Wanted Dead or Alive

by greenspace

Summary

Heroes didn't exist anymore, and if they did, she wouldn't be one of them. To the people who came across her, she was the brooding Ranger with the dark grey hooded cloak. All it took to disrupt her pensive calm was a quest halfway across the world. With it, she had a hard time understanding how down-on-her-luck she was and how everything can go all pear-shaped in no time.

Notes

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The dreams were a murky coalescence of distant memories and a lifetime's worth of grim thoughts.

*At first it was all red. Seldom she was able to dream of anything anymore except for the colour red; red like the rising and setting sun, red like the dirt on a battlefield, red like blood. Then the red bled into a dark blue. There was sand, grainy and wet, a pair of footprints on it—she could only imagine they were her own. A dark ocean reaching as far as the eye could see. The sound of waves crashing on the beach violently—*

It woke her up from a restless slumber. She was not sure, at first, what woke her. There was a nagging uneasiness in the back of her mind, but so often was the case after her dreams, she paid it no mind. It seemed only minutes prior that she'd decided to let her eyes rest for a while, but hours must have passed, for dawn had come and the sun was on the rise. Or so she imagined, under the heavy clouds that painted the sky a dark grey.

A gust of morning air blew and the Ranger inhaled deeply in the chilly breeze that came down from the North, like a knife cutting through the warmest woolens. The weather had taken a bad turn the week before; mid-spring snows were common enough—they were usually mild. The wind, however, especially during the night, was unforgiving at the best of times. Made the travellers across the river Lhûn seek any form of shelter, usually demanding layers upon layers of thick furs. Often they shuddered to think how hard it'd be come winter.

Rumours of strange creatures roaming near Emyn Uial had spread across the land. Dark shapes in the woods, dreadful things that it made villagers and countrymen's blood run cold to think of. It had her kinsmen alerted. Small groups of two or three had been dispatched immediately to the southern end of the Hills and Lake Evendim to acquire direct evidence. She had strayed a few miles from the planned route and her assigned comrades, following the rumours from village to village. Hadn't meant to travel so far up, beyond the river, but the last sighting had been there a fortnight ago, so she was left with no option but run a few patrols in the hope of coming across the root of all trouble.

Hissing sounds that vaguely resembled words suddenly drew her attention, and she tried to discern what they were and, mostly, where they came from, here in the middle of nowhere. Travellers? She swiftly hauled herself up, grabbing her quiver and bow from where they lay beside her, and then started climbing the tree her back once leaned against. Perching herself soundlessly upon a branch, she waited for the source of the voice to come into view.

The sight made her eyebrows rise to her hairline with surprise. It was going to be an... *interesting* morning, for lack of a better word.

There were five of them and in a distance where they might as well catch her scent if she didn't act quickly. Although there was a *slight* chance her scent had blended in that of nature after weeks of treading muddy paths, sleeping on the dirt with fallen leaves mushed under her cloak, and forgoing even a quick dip in a stream, let alone a proper bath, she wasn't willing to try her luck so early into the day—for the record, that rarely went smoothly. It made her wonder why and how they'd managed to come so far west without being caught by any of her kinsmen. Mere words she caught from their screeching hisses, being not so familiar with their language; words such as 'scum' and 'kill'—naturally. They were orcs; if murder and death weren't included in their permanently evil plans, then something was off.
She had once sworn to wipe them all out off the face of the earth. At the time it seemed entirely possible. In retrospect, she recognised the mentality of someone coming of age in the throes of vengeful anger. As the anger ebbed and reason settled, that mentality grew out of vindictiveness and into a more noble element. By killing as many as she could, she believed to be saving another innocent soul somewhere else. Any sensible being would not stand doing it for revenge for too long, because revenge corrupts all those who seek it. And getting corrupted, having a biased way of looking at things, wasn't a trait fitting for a Ranger.

She waited awhile for the group to move further and blew a soft whistle in the air of the small forest that was slowly coming back to life after the peaceful night. Not long after, a dark brown steed emerged from the tree shadows, approaching her with a brisk, yet quiet pace. Urúvion escorted her only when circumstances demanded, meaning every time she had to travel a rather large distance.

She spared a few seconds to pet his muzzle before mounting him in a hurry. "Noro lim, Urúvion", were her only words to him before he started galloping.

She could feel the wind bite harder at both her skin and the horse's as they rode to the bridge ahead. Curiosity got the better of her regarding their travelling in daytime—Though, on second thoughts, there were plenty of clouds in the sky for them to tolerate the meagre daylight. Still, they were known for their inclination to travel at night if possible, so they clearly must have been under a lot of pressure to consider the daylight the lesser of two evils. It made her wonder what the other evil might be. Perhaps they were just hungry and she had caught them in the middle of the hunt.

Her patience started to wear thin as the distance between them shortened, which was no surprise considering the notable stench they left on their trail. It was like a moving cesspool, and she was being forgiving with the term.

Approaching the stream, she spotted several yards ahead of her a lone man riding a pony toward the bridge and them hiding behind large rocks, remains of an old watch-tower that once stood there. He didn't seem to take notice; if he had, he hid it pretty well. She dismounted Urúvion and run to the opposite of where the bridge was, taking cover behind trees and bushes, until she found a turn where the stream narrowed down to a rill, where she could cross it without risking being carried away by water. She quietly crept up the other bank and took cover behind a large tree trunk, then brought an arrow forth to her bow, lithe fingers slowly drawing it back and stretching the string.

The man on the pony slowly crossed the bridge to pass on the other side when they made their move to attack him. Undetected by either party, she shot the arrow and the first orc went down. Then the second, and then the third. Promptly the other two, as well as the man on the pony who was stunned to shock, turned around to see her sprout behind the tree with a wild gleam in her eyes. One of the remaining two took his fair share of time to react, so he quickly had his neck sliced by her daggers. Yet the victory was short lived.

As the fight with the last orc commenced, the strangest thing happened. In retrospect, it'd be the second in a series of exceedingly strange things happening from that moment onwards.

The Ranger swore she could hear the tapping of another set of hooves approaching. Who would ever thought there would be so many souls gathering in this godforsaken place? Strange things, indeed.

Somewhere between the third deflect and fourth strike, she took glimpse of a pointed grey hat moving in the background. The instantaneous distraction was enough for the orc to pull a small knife out of his muddy clothes and embed it to her side. It was a mellow kind of pain, like cutting your palm on glass rather than scratching against wood or hard rock. It didn't hurt until she noticed the red against the white of her tunic. She briefly glanced at it and then at her opponent, who eyed her with a sinister look. With an abrupt move she launched forward and kicked him in the groin, resulting in
him collapsing on one knee before her. The left blade whirled and clashed with his sword then, so forcefully that it fell on the ground.

The daggers whizzed as they slid across the skin, meeting at a cross in front of his neck, not slitting his throat open but sinking in the flesh enough to cause a tingly sensation.

"What master do you serve?"

No answer came except for a growl.

"I don't have all day," she warned with the patience of someone who had run out of it already, and the cold steel pressed against his skin more persistently. "Speak or die."

Still no answer.

"Die it is then."

Black blood spilled around and the shrieking sound of the blades slashing his neck was hushed by a whistle of the wind.

She wiped the black liquid stains off the daggers with a dirty piece of cloth she'd conjured out of a pocket, with the swiftness of a gesture that had been repeated many a time before. Slender and keen edged were her steel blades, fitting arms for a warrior of equal keenness and skill. After they were back in their sheaths, she turned to see the two men staring back. The one who rode the pony had now dismounted it and gawped at her in a strange manner, a firm grip on his sword. With a sigh she directed her pace to the other, the smiling one. The closer she got, the more noticeable became the height difference between the two.

Annoyingly, her mind had the bad habit of jumping to the worst assumption most of the time. A quick glance to the skies, and she was already fearing that the short man wasn't actually a short Man, but a taller-than-average Dwarf.

Anyone in Middle Earth who wasn't living under a rock knew the stories. Dwarves' general distrust of people other than their own and the hatred they harbored for certain people were the stuff of legends. Which was unfortunate, because, despite that she wasn't one of those people, she did have dealings with them. Obviously the dwarf wasn't aware of that and he was unlikely to ever know about it, but stars have mercy on her nerves if he, by some unhappy coincidence, ever found out.

She gave a slight bow of her head in greeting. "Mithrandir."

"Mae g'ovannen, melon nin."

The Ranger glanced at the dwarf only momentarily, but it was just in time to glimpse him screwing up his face as though he'd a whole lemon shoved into his mouth and made to chew on it as soon as the elvish words sounded. She held back a scoff. "Gwenwin in enninath."

"Indeed," Gandalf agreed with a smile. "Your skill with the blade remains as good as I remembered it to be."

"It would be worrisome if it didn't," the woman laughed. "Yet you aren't one for flattery..." In a matter of seconds her expression turned serious and she threw him a wary, suspicious look. "What do you want, Gandalf?"

"Why does everyone assume I want something?" the wizard wondered dramatically.
"You have a history of wanting things."

"Can I not pay a most innocent compliment to a friend?"

"You may. Although, knowing you, your compliments bode ill for any who's concerned."

There was a scandalised intake of a breath. "Slander and calumny!" he protested. "Whatever's made you believe such a thing?"

She quirked an eyebrow. "Certain people might have warned me about you and your ways a few years prior."

A low laugh deflated the seeming tension in the air. "Oh, and I thought I could play it out for more this time," he feigned annoyance. "No matter—'tis rather fortunate we all met here."

The cunning wizard spoke unhurriedly, moderately, as though he was weighing his sayings first. The woman and the dwarf listened with caution. Both winced at the sound of the word 'all', though neither seemed to care that the other was watching.

He and the dwarf were already acquainted, that much was obvious. So there must be a bigger plan in the making, the Ranger concluded. She didn't know how to feel about this; she was divided between curiosity and worry.

"Rumours reached me," said Gandalf merrily, "that you were seen wandering round these parts. Five days I have been searching for you." A pause. Then a cryptic smile. "I come bearing adventure."

The woman snorted. "When do you not?"

"In this hour of need, dear friend, your name has arisen." Before the question even formed on her lips he was saying it, "I would like you to serve as a guide in a quest."

"A guide?" she parroted with incredulity.

The dwarf beside him turned to him so fast, he almost got whiplash; surely it could not be his quest. How did the wizard take the liberty to reveal his plans to a complete stranger? He cleared his throat a little less than discreetly, "Do I not have a say in that?"

So they were acquainted with each other and there was definitely some sort of plan in the making. The plot's thickening. The woman arched an eyebrow and paid the dwarf a studying glance, a little taken aback at the slightly intimidating, for someone that short, attitude.

"Oh, how ill-mannered of me. My dear, let me introduce you to the leader of this particular quest, Thorin Oakenshield," said the wizard, casting a cautious look at the dwarf and an intense one at her. At the sound of his name, her eyes went wide. "So you are Thorin, son of Thrain," she acknowledged and did her best to conceal her surprise and the onslaught of deductions her mind made. "His Majesty in person, hence the mighty dwarvish suspiciousness and not at all amiable behaviour," was the mentally added part for her ears only. Afterwards, with a highly displeased pout, she noticed the look Gandalf paid her and huffed. "I am Arya, a Ranger of the North," she said brusquely and offered him a faint nod with her head.

Thorin looked the woman up and down. She was standing quietly two yards away with her hands loose at her sides, yet in a distance from her belt that she could easily reach for her sword should danger arose, although she could just as easily reach for her bow and arrow as he realised a moment later. She was towering him something more than a whole head, but was still shorter than the wizard.
and, as she had just truthfully declared, was dressed and equipped like a Ranger; dark grey cloak with the distinctive star-shaped clasp and in possession of a considerable amount of weapons. Rumours were once spread of female ones, but everyone within his Halls in Ered Luin had dismissed them. As it was customary within the dwarven race, females’ lives were not supposed to be endangered by wandering in the Wild or partaking in fights and battles. On the other hand, the race of Men had a copious amount of women compared to the Dwarves’, so they could perhaps spare a few; although it still felt out of the ordinary.

He gave a curt nod in lieu of a greeting.

Arya was a good sport about it. "I wonder if there's a chance that quest of yours could be the reason those orcs attempted to ambush you."

Thorin scowled, although there was a fleeting moment that worry managed to creep in. He stole a glance at Gandalf, recalling their chance-meeting in Bree nigh a twelvemonth ago, as well as the damned piece of parchment with the promise of payment to whomever took his head off. He had grown even more suspicious of people since then. Even if the wizard was acquainted with this woman, he couldn't bring himself to give out any information. "Perhaps if you took the time to interrogate the last one, you'd have an answer to that question."

"If one had the good grace to warn me beforehand, I would indeed," she countered. "Yet seeing as neither of you made any attempt to stop me, I simply did my duty."

"Either way, my quest is no concern of yours."

She actually looked amused. "I agree. Still," she shrugged, "if it weren't for me, I doubt it'd bode well for it to begin with its leader dead, no?"

The wry remark made the dwarf frown even more and Gandalf think it as the right moment to intervene. "How were you aware of this?"

"I heard them discussing their plan. I did not catch but a few words, thus considered it wiser to check for sure."

The dwarf peered curiously at the woman, his eyes gradually narrowing in distrust. "Did they not catch your scent?"

"I'm a Ranger, master dwarf. I know how to cover my scent." She was ready to go on a small rant about life in the Wild that, given her mild disposition towards sarcasm, would probably culminate in an invitation for him to get a whiff of her if he wanted proof. Yet that little annoying voice in her mind reminded her that the closest thing to her current scent was, in all likelihood, a bog. And the last thing she wanted was the dwarf commenting on what that entailed for Rangers’ sense of personal hygiene. Therefore, she remained silent. Wisely so.

Oblivious to her slightly far-fetched trail of thoughts, Thorin felt something akin to a brick sitting at the pit of his stomach. Unfortunately he had the same bad habit of jumping to the worst conclusion. "And how exactly did you hear them?"

"Here we go. 'May my good ear be blessed.'"

"Human ear could not have caught the sound from a large distance," he grunted.

"One gets accustomed—"

"Her mother was an elf."
Both heads turned sharply towards the wizard.

There it was. The tragically unhappy coincidence. Arya had a dumbfounded look on her face, one that situations rarely warranted. She just stood there, jaw dropped slightly, staring at the wizard with eyes that screamed 'What in the name of hell?'.

Gandalf gave a nearly imperceptible shrug, too innocent to be true, as though he had no idea that he'd just possibly incited a grudge the Ranger wasn't inclined to add in her list of things to have to handle.

The woman let a long-suffering sigh—at this point she was starting to believe it, the man surely just went around looking for trouble. "I see no reason for explaining myself... but since the cat's out of the bag," she said graciously. "Yes, my mother was an elf. That may or may not have affected my hearing and eyesight, for they appear to be slightly better than that of the average person. Personally, it's more likely that twelve years of living and travelling in the wild have simply accustomed me to ambient noises."

Thorin looked ready to pop an artery, if that hadn't happened already. "You—" he turned to Gandalf, feeling truly offended, and then to her. "How dare you? I will not have one of them join my company!" he growled in disgust, clenching his fists.

"For goodness' sake, Thorin, did you not hear—"

"Aye, I heard more than enough!"

"You owe her—"

But the king was furious and had no intention of being subtle about it. His voice was filled with disdain as he spat out, "I most certainly do not owe anything to the likes of—"

"I said slightly better than the average," the woman chimed in rather tiredly, but her voice seemed to fade in the background as the two men argued.

