much had changed in her brother, and still very little. He was still a self-sacrificing idiot, too inclined to take on problems that were not his own. Of course, almost everything is your problem when you are king, and she knew how the line had become blurred even before he had taken control.

Like herself, Thorin had aged much. His hair was more grey than black, now, and it did look good on him, but he was thin—so thin. This was more than the thinness of long travel, of a lifetime of light rations so others could have more. This Thorin looked like he was coming out of a long sickness.

And in a way, he was. The afflictions of their line had not been kind to him.

He hovered in the doorway, and Dís knew what this was: he had come to atone, to ask forgiveness Dís was not sure was hers to give. Still, she felt her anger cracking, flaking away like ill-fired enamel.

“I remember her putting these on,” she said, gesturing gently with the box. “She loved them, though Adad never seemed to.”
Thorin smiled wryly, just a slight uptick of the corner of his mouth, but it took ten years from his face. “They were his gift to her,” he said, and Dís blinked.

“Really?” she asked, and Thorin’s smile widened further, and he gave a small, creaking chuckle.

“Really. She loved them. He loved her. He would have given her the moon, if she had asked. But no,” he shook his head. “He never stopped teasing her.”

Thorin stepped into the room, finally, and cocked his head. “They would look lovely on you.”

Dís sighed, and closed the box. “Thorin…”

“I mean it,” he said. “You don’t see it, do you? How much you look like her?”

“Frerin looked like her,” Dís said, and Thorin nodded.

“Very much so,” he agreed. “And Fíli. The three of them, the golden few of our line. But our brother had our father’s face. You, my dear sister, have our mother’s.” He stepped in again, and gently turned Dís to face the mirror.

The two of them together were uncanny; she could see why she was often mistaken for Thorin when not dressed for court, but they were not the same, and now, here, Dís could see that the differences between them were their mother after all.

“I don’t have much need for pearls,” Dís said. “There’s so much work to be done.”

Thorin nodded. “Aye, that is true. But the work will not last forever, and besides. There is always the coronation.”

Dís tried a smile. It hurt. “I guess it would be fitting to wear mother’s pearls to your coronation.” Thorin winced, and Dís frowned. “What? What is it? Did you pull your stitches? Thorin! I’ll leave you to cousin Óín’s tender mercies—or better yet, Lord Elrond’s!”

“Peace, sister!” Thorin protested, holding up a hand. “I am well.” He took a breath. “But it will not be my coronation.”

Dís nearly dropped the box in her shock. “Thorin!”

“It will be Fíli’s.”


Thorin sighed again, and sat on the chest that still stood at the foot of their parents’ bed. It creaked a bit, but held. “I am not well, Dís,” he said, and it was a shock that he spoke so frankly about this. Always it had been a forbidden subject. She reached out and sat in the vanity seat, still clutching her doll and the pearls.

“I am myself again, for now,” Thorin continued with his dark humor. “I have B—“ he stopped, pressing his lips together. “It was not easy, and I do not trust it. Always, I feel it pressing. The possibility is a vast cavern before me, and always I teeter on its edge.” He looked up and met her eyes. “We sit in a dragon’s den, sister, and I took one look and broke.”

“Thorin,” she tried, but he held up his hand again.

“It was not my fault, I know,” he said. “I have heard it enough. There were forces far greater and far more evil than I at work, and in the end I was simply pawn to their whim. I hope one day I can
learn to not blame myself for that.” He licked his lips, and worried his lower lip between his teeth. Dís frowned. That was not one of her brother’s tells, but she had seen it before. On the hobbit, she realized. On Bilbo.

“Our people deserve a king who is not constantly second-guessing his own mind. Fill is strong. He is young. He has you,” Thorin smiled. “Dain has offered to stay and help guide him for a while, as well. Our cousin knows about ruling young.”

“So do you,” Dís said. “Dain was not the only new king after Azanulbizar, just the only one crowned. I loved father, but grandfather’s death was his own.”

Thorin looked away, and did not speak for a long moment. “Still. There is too much here. I do not want to fall again, and if I stay it will happen, sooner or later.” He looked up. “There is a shadow coming, and if the future will hold bright, there is still dark work to be done. I know not yet what work will be required of me, but I will do it in glad penitence.”

Dís gritted her teeth and felt them grind. “You will not be king, so you will martyr yourself? Must I lose you, too?” Thorin flinched, and Dís couldn’t help the grim flash of satisfaction.

“Fíli is ready,” Thorin said, and it ached how sure he sounded. Dís did not want her son, her firstborn, her little bit of luck, to be grown enough to be king. She could not keep him safe if he was king. “It was he who pulled me out, at the last. It was he who has been acting in my stead when I was at my worst, just as I stood for father and grandfather. I will go because it will need to be done. I have always been good at that, sister. I do not seek death, but if death finds me, I will go as me.” Thorin’s voice cracked on the last word, and the last of Dís’s anger left her like mist before the morning sun. She lowered her eyes, and nodded.

“Aye,” she said, at last. “That seems fair, then.” She looked up. “I will miss you when you go, nadeth. I always miss you.”

“I do not leave yet,” Thorin said. “I must see my nephew crowned King Under the Mountain, after all, and somebody will need to help you with those pearls. Mahal knows Dain doesn’t have the patience for it.”

Dís laughed. “Oh, if I left it up to Dain, he’d braid more of those boar teeth into my hair. Do you remember? When he tied rocks and twigs in?” It had been before the dragon, on a state visit. Nain had brought his son, almost of an age with Dís, and the four of them, along with cousin Balin, had had great fun and fairly terrorized the court.

“I thought Adad would have a fit,” Thorin said. “But even then, Dain could charm his way out of anything.”

“It helped that Amad laughed,” Dís said. “He forgave anything if she found it funny.”

Thorin hummed, and they sat in silent for a long moment. “I miss them,” he said, quiet.

“Me too,” Dís said, and they sat there, in the first calm in what seemed the hundred years since their exile.

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When Gimli woke, Óin was there, sitting on the other bed and turning his ear trumpet over in his hands. Gimli watched him for a few moments, but Óin didn’t seem to be aware that Gimli was awake until Gimli sat up and rolled to his feet. Óin froze, not looking up at him until Gimli gently eased the trumpet from his hands. Gimli sat next to Óin on the bed, his fingers working at the dings
and dents that still marred the horn, further smoothing the damage that had been done.

“Say it Uncle,” Gimli said into the silence. “You clearly want to, whatever it is.”

“Is it clear?” Óin said, but he didn’t sound bitter, the way Gimli had half expected. He sounded tired, more than anything, and Gimli wasn’t surprised. His uncle’s skills had been in high demand for the last few days. “I’ve had a lot of time to think about what happened.” He shook his head. “Not a lot of it makes sense, and you’ve traveled too far into elven mysteries for my comfort.”

Gimli’s mouth curled into a smile almost despite himself. “I’ve not found much of it comfortable myself, Uncle. It has not been all bad, however.”

Óin sniffed. “No,” he said. “You’ve seemed to have found yourself a pretty princeling to marry, at least.”

“My husband is a great warrior,” Gimli said, a bit miffed at the implication that Gimli would have married for looks. “He is brave and strong, true and honest. He delights in song and laughter and joy. How could I not love him?” He asked.

But Óin held up his hand. “Peace, nephew. I don’t question your devotion; I was there when you each defended the other from Thorin’s madness. I saw you fighting together. I saw the way he hovered by your side when you fell after the battle—Nay, Gimli. I do not criticize.” He shook his head. “But I do not understand.”

“Legolas and I have been through much. We have seen each other stripped of all but our barest selves, and in those moments found someone worthy of our love.” Gimli shrugged. “My heart sang its recognition of his soul, and his heart answered. The rest of it seemed insignificant.”

Óin shook his head. “Then it matters little what the rest of us think, doesn’t it?” he said, but he smiled. “I am happy for you, nephew. Love like that is rare, even among our kind.” He shrugged. “The rest of us will get used to the rest, sooner or later.”

Gimli grinned, and handed Óin his trumpet, smoother than it had been by a fair margin. “I am happy for that Uncle.” His grin faded and his eyes turned inward. “The future is uncertain; we are at the end of an age, and there is much that will have to change.”