"At least you have to offer some help for her injury!" Gandalf chided him. "Do not forget that she saved you." He then returned his gaze to the Ranger and the red spot on the white fabric, gesturing towards it, "My dear, I think a healer might be in order." The next second found him glaring at the king, who nodded with reluctance and stifled a grumble.

Arya glanced down at the wound, only now taking in the extent of it—namely the purplish black hue of the skin around it. Oh bollocks, she thought wearily. As if the day wasn't interesting enough already, there was a wound caused by a blade dabbed in poison to top it all. Wincing as her hands fumbled with a cloth in her satchel, she tied the piece of fabric around her middle tightly to stop the bleeding.

"I'd be obliged to you for your help," she said with forced politeness, rolling eyes at the dwarf who didn't even do them the courtesy of staying around—he was already off to his pony. Arya went to retrieve Urúvion from where she'd left him earlier and the three of them took the long way west.

During the several hour ride to Ered Luin, both she and Gandalf stole a few glances at Thorin, who looked like he was stewing in his own juices. The dwarf wasn't much of a talker, limiting to grunts and snorts when he was asked anything, so the wizard and the Ranger kept to themselves mostly.

Tightening her cloak around her shoulders as the early afternoon chill made its appearance, Arya kept pressing, unsuccessfully, for any tidbit of information about what sort of plan was in the works this time. She wouldn't have guessed even if she tried to.
Another gust of cold air blew, making her teeth rattle, and all her thoughts were buried in a deep part of her mind as she pulled her hood on to shield her head from the wind.

The Ranger blessed whatever semblance of luck she had left when the Halls' gates came into view. So weak and dizzy she'd grown on the way, twice or thrice she'd resorted to Gandalf for support so as not to fall from her horse. Barely any food and being on the move for days didn't help the situation any, either. Perhaps the poison had already spread through her system and she would die soon. She'd rather not.

As soon as they stepped foot in the city, Gandalf escorted the pale Ranger to the healers and made sure she'd be taken care of. Then he made his way through the market to find Thorin, who was waiting in the council hall, angrily stomping up and down the room, ready to snap at the first unfortunate soul that appeared before him.

"How could you– She is not coming with us!" He didn't care that he could be easily heard outside. "I will not let one of them join–"

"As I would not expect you to," the wizard interrupted with a serene smile. "She is not one of them, Thorin; her mother was. And to my knowledge, no one can handpick their ancestors. That is not her fault and you needn't be so harsh about it. Only her vision and hearing are slightly better, and they are the only signs that could possibly show a connection with the elven race, if there is one at all."

"Still, Gandalf, she is a woman! A very young woman, mind you–"

"Age is no indicator of ability."

"Yes, it is!"

The wizard arched an eyebrow.

Thorin realised a little too late the implications of that statement. "Now, I didn't mean that you are too old–" At the wizard's wry nod, he realised there was no chance for him to crawl out of the hole he'd dug for himself. "I am only saying that I doubt she's as experienced as I or the others are–"

"She is a Ranger," the wizard objected. "Also a skilled tracker, sufficiently experienced in warfare and will be an invaluable asset–"

"I would not care even if she was the most venerable Ranger in existence!" the king snapped, his tone screaming intolerance to an opinion divergent from his own from a mile away.

"You asked me to help you find the fourteenth member of your company, and I also found you a fifteenth one with very helpful skills and thorough knowledge of the roads ahead," the wizard's voice was booming and echoed in the hall out of the large room now. "You can either accept both my suggestions, you can delay further in order to recruit one of your preference, or you can stick with thirteen companions and receive all the bad luck you want!"

What none of them were aware of was the fact that Arya, who had her wound effectively disinfected and bound up, was standing outside of the room where the two men argued. She just sat there leaning on the wall with panache, nibbling at one of the oranges she'd just bought from the market at the healer's advice to eat some to strengthen up, shaking her head with mild amusement at what was happening inside. Didn't need to stick an ear on the door to listen to them, as some people who passed by seemed inclined to do. They were that loud.
"Whatever do we need a guide for, anyway? We know the road!"

"The roads have changed," argued the wizard. "You scraped through an orc ambush in the middle of nowhere—you think rambling in the Great East Road where anyone can see you will be safer somehow?"

"Exactly my point. Safest way to do it is under their noses than take all the godforsaken byroads through fields and mountains."

"Don't be so certain. Safety is not a permanent state of affairs," the wizard advised. "There is a bounty on your head. Rest assured, no one will care whether it happens in the middle of a godforsaken field or in the middle of the Road. And, of course, let us not forget that whoever issued that bounty may as well know about your extended family."

His reluctance cracked slightly, stomach twinging just at the thought of his nephews suffering an ill fate because of him.

"That woman," he pointed to a general direction outside the room, "knows these lands, she knows how to travel unseen."

"Still, a lone woman amongst fourteen men?" the dwarf protested yet again. "You know that this journey is loaded with difficulties. And some are still young; the comforting touch of a woman is something that's nagging a male's mind even in the darkest of times."

You must be joking, thought the young Ranger wearily. She was not some kind of a hussy. Nor a tavern wench that would offer her services every time someone felt burdened by his woes.

"She could be a distraction—"

"Oh, enough with the excuses!" Gandalf sighed. "She is no such woman. To her, this will be a mission that is to be taken seriously. You must trust me."

The dwarf seemed to dither, but the voice echoed in his head again, 'Her mother was an elf.' The thought rekindled the sentiments that were so abhorrent to him when he first heard the wizard saying that. "No," he deadpanned. "I will not have– I cannot stand– I'll die before I let a traitor amongst us."

Before Gandalf was able to form any words she walked into the room, long hair wobbling over her shoulders and eyes shooting daggers in the direction of the king. Thorin's eyes roved over the woman, simmering with distrust and unkindness, but also noticing the proud composure in her air and manner of walking.

"Would you please care to elaborate in what way I am a traitor?" she asked coldly. Deep down she was itching to teach him a lesson about the elementary courtesy he was supposed to show to people that he was unacquainted with. He had practically referred to her as a harlot, for crying out loud. Not in the exact words, but the underlying meaning was obvious. She could put up with petty comments like these, but in no way she would take kindly to anyone calling her a traitor.

"You descend from the enemy," Thorin stated. "And my kin's legacy ought to be protected from enemies."

Knowing exactly what he meant by 'enemies', the way in which she rolled her eyes could not be mistaken for anything else but irritation. Apparently, his attachment to the past was the stuff of legends. "Why do you have to be so stubborn and cling to your prejudice? I feel deeply sorry for what happened to your people, but let me remind you of something. I was not even born then! In no way have I betrayed you or your kin," she reasoned. "And why do you insist on accusing the Elves
for the misfortunes that have fallen upon you? Has it even occurred to you that they didn't want to jeopardize their lives in a battle where the odds were easily against them?"

"Do you mean to suggest that I do not value the lives of my people?" Thorin barked and took a threatening step toward her.

"I imply no such thing. What I'm saying is that you refuse to see things from a different point of view other than yours."

The dwarf let a scornful huff and cocked his head from side to side, "I expected no better."

"Are you hearing impaired, or just completely immune to any voice of reason?" Arya yelled. "This is something that happened in the past. Accept it and move on, with everything you have left at your disposal. Even if you have nothing."

The last words were added bitterly and she swallowed hard, her fingers gripping the hilt of her daggers tightly. For those were not words spoken lightly. In the wild, her home of the past ten years, she had nothing. She was alone. To have everyone away from her was a path she'd taken long ago and it was inconsiderable to act otherwise and wander off course. Her closest people had gone their separate ways, meaning either death or travel. Her family had perished and her fellow Rangers travelled around the lands, never settling somewhere, just like she did. Only one of her kin she had in the world now, and not many knew that they were even related.

"You are a woman; a ragged Ranger," an exasperated growl escaped his lips. "Not someone of significance, not someone who has any clue of how to rule a kingdom. Not someone who has any right to lecture me on loss and defeat."

Arya cast a thunderous glare to the dwarf, and her eyes blazed with anger so fierce that her face had turned scarlet. "And those are the words of an alleged king!" she exclaimed and her shrill, crazy laughter filled the air. "I've been acquainted with loss and defeat in a much more savage way than you think---"

"Enough!" Gandalf's voice came booming out, silencing the other two. He turned to the dwarf first. "I will not have you offend our friends when you're not familiar with them."

"I do not recall inviting her to break bread with me to begin with. And by no account I mean to be her protector. She is not coming," Thorin stated firmly.

Maybe her decision was not yet final, but the dwarf and his lack of cooperation were giving her a headache the likes of which she'd rarely experienced before. "I assure you I am more than capable of protecting myself. Also, a piece of advice," she said, "being so bigoted and narrow-minded will never be a useful tool in trying to make allies."

"Watch your tongue, girl," the dwarf warned. "You should know your place when addressing a king."

Her stiff shoulders suddenly relaxed and she regained the unnervingly placid composure and the coldness in her voice. "I believe I'm addressing a man like any other, with weaknesses, like any other."

Thorin gave a thoughtful snort at her straightforwardness. Less than a handful of people had the nerve to face him with that attitude."

"Can you tell me anything about this quest at all?"
The wizard considered the dwarf's face for a long minute before he turned to her. "Thorin is assembling a company to reclaim their homeland, the Lonely Mountain."

It was a good thing she wasn't drinking anything in that moment, for the liquid would have definitely spurt out of her mouth. "A company of how many exactly?" she inquired quietly.

"Fourteen," Gandalf offered.

The woman almost did a double take. "Sorry?"

The following silence could only mark something dreadful. Her eyes immediately fell on the small table against the wall that accommodated several cups and three big flagons of what she supposed was a liquor of sorts. She took the liberty to walk over to it, grab a cup and the flagon closest to her, and pour whatever it was in there till the cup was almost full. A very large swig felt mandatory.

"So you tell me," she muttered, addressing no one in specific, "you intend to reclaim the Lonely Mountain with the aid of fourteen people?"

"Well... with you, that's fifteen," the wizard supplied.

"Oh, that's so much better," she muttered wryly. Bloody hell, there wasn't enough booze in this place to make this any less of an insane idea, and that was coming from her, who had had her fair share of crazy ideas in her life.

"I know what you're thinking--"

"Oh, I'm thinking about a lot of things. Did you think this through at all?"

"Thorin made that decision at my instigation."

Arya shook her head again. That made perfect sense; it wasn't without reason that Gandalf had earned the reputation of a meddler, after all. Still, her expression was that of sheer confusion. "Why even attempt such a thing?"

"For reasons I wouldn't like to burden your mind with," Gandalf said quietly. "Not yet, at least."

"Of course," she said dryly, as if expecting no different. "Let me list all the ways you're going to die: outlaws, wildlings, heavy rain, mud, drowning, steep mountains, fever, infections. Sure, you could load up on all kinds of healing supplies for these, but what about the unknown poisonous plants and disease-carrying insects you'll come across in Mirkwood? And we haven't even started on the things that want to eat you alive." She made an emphatic pause. "So what reason do I have to agree to this fool's errand?"

"You owe me a favour, dear," the wizard reminded her with a cryptic smile.

Her head slumped forward and she favoured pinching the bridge of her nose rather than whimpering aloud in front of the dwarf.

"You had better accept her," Gandalf advised Thorin in a whisper, "before she ceases feeling indebted to me."

Thorin was angry knowing where the discussion was going. She had already learned enough, and he wouldn't want her going about and accidentally spilling the beans about their plans. Therefore, there were two ways this could go; either kill and silence her forever, or accept her. He imagined she wouldn't be pleased to know how seriously he was considering the first option. His permanent frown
"Fine. So be it," he grumbled with reluctance after a long silence, feeling a knot get stuck in his throat. "But know that she, alone, will be responsible for herself."

Her head snapped up and she seemed a tad insulted. "No one asked you or any other to be responsible for me." And, although being aware of her real name miffed her to no end, she thought it rather unmannerly of him to refer to her in the third person when she was actually present in the room.

The king limited himself to a sneer and said nothing. While Gandalf dissected the plan of the journey, his mind was working feverishly, once again mulling especially over his sister's sons. They were young, the human was also young, and the last thing Thorin would like to experience was one of his nephews, or —worse— both of them rubbing shoulders with, Mahal forbid, one of the tall folk and get distracted from their purpose. He'd grow blisters up his bum before that moment ever dared to arrive.

When the informational session was over, she excused herself and headed to the market to purchase supplies, with Thorin's everlasting scrutinizing gaze studying her movements even till the last moment as she exited the room.

"Too spirited, that one," he said with a sulky huff once the two men were left alone, briefly staring at the door she had just closed.

"She is."

"Might as well pass for royalty judging by the way she acts on certain m–"

"That, she is, too."

Thorin didn't expect that to come back and bite him in the arse. His slightly contemptuous laughter was cut short and tense silence filled the room. Only after he got his bearings back he crossed his arms in front of him with an inquiring look, extremely curious to hear the rest of the tale.

"Or she would be, if the world were any different," Gandalf continued gravely. "There are but a few left in Middle-earth of her people. The race of the Kings from over the Sea is nearly at an end."

"Is she really one of the people of the old Kings? I thought that race had passed into legend."

"Reality begs to differ," said Gandalf, a little amused by the quizzical look on the dwarf's face. There was a brief pause and his voice lowered then, "She hails from a royal line. A fallen one nowadays, though the blood is not lost yet."

To say that Thorin was taken by surprise would be a gross understatement. He, who took pride in claiming that he had control over most of his reactions, now found his arms falling to his sides. The woman's ancestors were Kings and Princes of Men, with whatever troubles that entailed, considering the constant brooding expression on her face.

"Is that so?"

"Yes," the wizard said simply, "and I trust you to keep that to yourself."

The dwarf gave a curt nod, but the thought of her elvish descent had certifiably no intention to evacuate his mind, no matter how surprised he was from the information he had just acquired.
"How do I know she won't betray us?"

The wizard shook his head frustratingly and straightened his back, appearing far more menacing than usual. "Because I'm telling you so," he countered with an exasperated sigh. With that, he bid him goodbye and was gone in a flurry of long grey robes.

After he left, Thorin walked to the nearby table, grabbed the flagon and poured himself a cup or two.

Gandalf's little walk around the halls in Ered Luin ended to the stables, for he had to leave in order to find another member of the company. He found the Ranger there, perched upon a small bench beside her horse, all set to leave and only lingering back in wait for his directions. One might say she looked as stoical as any woman her age, though her quite restless right leg said otherwise. Her face snapped up to him as he approached, all scowls and raised eyebrows that would discourage even the bravest of people from going near her.

"Really?" she inquired dryly. "There may not be many Rangers left and I indeed owe you a favour but, to accompany a bunch of Dwarves, you had to choose the only one who descends directly from the Elves, didn't you?" She was already on edge because she had been on the receiving end of numerous prying glances and became the subject of whispers back at the market, not minutes ago; if so, justifiably. A human, let alone a female Ranger, was not the most frequent of sights in the midst of a dwarven realm. Still, being the center of attention was not her field of expertise. She would rather go unnoticed and, thus far, had actually been doing pretty well at this.

The wizard just graced her with his usual secretive smile, which she had many times seen previously. "It will merely make the journey more interesting for everyone, do you not agree?"

"By all means," Arya replied, maintaining the sarcastic look from before. "Nasty piece of work he is," she added then, her voice considerably lowered than before, for the last thing she wanted was the dwarves to hear her charming remarks about their ruler. She could certainly live without having to face such a trouble.