After Óin settled in to sleep at last, Gimli made his way back across the hall to Fíli and Kíli’s room, to find the brothers sitting with Tauriel. Someone, most likely Kíli judging by the straightness of the lines, had sketched a grid on the floor with chalk, and they were using a handful of gems as playing pieces. Fíli was playing against Kíli and Tauriel from where he sat on the bed, calling out moves, letting Fíli move the pieces for him.

“Hello lads,” Gimli said. “Captain.”

“Gimmers!” Kíli cried, twisting around and nearly overbalancing onto the board.

“Hello, Gimli,” Fíli said, smiling. He still looked tired, as did all who would recover from such an injury, but his eyes were bright and present in a way they hadn’t been for days.

Tauriel blushed faintly. “I think you may call me Tauriel, now,” he said. “After I aided you in the preservation of your forbidden marriage to my friend and prince.” She bit the tip of her tongue, as if it could hide her smile.

Gimli grinned. “Then I am Gimli,” he said, sketching a sincere bow. “Speaking of—where is my husband? I have not seen him in some time.”
“He’s with the other elves,” Óin said.

“Keeping the Elvenking from drinking himself to death,” Óin said, dry.

“Offering his help as ambassador between our peoples and easing the transition to the mountain,” Óin said, ignoring Óin and sounding like he was quoting. Probably Balin.

Tauriel offered a grin, and Gimli found himself charmed anew by her youthful exuberance. She and Óin were well matched. “My prince is keeping his father occupied.”

Óin threw his hands up. “Does no one listen? Is that not what I just said?”

“You sound like Balin,” Óin offered, and Gimli grinned. He was right! And you wonder why we don’t listen to you.”

Chuckling, Gimli sat himself on the bed next to Óin, and was content to watch them play, offering advice to both sides indiscriminately, with little regard for the actual usefulness of that advice.

Tauriel caught on the third time his advice led to Óin swearing, and her eyes twinkled at him over Óin’s head.

They played to a standstill and beyond, Óin and Óin happy to chance each other around the game board.

It was surreal for Gimli to be here in this moment. He had spent so much time focused on the battle that he had paid no thought to what life would be like if he succeeded. He certainly didn’t expect to be listening to his cousins bicker over a strategy game, like so many evenings before. He looked up to see Tauriel watching him and offered her a smile, less bright but more real. He was—he was fine, really. He just needed the rest of him to catch up to that fact.

Someone knocked on the door and a moment later, Legolas poked his head in, his face lighting in a bright grin.

“There you are,” he said to Gimli, slipping in the room and darting in to press a quick, familiar kiss to Gimli’s lips. Gimli rolled his eyes when he heard Óin and Óin both making exaggerated protesting noises behind them, and made a point to pull Legolas in for a longer kiss.

“I thought you were with your father,” Gimli said, and Legolas nodded.

“I was,” he said, and dropped down onto his back, stretching like a long cat in a sunbeam and tucking an arm behind his head. His feet dangled off the edge of the bed, and his foot bounced in time to a song only Legolas heard. “We spoke long, about many things. He will stay and hear the council.” His foot stilled for a moment, the sudden ceasing more jarring than a sudden movement would have been. He opened his mouth to say something, but seemed to reconsider. “I left Bard with him; he will make sure my father appears tonight, and sober enough besides.” He smiled. “My father has taken an unforeseen liking to the Dragonslayer, and will want to continue to make a good impression.”

“What is it with your kingdom and mortals?” Óin asked. He glanced meaningfully at Tauriel, wiggling his eyebrows. “Not that I’m complaining, mind.”

Legolas blinked at Óin, and then laughed aloud. “I had not given it much thought before,” he admitted, and his tone turned considering. “I guess it is true, though it is a recent change of heart. Our wood treats more with mortals than the other elven realms, for all that my father’s people were distrustful of men in the beginning.” he said. “Perhaps it is our relations with the dwarves
that let us so quickly see past ourselves and see the joy in a mortal life.”

Gimli nudged his shoulder. “It matters little how or why, and much more that it is so. I am quite happy that you saw my life.”

“And you mine,” Legolas said, and gently they touched their foreheads together.

“Are you always like this?” Fili asked. “Was is truly just the bars between you that kept you apart from each other before?” He paused, and blinked. “Am I going to be spending the rest of my life watching you two make cow eyes at each other?”

Gimli and Legolas looked at each other, and shrugged.

“Yes, I very much think so,” Legolas said.

“Aragorn did,” Gimli added, dry. “He survived it.”

“Ah, but he’s not your cousin,” Kili said, wagging his finger. “We remember you in nappies, Gimmers.” Fili nodded in agreement.

“Oi!” Gimli protested. “No need to bring that up, aye?” Really--to go from gentle teasing all the way to nappies? It was uncalled for.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Fili said, stroking his fingers over his beard and mustache. His eyes twinkled and Gimli felt himself begin to worry. “Seems like quite a time for stories.”

Gimli’s eyes widened as Legolas lit up in excitement. “Oh, I do think it is! I have not my husband’s way with words, but I find I may have a story or two to tell from our travels.” He grinned at Gimli, his teasing wicked, and Gimli raised both his eyebrows.

I will get you for this, my love, he thought, and it may have been his surprise, but he seemed to see the challenge accepted in Legolas’s eyes.

What had he been thinking before? About not thinking about what his life would be like?

“Mahumb.”

Chapter End Notes

*Mahumb* – droppings

*Shamukh ra ghelekhur aimâ!* - welcome, hail and well met!
Councils and Councilors

Chapter Summary

There were few tales that either his cousin or his husband could tell that Gimli could not counter with one of his own, and where he lacked stories, Tauriel proved to be a surprisingly bountiful source. No one escaped that room unscathed.

So, it was with his pride bruised, but still intact, that Gimli found himself helping Kíli once more bring Fíli to the council chambers. Fíli, somewhere between laughing at their shared tales and being helped onto his litter, had fallen into a rather dark mood, and was churlish and snappish. He did not say much, perhaps realizing the sudden onset of his distemper, but his mood would not have been more obvious if there had been a black stormcloud over his head.

“Cheer up, brother,” Kíli said. “Cousin Óin said you’d be back on your feet before the end of winter.”

“I wouldn’t be so cross if you would hold me a bit higher,” Fíli said. “It has been decades since I was so low to the ground.”

“Has it?” Kíli asked. “I hadn’t noticed. To be honest, everyone below a certain height looks the same to me.”

“You’re only eight centimeters taller!”

“Yes,” Kíli said, grinning. “eight whole centimeters.”

Fíli sighed. “Gimli, please tell me you’ll grow taller than my dear brother, so you can put him in his proper place.”

“Afraid not,” Gimli said. “I’m not going to grow more than a centimeter or two, excepting in the shoulders.” Legolas’s face scrunched as he bit down on whatever comment he was going to make, and Gimli winked at him.

“It must be very strange,” Tauriel said.

“Lower than my stones do dangle,” Gimli called back, quick as a wink, to Dain’s uproarious
laughter. Several of the dwarves laughed, though looked appalled that Gimli would know that song, and more that he would use their secret tongue before others when not on the battlefield. Gimli ignored the lot of ‘em. There were bigger issues than pointless secrecy at stake.

The room where the council was to be held was, in fact, King Thror’s stateroom, where he would meet with his councilors, ambassadors, and other dignitaries and diplomats. As such it was suitably grand, the ceilings high and the pillars elaborately carved to display the strength and cunning of the dwarven craftsmen. The King’s Seat, a lesser version of his throne, once stood at the eastern edge of a large stone table. Now, however, the seat was gone, replaced by one of many salvaged from the wreckage, and the table lay cracked and broken. It seemed like a portent to decide the future of middle earth around a broken table, but Gimli could not for the life of him tell if it was for good or ill.

Thorin was already present, as were Dís, Bilbo, and the sons of Fundin. Dís was already seated at the table, next to Dain, who had his iron foot propped up against a piece of stone, and the others stood behind them, speaking softly. Dain, in his half-reclined position, occasionally offered a comment to their conversation, while Dís seemed lost in thought as she ran a hand over her mustache in a move so reminiscent of her son that Gimli had to look twice.

Conversation stilled when they came close to help Fíli into the seat next to Dís, but it broke Dís from her reverie and she smiled at her elder son, knocking their foreheads together before she gently bussed the same spot while Fíli flushed.

“Amad,” Fíli protested, but there was nothing behind his words except habit. Kíli greeted their mother much more enthusiastically, and Gimli turned when Dain beckoned.

“Cousin Dain,” Gimli greeted. “I’m happy to be seeing less of you today.”

Dain grinned. “I’ve nothing to be ashamed of, even if I had shame left to have. It’s healthy to air out the tender bits—grows ‘em large, and keeps ‘em strong.”

Dís snorted. “From the many times I’ve seen your hairy arse, I feel for your wife.”

“Ah, me lovely has no complaints,” Dain said, brushing the comment aside.

The chamber doors opened again, and Gimli turned to see the representatives of the White Council enter the room. Gandalf was first, looking better than he had, though still worn and travel-stained. Following him was Lord Elrond, free of his armor and dressed in silver and green under tunics. Elrond as well seemed weary in his particular elven way, and that line of tension in his brow that Gimli remembered so keenly from before had returned. With Lord Elrond walked the Lady Galadriel, dressed in a gown of simple white and barefoot; she glided across the floor like a whip of fog over the surface of a still lake, and her hair shone with brilliance. Her eyes, however, sparkled with good humor, and hinted at the depths within. Last to enter was Glorfindel, his presence a shining, rosy gold. Good humor filled his face, and he seemed little burdened by the battle so recently ended. Then again, Gimli supposed, if he had fought and killed a balrog, only to die and return, he would not let himself get weighted down by a single battle.

Gimli expected the council to take their seats directly opposite where Gimli and the other dwarves stood, to offer a balance to their position and not allow Thranduil or Bard favor over the other. Instead, however, Galadriel led the others to sit beside the dwarves in a clear display of support, and she bowed her head to them. Nobody, it seemed, knew quite what to say, though they all, save for Fíli, stood to return the bow.

Galadriel broke the silence. "Shamukh ra ghelekhur aimâ! I am Galadriel of Lorien. Already I am
known to some of you,” she smiled at Dain, who returned her grin, and at Gimli, who bowed again. The others were too taken aback by her use of Khuzdul to respond. Thorin in particular looked like he had taken a blow to the back of the head, while Balin looked like he had sucked on a particularly bitter lemon. Kill simply stared, slack jawed, until Tauriel discreetly pushed his chin up with her forefinger.

"Shamukh ra ghelekhur aimâ! Lady of Lorien,” Gimli said, when no one else seemed able to speak. “I trust you have been well? I’m afraid our hospitality has been more lacking than we would like, though I hope you can excuse us.”

Galadriel twinkled at him. “I do believe a dragon is a good reason, my champion,” she said, and the room relaxed by degrees; this council may yet be a less formal affair than the last. Gimli felt himself flush painfully red across his cheeks and through his ears, but he bowed again all the same before taking his own seat on Fíli’s other side. Legolas stood next to him, his hip warm against Gimli’s shoulder, and his hand rested in Gimli’s hair, his fingertips just grazing Gimli’s ear. Gimli let his eyes slip half-shut at the pleasant touch. Legolas seemed unwilling to be far from Gimli again so soon, and Gimli wondered if he would be able to sit with his husband, or if Legolas would be needed to sit with the woodland delegation.

“Hopefully it will be an excuse we can never use again,” Fíli said, addressing Galadriel directly. She smiled at him, the same warm smile that secured her a place in Gimli’s heart so thoroughly. There was something knowing about that smile, however, and Gimli wondered just what other secrets lay in store.

Glorfindel looked at Fíli from where he had sat next to Dain, mirroring his position, much to Dain’s amusement. “Surely Smaug was the last of them?”

Dain groaned aloud. “Oh, whatdja have to say it out loud for? Now you’ve gone and jinxed it.”

“Come now, Glorfindel,” Elrond said with a teasing familiarity. “Or do you wish to add “dragonslayer” to your titles?”

“There will be no more dragons in Arda,” Thranduil announced from the door to the chamber as he strode through. “And King Bard will be the last to bear that title.” Bard, who was again walking with Thranduil, his attendants mixing with those from the greenwood, turned a bit red at the assertion. Still, he did not deny it.

Legolas tensed, and Gimli looked closer at his father-in-law (that was a thought that had never lost its strange nature). Thranduil looked drawn, pale even for an elf, and the pale colors of his robe did him no favors. He was once again wearing his woodland crown, though he was otherwise unadorned. Gimli could feel Legolas's concern as if it was a physical thing. Thranduil’s gaze swept about the room, his eyes passing over Galadriel as if she was not there, which Gimli did not like in the least, and came to rest on Legolas with an odd sort of hunger in his eyes. No, not hunger--regret. Grief.

“I thought you spoke with him,” Gimli murmured.

“I did,” Legolas said. “But we elves have long memories, and change takes longer still. My father will lose some of his grief in time.”

“Indeed, Glorfindel,” Lady Galadriel said, and Gimli blinked at her, coming back to the conversation. Until now, she had kept quiet with a look of pensive observation. To be honest, Gimli hadn’t expected her to speak until negotiations were through. “Lord Dain is a dwarf to be hearkened to. His perspective refreshing and his countenance is…revealing.”
Gimli choked on air and bent forward to hide his face. From the corner of his eye, he could see Legolas turning pink, though his expression remained mostly even. Gimli glanced up and see a twinkle in his Lady’s eye.

“Blunt, you mean,” Thorin said, his voice dry. He knew he was missing something, but was not willing to call them on it. “Aye, he can be.” He said no more, though Gimli could practically see Thorin think it: and he could be twice as canny, too, when the situation called for it. Dain had been a good king for Erebor, building her nearly back to where she had been in her heyday, and it was in part because of Dain’s ability to play the fool.

“Indeed.” Galadriel said.

Thranduil and Bard were the last to arrive, and they took that as their cue to begin. Everyone settled into a seat, and Gimli was happy to note that Legolas chose to sit next to him and pulled their chairs in close. Bard sat readily, with a heaviness that made Gimli wonder if Bard had slept at all. Thranduil took longer to find a seat, but he sat in it in his own way, sprawling possessively.

Thorin stood. “Welcome, all of you, to this council.” He looked about the room. “It may seem strange, to discuss such things as will come in the rubble of a recently occupied kingdom; it may seem overreaching when we should be focused on our own losses and licking our own wounds. It I have learned one thing, in my ears of exile, it was this: the world waits for no one.”

Bard cleared his throat, shifting uneasily in his seat. "I agree that there is much for us three to discuss, but what does the rest of the world have to do with us?"

Gimli snorted, drawing the attention of the room. “War,” he said, and longed for his pipe. Legolas threaded his fingers through Gimli’s. “A war to end all wars.”

“The end of an age,” Legolas said. “And the beginning of a new.”

Bard raised a skeptical eyebrow. “That seems like quite a lot.”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “And it’s hard to hear. Still, hear it we must, for our enemy in this great war is the greatest of enemies.”

Thranduil cocked his head. “And are we to believe you? You are no ordinary youth. That I have long since known, but what special gifts do you possess, that you claim to have fought the Shadow and won?”

Galadriel leaned forward, ever so slightly, and Gimli bowed his head in deference to her when she spoke. “Once already the White Council and I have faced this enemy in what may well come to be the first of many skirmishes of this great war. We have beaten him back, and at great cost, but it has earned us some well-needed time. We can yet breathe and see to our wounded and our dead before we look to the next battle.” She looked around the table. “I pray you all, listen to Gimli and take heed; it was on his word that we were in position to stop the enemy’s advance when we did. I can vouch for his words.”