Gandalf chuckled lightly. "He can be a handful every now and again."

"This quest shall better not prove to be a complete waste of time." For time was precious, and she had already wasted a considerable amount of hers by discussing about a dwarf and his mood swings; there was a patrol she had yet to complete.

"There needs to be another voice of reason beside myself."

"And you thought of me, of all people?" she muttered in disbelief. "One might argue that I'm two or three steps away from reason most of the time."

"Yet still closer to it than Thorin Oakenshield," he countered with a smile. "There are also matters I might need to attend to, so you'll be on your own sometime."

Arya visibly cringed, holding back a dramatic whimper. Splendid. She would be left alone with a bunch of dwarves for unknown periods of time. Wonder how that will go. "When shall we meet to depart?" she asked, finally resigned to her fate.

"Tomorrow fortnight."

"Man sad?"

"Nad i Drann."
She arched an eyebrow, "Is there going to be a hobbit in the company?"

As expected, he did not answer the question. That man and his eternal riddles. She could see it in his eyes once again, he seemed somewhat humoured by the creatures that surrounded him. It made her believe that he must be probably having much better time than one might think. She didn't know why, but it was a little unnerving.

"Search for me in the Westfarthing. Be there before supper," he said simply and mounted his horse. "Boe i 'waen. Na lû e-govaned vîn, melon nin."

"Namárië," Arya said quietly and watched him canter out of the stables.

Apparently he wasn't very deliberate to disclose further details, which was alarming news in and of itself. As if she didn't have enough troubles already. With a weary sigh and these disturbing thoughts buzzing around her head, she mounted Urúvion and briskly rode south-east to resume her patrol in the place she should have been, keeping her back turned to the sun that had dived behind the Blue Mountains and now coloured the sky orange as seen through the scarce chinks across the canvas of grey clouds.

Chapter End Notes

For anyone wondering, 'tomorrow fortnight' means 'two weeks from tomorrow'. As for the elvish: not sure if they're all correct and if they're all in Sindarin (except for the last one, which is definitely in Quenya). If you know anything to be wrong, please feel free to correct.

Noro lim = Run fast
Mae g'ovannen, mellon nin = Well met, my friend
Gwenwin in enninath = It has been too long
Man sad? = Where?
Nad i Drann = In the Shire
Boe i 'waen. Na lû e-govaned vîn, melon nin = I must go. Until next we meet, my friend
Namárië = Farewell
A league of extraordinary gentlemen

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The Ranger was limping in silence, in danger of having that wince of pain become dangerously noticeable. She could feel every little shift of every weapon against her as she tugged the cloak and hood closer to fight off the cold breeze. Her annoyance at the newly acquired cut across her calf was increasing exponentially. Mercifully, and quite surprisingly since this had to do with her luck, the bandit's knife that did the job was not poisoned, or else she would have departed this life by now. As her mind fell into wondering how he and his slimy cronies had dared to approach these places again, a faint blue gleam on a door caught her eye.

So Hobbiton it was.

It was, of course, past the time for supper. She could have been there earlier if it wasn't for her unexpected injury, and also if Gandalf had the kindness to be more explicit about what village in the entire Westfarthing she should go to. But it was Gandalf, which meant that she'd have to go around searching every village and house, asking the locals whether they'd encountered a wizard with a tall, pointed grey hat.

It had been a one-of-a-kind experience, one of the big folk —and a Ranger at that— strolling in a town full of hobbits. Most of them were sidestepping to avoid her as she went, yet some had no choice but meet her eye when she stopped to ask a question. Far be it from her to say that she was embittered by their suspiciousness. Had she been in their place and stumbled upon a considerably taller, dark-cloaked, armed figure, she'd keep her distance as well. Yet her manners were deemed oddly polite despite her dark and gloomy appearance, according to the murmurs that spread upon her pass.

The dark cloaked figure lingered a minute or two before the hobbit hole at the very beginning of Bagshot Row, mulling over what she was about to throw herself into. With a resigned sigh she escorted her horse in a small clearing nearby, took the saddle off his back and set it on the grassy ground, whispered something in his ear and left him there to rest for the night. She began trudging across the stone path that led to the hobbit hole, where a blue mark was now clearly visible, while the multiple voices heard from the inside increased in volume the closer she got; chuckles and slight protests as well and, as she realised, a rather large assembly was taking place.

With several thoughts roiling in her head at once, she knocked three times on the round green door with the brass knob in the centre.

Bilbo Baggins was a creature of habit, and he believed in the efficacy of a daily routine. Every night after his dinner he sat in his favourite armchair by the fire to smoke his pipe, and religiously went to bed no later than midnight. Every morning he woke a little after dawn to a brief wash, followed by a hearty breakfast and a visit to the market, to end up, weather permitting, spending his afternoon on the bench in his garden smoking his pipe and enjoying the quiescence of a simple life. And on and on and on it went.

At the moment, Bilbo Baggins was positively seething.

Just when the otherwise kind-hearted, respectable hobbit was about to snap, firm thuds were heard on the door and all the noise in the kitchen stopped at once.
"Ah, splendid," Gandalf exclaimed mirthfully, heading to the hall to open it without lingering a moment longer, "that must be the last guest."

There was a loud shuffling inside the hobbit hole as thirteen dwarves, a hobbit and the wizard scooted from their seats around the table. Then the door opened wide, and the hooded, fully armed last member of the company stepped inside.

"Ai na vedui mellon nín," greeted the wizard. "Le abdollen."

Well, he should know, being partly at fault for the tardiness. The Ranger snorted quietly without replying and dropped the hood back, revealing the face they all were so curious to see.

It was more anticlimactic than one might anticipate of moments like those.

"You must be joking," one of the dwarves, a partly bald one with ears adorned by several piercings, muttered with an incredulous look.

Needless to say, the rest also took it with a grain of salt.

Gandalf had conveniently skipped the part where the last guest was revealed to be a woman. Now that some gave it a second thought, the wizard had skipped a whole lot of information. He'd been rather vague as to whatever business the last guest had there with them in the first place. And Thorin hadn't mentioned anything either.

"She's a lassie!" another, with more intricately braided hair and beard, cried. Then he turned to her, "You're a lassie!"

The woman graced him with a hint of a smile. "I am a lassie," she confirmed in amusement, "and I'm a Ranger."

"You are late."

Her face hardened, but otherwise she seemed unfazed by the dwarf king's biting remark. "Was there a great emergency that warranted my immediate presence?" she asked dryly.

Thorin grunted a sullen "No", making a point of glaring at Gandalf from the corner of his eye. Why the wizard had called for her was still beyond him.

"Then I am not late," she told him in a poised manner, even though her eyes were challenging him to contradict her if he dared. She was injured, tired, and seriously deprived of sleep. The last thing she wished to deal with was Thorin's rebuke just for the sake of demonstrating his leadership.

Many pairs of eyes belonging to all the dwarves present, save Thorin's who simply glared at her, goggled in a very comical way. A low grumble also came from the stout, partly bald dwarf who, as Arya aptly suspected, considered it very disrespectful for a stranger to answer back to his king. She mentally smiled to herself, reflecting on the promising journey ahead of them; two moody dwarves so far and still counting. Oh the joy.

"Now," Gandalf loudly cleared his throat and stepped between them, placing a hand on her shoulder and nudging her to take a step forward, "this is Arya." She gave them a light tilt of her head as he presented her to the others. "She will be your guide."

That was taken in with varying levels of enthusiasm, mainly ranging from protest to doubt to mild curiosity. Comments of superstitious nature were, of course, unavoidable. All kinds of whispers started to spread from ear to ear, the majority of them along the lines of "What the devil do we need a
guide for? We know the road!” and "Methinks it's frightful bad luck to bring a woman along..."

When it was Dwalin's turn to voice his concerns to his closest friend, Thorin rewarded him with a sigh and a nod towards the wizard, shaking his head in frustration, "It'll be far worse not to have her."

Before the voices got too loud for his tastes again, Bilbo had the prudence to introduce himself.

"Lady Arya," greeted the hobbit first, as benignly as his nerves allowed, "I am Bilbo Baggins. Pleasure to meet you."

Bilbo had previously been exhausted only at the thought of all these people his pantry and house would have to respectively feed and accommodate for the night, as his gut told him. At the sight of the woman, however, he felt his mood lighten up, if only a smidgen. Perhaps he was mistaking it for curiosity. He'd never seen a female Ranger before —not that he'd seen a male one, mind you— but from what folk who had traveled to Bree used to say during conversations at the Green Dragon's, only men were Rangers. Of course they had downed more than one mugs of Gaffer's home brew, so that could well be complete nonsense. And this woman did not seem so menacing as the tales of old told of the quaint, dressed in black folk that went wandering around old Arnor and often brought dark news with them.

"The pleasure is all mine, master Baggins." She could sense the good aura coming off of him, but there was an exasperated gleam in his eyes, as though he barely was holding back from committing murder. Understandable, what with Gandalf and all. "You have a lovely home," she complimented and he cocked his head in appreciation.

"M'lady, I'm Bofur," a man with a funny hat called to her, "me brother, Bombur," he pointed to a chubby dwarf who gave her a smile, "an' our cousin, Bifur."

Dori, Nori and Ori were the next to introduce themselves, followed by Oin and Gloin, and —at last— the stout, partly bald dwarf from earlier, Dwalin. So intrigued he had her that, had she known him better and not been discreet by nature, she would have already been badgering him about the tattoos on his head and hands. He limited to offer a curt nod and immediately turned to Thorin with a sceptical frown. His older brother Balin, with the long puffy beard, seemed less likely to assail one on sight and even gave her a faint smile.

The last two were, as she reckoned from their youthful faces, the younger ones in the company. Her eyes skimmed over their apparel, noting it to be finer in comparison with the others'. In appearance they were as similar as chalk and cheese, so she doubted they were siblings, but each one separately gave her the impression of kinship to the dwarf king. Although they bore not enough resemblance to be his sons —the blond even less so than the brunet— each seemed related to him after a fashion. Perhaps cousins from either side of the family— And that was enough digression for one night. Whatever their kinship to Thorin was or might be, her inner query was never answered, for only the blond one was kind enough to offer her both their names, but nothing that signified a relation. The other just stared at her with pursed lips and didn't even bother to speak.

Several of them still eyed her curiously, unable to believe that she actually was one of the northern wandering people of Eriador. She expected they'd take their sweet time to find her amiable, as it were—for gaining their trust would probably never enter the realm of possibilities. Still, she was in a somewhat good path since she had rescued their king. Surely Gandalf must have recounted the event.
before her arrival so they wouldn't take such a dim view of her accompanying them.

The dwarf with the blond hair and braided beard, Fili, approached with curiosity. He seemed pretty unconcerned about a Ranger coming along, or said Ranger turning out to be a female. As long as she was good at what she did, it was fine by him. He was quite pleased to have someone new around instead of the same old faces. A woman in particular, even not a dwarrowdam, would add an agreeable sense of light mood, or so he thought. Inadvertently his eyes roamed about her form—hair long and dark as the night, intense dark eyes almost matching the colour of her hair... and his thoughts rapidly came to a halt when he met his uncle's lethal glower.

Thorin had been unlucky enough to witness the entirety of Fili's actions and reactions. Needless to say, he could already feel the blisters slowly starting to grow up his rear body cavity.

Against all odds, his other nephew surprisingly had a hard time comprehending the purpose of her presence there. Kili shared his uncle's view that quests and battles were not actions for women to take part in. He couldn't fathom how his uncle had agreed to this in the first place. He and Fili had been allowed to join only after seemingly endless weeks upon weeks of arguing and she had managed to persuade him —no matter because of Gandalf's meddling— in the one day he'd been acquainted with her? *What kind of sorcery is this?*

He gave her a once-over from head to toe none too discreetly. Even if he straightened up, he still came up about shoulder-high to her, and he was considered the tallest dwarf in the company. There was a belt strapped across her chest, whose ends led to a rolled-up leather satchel within which was her bedroll and, as he imagined, scarce items essential for survival in the Wild. It was thrown across her back alongside a quiver full of arrows and a bow. Then his gaze moved to the sword and two daggers that were sheathed in the other belt around her middle. Curiosity veiled him as to how skilled she was with all these weapons. That was one too many to carry around for a seemingly slender, delicate figure like that of a female of Men. Maybe this was the cause of the odd way she carried herself, for he had definitely not failed to notice her limping.

He was quite overwhelmed with a strange emotion... *Dislike?* No, no, he couldn't possibly dislike her, he had just met her.

"Aren't you a little young to be a Ranger, and a mite too weak for a task like this?"

Several things happened in the seconds that followed: Gandalf sighed dramatically; Bilbo cringed; the woman raised an intimidating eyebrow at the dwarf who addressed her, slightly amused, though for the most part insulted; Thorin turned and looked at him as if waiting for him to sprout wings any moment now—he could have bet his younger nephew would be as excited as the other one, but, if the frown on his face was any indication, the lad seemed more thoughtful than excited; Kili, finally, hadn't meant that to come across as rude as it sounded, it was just genuine curiosity, and he was left there wondering what part of his sayings was so strange as to trigger such reactions.

There was a collective gasp of surprise when she had, in a blink of an eye, two daggers around the young dwarf's neck.

She sized him up for a good five seconds. "If your beard, or lack thereof, is anything to go by, I'd say the pot is calling the kettle black," she said wryly, struggling to hold a straight face and keep a wince—the result of her abrupt movement that made her injured leg hurt even more—under her hat. "And if you think me weak or lacking of skill, I'd be happy to give you a demonstration."

In contrast to him, she meant for that first part to sound casually insulting and, judging by the veins popping out in his neck, it'd hit him just right. One or two elected to see the humorous side of it and muffled a chuckle behind their bushy beards, though it was Fili who had absolutely no qualms about
laughing so... brazenly.

A pair of arms tried to lower hers, which she recognized as Gandalf's from the corner of her eye. "My dear, I believe our host would not be pleased to have his hall turned into a training field."

There was a nearly imperceptible change in her eyes and countenance as the words sank in. She turned to the hobbit, "My apologies, master Baggins."

Kili sat there waiting for his name to sound next, but no hint of apology came. When it became painfully obvious that he would receive none, he swatted her arms away furiously, whereas she, calm as ever, put the blades back into their sheaths as if nothing had happened. Watching his brother's face continue to change colours, Fili gently ushered him to the table to put as much distance between them as possible.

While the others were taking their seats, Kili shot a heated glance over his shoulder to the Ranger who was unloading her stuff near the window sill at the corner of the room. With no warning whatsoever she raised her gaze and met his.

As Arya removed her weapons she felt eyes digging on her back and turned at the direction of the room everybody was heading to, only to find Kili's gaze expectantly lingering on her. Their eyes briefly locked before he swiveled his head around. *What, now?* The dwarf had been told what she did for a living. What additional proof did he need to verify that she knew how to fight?

*Men,* the Ranger thought with a sigh and hurried to follow, though not neglecting to take her satchel with her. She hobbled along to the small hall where everyone had settled in the chairs, only to find that there were no spare ones, thus resigned to perch herself upon a small counter next to Thorin and Bofur to wrap her cut.

"How did you injure your leg?" the hobbit peered curiously.

"I happened to stumble upon a group of bandits southwest of the Hills of Evendim." Her injury did not worry her nearly as much as the fact that highwaymen were regularly seen operating so close to the borders of the Shire.

"And you were all alone?" someone asked, shocked.

She considered them for a long minute, debating on whether it'd be prudent to reveal that three others patrolled along with her near the Hills, but eventually decided that it was none of their business. "Master dwarf, I believe it would take more than a few bandits to take a Ranger down. Even a female one."

Fili smiled at the little dig, getting more excited than it was socially acceptable for adults. In his defence, one did not meet a female Ranger everyday, let alone one who had in fact made his beloved little brother's face go fifty shades of purple with rage. "So what happened?" he asked eagerly. "Did you kill any?"

"Apart from thievery, looting, and questionable personal hygiene, had they anything else to offer to this world in order for me to spare even one's life?"

The answer elicited a low chuckle from across the table where the blond dwarf sat, and he promptly leaned to whisper something in his brother's ear, which Kili blatantly pretended not to hear.
The woman then removed her boot and sock, stretched out her leg and placed it atop Bofur's chair's arm to have better view, and slowly drew the ripped across the injury leg of her trousers above the knee. Bofur promptly scooted himself as far away as possible. Untying the torn piece of fabric she had offhandedly employed as means to stop the bleeding, her hand blindly reached in the satchel and pulled out the clean bandage she had bought on her way here, along with another piece of cloth and something else—metallic, it was.

Bilbo appeared by her side then, holding the small teapot with hot water that had been cast aside earlier as the dwarves pillaged his kitchen, and gestured to make whatever use of it she deemed more helpful. It was the least he could offer considering the situation.

"Thank you," Arya offered him a crooked smile and nodded her gratitude. Quaint some called the Shire-folk, though she found them quite likable and often envied their peaceful way of living. "Rather vexing, isn't it? To host such a large gathering, I mean."

"Ah, mistaken me not," the hobbit replied in the same low volumes she'd spoken, "I enjoy social gatherings as much as the next hobbit." His pointed gaze then fell on the wizard before he murmured, "So long as I am acquainted with the guests." The woman choked a laugh at this and turned her attention to the task at hand.

Kili's eyes followed her hand's movement as she poured hot water onto the cloth and started cleaning the dried blood from the wound. Much to his chagrin, he found himself gawping at her shank that glowed bare, long and injured under the dim candlelight. Something stirred in his stomach when he noticed that it was hairless, and he cringed.

The cut might be small, but was deep enough to cause an annoying pain that she was resolute not to unveil in front of them. After smearing a portion of a liquid over the cut from the tiny, metallic pot she had pulled out, her hand reached for the clean bandage and deftly bundled it up over the wound.

The whole experience proved a rather painful ordeal for the dwarf king's already jittery nerves, for the attention of most of those present was fixed on the woman and not the more serious matters it should be fixed upon. He gave a less than discreet clearing of his throat and those whose attention was focused elsewhere and not on him—namely his nephews and one or two others—detached their eyes from the Ranger and her leg.

Thorin was bombarded with questions regarding an important meeting in Ered Luin and whether Dain was going to help them, only to be disappointed at the news. Some looked quite affronted, as well. Only Dwalin snorted privately, the sound more bitter than anything, as though he was expecting no different outcome.

Standing in a corner quiet and unspoken, Bilbo still didn't know what to make of this, or what role he played in it.

Not unlike him, Arya wasn't exactly listening to them either. She was still occupied with mending her cut when something that Balin said almost started a riot—or what was, as she'd learn later, casual chat to dwarves—and only then was her attention drawn from the task at hand. How much did she miss?

"...may be few at number, but we are fighters. All of us, to the last dwarf," Fili chimed in with a discreet nod to Thorin.

Kili then piped up, "And you forget we have a wizard in our company. Gandalf would have killed hundreds of dragons in his time!"
Gandalf's eyes went wide and he coughed uncomfortably. "Uh...no," he almost stuttered. "No, I wouldn't say—"

Arya put a mighty effort to hold back laughter. Unable to wipe off the first signs of it from her face, she discreetly covered her mouth to conceal it.

The hubbub that followed the wizard's reply was the stuff of old tales. At some point there even were wagers on how many dragons the wizard had killed, practically making just noise rather than placing their bets, and were thankfully stopped by a strong hand swatting the table with such force, everything on it rattled.

"Enough!" Thorin's booming voice echoed throughout the room, effectively calling the rest to order. "If we have read the signs, don't you think others would have read them too? Rumours have begun to spread, the dragon Smaug has not been seen for sixty years. Eyes look east to the Mountain assessing, wondering, weighing the risk. Perhaps the vast wealth of our people now lies unprotected. Do we sit back, while others claim what is rightfully ours? Or do we seize this chance to take back Erebor?"

In the midst of the exciting yells the encouraging speech roused, Balin prudently brought up the main problem of the no longer existent main entrance of the Mountain, and all the voices piped down, frustrated. It was then that Gandalf took a small key out of his cloak and revealed that there was in fact another, secret path that led inside. So this is why they needed a burglar, an expert one as someone pointed, to enter the Mountain unnoticed by Smaug. Then a new round of voices and yelling broke out, mainly regarding the fact that whether master Baggins was the one they needed or not, only to be shushed from Gandalf this time, who insisted that his choice was right.

"A toast then!" someone exclaimed.

"Aye!"

"Anyone care to do the honours?"

"Lads," Bofur stepped up, and everyone raised their mugs in unison, "lady," he added with the utmost civility and the Ranger bowed her head as she had no mug, "may our journey be long, filled with agony and torment, and may we all complain about it bitterly as old men!"

The massive sound and spillage that followed when the mugs chinked had Arya lean as far away from the table as she could, diverting her attention to another, very quiet exchange. She knew the wizard just enough to not bother doubt his decisions—or at least most of them—and was not opposed to have the hobbit tag along. He seemed like a nice fellow after all, but made her wonder if he had the guts for such a task. If she were in his place, the possibility of facing a living dragon would never become her top priority.

Thorin handed Bilbo the contract and, after the latter retreated to read it, he leaned to the wizard. And proceeded to issue the same warning he'd given about her, that he won't be responsible for his fate.

Nobody seemed to pay attention to them except Arya who, willingly or not, was within earshot and heard it. She scoffed, shaking her head with amusement at the repetition. At that moment she resolved to keep an eye on the hobbit, seeing as they were both considered the outcasts of the expedition.

It almost felt as if Gandalf hearkened her unspoken thoughts. "The two of them will form their own alliance," he whispered in the dwarf's ear. "An alliance that will make you change your views on many matters, I believe."
To that, Thorin grumbled something inaudible through his teeth and Arya laughed breathlessly. She sensed many arguments coming their way, and it would be a tough task for her patience and nerves to deal with them. While the dwarves spoke to each other about the quest, her eyes wandered about the room, pausing to look at a particular person longer than necessary. She saw that he was looking back and moved her gaze away, ignoring his hateful stares and sinking into her thoughts once more.

Kili had nailed his gaze upon her, examining her every move, until his brother turned to him and he was forced to take his eyes off so as not to be caught staring. Unfortunately for the brunet, Fili had witnessed their little staring contest, which made him contemplate his brother's demeanour towards the woman as well as the frequent murderous glances he paid her from the moment they met.

The hobbit was still reading, until he paused over a word, gradually missing the colour from his face.

"Think furnace with wings. A flash of light, searing pain, then poof! Ye're nothing more than a pile of ash," Bofur's poor attempt to explain the term obviously did not have the results he expected.

The Ranger, as much as she wanted to laugh at his choice of words, slightly elbowed Bofur in his shoulder and turned to look at Bilbo, whose face was a shade of white. *Uh-oh.*

Bilbo had started to feel his entire left side go numb. He looked at everyone, declared "No," and promptly passed out on the floor.

"That was very helpful Bofur, thank you," Gandalf commented dryly.

None of the others made a move to help the hobbit, so the Ranger hurried over to him to check if he was alright—thankfully she could support her weight on her foot with less effort now, which made walking far easier. Gandalf followed suit and and came to stand beside them. "Can I get some water here?" she asked no one in particularly.

A hand touched hers and she turned her head to see an eager Fili smiling at her, with a glass of water in his hands. She thanked him and poured some drops to Bilbo's head, and he suddenly seemed to react at the coolness on his brow. She left the glass on the first table that happened to be in her way and, along with Fili, they lifted the hobbit and dragged him over to the big armchair beside the hearth.

Several minutes dragged by until he opened his eyes and was offered a cup of tea by a slender hand, which he presumed was the woman's, yet she disappeared before he could even swivel around. The next image looked more sinister—Gandalf's massive form hovering above him before placing himself comfortably on his opposite, ready to engage in a very promising conversation.

Bilbo let a long-suffering sigh and looked forlornly at the cup of tea in his hands. Gaffer's home brew would be preferable at the moment. His gaze wandered briefly after the first sip, and he found himself glancing at the door case where the Ranger lingered, although she swiftly turned away to give them some privacy.

Fili had swiftly retired to the table after the aid he offered in carrying the hobbit. Currently sitting with Ori and Dwalin, his eyes closely watched how the woman had withdrawn from the crowd in a quiet corner and straightened up her trousers over the bandage. The possibility alone of having Kili and her remain at odds —given their respective first reactions— for the rest of the journey made the blond grin like a cat. It wasn't every other day, after all, that someone was able to make Kili go ballistic. And just because that woman had managed to ruffle the little rascal's feathers so much and in such a minimal amount of time, Fili was already scheming towards his own entertainment.
"I foresee epic quarrels between my brother and that woman, I tell you," he smirked, shooting a conspiratorial look around to check if Kili was near. "Now, this is something that could make this journey marginally more fun."

"I wouldn't get my hopes up," Dwalin tried to discourage him. "The funniest your uncle will allow any part of this journey to get would be the pall of a funeral."

The prince laughed heartily, "Call it what you will, but I wager five silvers that they'll be at each other's throats before you know it."

Challenge gleamed in Dwalin's eye. "I'll take that bet!" he exclaimed with a laugh and shook hands with the young one. He promptly cast a cautious glance at the woman, eyeing her with mild distrust and weighing what were his chances of winning.

Fili, for his part, upon catching his brother glaring at the woman from the other side of the room, slipped into the role of the devil's advocate. He flounced over to her, careful to be loud enough to be heard when he extended an invitation to sit with them. On the way, he caught Kili's appalled look.

Good. Everything was going according to plan. Luckily, she accepted with a smile and followed him back to the small table, even sitting where he beckoned her to. From the corner of his eyes, he saw Kili fume. Fantastic.

"Ye know, lassie," the bald dwarf pondered loudly, "for a descendant of those tree-huggers, ye don't seem half as bad."

Arya eyed him warily, undecided if he meant it as an insult. When she noticed the corners of Fili's mouth curling upwards, she raised an eyebrow. "Thank you," she said pointedly. "And you, sir, for a dwarf, do not smell half as bad as I expected you to."

The dwarf glanced at her sharply. Tense silence enveloped them for a moment, during which she thought she had truly offended him. Suddenly he laughed, a raw snort of amusement that came bursting out through his nose entirely without his permission.

"That's some spirit ye have there," he said with a pat on her shoulder, putting a little more force than was necessary.

"So I've been told," she muttered dryly, eyes narrowing at the gesture, but nonetheless tried to pull off a smile. It failed miserably.

Fili watched their banter, or what could pass for banter, silently. He had a feeling that she must have had a rather fascinating story under her hat. In an act of chivalry —and ever so slight gloating, if he were honest— he turned on the charm. "My lady, should you ever need protection during this quest, I'd be more than glad to offer it to you."

Arya locked eyes with him for a second, forehead crinkled in confusion. "Are you puffing out your chest?"

"Yes."

The admission was met with peals of laughter. "Thank you," she reassured when the laughter piped down, "but I think I made my point of being able to defend myself when he," she pointed at Kili, "spoke to me before."

"Take no offence, my lady," the dwarf responded quickly. "What I meant to say is, I shall come to your assistance if need be and you can count me as a friend. It was neither my nor my brother's intention to slight your skill with a blade."
Ah, so those two were actually siblings; that certainly explained the name trend with the same suffix. "That's very kind of you. And you may call me just by my name, if you please. Also, my deepest condolences for having him as a brother."

The dwarf tossed his head back, laughing. "Nah," he brushed off, "he is not that bad."

"...he fainted at reading the contract, I cannot imagine what he will do once against a living dragon," Thorin remarked, feeling beads of sweat adorning his brow due to his ever growing angry frustration as he and Balin stood in the crossing of the two halls, with ample view to the table as well as the living room.

"Come now, lad," his friend tried to appease him, seeing him more distressed than he'd been the past few years. "Perhaps the little fellow will surprise us."

Thorin harrumphed. "I never was one for surprises."

So far standing beside his uncle and Balin, who were discussing lowly, the younger prince had focused his attention more on the scene at the table than anything else around him. And what he was witnessing engendered a need deep inside him to smack Fili upside his head for sitting there and being all grand and charming with the person who had practically assaulted him.

"She should not come with us and certainly not converse with my brother," he grumbled mostly to himself, but he was heard.

"Nephew," Thorin sighed, "as much as I agree, you have my blessing to try and debate Gandalf on the matter." To this, the young one replied nothing and turned pensive. "Although I assure you she's rather able in combat, at least from what I've seen."

"Laddie, you, too, saw her before--" Balin quickly cut the sentence in half as he realised that it wouldn't be particularly wise to make a reference to the prince's unfortunate first encounter with the woman.

Kili sulked slightly, hoping that everyone would let the event go. He was the younger in the company and thought to have the quickest reflexes. The fact that a woman had caught him off guard certainly was a blow to his pride. In fact, it made him dislike her more than he probably should.

"Pray, what reason is there for her not to talk to Fili?"

The lad turned to his elders with a deep frown. "Because she shouldn't," he said simply.

Balin noted the bitter look Kili was shooting his sibling, who was sitting unreasonably close to the woman, and she in turn was laughing at something the former had said.

Kili was forced to pass by them on his way to the door of the next room, frothing at the mouth after Fili's hand clapped her arm as a result of their laughing over something. His severe look all but masked his irritation. So focused he was on them that he lost his footing and almost tripped over the carpet. Much to his chagrin, it did not pass unnoticed. The moment he raised his gaze from the floor to check whether anyone had witnessed this, he found several pairs of eyes fixed upon him and half their respective owners guffawing at his little trip. Embarrassment began to flood in galore. He cursed to the skies in Khuzdul, but it did not fall on deaf ears as intended.

Fili chuckled under his breath. Their mother would kick Kili's tender till the end of time if she heard that kind of talk coming out of his mouth; then Dwalin's, for forgetting himself and hurling all kinds of profanities when the two were still dwarflings and happened to be present at a council meeting.
After the little show, the blond turned to the woman in hopes that they'd resume their conversation, taking in the unperturbed look and clenched fist.

"He did not say something about y—"

"No need to," she brushed off with a wave of her hand. "There are numerous people who do not get along with me. What is one more in the list?"

Now sure how to to respond without complicating things, Fili simply offered a brief smile.

"I shall go out to take some clean air now." She'd had enough of company for one night. "If you'll excuse me."

She stood up and swiftly headed to the door that led outside, clenching and unclenching her fists, and wondering what was the dwarf's problem. Granted, her reaction to his comment might be a little over the top, but he hadn't been the epitome of politeness either.