Gimli had to close his eyes for a long moment, or he would have leaked tears. As it was, his eyes were still shining when he stood to speak. He took a deep breath, and Legolas squeezed his fingers gently. “Many of you, by now, have heard of my ability to see the future; you have heard of my true-dreaming. In truth? No. I possess no special special gifts. My uncle is the truth-seer, not I. But the truth is much harder to explain. Still, i will endeavor to do so, though my tale may push the limits of what you believe.”
Reluctantly pulling his hand from Legolas’s, Gimli undid the front ties to his tunic. He had to make sure they believed him, and he had only the one proof.

He pulled the Lady’s Gift from his tunic and held it up by the chain, letting it dangle and spin, catching the light and setting it aflame.

“Oh,” Lady Dís said softly. Dain was silent, and when Gimli chanced a look, all stared at the jewel with bewildered awe. The jewel was smaller at second glance than it appeared at first, as if the mind was trying to fix what the eye could not; that the Lady’s Gift was more than the sum of it’s crystal. It was a small gem—smaller than the Arkenstone, certainly, and cut in such a way as to dazzle, while also clearly showing the contents inside. The jewel was set in pure mithril, and it shone with a glow like pure sunlight. Gimli considered all of this as he thought of what to say next.

“This is the Lady’s Gift,” he said, quietly. “And my tale is tied with it in a way most peculiar. The defeat of the dragon, the Quest for Erebor—these are but among the first moves of a chess match that has been ages in the making: the return of the Shadow. Some sixty years hence, after Erebor was reclaimed, I was sent with my father to a council in Rivendell, where it was revealed that the Enemy had returned, and that the One Ring had been found. I joined a company, its sole purpose to destroy the ring and defeat the enemy once and for all.”

Gimli pinched the top of the setting between his fingers, upending the jewel and turning it to make sure all could see the lock of hair inside. “On this quest, we were gifted many things. I was gifted this lock of hair from the head of the Lady Galadriel of Lorien,” he nodded at her, and she smiled. “As you have heard, she named me her champion, Silvertongue, and elf-friend. I kept the lock safe through many battles and many more wanderings. I set it in crystal in the caves of Aglarond. When I had reached the end of my life,” he paused here for a moment, and laid his hand on Legolas’s shoulder, offering comfort. Legolas turned into the grip, hiding his face as best he could. “When I died, I did not expect to see it again.” He chuckled to himself. “Imagine my surprise to wake up again in Ered Luin with only my memories and this.” He lifted the gem again, and sighed. “Not even my beard stayed, yet this had.”

He looked around the room, and put the Lady’s gift away. “So you see, I know what is coming because I have lived through it. My presence has changed some things, yes, but some things I have been unable to change, and some of the things to change were not of my doing, for the Enemy has returned as well, and he knows all I do about the coming events, if not more. Every move I make is countered by him, for well do I remember the movements of the war that defined my youth, and well does he remember the war that ended his last chance to rule.”

Silence fell. There was more Gimli could have said—more, perhaps, that he should have said, but Gimli was watching Thranduil and the way he just barely shook. He looked about the room, and none seemed inclined to dispute his story, at least not openly.

“So, it is to be war again,” Elrond said.

Gimli looked up, and met the sad and knowing eyes of Gandalf. He held them and remembered the depthless grey of Olorin in Aman. “If I have learned anything by my trials, it is that some things cannot be changed, for good or for ill.”

“The melody remains,” Glorfindel said, as if to himself, and he offered no explanation.

Gandalf tapped the bowl of his unlit pipe idly against the broken piece of tabletop that was before him. “You said that the destruction of the ring of power brought an end to the enemy.”

“It did,” Gimli said, and from the corner of his eye, he watched Bilbo shrink back in his seat. “The
ringbearer and his closest companion traveled alone through the orc-infested hell of Mordor to deliver the ring at last to the fires of Mount Doom. We, Legolas and I, were at the gates when the ring was destroyed."

"It took with it half the mountain," Legolas said. "The orcs scattered, and it was as if the world could breathe again; the shadows were lifted before the face of the sun."

"The ring is the key," Gimli said. "It always has been. But now the Enemy knows our plan; it will not work the same way again." Gimli’s words brought contemplative silence, and idly thought of the last time such a council had met; what would that Gimli think of this moment? That Elrond? He glanced at his husband. He had a good idea what that Legolas would have thought, and he had to hide a rather inappropriate smile at how happy he was to have *this* Legolas here, in this time.

It was Dain who put his finger on the problem. "You say out future must change, but you also say the future cannot change. How are we to fight?"

"We fight because we must," Thorin started, and Dain waved him off, the boar teeth in his beard moving with his mouth as he spoke, making him look fierce when before he’d looked simply good-natured. For all his years, Gimli had never learned just how Dain was able to so easily switch between such different personas.

"Aye, aye, I know that. I’m not saying we don’t fight, Thorin. How long have you known me? I’m saying we seem to be facing a logically impossible situation."

Dís looked up then. "Some things have already been changed," she said, her voice filling the chamber, though she spoke softly. "My sons. My brother. They live, where before they did not."

She looked up at Gimli. "Is that not so?"

Gimli bowed to her. "Aye, my Lady. Though I fear I had little to do with that, in the end."

"You have changed things more than you may yet realize, Gimli son of Glóin," Galadriel said. Then, she turned to Dís. "It gladdens my heart to see your family survive."

Dís smiled. "And mine," she said.

Gimli cleared his throat. "I feel the need to point out that there were many trials along the way that I could not change." He did not look at Bilbo. "I could not stop the ring from being found, nor could I stop its influence."

Bard started. "Wait—it’s here? The ring?"

Gandalf nodded. "Let the ring be brought forth," he said, and nobody moved. Gimli frowned, and finally looked back at the hobbit. Bilbo was staring at the table, twisting something in his fingers, and he didn’t appear to hear what was said around him.

Thorin touched his shoulder gently. "Bilbo?" he prompted, and Bilbo’s head snapped up, a snarl on his lips—and just as soon it was gone, and in its place Bilbo looked pale and frightened. Thorin looked equally shaken.


This time Bilbo stood, and he made his way carefully to the center of the table. He stood there for an extended moment, then thrust his hand forward, dropping something that glittered like gold and fell like lead. Bilbo breathed in sharply, like he was coming up for air, and staggered back. Thorin stood to catch him, and held Bilbo still while he regained his composure. Side conversations
sprang up in its wake.

“There it is,” Galadriel said, and in her voice was an echo like the depths of the sea. “The ring of power.”

“Such a small thing,” Dulcan said, softly, to Bard, who nodded. His eyes never left the glittering ring.

“Pah,” Dain snorted, and the spell was broken. “I’ve seen better trinkets in my time.”

Legolas leaned in close; his husband had grown pale, and his eyes were haunted, but still he tried to smile. “It is a good thing you did not reach again for your axe, meleth,” he said. “I fear the table would not survive such a blow.”

Gimli hummed. “Save us all a lot of time and trouble.” He shook his head.

He looked up to find the eyes of the council on him. “You are not even tempted,” Elrond said, quietly, and there was an awed respect in his voice.

“What need have I of power?” Gimli said.

Legolas smiled at him. “My heart desires other things; I have passed this test, besides.”

“It feels foul,” Fíli said.

“Like bad air at the end of a tunnel,” Kíli said. “The kind that explodes.” Fíli nodded his agreement.

Tauriel shivered. “It slithers.”

Thorin called out over the chamber. “It is clear this must be dealt with. A strategy must be devised, a different plan with the same goal. A company must deliver the ring to Mount Doom.”

“They cannot simply walk into Mordor,” Elrond advised. “The enemy is weakened, but his servants roam still. What’s more, knowing of the earlier defeat, he will have shored up his guard, especially in those places.”

Glorfindel shook his head. “We must still try, and quickly. There may not be a better time for it.”

“Gondor should be warned,” Gimli said. “Ever have they been the watchtower in the south; they will lose the most if Mordor marches.”

Legolas cocked his head. “A diversion…” he murmured. “Would a distraction work again, do you think?”

Gimli smiled softly at his husband. “It depends entirely upon the distraction, my love,” he said. It was a good question; a diversion would most likely be very necessary, but what would be more diverting than a battle at the gates?

“We take the fight to him,” Gimli said, softly. “We have to march on Mordor.”

That brought silence to the room.