Closing the door behind her, she strolled to the small bench the hobbit had on his garden and slumped down on it heavily. The fresh night breeze felt like someone tickling her face with a feather. The wooden board was not offered as the most comfortable of lodgings, yet the thin cushion upon it certainly improved the situation to a considerable extent. Fairly tired, she lay down and turned her gaze towards the starry sky, until rehashing thoughts became too tiring, and everything faded into turbid images of woods and snow and patrols round the Lake Evendim. And in the midst of those sprouted a fleeting image of a pair of eyes. They were a funny colour, his eyes, a mixture of hazel brown and green, as though reflecting the changing colours of a forest in autumn. She couldn't guess why her subconscious reckoned them something to bother her head with.

A few minutes later, or perhaps an hour —she wasn't sure, she had lost track of time when her blinking became slower— distant voices filled the air. Someone was singing.

*Far over the Misty Mountains cold*
*To dungeons deep and caverns old*
*We must away, ere break of day*
*To find our long forgotten gold*

*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 tune lulled the Ranger back to sleep. She tucked the dark grey cloak tighter around her, unable to banish the thought of that dwarf burning holes on her back—damn his dark eyes. She gave in to fatigue a little later, while ruefully mulling over the fact that she had not seen to enquiring whether Mr. Baggins was better. Much of a good guest she was.

Chapter End Notes

If you notice familiar quotes from TV series or films popping up every now and then, please don't take a dig at me, it's just that I wasn't able to resist incorporating them into the story.
Ai na vedui, mellon nín = At last, my friend
When the songs dissipated into silence, Thorin ordered the company to find a place to rest for the night. Every corner of the house was thronged by a bunch of dwarves and all their possessions, and for the first time in decades the Baggins estate felt so overcrowded. Dwalin and Balin had laid claim on the two armchairs in the living room, Thorin was resting on the small couch, while his nephews were left with no choice than to occupy the space in front of the fireplace to stay warm during the night.

Dwalin and his uncle were already snoring their troubles away, his brother seemed to be asleep, and only Balin was awake when Fili remembered of Arya. She'd said she would go outside, though he didn't see her come back. Balin seemed to share his thoughts and inquired of her whereabouts.

At the sound of her name Kili's eyes popped open, and he felt his body going rigid. He had been quite weary and precisely the moment he was ready to drift off, her bloody name just had to be mentioned—damn her.

"...to take some air, but she's been a while now. Perhaps I should fetch her," Fili's voice sounded as he took the liberty to unroll her bedroll and place it down for her. He hoped she wouldn't mind. Then he stepped out of the house, careful not to make too much noise as the door opened and creaked creepily in the peace of the night. In contrast to his belief that he may have to search around the estate or even further than that, it didn't take him more than ten steps to spot her. There she was on the bench, lying on the side, a cloak wrapped around her.

"Lady Arya," he whispered as he leaned down, placing a hand on her shoulder, cautiously.

The woman was startled to consciousness as though someone had flogged her bottom with a whip. Fili took a step back purely out of survival instinct. She blinked rapidly a few times and, when her vision cleared and she recognised the silhouette, dropped her head back to the bench with a groan.

"Lady Arya," the dwarf tried again.

"She's sleeping," she whispered back, with voice soft and sleepy. Fili chuckled.

"She is also freezing. We must go inside," he urged, only to elicit another groan of protest. "You can't sleep out here."

"I will if you let me," she muttered angrily, not even bothering to open her eyes. He sighed. "I already took your bedroll out. Come on," he insisted, "it's a waste to miss a good night's sleep by the fireplace to sleep out in the cold."

The human turned on her back with half a mind to kick him away, groaning audibly. "Damn it, you can't take no for an answer, can you?"

Fili smirked. "Not when I'm right." He kept laughing beneath the braids of his mustache all the way to the front door watching her stomp ahead of him.

There was the sound of the door closing, then two pairs of footsteps, a small trip on the rug, a low
curse, and finally the source of the noise peeped around the corner. The sight was enough for Kili to delay his sleep for one more hour in favour of coming up with scathing remarks, though he eventually decided not to lower himself to that level.

As the blond watched the woman slumping down on her bedroll with little to no care that it was placed between his own and his brother's, Kili's angry expression caught his eye. With a tired shake of his head Fili brushed it off, not even bothering to ask, wanting nothing more than to rest and build up his strength for the morrow. He lied down in silence, had the good grace to lend her his spare blanket and after a few minutes drifted off, noting how terribly weary her face looked.

Blood and gore were the basic elements of her dreams for the most part. She never remembered all of it, only flashes of images and distant echoes of voices before the dreamworld would fall off its axis again and she'd wake up with bleary eyes and vague recollection of it.

This time, apparently, it must have been more vivid than usual. Her legs were moving as though she was trying to run away from something, or someone. Near the tail end of the dream, her brain sent out distress signals for her still sleeping body to snap out of it, but it took a good few seconds to do so, which in dream time felt like eternity. One of those signals kept reminding her that she was clutching something tightly—a pillow perhaps?—but she ignored it at first in favour of groaning discontentedly about the quality of her sleep. On second thought... where on earth had she found a p–

Her eyes snapped open in alert, only to face three other pairs watching her from above like hawks. With trepidation she realised that, instead of a pillow, she had a hand clamped around someone's arm, who was trying in vain to keep her still. She extricated herself from his grip frantically and might have landed a few good punches and kicks in the process.

"What happened?" Fili asked with genuine worry in his voice, looking rather alarmed. "Are you alright?"

The Ranger failed to reply, still a little disoriented. Only her eyes hid something that could pass for embarrassment as they nervously flickered around the room.

"Nothing more than a nightmare," Gandalf supplied casually. "Give her a moment and she will be just fine."

There was an absent-minded nod and a clearing of a throat as reality sunk in. She promptly jumped on her feet, turning to Kili with a furious look, "What the devil are you doing?"

He raised an eyebrow in warning. "What do you mean what am I doing?" he mumbled starkly, his voice still hoarse from sleep. "Trying to sleep, but you obviously have a problem with that. You were growling in my ear."

"You were hugging me, that's what you were doing. And I was unconscious," she said with a weary sigh, "I did not mean to growl in your ear."

"I was hugging you?" Kili burst. "You were hooked on me and I couldn't even move!"

"You might as well have rolled me back to my spot if I bothered you so much!"

At that moment Kili was torn between yelling and letting a most pretended laugh if ever there was one. The end result was a mix of the two, effective in getting under the woman's skin. "Oh, I am sorry for being nice, trying to calm you, keeping you warm and letting you use me as a bloody pillow!"
She was ready to retort when Thorin, morose as ever and too overwrought to deal with bickering first thing in the morning, rushed into the room like a thunderstorm, "Will you shut it, the pair of ya? You're acting like children! Get ready, we are leaving after breakfast."

Kili nodded obediently, stood up and stomped all the way to the kitchen, while Arya grimaced at him and tiredly took the exact opposite path to get out of the house. Thorin was off somewhere, probably to oversee preparations, leaving Fili and the wizard alone.

"What was that?" the dumbfounded dwarf asked.

"Bad dreams, my lad. Just bad dreams," Gandalf mumbled and moved to follow the others with the young dwarf in tow.

As breakfast was served the dwarves discussed about Bilbo, who was still sleeping in his bedroom, on whether he was joining them or not. Gandalf, being his usual prudent self, suggested they leave the contract behind for the hobbit to sign, lest he decided to follow them.

Arya was out in the porch, trying not to drown in self-pity after the little incident earlier. It wasn't so much about the nightmare; she was almost impassive to it after all this time, for it was simply the actual memory slowly fading away over the years—although the fading rate felt painfully, agonisingly slow. Ten years had gone by, and yet it still seemed quite lifelike to her. It had become part of her, as subsequently had the way of waking up twitching like some sort of possessed lunatic. But she was not used to sleeping with others, let alone holding them. For the past ten years she was sleeping and practically living alone, and now it felt not just surreal to be close to such a large group of people, but kind of wrong.

It was the same when she visited Imladris. Even if people counted on the fingers of one hand were fully aware of the exact content of her nightmares, in Rivendell it was an open secret. This was the main reason her visits had a duration of two weeks at most, because she absolutely loathed the compassionate glances she received from the elves every time they happened to hear her during the night. But they knew who she and her family were, knew what she'd been through; she'd learned to live with that. Now other people had, not just heard, but watched her in this vulnerable state—people who knew next to nothing about her. Needless to say, she did not feel comfortable with that. And the last thing she wanted to deal with was the usual sympathetic head tilt from a dozen strangers.

Trying to set aside all this, she forced herself to go and get something to eat, although no hungry at all, and tentatively walked back into the house, thinking of whom and what she'd face in the kitchen.

Meanwhile in the kitchen, Fili was observing his brother who sat in the chair beside him and barely touched the food in his plate in concern. Kili having lost his appetite for fried eggs and delicious, crunchy bacon was a sinister sight in and of itself. Unfortunately the young one, contrary to popular belief, was not a morning person. That is, with a few bright exceptions; the present was definitely not one of them. And to top it all, that damnable woman—

"What's with all the yelling?" groaned Dwalin, the signs of an abrupt awakening evident in his form, interrupting Kili's line of thought. "Did that crotchety old fart of an uncle of yours woke with a mood again?"

Fili swallowed a chuckle. "I pray to live to see the day when the answer to that will be 'no',' he said wryly. "Nothing to worry about—Lady Arya just had a bit of a... rough start, is all."

"Whryever?" Ever the teaser, Bofur seemed to always revel in poking fun at either of the brothers since they were little tots. "Didn't the lass appreciate your brother's warmth? Seemed content to be
sleeping next to him, I reckoned."

The dwarf in question almost swatted the table with his fists, getting inexplicably offended and defensive. "Next to me?" he spat out with a wild look. "Next– She practically slept on me!"

"What's with the screaming then? Ye fought over who was going to sleep on top o' the other?" Bofur inquired, rousing laughter from a few of those present.

"No," Kili grumbled sullenly. "I am merely not inclined to have strangers use me as a pillow."

"Why, a curse on me if I'm lying," the dwarf with the hat pressed on, a mischievous gleam in his eyes, "but ye didn't seem to mind at all, m'lad."

Kili, however, was enjoying himself not even half as much as some of his comrades, who were in a disturbingly good mood to crack a joke so early in the morning; in fact, he wasn't enjoying this at all. He was frothing at the mouth, yearning to cut the tongue of anyone who would dare comment further on the matter.

"She just had a nightmare," Fili explained within a mouthful of bread.

Just then the aforementioned woman stepped into the room and all the voices hushed. Discomfort crawled up her spine at the several pairs of eyes looking at her. A certain someone had the good grace to pretend that he hadn't noticed her enter. Never let it be said that she wasn't thankful for someone indulging her wont to be ignored as much as she wished to ignore them.

"Is Mr. Baggins well?"

"Well... he looked less yellow on the face when he turned in for the night," offered Nori, "so make of that what you will."

No one seemed too eager to supply more useful information on the matter and simply went on with their morning tasks, essentially telling her not to bother her head with it too much.

Gandalf lost no time either; merely mentioned something about the contract they ought to leave back for Bilbo should he suffer a change of heart and, without further ado, marched out of the house.

Thorin watched her stroll at a rather leisurely pace, ushering her horse by the reigns to the place they were gathered. "When exactly do you plan on preparing to leave? We are not going to linger here because of you," he grumbled, earning a somewhat amused look from his younger nephew.

"Pardon me, plan on preparing?" she said in confusion. "I am perfectly ready and good to go."

Kili fixed her with a bemused look. "You have barely any supplies on your horse," he deadpanned, as though she was missing the obvious.

Arya responded with a shrug, "I always travel lightly."

Everyone but the wizard looked askance at her, as if they had it arranged. The harmony was hilarious.

"Worry not," the woman sighed as she mounted her horse. "Apart from a bowl of food every now and then, I'm fairly certain my eating habits will hardly affect the portion of each of your meals." Urúvion whinnied slightly, as though laughing at his mistress's wit, and she glanced at the dwarves who went back to their business only mildly embarrassed. Then she raised an eyebrow at Thorin, "I
thought you said we were in a hurry?"

The dwarf gave a condescending smile, at best, pretending not to have heard that for the sake of his nerves. Him mounting his pony was the sign for the rest to follow. Kili, for his part, was sulking over the wasted chance to enjoy the sight of her falling prey to one of his uncle's moods.

"Is she always like this?"

Gandalf hid a smile. The mustache and the beard helped considerably. "Oh, it gets better. That was only a glimpse of what is to come."

Fili was left there to mull over that and the wizard's cryptic reply before his brother's pony's pace caught up with his own.

Not an hour into the journey, a distant sound echoed in the woods, making all kinds of birds fly off their nests on its way. The wizard had been leading alongside Thorin, whereas the Ranger had found herself riding behind them when she heard it. Her head promptly turned to the source of the sound, bow in vigilance.

"Nad no ennas," she said quietly as her fingers cautiously drew the string back with the arrow.

"Speak in a language we can all understand."

Irritation hooded her eyes and she looked askance at Thorin, "Someone approaches." The dwarf immediately grabbed the hilt of his sword.

"Wait!" Once the distant voice became crystal clear to her ears, she immediately lowered the bow and put the arrow back to her quiver.

The small cavalcade came to a halt when, to the surprise of everyone, the hobbit peeped out through the trees, gratefully shifting from a sprint to a jog upon their stop. He was still panting as he handed over the contract to Balin, who was already preparing his magnifying glass.

"Everything appears to be in order," the dwarf asserted after a quick browse and cracked a wide smile. "Welcome, Master Baggins, in the company of Thorin Oakenshield."

"Give him a pony."

The pleased smile on Bilbo's face swiftly melted into a look of terror. Before he was able to complete his sentence and object, two hands belonging to Fili and Kili respectively hoisted him off the ground and placed him on a pony. Small pouches of coins promptly started to fly in the air above them, making the Ranger wonder.

The hobbit shared her look of confusion. "What's that about?"

"Oh, they took wagers, on whether or not you'd turn up," the wizard explained. "Most of them bet that you wouldn't."

Arya frowned. *That's a shame.* They had not offered her to take part in the bet and she indeed had a few coins left, but she could really use the gold as payment at the inns they would stop on their way.

Bilbo was pleased that not all of them thought he was a lost cause. "What did you think?"

"Well..." Gandalf made a dramatic pause before he deftly caught a small pouch coming at his direction. "My dear fellow," he laughed, "I never doubted you for a second."
The temporary feeling of belonging was disrupted by a string of powerful sneezes that made him stop the cavalcade a second time in order to search every single pocket in his clothes to find his beloved handkerchief. Unfortunately, luck was not on his side.

At the sight of the ever cheerful dwarf going by the name 'Bofur' and the face the hobbit made when the former tore a piece of his tunic and tossed it to him, the Ranger pursed her lips in amusement. "Master Baggins," she addressed him with a small laugh as she handed over a small —mercifully cleaner— piece of cloth. "I'm afraid that, henceforth, you shall have to make do without the luxuries of your home."

He seemed rather upset when the realisation dawned on him. He thanked both the dwarf and the woman's kind offers, careful not to be seen when his fingers accidentally dropped Bofur's makeshift handkerchief behind.

Soon, everyone had fallen into discussion with those around them, pairing off as they moved on. Only one or two had remained unpaired and silent. Some of the dwarves, in fact, were in the middle of a considerably heated conversation.

"–have misunderstood her, brother. She's merely spirited."

"Aye," Kili grumbled, "I gathered as much when she went to cut my head off last night."

"Well... you were a wee rude to her yourself," Fili said sardonically. "Though I'm fairly certain she was not going to kill you."

"Either way, I do not condone nor understand the reason of her presence here."

"Help is always welcome," the blond said with a shrug and then chuckled. "And she's coming along whether you condone it or not. You'd do well to take in that she has a mind of her own."

"Mmm, I hate that."

All this time Arya felt someone's eyes digging holes on her back and, wondering who it was, she didn't pay much attention to Urúvion's pace. Thus she ended up riding next to the brothers, whose talk immediately drew to an end.

Fili's expression immediately shifted to a smile. "Now," he began mirthfully, "what brings our lovely Ranger back here?"

"Chance more than anything, to be honest," she replied. "Fortunate to have someone with good ears and eyes watch your backs, though, isn't it?"

"That's not exactly the word I would use," Kili muttered to himself. Predictably, he saw the glare coming his way before he even completed the sentence. To be fair, he had it coming.

Luckily, Fili had remained oblivious to that little exchange. Luckily, that is, for Kili, who wouldn't get away with anything less than an elbow in the ribs or a kick in the shin as a telling-off for that implicit ill-mannered comment.

"Now that you're here then, my lady, we'd be happy to oblige to whatever you'd like most to talk about, right, brother?" He nodded to Kili, who made a point of rolling his eyes till they found brain and moving to ride next to Oin.

He might have trotted ahead, but his ears didn't seem to get the brain signal. "Fili, if you call me a lady again, I may actually punch you in the face," he heard the woman say and absentmindedly
glanced at her over his shoulder, a chuckle threatening to spill out before he realised his predicament. Whatever traces of laughter vanished and he glared ahead at an empty spot as if he could see his own head, scowling at the betrayal.

The sight did not go unnoticed. Unfortunately Arya mistook it for displeasure at her being around and felt her hand itching to throw a boot at the back of his fat head, if only to revel in his reaction. It'd be nice to have something to laugh over when times got hard. Although able to keep her hands at bay, one can only control so much.

"Dõl gîn lost."

The blond's face crinkled in confusion, thinking whatever she'd said directed to him. "Pardon me?"

"I merely pointed out that your brother's head must be empty," she said, silent irritation blazing every fibre of her body. "Does he detest everyone he meets for the first time without getting to know them, or do I have the honour of being the first?"

Fili barked a laugh and watched as her eyes raked over his brother's form. "He may or may not still be a little mad at you about the incident the other night," he said gingerly and she gave a tired eye-roll. "He's not gone so far as detesting you, though."

"Well, apparently he doesn't like me either," Arya countered, confirming her suspicions from the look Fili gave her.

"So it would seem," he thoughtfully mumbled more to himself, rather than as reply to her. "Now, would you be willing to share a story with me?" he asked, trying to divert her gaze and the conversation from his brother.

"No."

"How do you know–?"

"You've got that look," she accused.

"Oh, humour me!"

"Wasn't planning to."

"But–"

She gave a shrug. "Sorry to disappoint, but I don't do backstory."

"Which must undoubtedly be more interesting–"

"Not really–"

"–than the long, tedious road ahead of us."

Arya's head slumped forward.

"Please," he persisted with the most innocent look he could employ. And considering his brother was the reigning champion of the puppy eyes, Fili didn't do so bad himself.

The woman sighed deeply, wondering how bad would it be to reveal something. Down the road, she'd probably come to regret that decision.
The dwarf knew that he was starting to crack her and decided to drop the bait. "So how could it be
that a most elegant lad--" he stopped midsentence and immediately corrected, "Woman. A most
elegant woman, such as yourself, decides to become a Ranger?"

Her next sigh marked her surrender. "My grandfather was, my father too, my brothers were going to
be; and I was expected to be graceful, and noble, and wise. Mild-mannered. Well-behaved. A good
cook too, preferably. And... well, not all expectations are met. When I told my father, he, of course,
decided, so, being the little rascal I was, decided that drastic times call for drastic measures. So I
went directly to the Chieftain and pestered him until he accepted me. It was five long months," she
concluded with a pensive shake of her head, "for them, at least. It's been nearly a decade now, and
that pretty much sums it up. Satisfied?"

The prince nodded with mild fascination, which in short time manifested into questions. "A decade?"
he repeated. "How old are you?"

"Fili," Arya feigned offense, "you never ask a lady of her age!"

"You just told me not to call you a lady!"

"I told you not to call me a lady, not that I am not one."

Kili was still listening to what they were saying, the occasional chuckle making the frown cut his
face even deeper.

"Your father and brothers are also Rangers, you say?" Fili inquired. "And they've allowed you to
join us on your own?"

Her smile slowly gave its place to a solemn look, and she turned her gaze straight ahead. "They've
been dead for a decade."

"Oh." Fili felt stupid to ask so indelicately about one's family—usually he was more tactful than that.
"Forgive me, I did not mean to pry," he said quickly, earning a dismissive look from her that it was
fine.

Kili momentarily felt bad for the woman. Truly, he did. But it wasn't too long before his old sour
mood resurfaced.

"Even if they were alive, do you think they'd be able to change my mind? Or foil Gandalf's master
scheme, whatever that is?" she told Fili with a conspiratorial tone, who was glad that his question
didn't have any kind of negative impact. "And to satisfy your curiosity, I am eight-and-twenty."

"Finally!" It was an exclamation of genuine relief. "My brother will stop nagging about being the
younger one."

Her eyes reflexively flickered at said person, then back to her companion. "How old are you?" she
asked curiously.

"Well, I have seen eighty two winters of this age and my brother seventy seven," Fili said with a
smile so wide, it made his face muscles contort funnily. "Which makes you the runt of the litter."

"Oh, that's how it is?" Arya thought with an impish twinkle in her eyes. "Yet you forget, my friend,
that I am one of Men," she objected. "Ergo, unless my calculation is incorrect—which I'm certain it
is not—if you were of the race of Men as well, you'd be younger than me. Which would
subsequently make you two the runts of the litter."
That was not correct, for she was one of the Dúnedain. Their lifespan was that of three times longer than normal Men's, making it almost equivalent to the lifespan of Dwarves. Therefore, she was indeed the runt of the group. Arya did know that, but it wouldn't hurt to joke about once in a while. He and Kili might have lived more decades than her, but she'd seen her fair share of things in her time as well. She watched the young dwarf mull over her words with furrowed brow, deep down knowing that there was something dodgy about it, and looking so close to debunking her claim, but still too far away.

She pursed her lips to hold back a laugh and quickly composed herself. "On second thoughts," she said, "mayhap you two are enough to guard the back, so I think I'll move ahead."

"Wha–? Hold up, there!" His eyes suddenly snapped back to her, hooded with suspicion. "You are one of the Dúnedain, it doesn't mat–" he exclaimed, genuinely aggrieved at being bamboozled, but she had already spurred her horse in a canter towards the front of the line.

The Ranger glanced at him over her shoulder and flashed a smile of—in this case, deceitful—triumph. She wondered how he was aware of that fact, but quickly figured that Gandalf had divulged more information about her lineage than she'd like. The one who was not at all pleased with the easy banter between them was Kili, judging by the force he was using to clench his pony's reins and the resolute frown on his face.

"Seems the lass is a good laugh, isn't she?" Fili pondered loudly, coming to ride next to his brother and startling him from his thoughts.

Oin, Bofur and Bombur, who rode ahead of them, turned to him with arched eyebrows and one or two sly whistles. "My, my," Bombur teased, while stuffing pieces of cake in his mouth, "methinks someone's in trouble."

"Wouldn't be the first time," Oin piped up, elbowing Bofur to play along, "would it?"

All this time silent, Kili abruptly turned his head to observe his brother, his own face gradually taking a shade of red. He could decipher his brother's sentiments just by observing him—not because he was good in the art of rationalisation, rather because he'd spent his seventy seven years of life in his presence and knew him like the back of his hand.

Fili rolled his eyes, "I barely know the woman!"

"And when did that stop you?" Bofur added with a wink and the others doubled up with laughter.

"Thorin and mother will not approve."

"Approve?!" his brother almost sputtered in shock. Yet seeing Kili's impeccably serious face led him to wonder aloud and rather dryly, "I did not even claim to like her in such a way and you've already thought so far ahead?"

The brunet did not dignify this with a reply.

"One could say she's good-looking," Bofur shrugged, receiving thoughtful nods of agreement from Oin and Bombur. "Tho' the lack of hair is quite the turn-off."

"She is not a dwarf," Fili sighed. "Females of Men do not grow beards. Still, even without one, she is quite charming."

"What about ye?" asked Bofur, seeing Kili had not responded. "Do ye think she's a bonny lass?"
"Merely tolerable," the prince flouted.

"Good heavens!" Fili sighed dramatically and rolled eyes at his brother's tenacity to constantly hint at something disagreeable regarding her person. "To declare this woman merely tolerable is a crime--"

"Then convict me to death," the brunet said dryly. "You may as well save her time from trying to kill me again."

"So you tell me that even if she was a dwarf maiden and had the most fetching beard in Ered Luin, you would still consider her simply tolerable?"

"I would, yes," Kili deadpanned and galloped away from them, seeing that the conversation was getting out of hand. He had no intention of admitting something like that ever in his life, least of all about her, and especially not in the presence of living people. He would never hear the end of it if that happened. And he still couldn't pinpoint what it was about her that bothered him so much.

"Honestly, I do not know what's got into him," Fili muttered with a shrug. The ability to decipher his sibling's thoughts wasn't mutually exclusive. And this was the first time that the older prince was unable to comprehend his brother's discomfort around her, no matter how hard he was trying.

"Don't trouble your head, laddie. They might get along better in time," Oin reassured him and their ride continued with talking, singing and every other way their time could be filled with.

Somewhere in the front, faint parts of the conversation reached the Ranger's ears, but they were enough for her to figure out the general topic of discussion. She never was one to care about her looks or seek attention from the opposite gender, yet on some occasions her male acquaintances had complimented her on her graceful appearance, which fact's logical interpretation was that she was pleasing, or at least decent to look at. Though, despite the other males' opinions, this dwarf seemed determined to come up with ways to slight her with either a sentence or mere word. He was a dwarf after all; their beauty standards differed considerably. Still, the thought alone of him actually admitting she was pretty was simply ridiculous, if viable at all, and made a guffaw desperately trying to find a way out of her system and her desperately trying to hold it back.

Kili's pony was cantering towards the front of the line. The moment he passed next to the Ranger's horse, he heard a chortle and a quick clearing of a throat that obviously was her unsuccessful cover for it. He clenched his pony's reins once more, mistakenly thinking she was laughing at him, and moved even further ahead to avoid her. Now she was laughing at him? Just considering the thought made him grit his teeth punishingly. He still was unable to comprehend her quite hostile disposition and the insult she paid him during their unforgettable first encounter the night before, believing that it was perfectly normal and reasonable for him to ask these questions, and doubt whatever help she could offer them. It didn't make any sense for Gandalf to need especially her to be their guide since there were quite a few Rangers in Eriador who, most importantly, were males.

Of course, with his luck, the Ranger who now escorted them was her. A woman he thought so alarming and short-tempered that she could surpass Thorin who, from Kili's personal experience over the decades, could be a real pain in the arse from time to time.

Yet she could pass for friendly, judging by the lively conversation she just had with his brother. Fili naturally had taken a liking to her, thinking her as an interesting person to interact with, the shiny new toy more so. The thought only of his brother spending time with her had Kili appalled. He wasn't so certain what the opinions of the rest of the company were of her; they appeared to behave with the elementary civility to her, but who knows what a dwarf has in his head? Besides his brother, only the hobbit seemed to genuinely like her. Therefore, after thinking about it for what seemed like hours, he was completely lost as to what his opinion was of her, although the scales tilted
dangerously toward dislikeness.

Chapter End Notes

Nad no ennas = Something is out there
Dơl gịn lost = Your head is empty
The north went on forever.

Bilbo Baggins knew the maps as well as anyone, but a fortnight on the wild track that passed for the Great East Road had brought home the lesson that the map was one thing and the land quite another.

Days were slowly starting to become evidently less cold. Southwest of the road were flint hills, grey and rugged, with megaliths on their stony summits and barrows underneath them. To the east the land was lower, the ground flattening to a rolling plain that stretched away as far as the eye could see. Stone bridges spanned swift, narrow streams, while small farms started to appear, walled in wood and stone. The road was well trafficked, and at night for their comfort there was the occasional rude inn to be found, or else it was a makeshift camp on the outskirts of the villages. The inhabitants of Bywater, the villages around Brandywine, Bree and Chetwood proved abnormally undisturbed by the admittedly odd cavalcade of the company—probably due to the rather intimidating figures of the Grey Wizard and the dark-cloaked Ranger at the top and the end of the line respectively. It still won them many looks and talks behind their back, none of them favourable.

The lands and paths so far were in general quite easy to trek. Three days ride from Bree, however, the farmland gave way to dense wood, and the traffic lessened. The Road naturally veered south by southeast to avoid the marshland that lay to the north of it, yet the shortcuts the Ranger often took to take to cover led the company too close to that treacherous fen, resulting in incessant grumbling the likes of which she was not prepared for.

After two days and nights of travel it was clear to everyone why there were no inhabitants. The land was dangerous with no permanent path. Pools, reeds, and rushes filled the area which was home to birds, flies, tiny biting midges, and loud cricket-like insects—the Neekerbreekers, as per Bilbo's apt naming, the evil relatives of the cricket—which deviated from their dwelling and found their way to the camp, leaving most people without sleep and many others with swollen bites and an insufferable itch.

That was the sole discouraging event and, had it not been for that, the company would have enjoyed this pan of the journey better than any up to that time. The sun was shining, clear but not too hot. The woods in the valley were leafy and full of colour, and seemed peaceful and wholesome. The Ranger guided them confidently among the many crossing paths, taking a wandering course with many turns to put off any pursuit, just as Gandalf had advised. Left to themselves, the company would probably have been at a loss soon. Bilbo was quite pleased with her as their guide, though Thorin and most of the dwarves did not seem to share that feeling.

Tonight was the first night they would camp very far from any inhabited regions that lay at the easternmost end of Bree-land. Away in the distance eastward they could see a line of hills. The highest of them was at the right of the line and a little separated from the others. It had a conical top, slightly flattened at the summit.

"Amon Sûl," muttered Gandalf gingerly as Thorin, Dwalin and Balin led their ponies on his right, "commonly known as Weathertop."

"Ever been up there, gentlemen?" a feminine voice enquired as her horse cantered beside them. "At the tower's ruins?"
"Can't say that we have, no," said Thorin. "What of it?"

"It commands a wide view all round," said Arya. "There are many birds and beasts that could see us, as we stand here, from that hill-top. Not all the birds are to be trusted, and there are other spies more evil than they are."

The dwarves looked suspiciously at the distant hills. His pony's pace having ceased near them, Bilbo could not but hear them and looked up into the pale sky, fearing to see hawks or eagles hovering over them with bright unfriendly eyes.

"What do you suggest?" asked Gandalf.

"Well," answered the woman slowly, as if she was not quite sure, "I think the best thing is to go as straight eastward from here as we can, to make for the line of hills, but not for Weathertop. Andelu i ven." There was nothing to dispel the feeling of stark exposure one got standing on their commanding summits, so they might as well camp where they could be seen least.