After a moment, Bard spoke. “How?” He asked. “We should have three armies between us, if not four. Instead we have two, and they are long weary and lessened from battle. What strength do we have to march on Mordor?”
“The dwarves of the Blue Mountains will fight,” Dís said. “But they are far away. It would take months to bring them here.”

“Doesn’t Gondor have an army?” Kíli asked. “If they’re right there, the knowledge may prove invaluable.”

“What of the other dwarves?” Bilbo asked into a sudden lull, and the room fell quiet. Bilbo, noticing the attention, looked out evenly across the broken table. Gimli thought back to the Hobbit he had met in Bag End, the little fellow who stammered when addressing a room of 14 dwarves, let alone a council of wizards and kings. Then again, maybe this wasn’t so new; he remembered Bilbo taking Gandalf to task for the guests that very nearly caught him unprepared. He cleared his throat and continued, looking at Thorin. “Before, in my dining room, you spoke of the armies of the dwarves, of the need for the arkenstone to rule. You have the arkenstone; can you not now raise the armies?”

Thorin did not speak for a moment, trapped as he was by Bilbo’s stare, and it was Balin who began to speak of the formalities, the logistics, the sheer distance needed to travel, and the time it would take to cross those many leagues, when Thorin interrupted.

“I have seen the chaos that stone can bring,” he said. “I will not stand to let it further corrupt the ruling of Erebor. Too long has our family been subject to the malicious whims of malevolent magics.” Thorin held his head high, and Gimli saw Fíli grin at his uncle, looking very proud.

Balin blinked. “Thorin,” he hissed. “You can’t just—"

“I just did, Balin,” Thorin said. “It is well within my powers, limited as they are, to remove such an insidious threat to the crown. The arkenstone was claimed by my grandfather, and he is dead, so the stone is mine by conquest—and I propose to drop it down the deepest, darkest mine shaft so that it may return to the earthly fires that forged it.”

Elrond was looking at Thorin, remembered pain mingled with respect on his still mostly stoic face. “You speak with great wisdom, King Under the Mountain.”

Thorin’s expression grew heavy, and he spoke slowly, as if only having just come to a decision that, while he was firm in his belief that it was the right choice, it was also a difficult one. “I thank you, but before we go any further, there is more that must come to light. I am not the King of Erebor.”


Balin sighed, and cleared his throat. “Technically, since King Thrain has disappeared, and we have no proof of his fate, Thorin is still prince regent—acting king. There are certain limitations to his authority until such a time has passed that King Thrain will be either found or assumed to have passed unto His halls.”

Gandalf leaned forward, folding his fingers together. They were dark against the dirty grey of the fingerless cuffs he wore, and looked as if they had been through much. There were healing cuts and a few new scars, and the nail on the third finger on his left hand was missing. Gimli stared and could not help himself. “I believe I may be of help with that,” he said.

Gandalf looked around the table, to make sure he had the attention of everyone. “I first became aware of the growing shadow several years ago, but it was only in the vaguest of whispers, and the smallest of moments where the actions of friends brought more ill than was wanted. Slowly, I began to notice a pattern of discord that only grew, and I began to investigate. All too soon, I came
to fear the worst.” Gandalf looked at Thorin. “You father had already left by this time, and I am afraid that his departure was the final piece to this dark puzzle. That was when I came to you, to speak with you about reclaiming the Mountain.”

Thorin nodded. “I remember,” he said.

“And now you know why,” Gandalf said. “With your people displaced, the whole of Middle Earth is at risk of falling to the enemy. I only wish I had realized more quickly,” he looked away. “Either way, at the request of the council, I left the company bound for Erebor to head south, to investigate the rumors of a Necromancer. Instead I found Sauron himself, and in the dungeons, an old dwarf, nearly mindless in his grief and fear, but still, in his heart, himself.” Gandalf looked up at Thorin and Dís. “I am sorry, but Thrain is dead; he died at the hands of the enemy.”

Dís hung her head, and her sons held her on either side. Thorin stared at the table while the rest of the room kept their silence in there respect.

“My father had a ring,” Thorin said, his voice rough. Gimli looked at him, and knew, then, that Thorin knew, perhaps better than any of them, why the one ring had to be destroyed.

“It is now in the enemy’s hands,” Gandalf said.

“That is ill news,” Thorin said. He sighed. “I had much desire to throw it down into a pit with the arkenstone.”

There was a pause, and Dain began to laugh. It was as if some film over the world had been punctured, and the laughter spread from dwarf to dwarf. Even Legolas seemed to find the humor, and laughed wearily to himself, hiding most of his face behind his hand. It was a much needed salve to their frayed tempers, though they sobered quickly—save for Dain, who continued to shake and wipe at his eyes, though he stayed mostly silent.

Gimli saw Bard look to Thranduil, as if for an explanation, and Thranduil simply waved a hand, dismissing the question. He had no idea, either, but then again, how could he? Gimli had long since learned that not many shared a Dwarf’s sense of the absurd; elves were far too serious, too wrapped up in their own unchanging view of the world, and men were far too earnest, forever living in their own youth—and like a youth, desperate to prove themselves grown. No; the dwarves understood what the men and elves would not see, for they lived long enough for wisdom and died soon enough for mirth.

“The death of my father grieves me, though there is some comfort in an answer to a long asked question,” Thoin said, wiping his eyes dry with his knuckle. “Either way, I will not be crowned king.” He looked up at the table. “I plan to renounce my claim to the throne, and so does kingship pass to my heir, Fíli son of Dís.”

Fíli started. “Uncle!” he said, and seemed to catch himself. He swallowed, blinking rapidly. The room waited for him, watching as he composed his thoughts. “I am honored,” he said, at last. Gimli frowned as Thorin nodded. Fíli had grown quite pale, and did not react when Kíli tried for his attention. Lady Dís took her son’s hand and squeezed, and gave him a sad sigh when he clung tightly in return.

“How certain are we that we need an army as yet?” Glorfindel asked. His usual good humor had faded, revealing startlingly keen eyes. Here, even more than on the battlefield, was the great warrior of old. “Lady, you took much of Sauron’s power from him; he fled formless into the mists of this world. If we move quickly, we may yet be able to get the ring to the mountain without open battle.”
“It takes time to muster an army,” Dain said. “More time than to outfit a company for travel, that’s for certain.”

“But is it time we can afford to take?” Bard asked.

“We may have no choice,” Lord Elrond said.

There was silence for a moment, and then Galadriel spoke, her voice clear as silver bells. “Tell me, Gimli, is the future naught but worry and woe?”

Gimli blinked at her, surprised. “Well, no my lady. There was yet joy in the world, and all the more after such terrible darkness.”

Galadriel’s eyes were like midnight starfields, and Gimli was held in her stare. “Then tell us the good of the future.”

So Gimli did. He spoke of the return of glory to Erebor, of her loyalty to Bilbo and her steadfastness in the face of the enemy, holding the line of the north. He spoke of the glory of Rohan and the discovery of Aglarond. He spoke of Moria, once freed from the Balrog and again bearing the name of Khazad-Dum. He spoke of the peace and friendship between the elves, and the lasting friendships of the Shire. And most, he spoke of Aragorn, son of Arathorn, King Elessar Telcontar, the King of Gondor and the Golden Age of Man. There was quiet again after he spoke, as those who listened thought about what they had just heard.

“A terrible choice lies before us,” Galadriel said at last. "For there is much suffering ahead, and yet it is in the deepest darkness that the candle burns brightest. Do we act to end the suffering now and risk snuffing that candle before it can truly burn, therefore doing the enemy’s work for him? Or do we, with our knowledge, commit the world to suffering and torment on the promise of a glorious someday?” She bowed her head.

Gimli was aghast; would it all be for naught? Would his drive to save his kin and destroy the ring lead to greater darkness and prevent the Golden Age of Man? The scope of it all loomed before him, and he was nearly overwhelmed. There was so much to do, so much that could go wrong! His heart quailed. How could he possibly—

"Take heart, dear champion,” said the Lady’s voice in his mind, as he had once heard her long ago. “Great your part in this all is, but it is not the only part to be played. You must trust that those who got us through before will get us through again.”

Trust.

It was not in Gimli’s nature to be a grand manipulator of design, though this quest had given him much practice. Still, such machinations were the province of wizards, not dwarves. And the wizards could have it. Gimli would be Gimli, and that would have to be enough. He would offer his advice and help where he could, but even he could not control the outcome of rolled dice.

Aye, my Lady, Gimli thought, and bowed his head to her.

It was Elrond who gave voice, at last, to the terrible truth. “We cannot yet destroy the ring,” he said, and his voice was heavy with sorrow. “Estel is yet a boy, and not ready to lead, crowned in Gondor. Without the White Tree, the war will not be won.”

Of course, it was Gandalf, in his wisdom, who offered up the only solution. “So we cut our losses,” he said. “We cannot defeat the enemy quickly, but we can at least cripple his power. He knows what moves he makes, what resources he has. We take them away before he has chance to use
“Like the dragon,” Thorin said, his voice echoing with something deep, like iron against anvil in a cavernous forge. “We cripple him the same way we did before, we take back his strongholds, make them our own.” Gandalf nodded, and Thorin sat back, considering.

Fill sat up a little straighter in his seat. “The war was an attack on two fronts,” he began, looking to Gimli for confirmation. “The might of Mordor in the south, and Gundabad and Angmar in the North. Erebor held, with Dale and the Greenwood and the Iron Hills, but if we were to focus on the North—“

“Change the war to one front,” Kíli said. “Fight the war in the North now.”

Bard blinked at them. “With what resources?” Bard asked. “Between the dragon and the battle we just fought, we don’t have the resources to lay siege to that land.”

“Lands,” Gimli said, quietly correcting. “Angmar rose up, too.”

“Winter is upon us,” Thorin said. “It would be folly to march north now; we would be battling the very seasons, let alone the ill creatures that live there. If we wait out the winter, rebuild our strength and rest, heal out our wounds, by spring we will be ready to march.”

There was a general assent from the table, from all but one corner. “And what of the Ring?” Thranduil asked. “These plans for battle are all well and good, but it is the ring’s destruction that will win us this war. If it is not to be destroyed, where shall it be kept? Surely not where it was kept before.”

Fíli said, mildly. “I wouldn’t underestimate our dear burglar, here. That was the dragon’s undoing.”

Bilbo snorted at the title, but his fingers fidgeted with his pocket, as if he was fondling something inside.

“Hobbits are surprisingly immune to the ring’s effects,” Gimli said. “Bilbo held the ring in the Shire for near sixty years, and not only did the Shire not feel its effects, Bilbo was able to give the ring up willingly. After sixty years, would any of you be able to claim the same?”

There was a quiet around the table, and Bard spoke. “Would the ring be safe in the Shire?” he asked. “Nothing against the place, but wouldn’t the enemy know to find Bilbo there?”

“The ring cannot go to the Shire, true,” Glorfindel said. “I am sorry, Bilbo, but it would be too dangerous.”

Bilbo seemed to deflate a bit. “I understand, though I do not like it,” he said. “I had quite hoped to see my cozy little hobbit hole again. All these places I have seen, each grander and greater and stranger than the last, and all it has done has filled me with a longing for home.”

“So stay here,” Dain said, to the surprise of everyone. “Well, why not?” he asked. “Wee Gimli here said it; the Mountain does not fall to the Enemy. We can withstand against his lies and treachery—Bilbo would be quite safe within these walls.” He raised his eyebrows at the assembled lot. “It may be the only place on Middle Earth where he could be safe. The Dwarves of Erebor owe him much, besides, and would offer him any comfort.”

“Aye,” Thorin said. “‘Tis true. You could make your home here, agyàdê. You could stay.” The ‘with me’ was not said, but Gimli was sure all could hear it anyway.
Bilbo swallowed several times before he could speak. “Well, perhaps I could at that,” he said, softly, his eyes shining. In view of everybody and not caring, Thorin took Bilbo’s hand in his own, and held on when Bilbo gripped it tightly.

“There it is then,” Dain said. “Love conquers all. The Ring will stay here, kept from enemy hands.”

“The enemy still knows Bilbo has the ring,” Legolas said, a shadow on his voice that Gimli had not heard in some time, and Gimli remembered just why Legolas had been in Rivendell all those years ago; it was from the Greenwood that Gollum had slipped his prison. “Long ago he learned his name as well as his home. If the enemy knows Erebor is his haven, the mountain will not get a moment’s peace, and even a mountain may crumble to the constant onslaught of a river.”

“What about a decoy?” Lady Dís said. “A distraction, to focus his attention there and not here.”

Thranduil raised an eyebrow. “It would be asking much; whatever land is chosen would face the full brunt of Mordor, and without the ring at hand, bitterness may grow that they must fight to keep another alive.”

“Well, your kingdom's out,” Gimli muttered under his breath, and refused to quake when Thranduil’s icy glare flicked towards him.

“They may come to Lorien,” Galadriel said at last. “Our forces are fresh and our archers keen. They will break upon us like waves against a rock, and never shall they penetrate our lands. The secret will be kept safe with us.”

“Um, excuse me,” Bilbo said, raising his hand to the level of his ear. “Just how are we going to convince Sauron that I’m not where I am?”

“We shall beat him at his own game,” Galadriel said. “A company shall depart for Lorien with me, and bring with them a person in the guise of Bilbo, so the enemies spies will report that a hobbit returns south to Lorien.”

Gimli raised an eyebrow. “And just where are we going to get another hobbit to pretend to be Bilbo?” he asked.

“It would have to be a dwarf, lad,” Dain said, looking at Gimli with a queer expression in his eye.

“Well, I’d hardly think it’d be an elf,” Gimli snapped back.

“Ah, you don’t get it,” Dain said. “It has to be a dwarf lad.”

Gimli blinked at him for a—oh.

Oh.

“What?” Gimli said, flatly, as the whole of the council turned to look at him.

“It has to be you, I’m afraid,” Gandalf said, and the old bastard was laughing. “You're the closest in stature.”

“And you have no beard to worry about,” Kíli added.

“Why don’t we shave you; then you can do it,” Gimli growled, and Kíli’s hands smacked to his cheeks to cover the short growth.
“He’ll have to cut and dye his hair,” Thranduil said, and Gimli’s breath caught in his chest.

“It can be done,” Thorin said, and Gimli glared at him, betrayed. His hair, his beautiful, long hair.

Gimli felt slender fingers, touch the crown of his head, smoothing down the back. “It would be a shame to lose such beauty, however temporarily it may be.” Gimli pressed against Legolas’s hand, and when he looked, Legolas was just as sad as he.

Trust. He must trust those who had won before to win again.

“Aye,” he said, resigned. “I’ll do it.” Legolas’s grip tightened for a moment on his curls, as if he could keep them by sheer force of will, before his hand relaxed and began to stroke. Gimli wondered if Legolas would stop touching his hair at any point between now and when it was—cut off. Gimli shuddered.

“Now,” Dain said, clapping his hands together. “Who shall we send on this quest?”

“All may be chosen but those who themselves choose to go,” Lord Elrond proclaimed. “For they are taking danger upon themselves as if they were conveying the ring-bearer in truth. Great their danger will be.”

“Ayed,” Gandalf said, quietly.

“Ayed,” Lady Galadriel said. “Who, then, will walk with the Company?”

Elrond spoke again. “Nine companions, there should be—Nine to counter the wraiths that have risen in aid of their dark master. Already we have one. The others should be found among you from all the free peoples here today, for this is a matter that concerns us all.” He looked around the room. “Who will accompany the ‘ring-bearer’?” He looked at Gimli with a small, commiserating smile, and Gimli felt something unhinge in his chest.

“I will go,” Legolas said. “So I have sworn, I will not be parted from my husband. Where he goes, I go.”

“I, as well,” Gandalf said. “The enemy would not believe it, I fear, if I were not present.”

Balin stood. “No dwarf of Thorin’s company would let you go without a dwarf by your side,” he said to Bilbo. “Therefore, I will go. You have my sword.”

“It is good you come,” Galadriel said. “For your destiny awaits near my borders.”

Balin looked startled, but nodded. “Aye, my lady.”