After hours of riding under the bright sun, just as it was taking the dive west, they reached the westward slopes of one of the hills north to Weathertop. A few trees lay scattered here and there, and they doubtfully posed as a forest that possessed a name in any map. When the blessed moment came that Thorin muttered something to the wizard, who in turn whispered something to the Ranger, and she glanced over her shoulder to see fourteen miserable faces glaring at her almost murderously, she took the hint. There was a collective sigh of relief when she and the wizard dismounted their horses.

Thorin was still unsure how much Gandalf had shared regarding the price on his head with the woman, but he did learn one thing: whatever it was that he'd told her, it made her move urgently. And when Rangers travelled with urgency, they were relentless. Even he, who had had his fair share of travels in his life, had grown tired at the near brutal pace they were moving. She'd even gone so far as to suggest skipping the midday stop for lunch and instead cut down their portion of supper by a third, so they could eat the remains the next day as lunch while on horseback to buy time. The refusal was unanimous. In the end they settled for doing that only every few days—Arya thought it was a win, considering.

By the end of that infernal day, Bilbo's thighs were raw from hard riding, his legs were cramping badly, and he ached in places he didn't even know could ache. He did not complain. He'd be damned if he gave Thorin Oakenshield the satisfaction. The only thing he did was stretch all limbs for a good ten minutes before he and a few others were sent out for firewood.

Presented with the chance of wandering off on her own for the first time in nearly a month, Arya seized it like someone abandoned in the desert for days and suddenly faced with a pond of crystal clear water. She ventured into the woods as soon as she set her things on her ground, before anyone even noticed her leave.

After a purposefully long look around, on her way back to the camp she passed in a distance by a small group consisting of Fili, Kili, Bofur, and what seemed like a very sceptical Bilbo. They seemed to have gathered the requested firewood, but hadn't taken it back to the camp yet. They were huddled up around the collected branches, having a rather grim discussion by the looks of it.

"...could be leading us anywhere, for all we know."

"Dangerous folk, the Rangers," muttered Kili. "Wandering in the wild..."

"I've heard stories," Bofur piped up. "They're preying on their enemies and then cut their heads so
nimbly and quietly, even themselves barely feel it."

"Never leave any survivors," Fili added with a dark look.

"No survivors?" Arya's voice emerged out of nowhere. "Then where do the stories come from, I wonder?" She couldn't contain a pleased grin at the spectacle of them jumping a foot.

Bilbo's armful of branches dropped to the ground. He went from petrified to surprised and, ultimately, relieved upon recognising the intruder. "What the bloody hell was that? Do Rangers enjoy frightening people to death?" he spluttered, still recovering from shock, but then thought that he might have sounded rude and went to open his mouth and apologise.

The corners of her lips tugged to a smile, and she laughed breathlessly, raising her hand to prevent him from doing so. "A Ranger ought to be light-foot and nimble, Mr. Baggins, otherwise they shouldn't deserve the title. Oh, and gentlemen," she added casually, "it is no easy task to sever a man's head. You must find the right angle."

"I am absurdly in awe of your flair for the macabre," said Fili. His brow furrowed at the folded cloth held under her arm.

The woman followed his eyes. She unwrapped the very edge of it, revealing something feathery and three or four shiny handles of what he supposed was arrows and knives respectively.

"And you just so happened to have a secret stash of weapons lying around here," Fili commented with an arched eyebrow.

The woman smirked. "As a matter of fact, I did."

"Where?"

"It wouldn't be secret if I told you, now, would it?" she noted and the dwarf chuckled.

The only one who had stopped talking the moment she arrived was Kili. And he continued not to talk afterwards as well. Not that she minded.

It seemed like there was an unspoken agreement between the two parties to have a silence contest all these days, which satisfied both of them greatly and neither desired to put an end to. However, nothing could prevent the younger prince from grumbling at his brother about her dysfunctional behaviour and the non necessity of her presence there. Fili, who was more than amused to sit and listen, reckoned that the woman resembled his brother a great deal in character; her witticisms, her playfulness—in the rare occasions it surfaced—her stubbornness, and other similar traits would make her good company for Kili. It made him wonder how they'd managed to rub each other up the wrong way.

A series of misfortunate, badly timed incidents, such as the bending of the tip of an arrow or the witnessing of an insignificant, yet embarrassing slip over a rock, had led Arya to believe that Kili considered her a mortal enemy, judging by the glares he gave her or what he mumbled under his breath in Khuzdul when she was around. Although unfamiliar with their language, she was positive that the words behind these murmurs were more or less mild compared to what he was thinking of her. It was made perfectly clear, and he had taken it upon himself to remind her of it whenever he could, that his obstinacy and willingness to misunderstand anything that had to do with her knew no bounds—a legitimate nephew of Thorin Oakenshield, no doubt, as she'd learned a few days prior. In any case, if he was determined to ignore her, she was more than willing to go along with his decision.
With these two walking with a significant distance between them, they returned all together to the camp and lit the fire, so Bombur could finally start cooking. When the food was ready, Bombur divided the stew and served everyone a bowl. Arya took a seat between Fili and Bilbo, as it was her wont lately.

Kili was on the other side of his brother, sulking and stirring his stew as though it had wronged him. The last thing either of them desired was to have the other in such proximity, yet, somehow, the past days during every meal she happened to join in, they happened to be seated rather close to each other, usually with only Fili separating them.

"How can you be so quiet and light on your feet?" Fili wondered within a mouthful of stew. "You nearly scared us back there."

The Ranger chuckled, though it was more like a choking cough that came out. "If by 'nearly scared' you mean that you nearly shit yourselves, then yes, I did." That elicited a whine from the blond dwarf. Undeterred, she laughed again, "With all due respect, you must put your wits upon the hone, or else you might end up gathering body parts off the forest ground."

The blond grinned wickedly. "As long as certain appendages remain intact and fully functional, that'd be fine by me."

"He may even wish for ye to comfort him afterwards," added Oin, a light smile on his face as his hand supported the trumpet in his ear.

Winks and whistles literally swarmed at their direction. Fili tossed his head back, laughing, whereas his brother and the woman's faces turned red, only with an ever so slight difference; Arya's was red from rising discomfort and Kili's from raging anger.

Arya recovered her wits quickly. "I'm rather confident, master Oin, that his nibs would never condescend to have me, of all people, comfort him in case of such an unfortunate event."

"Right you are, there," Fili casually piped up. "Take no offence, but I prefer lasses with some hair on their chins," he added with a smirk. Arya promptly covered her heart as if she had been shot.

"A pity, really!"

"Indeed," Nori agreed to Bombur's remark with a nod, playing along, "any offspring of yours would be easy on the eye!"

Arya almost choked on her food and Fili choked with laughter. His brother simply wondered if it was humanly possible for one's head to spontaneously implode so he'd be spared the cringing comments, not really noticing his hands shaking so hard that half his stew had spilled out.

"I could make an exception for you, though," the blond dwarf told her with a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

Within the space of two seconds Kili went from angry to relaxed to struggling not to let his shoulders shake as he laughed silently to himself. It was the first time since their meeting that he found himself not so edgy in her presence. Now, for example, he could understand why his brother fancied having her around. Apparently she hadn't seen that backfire, and the expression of utter dread and terror on her face at that moment was priceless.

Settled on a rock at the other side of the fire, Thorin seemed anything but pleased with the banter. Dwalin, Balin and Gandalf, who sat on his sides, were instead rather amused.
The murderous look on Thorin’s face did not go unnoticed. It was the first—and probably last—time that Arya felt grateful for it. "For the very health of your king," she pointed out, "I think it would be wise to halt our otherwise joyful conversation."

Confirming her sayings themselves as they took a glimpse of their fuming leader, the rest of the members returned to their food and limited to eat in silence for most of the time.

When they were all finished, the sun had already sunk into the western shadows. A few melancholy birds were piping and wailing, and an empty silence fell after they lay down to sleep, with the notable exceptions of Gandalf that was smoking his pipe, Bilbo who found it impossible to sleep with Bombur snoring like a broken drain a few feet away, and the two younger brothers who were assigned the first watch. Arya had a restlessness that she knew would keep her awake, so she didn't even bother lying down. It was an often occurrence.

Almost two weeks had passed on the road and there hadn't been a single night where she got a proper night's rest. Although staying alone in a room at an inn had its privilege, for no one could see if she was indeed sleeping or not, and she had a semblance of peace and quiet for a few hours before the morning ruckus, half the nights the howling of the wind and an army of thoughts kept her sitting by the fire and staring at the shadows the flames created on the wall.

Now she was occupying a soft spot on the ground, her back against the large rock behind, listening to the whistling sound of the fire. Her eyes caught movement, and she saw Bilbo sneaking up to the pony he rode all these days to smuggle her an apple. The smile it brought to her face quickly fell when a screech disrupted the peace of the night. Eyes looked around, close and farther away, cautiously; vigilantly. A sinister feeling had been roiling within her since they first laid eyes on Weathertop that morning, for any random person could be at the tower's ruins upon the hill and watch the lands around; a feeling that she wished to be simply false alarm and nothing more.

To his chagrin, Kili found himself sitting practically beside her once again, near the rock she was resting on. He could not see her face, only her hands, but all the same tried to ignore her and focus on smoking his pipe. He could not stop staring at them, though. Truth be told, she had beautiful hands, with long fingers, strewn with a few scratches and small, nearly healed cuts. He wondered if they would be soft to touch, or coarse.

Get a grip, said a voice in his head. On yourself, damn it, not her bloody hands, came the afterthought. He shut his eyes in exasperation.

He had recently begun to feel the danger of paying the woman a little too much attention than what his pride was comfortable with; felt the stirrings of curiosity and something much more primal and raw begin to take hold of him, and he was fighting tooth and nail to curb it. It was with great effort that he thought of her as just 'the woman'. Seldom, the Ranger. Not Arya. He shied away from her name every time it came to his thoughts as though it was the plague.

When he opened his eyes, for some obscure reason he risked another look. A glance, really, but it was like he couldn’t keep his eyes off of her. Every time he looked to his brother on his other side or to the rest of their companions snoring their troubles away, his body was still tilted in her direction, ready to look at her again.

In the end he could do nothing but accept that his attention was going to be consumed by this woman until something of greater importance caught his eye.

But when his ears caught the same sound he drew closer in alert, elbows rubbing against each other, and he suddenly became extremely conscious of her every move. His eyes remained fixed on her
hands as her slender fingers fidgeted with the string of her bow.

Bilbo's ears picked up the sound as well—not that it was low and difficult to hear, really. It startled him all the same, and he jogged away from his pony, towards the two brothers. "What was that?" he asked curiously.

Kili had spent enough time in the Wild for his mind to go immediately to the worst. "Orcs," he blurted out before he could stop himself, but the need to get his mind off the woman's hands was rather urgent at that moment. He mentally smacked his head for not thinking this through, for it was probably an owl or another animal, and then recoiled a few necessary inches away from her for the sake of his sanity.

The word alone, unfortunately, was enough for Thorin to jump up from his slumber in alert.

"Orcs?" Bilbo repeated in mild panic, wondering why the bloody hell both of them still sat on their bums and hadn't already scrambled to alert the company to danger.

Before Kili had the chance to even open his mouth and reverse his sayings, Fili's casual voice continued. "Throat cutters. There'd be dozens of them out there." He mistook his little brother to be in the mood for jokes, and the thought of a frightened hobbit seemed to entertain the blond greatly. "The lone-lands are crawling with them..."

As long as every living soul around remained oblivious to his real musings, Kili would happily play along. "They strike in the wee small hours when everyone's asleep. Quick and quiet. No screams, just lots of blood," he piped up grimly, failing to notice Thorin's looming silhouette glaring at him from afar.

Then he risked a glance over his shoulder to Fili, who couldn't hold any longer and promptly burst into chuckles. Kili had no intention of holding back either. Even Arya chose to see the humorous side of this and huffed a laugh when the hobbit himself didn't seem like the type to hold a grudge because of an innocent, if ill-timed, joke. Thorin, now, was as purple as a ripe aubergine with anger.

"You think that's funny?" the hoarse voice rumbled and the laughs were cut short. "You think a night raid by orcs is a joke?"

Kili didn't see that coming back to bite him in the arse. His lighthearted look evaporated faster than a drop of water under the scorching hot sun in the vast deserts of Far Harad. This is what happens when your attention is drawn by someone's bloody hands. He shouldn't have gone through with this in the first place, damn it, even as a joke.

"We didn't mean anything by it," he said lowly, his eyes downcast.

"No, you didn't," Thorin huffed scornfully. "You know nothing of the world," were his final words before he stomped over to a small rock near the edge with his back turned to everyone.

Kili was always more prone to talking back to him, yet, this time, an approaching figure gesturing him to stay quiet made him give it a second thought. The one responsible for averting an argument was none other than Balin, who joined them by the fire. The old warrior's eyes switched back and forth between Thorin and his nephews.

When the king had moved far enough, Kili felt he could breathe again. Sometimes it was hard to keep track of every word that came out of his mouth so as not to sound disrespectful, or unintentionally offend anyone. There were times he feared he was going to get caught for his thoughts.
"Don't mind him, laddie," Balin said comfortingly, as though he could read the lad's mind. It was of no help. Kili looked gloomier than ever, but seemed like he was used to it.

A silent spectator so far, Arya shifted in her seat uncomfortably, feeling like an intruder who had no business with these people and their interpersonal disputes in the first place.

Balin proved too kind and thoughtful for his own good. He glanced at her with a sad frown. "Thorin has more cause than most to hate orcs."

He began recounting the story of how their people, after Smaug destroyed Erebor, tried to reclaim Moria by marching into battle against the orcs that then ruled the ancient mansions of Durin's Folk; a battle in which Azog the Defiler beheaded King Thror. Thorin fought against the pale orc then and managed to cut his arm, using only an oaken branch as a shield—hence the sobriquet 'Oakenshield'.

The Ranger whimsically thought that whoever came up with that mustn't have had a wild imagination. Still, even though familiar with the events from books and tales, she appreciated Balin taking the trouble to fill her in on Thorin's background, probably implicitly casting some light on the reason why he constantly looked like someone, somewhere, was disappointing him even at the best of times.

As the tale drew to an end and Bilbo questioned the pale orc's whereabouts, Thorin plodded slowly down the path he'd taken, back towards them.

"He slunk back into the hole whence he came," he said angrily, startling the hobbit who hadn't seen him approach. "That filth died of his wounds long ago."

The Ranger's eyes flickered at the side of his face that was visible to her almost imperceptibly, thinking that he might want to cross check first. The look Balin and Gandalf exchanged was unmistakable; they knew. If not Gandalf, Balin at least, Thorin's most trusted advisor, hadn't made his suspicions of the pale orc's unfortunate well-being known. Perhaps he had his reasons. And a good thing, too, if the mere mention of the name was as harmless as pouring oil over a fire. Perhaps deep down Thorin already knew and simply refused to believe it. Heavens help any poor soul who might try to convince him otherwise, thickheaded as he was.

Arya trudged away from the camp to put her thoughts in order. The annoying feeling of someone's eyes digging in her back and following her step didn't abandon her, but she paid it no mind. She perched herself upon a small rock near the edge of the cliff and wrapped her arms around her folded legs as her thought raced leagues away from the present. She started humming a melody of her own creation and soon —she didn't know when and, if asked, wouldn't know why either— it took the form of a song her mother used to sing to her and her siblings when they couldn't sleep.

\[
\text{Immen dúath caeda} \\
\text{Sui tollech, gwanna omen} \\
\text{Là ah alagos gwinnatha bain} \\
\text{Boe naer gwannathach, annant uich ben-estel} \\
\text{An uich gwennen na ringyrn e-mbar han.} \\
\text{Uich gwennen na 'wanath ah na dhín.} \\
\text{Boe naid bain gwannathar,} \\
\text{Boe cuil ban firitha} \\
\]

Odd choice for a song to put a child to sleep, if one considered the meaning of the words.