Destiny. Gimli looked startled, and watched Balin. Moria. They spoke of Moria. Gimli had told them the colony failed; why would they be so eager to go back to that fell place?

But now was not the time for such questions. Volunteers still came forth.

“You have my bow,” Dulcan said, standing as well.

“I will go,” came a quiet voice, and Gimli looked to see one of the women of Dale, tall and slender with bright hair, stand next to Dulcan. She offered no weapon to their service, but then again, neither had any of the hobbits the first time around. Elrond nodded, accepting her pledge.

A dark-skinned elf dressed in the livery of the Greenwood stood. “I will also pledge my bow to the cause,” he said, “and so stand for the Greenwood.”
“I pledge my service,” said another dwarf, one of Dain’s from the Iron Hills, who had been standing silent sentry against the door. Galadriel nodded her acceptance. Gimli bit his lip and wondered if they would meet Haldir once more. That ponce pratling would get quite a nasty shock when his lady brought home with her three dwarves when, to his knowledge, none had set foot in Lorien for centuries.

“I would not be left behind,” Glorfindel said. “My path lies westward, and I can think of no better road to travel than one doing noble deeds.” He winked at Galadriel. “And I wouldn’t say no to seeing the beauty of your lands once more.”

Galadriel smiled. “You are always welcome, my friend.”

Elrond nodded, and there was a resignation in his posture, an expectation of grief that Gimli found all too familiar. “Then it is done; the Nine have been chosen.”
I know not more,” Gimli said at length, “though I know there is more to know. Neither the ringbearer nor his companion would speak much of it in the days or weeks following, and while their accounts of their times were written in a great red ledger…” Gimli sighed. “It was not an account I could ever bring myself to read with much attention.” It was one matter to know that his dear friends suffered, and quite another to see the account of their suffering in their own words.

At length the council ended and the chambers emptied save for Gimli, Legolas, the sons of Dís, and the members of the new fellowship.

Bilbo had reclaimed the ring, fairly snatching it from the rock and shoving it into the pocket of his coat. He, like the rest of the company, was still dressed in the clothing he had obtained in Laketown, and his hands fit deep into his pockets. He stood for a long while, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his elbow tight to his side, before Thorin placed a hand on his shoulder. Bilbo turned towards him and Thorin opened his arms, pulling Bilbo into a comforting embrace, resting his cheek on Bilbo’s head. He spoke soft words that Bilbo could not hear, but Legolas turned his head as if to give them privacy.

Therefore Gimli turned to this new company, studying them with a frown. He crossed his arms. “Some of you I have met before,” he nodded at Glorfindel, who grinned widely at him, “though I admit I know you not well. Others I have either seen and we have not spoken, or you are altogether new to me.” He bowed at the three new members of the company. “I am Gimli, son of Glóin. At your service.”

Legolas stepped forward. “I may offer some assistance, as one has been long known to me, and
another I have met more recently. This,” Legolas raised a hand, and the dark skinned elf nodded, “is Curuleador. I have known him most of my life, as he has long served my father’s house.”

Curuleador placed his fist upon his breast in the manner of the elves, and bowed shallowly—a mark of respect to a being of higher rank. Gimli contained his surprise; it was rare for an elf to recognize the rankings of the dwarves for any but the royal family.

“Long have I fought against the darkness of this world, wherever that road has taken me,” he said, and his voice was softer than Gimli would have expected. Yet, there was a brightness to his eyes, a keen sense of the world around him, that turned that softness in a wry awareness that could, in an instant, become dry amusement or cutting rebuke. He looked at Legolas, raising an eyebrow. “Often it has taken me deep in the Greenwood, chasing all sorts of wild creatures.”

Legolas, to Gimli’s amazement, flushed. “I was young, and had not yet developed a stomach for strong spirits,” he muttered, and Gimli bit his lip. “And this, I know, is Dulcan, captain under Bard of the guardsmen of Laketown.”

“I’m pretty sure that title no longer exists,” Dulcan said, sounding more than a little tired. “Safer to say my job is to keep Bard from dropping from sheer exhaustion. However, my relief seems to have arrived, and I may take time to do what needs done.” He snorted, crossing his arms. “Besides, if I hadn’t volunteered he would have, and he’s needed here.”

Gandalf frowned. “This is not a journey to take for another’s sake.”

“Is it not?” Curuleador said, much to Dulcan’s surprise. “I can think of no nobler reason than to act out of love for another.”

It was enough to make Gandalf pause, but Gimli did not know if that was because of what Curuleador had said, or that he spoke in defense of Dulcan.

Dulcan cleared his throat. “Exactly that,” he said. He put his hand on the shoulder of the final member of their company. “This here is Brig.” Brig, a bright haired woman, curtseyed to them, but the motion was stilted and out of practice. Standing, Brig was nearly as tall as Dulcan, taller than Mannish women tended to be, and broad shouldered. “Brig here is one of the finest sailors I’ve ever seen, and knows the river like none other.”

Gimli remembered at once the boats of Lorien, such fragile things that nevertheless carried them without tipping. He turned, at last, to the only dwarf he did not know, one of Dain’s company. The dwarf’s helm signified a position with the barrel riders, but the dwarf’s beard indicated a designation of akhi, neither male nor female, though, according to the customs of the dwarves, one would use “he” in Westron among the men and elves.

“I am Ster,” akhi said, and nothing more.

“Well-met, Ster,” said Legolas, with a bow. Ster’s eyes narrowed a bit at Legolas, but akhi bowed, all the same.

Gimli found himself watching Ster with trepidation as the others in the company offered their own names. He did not like the way akhi looked at Legolas or the other elves in the company, and did not think it boded well for a journey that would end in the heartland of the elves. Still, there must have been a reason for Ster to volunteer. Gimli would need to have faith in those around him.

Gandalf said. “Use this time wisely, all of you.” Gandalf raised his voice, and the quiet hum of distant conversation quieted. “Make whatever preparations you need. We will leave one week
Fíli was to be crowned the following night. With the enemy on the rise and the new quest looming, the mountain was filled with a sense of deadly urgency.

Gimli watched the preparations from the doorway to the amphitheater. In dwarven custom, the new king is crowned at the first new moon of their reign, a time of rebirth and beginnings like the dwarves’ own dark origins. By luck, the new moon fell that night, and so Fíli found himself the king incumbent of Erebor mere days after first laying eyes on the mountain.

Through Gimli knew he was needed elsewhere, he could not yet tear himself away. As he passed, he felt the urge to look and watch. The dwarves worked quickly, and the chambers were well cleared. Incense had been found and lit to help clear the smell from the air, and somewhere, he knew, Dori was having a fit over the tapestries as he worked to salvage what he could.

The whole of the mountain would be in attendance, dwarves, elves, and men. It would be the first such coronation in generations of dwarves—and yet it would be the third crowning in the aftermath of great loss. Gimli couldn’t help but feel the trappings of courtly life as a meaningless facade in that moment. Yes, Fíli was to be king of Erebor, and all honor and glory was due to him, but at what cost?

Fíli hadn’t spoken much after the meeting, claiming to be tired and retiring early. Kíli had helped him settle, but when he returned, it was clear that settled was the last thing Fíli would be that evening. Kíli, no matter how hard pushed, would not break his brother’s confidence to speak of his thoughts. It did them both credit, Gimli thought, but he worried about his lucky-haired cousin. Gimli knew in his heart of hearts that Fíli would make a fine king, a noble and wise king. But was he ready?

Gimli turned away at last and made for Fíli’s chambers. With the dwarves now focused on readying the room for the coronation, no new chambers had been cleared. Gimli had already heard Fíli grumble about wasting resources, only to be calmed by Dain. “You people need this, too,” he had said. “Give them a reason to party, and they’ll work all the harder the next day.”

Ideally, the coronation would wait until Fíli was more fully healed; even Dain was able to rest for a few months after the loss of his foot and his parents before he was named Lord of the Iron Hills. The speed of this coronation was a bittersweet testament to desperate times.

Gimli slowed as he neared the door, hearing the gentle rumble of Thorin’s voice. Fíli had been strangely reticent towards his uncle, and Gimli hesitated to interrupt. As it was, he ended up in perfect position to hear Fíli when he spoke.

“I do not claim to understand your decision, uncle; long have you fought to regain the throne. I do not see why you would leave it now when it is yours by rights.”

There was a silence from Thorin before he spoke. “By rights, aye, but it would not be right.” He sighed. “Our family has lived long under a curse of darkness; you saw with your own eyes how I fell. Be heartened that you did not see the same madness grow in the eyes your grandfather and great-grandfather.”

“You fought it,” Fíli said. “You fought it and won.”

“For now,” Thorin said. “I cannot promise that the sickness won’t take me again, that my fight will
always win, or that I will always be able to bring myself back from the brink. The times ahead are too dark to chance on a king who could so easily fall prey to the enemy’s whispers.”

“So you quest against him?” Fíli snapped. “You fear his influence, and so you head to his stronghold?”

“I fear the dragon-gold more than the enemy,” Thorin said. “I will be walking away from much that would poison my mind.” Here, his voice dropped. “It’s Bilbo, Fíli. How could I leave him, after all I’ve done?”

Silence once more, and Gimli could nearly hear what Fíli did not say. And how can you leave me here, with this? At length, Fíli said in a small voice. “I am not ready, Uncle.”

Footsteps, the sound of bedsprings creaking. “You will be, my sister-son. When the time comes you will be ready, and you will not be alone. Dain will be with you, and your mother. Listen to their counsel; may it serve you well.”

There was a harsh sound, a heavy breath to stave off tears, and Gimli turned to go. “Oh, do stop hovering, cousin,” Fíli called out. “Is this what they teach you in the future? To hover at doorways?”

“I learned that from you,” Gimli retorted, and stuck his head into the doorway. There was no point in denying he had been there, after all. “All right, then, cousin?”

“Apparently, I’m the king,” Fíli said, wiping at his eyes with the back of his hand, and he shrugged. “The king is always all right.”

Thorin left soon after; he had much to prepare and still much to do. Dís arrived well in advance of the ceremony to help her son dress for the occasion. Gimli was pulled away by his father to bathe and dress, and Glóin helped Gimli with his braids—all save for one. Now that their marriage was no secret, that braid would be bound by Legolas or none at all. Then, in the manner of these sorts of things, it was time.

Fíli was still under orders to not walk, but he could stand for a brief time, if supported. So, like before, Gimli and Kíli carried Fíli on a litter, Fíli sitting tall in his seat, and when they reached the dais where Thorin, Balin, Dain, and Dís stood, they helped him stand steady.

There were words, formal words in deep Khuzdul, that will not be recorded here, for they are not meant for any record save for the minds of the kings and their highest advisors. In this tongue did Fíli pledge to rule Erebor with honor, to do right by her people, and to uphold the laws of the land for all his days. Those in attendance watched in wonder, for they had never before heard the like, nor were they likely ever to hear it again.

Then at last Thorin stood with the Raven Crown held aloft over Fíli’s head and proclaimed, “Hail, the first of his name, Fíli son of Dís, King of Erebor!” He then placed the crown on Fíli’s head, and stepped back to raise his sword, and offering and a salute. “Hail, new King Under the Mountain!”

“Hail!” cried the dwarves, and men, and elves. “Hail!” Fíli closed his eyes, and bowed to his new kingdom. “Hail!”

“Hail,” Thorin said, his voice soft yet not lost in the sea of voices. “The Golden King of Silver Fountains.”

King Fíli opened his eyes.
Fíli had been crowned for less than a day before he became mired in paperwork, despite Dain honestly helping him prioritize. When Gimli stopped in, Fíli looked about ready to bolt and might have if his legs had been in better condition. “I cannot do this, cousin,” he said to Gimli, eyes pleading. “Thorin should be king, not I! What do I know of governance? I was a scout! And did you hear what they’re calling me? ‘Golden King of Silver Fountains’! I could kill Uncle; what possessed him to say that?”

“He believes in you,” Gimli said. “So do we all. You’re a symbol of hope now, cousin.”

Fíli sighed. “I never asked to be.”

“Symbols rarely are,” Dain said, putting down his parchment.

“How can I live up to so grand a name?” Fíli asked. He looked frazzled, like he hadn’t slept. Indeed, he might not have.

“One deed at a time,” Dain said. “And rest easy, lad. They got me the same way,” Dain said, knocking his fist against his iron foot. He seated himself at Fíli’s desk, and put his foot up on the desk; Gimli knew the foot still sometimes pained Dain, and wondered how much of Dain’s posturing was to hide that ache.

“That’s not quite the same thing,” Fíli said, but it caused some other tension to leave his face. “To be called ‘Iron Foot’ when you have an iron foot.”

“We could call you ‘Shatterbones,’” Gimli said, and was glad that Fíli could not actually chase him, though he had to duck a rather impressive paperweight.

“Aye!” Dain cried! “Or ‘Gimpy!’ I almost had that one myself, you know.”

“I hate both of you, truly,” Fíli said, but he seemed more at ease, after.

“Aye, I know you do,” Dain said gamely. “I hated it when my advisors made me do this, too, but most of kingship is paperwork, lad. Take the time to learn it now, when you can, and then, when you get them used to you, you can run away before they expect it.”

Gimli shot Dain a look, but Fíli looked considering, and so Gimli left him in Dain’s company almost, but not quite, against his better judgement.

Legolas had been spending time with the diplomatic delegation from Mirkwood. Thranduil was leaving soon, and Legolas wanted to spend time with him before he left. It left Gimli with nothing to do and, for the first time in months, he felt at loose ends.

The Quest was won; the Dragon dead. The battle was over, and they were in the deep breath before the war.

He wanted his husband, yet he would not begrudge him of his time with his father.

So he was surprised when he walked out before the mountain to hear the faint sounds of his husband singing. It was not a full song, the words often absently falling away to melody. Gimli squinted up at the mountainside to look.

The sun was rising behind the ridge, although the valley was still filled with the deep blue shadows of night. It created a sharp line on the side of the mountain, above which was painted the brilliant
colors of the sunset: rose gold and copper and shining brass.

There, well above the shadow line, shone a glint of white gold--Legolas shining pale. Gimli felt himself smile and began to climb.

Legolas did not stop singing once Gimli joined him on the ledge, though he smiled. His eyes were closed, face turned towards the rising sun. Gimli sat next to him with a small sigh and looked out over the valley below. It was difficult to see, for the sun was very bright, but the last embers of the pyres flickered in the remaining shadows of night. The smoke was still thick, mixing with the first brush of morning fog.

Legolas stopped singing, and the silence that grew between them was warm.

“Red sun rising,” Legolas said. “Storm coming.”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “But we shall weather it.”

“Aye,” Legolas agreed, and his smile grew rueful. “Again.”

Gimli snorted and stretched, feeling his joints stretch and crack. His mouth cracked open in a yarn, but he was too stuck in the stretch to cover it.

“Are you tired, meleth-nin?” Legolas asked, warm and teasing.

Gimli nodded. “Aye, my darling. You’d be tired, too, if you’d been awake as long as I.” He paused and looked at Legolas. “Well, if you were a dwarf.”

Legolas laughed. “Aye, you must be tired to lose the grace of your tongue. But I am not a dwarf. My love, come rest your head. I will keep watch this morning.”

“Aye,” Gimli said. “Aye, that will do nicely.”

Legolas held up his arm and Gimli slipped beneath, leaning against his husband until his head lay in Legolas’s lap. He hummed when he felt Legolas’s long fingers sinking to his hair, gently combing his hands through Gimli’s curls. Again, Legolas began to sing:

“Lay down
Your sweet and weary head
Night is falling
You have come to journey’s end
Sleep now...”

Legolas trailed off to his voiceless humming once more, and Gimli closed his eyes, filling his ears with the voice of his love.

”Soon you will see
All of your fears will pass away.
Safe in my arms
You’re only sleeping...”

As Gimli let himself drift to sleep, Legolas sang like a promise.

Don’t say
We have come now to the end
White shores are calling
You and I will meet again

Works inspired by this one: 

Comes Around Again [Podfic] by the_dragongirl, Chained Time by Genuka

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