It'd taken Arya more or less a decade to grasp the morbid aspect of it. To the unsuspecting ear it might sound like any other lullaby, yet it was sung by an elf —an immortal being— to her mortal
children, whose spirits, along with that of her mortal husband's, would depart this world upon their
deaths, whereas the former's fëa was bound to it and thus they'd be forever separated. Such was the
price and yet her mother had surrendered to that fate the moment her father had first smiled at her. It
was a consciously made choice and the elleth had allowed no one to condemn her for it.

The whole thing was a sad story, really; one that Arya rarely found herself in the mood to ponder on,
let alone share with anyone, purely out of sympathy for her own head and pride respectively. Long
story short, the song was more like a foreseeably early lament rather than a lullaby.

Whoever was still awake —and had a good ear— caught the faint whistle of her voice in the air. For
whatever reason, Kili's treacherous mind considered it something to bother his head with. Curiosity
got the better of him. He even found himself holding his own breath to hear the sound better for a
moment there. It was a nice melody, simple and sad, but almost wistful-sounding.

When the melody faded, coming to blend with the soft whizz of the night breeze, she quietly sneaked
back to the camp and lied down on her bedroll, which Fili had habitually placed between his and his
brother's. Frankly, she didn't mind anymore. As long as the dirt was remotely soft, it didn't matter
who was on either side. Sleep came to her after an hour of fidgeting until she found a comfortable
enough position to lie, where the occasional jag of a rock was tolerable. Oblivious to herself, she'd
been humming another tune, as old as the hill themselves.

Placed on his back with arms folded under his head as a pillow, Kili lay three feet away in a
quandary. He didn't know whether he wanted her to shut it so they could get some sleep or keep
humming the tune. In a strange sort of way, it made him want to stay awake to hear the entire thing,
but lulled him to sleep at the same time.

And when his eyelids grew tired of the constant blinking, they fell shut. And Kili started seeing
things. He imagined feasts and treasure-seeking with the wild Firebeards in deep mines and caverns
in Ered Luin during the winter; and then summer where thaw came and the forest above the
Mountains turned green again; and streams running with crystal-clear water, and him with a few
friends sneaking off at night to watch midnight feasts from afar and how the Wood-elves who still
dwelled in the Blue Mountains came out to dance with each other.

It must have been hours later when he shook himself awake. The low hum could not be heard
anymore; only the sizzling of the fire and the one on watch were reminiscence of the once awake
company.

Fairly startled by the strange dream, his head tilted to the side and he glanced at the sleeping figure
who lay two feet away with her back turned, knees folded and arms curled around her middle. Kili
inhaled deeply. When the breath came in contact with the air, there was a faint trace of condensation
—it was a crisp night. He didn't know what came over him right at that moment, but in an act of
good faith he moved to cover her with his blanket.

Sensing movement, the woman suddenly woke with a start and he recoiled. She barely noticed the
blanket, instead too focused on searching around for any sign of danger. Seeing that there was no
commotion that warranted her jumping upright in alert, her eyes closed and she fell asleep again.

Kili had been holding his breath for the entire time. Only minutes later, when the rise and fall of her
middle became steady, did he dare to fully turn to her. And as if she could feel his gaze pinned on
her back, lurking to catch him out, she changed sides, damn her. And he panicked, thinking her
awake and himself wholly unprepared to handle his embarrassment for having been caught staring.
Yet the movement was of far more innocent nature than the conspiracy theory Kili had in mind; a
mere attempt to seek more warmth, that's all. And that would have been the end of it hadn't she
scooted closer. Her head crawled somewhere below his folded arm, black hair flipping to every
direction and tickling neck, jaw and mouth alike, her legs entwined with his own in a quite peculiar way and, on top of everything, she threw an arm over his stomach.

The prince, with eyes wide and hands raised above his head in a silent gesture of genuine surrender, felt unable to move. He was, for all intents and purposes, trapped. Sadly, he was still a gentleman; he was not going to disturb her sleep just to shoo her away. Though, in all honestly, it may have been equal parts gallantry and cowardice to deal with the repercussions if he woke her that stopped him from moving her away. Absentmindedly, his eyes raked over her face. Her features were slightly drawn in a frown, as though sleep itself offended her, but he saw her face relax a little after a while. And even if she'd stopped shivering, he tucked the blanket tighter around her to keep her warm.

Bofur and Dwalin, the latter having just handed over the turn for watch to the former, were whispering between themselves and unavoidably witnessed the entire scene.

"Mahal save us," said the burly dwarf with a dramatic shake of his head.

He closed his eyes and after a minute or two let a snore, slowly drifting into the realm of dreams, while Bofur was left to observe the sleeping pair. He had a feeling about these two. Whether good or bad, he could not place.

A few feet away Kili felt her shifting again, this time her head budging so close to his neck that he could almost feel her breath on his skin. It made him bristle. Not in a bad way, though, if that even made any sense.

A strange feeling overwhelmed him as the woman tightened her grip, and he closed his eyes to try and resume his sleep, but only managed to for two or three more hours. In that time he couldn't for the life of him get the tune she'd been humming out of his head.

When Bofur's watch was over, morning had dawned fair, and he decided to rouse some of the others to prepare breakfast. One of those others was Fili, whose laughter nearly set the entire camp on foot as soon as he took in the wondrous picture beside him.

His head was bombarded with legions of bawdy comments that desperately searched for an exit. It was killing him. He wasn't even sure on what he should comment first, the hold Kili had on the Ranger's body as though she was a pillow on his bed, or the fact that she had buried her face in his chest, possibly suffocating herself under most of his weight. His only wish was to remember each one of these comments purely for blackmailing purposes, if circumstances ever arose.

Then he strutted to them with a little too much smugness than it should be acceptable for this hour, careful not to wake Arya. He landed a strong kick on Kili's foot and startled him up from his, what from his face seemed to be, rather enjoyable sleep.

Kili jerked awake, bleary-eyes and alerted to danger, only to face his brother's grin. From personal experience, that was occasionally worse. "What the...?" he growled drowsily, taking a quick glance everywhere but down beside him and seeing no commotion that would allude to a threat. "Why did you wake me?"

His sibling flashed him the slyest of grins, not gracing him with any reply other than motioning with his head to Kili's side.

The young one immediately looked down and, faced with that sight, flinched away as though scalded.

"Making a habit of this, aren't we?"
"Oi, lad, we have to take our turn too!" someone teased and those who were awake snickered.

Kili glanced at the sleeping woman again, then raised his eyes upwards, mentally cursing to the skies for not waking before everyone else to spare himself the public shaming. He scrambled to extricate himself from her, though mindful not to nudge her awake in the process. It was humiliating enough as it was, without her awake.

"Please, it was not my intention to disrupt your comfort," Fili rushed to say, deeply amused by his sibling's obvious distress. "Sleep as you like."

"Oh please," grunted Kili and sent him a glare so severe that the smile on his brother's face fell. "'Tis not my fault if she's wobbling around like a puppy in her sleep and ends up climbing on any unsuspecting person who happens to be nearby."

The smile crept back to the blond's face. From the little he knew Arya, and that was more than can be said for people who knew her for years, surely she wouldn't get herself wrapped up in his brother's blanket of her own volition, even if she was freezing to death. So the kind gesture to warmly swaddle her like a baby must have been Kili's thought.

"You might want to take your blanket as well, brother. Or else she might recognise the unsuspecting person she climbed on to."

Kili jumped to his feet as though he'd just accidentally sat on a doornail, debating on whether to remove the blanket and let her get cold, or just leave it there and risk body and dignity as it was. The embarrassment of having again slept next to the cheeky human naturally prevailed. He pulled the blanket from where it lay over her roughly, not so mindful of waking her anymore, and walked away fuming.

Fili was torn between laughing and laughing harder. He eventually decided against both and just watched him stomp around the camp to wake the rest. Then he glanced at Arya, who apparently had been awake since after Kili unforgivingly removed her source of warmth, and recoiled in mild fright. The woman had fixed him with a suspicious look, wondering why on earth he didn't busy himself with a more meaningful task than standing at her feet and laughing at something that only he found amusing. In the end she decided not to question his motives and, in turn, Fili thought it better to leave her in blissful ignorance regarding her earlier sleeping arrangements.

Once they were all awake and sated from breakfast they mounted their horses and ponies. Some of the dwarves were fussy enough as it were, and the heavy rain that started to fall as they made their way east did nothing to comfort them. Unlike them, Arya rode Urúvion with her hood on in silence, the voices of the others purposely muffled in her ears. The rhythmic sound of the raindrops falling on the ground or plopping on the tree leaves was her entertainment now. As long as she remembered herself, she liked rain. It helped her sort out her thoughts and brought her mind to relative peace. Not to mention that it was a most fortunate coincidence that could wipe off the traces of their path, what with all the evils lurking around.

She was deep in her thoughts as usual, trying to figure out how she had finally managed to rest properly for a few hours without nightmares interrupting her sleep a lot, when Dori's voice echoed in the woods.

"Mr. Gandalf, can't you do something about this deluge?" he complained.

"It is raining, master dwarf," Gandalf grumbled. "And it will continue to rain until the rain is done. If you wish to change the weather of the world, you should find yourself another wizard."
The woman suppressed a small, involuntary laugh in her throat.

"Are there any other wizards?" the hobbit asked curiously.

"There are five of us," the wizard recounted. "The greatest of our order is Saruman the White. Then there are other two blues, whom I have quite forgotten their names, and the fifth would be Radagast the Brown."

Bilbo's expression denoted that he hesitated to ask something. "Is he a great wizard," he finally decided to do so, "or is he... more like you?"

Gandalf's priceless sneer in respond to that question had Arya shaking with silent laughter. "I think he is a great wizard in his own way," she heard him reply as she retreated towards the rear of the line to laugh to her heart's content.

Riding barely ten feet ahead of her, Kili fancied his eyesight the second best there, probably only bested by hers; he wasn't so sure about Bilbo yet, though the hobbit had shown some promise. So every time his eyes rebelled against his will and looked past his shoulder at the rest of the line, he'd unavoidably catch a glimpse of her as well. She hadn't complained at all about being cold; of course she hadn't—the woman would probably rather die than give any of them the satisfaction. For some obscure reason she seemed inexplicably content riding in the downpour, even with the raindrops pelting the lower part of her face and rolling down her neck.

Not that he was staring there.

...

Somewhere about thirty seven tallied raindrops sliding down her neck later that inexplicably got Kili all hot and bothered in an ungodly way, he was so frustrated that he decided to take action just for the sake of his sanity. He lowered his pony's pace to fall into step beside hers and, without a word, threw his cloak around her shoulders, letting her huddle up under it and praying that it'd be enough to shield her neck and the bloody raindrops from his view.

Her eyes sought out the person who had been struck with a surge of kindness. To her horror, it was him. Which was rather surprising, given his behaviour of the past days. With a quizzical look she opened her mouth to inquire about the unexpected gesture, but his glower made her give a second thought to what she was about to say.

"Why—?"

"You look like a drowned rat."

"Oh, and you think you don't?" Arya countered with amusement, gesturing at his equally drenched clothes.

"How about we end this pointless conversation here and you keep the cloak?"

"How about yo—?"

"Just keep the damn cloak," he ordered with finality and immediately cantered to the front of the line, leaving no room for protest.

Arya was left there to stare at his back, biting her tongue with annoyance. Slowly the scent of his cloak, very enhanced by the rain, tingled her nostrils—it gave off a distinct whiff of bow polisher. It may or may not have made that annoyance subside a little.
Fili was desperately trying not to laugh at the exchange. He quickly cantered beside her with a smug grin. "By my word, was that a ceasefire?"

Arya gave him a dry look.

The blond was anything but deterred. Kili seldom held a grudge against someone and his brother was determined to fix that small misunderstanding between them. "I told you my brother isn't bad. You merely got under his skin in Bag End," he explained. "This is why he may seem a little... erm--"

"Broody and glowering?" she supplied. "Aside the incident of that night, I've been behaving better than him." Truly, she had done nothing to incite his anger, and yet, who knows what he said behind her back to the others; because she was certain that he did.

Fili arched an eyebrow. "Better?"

"Alright, I was trying to be modest. Much better than him."

"So," he said when his laughter piped down, "how's our Ranger feeling today?"

"Quite well. Oddly enough, I got myself a good few hours of sleep last night," she muttered thoughtfully. "My head is rather grateful for that."

Fili thought it better not to comment. They stayed silent for a few minutes before he gathered the courage to speak. "Can I ask you something?" he said hesitantly and she nodded. "What are these nightmares you see about?"

Even if he didn't want to, Kili unfortunately was at a distance where he could listen to their conversation clearly. He was by no means one to eavesdrop, but he did not make any move to ride out of hearing range either.

The woman took a deep breath and remained silent. She had told him that backstory was not her cup of tea. Yet the quest would probably take months, who knows how many more times they would see or hear her during the nights?

"If you wish not to answer, it is perfectly understandable," Fili reassured.

"There is only one nightmare," she said in the end. "That, being my family killed. Feels like I am reliving it every time... I see their faces again, hear their screams like they're right next to me and I am tied up, able to do nothing to save them and just waiting for those accursed orcs to play with their new toy."

Half the dwarves discovered how curious they had actually been to hear the young woman's story. Thorin closed his eyes, briefly regretting the words he had spoken to her in Ered Luin about loss and pain, aware of what orcs did with captives; of what they'd probably do to her. He was all too familiar with nightmares himself after the battle where he lost half of his family. They had a tendency to completely destroy one's sleep and mess up feelings and thoughts.

"Do not feel the need to say sorry. Unfortunately, it is something that has happened and cannot be undone."

Fili was surprised at how unruffled she appeared to be, but respected the subtle, indirect message to not take pity on her. "Take no offence, but... how do you mean 'play'?"

"Lad, take Azog for example." Before she had time to explain, Balin had answered first. "They didn't call him the Defiler for nothing," the old dwarf said with a nod.
Kili found Balin's commentary rather unnecessary, seeing as the mental image of it was planted in his head the moment she uttered the words. And it came as no surprise that he felt angry and disgusted just at the thought of someone torturing her in such vile ways. She might be a very annoying, impudent human being, but certainly didn't deserve this.

When Fili made the connection, he turned to her in absolute horror. "They didn't... you know..."

"What?"

Bilbo was riding next to them, exceedingly uncomfortable with the topic. He finished Fili's sentence as discreetly as he could, "You know... defile you, did they?"

Kili waited for her to speak with bated breath, not sure if he could bear hearing the answer. His heart would pump out of his chest if it continued to beat that way. Why, someone would ask. He wished he knew.

The Ranger snorted awkwardly. "No, they did not," she appeased. "I would not let them. If anyone tried to defile me, I would defile them first."

Kili felt his heart return to its normal beat. Two or three others cracked a smile at the threatening words for her enemies, but paid no heed to her statement, even though she sounded pretty serious.

"You would defile them first?" asked Fili with a mystified look.

"Trust me, you don't want to know." There was an edge to her voice that belied her casual manner and she blinked far too innocently to sound harmless.

They had progressed nigh eighty miles in the next few days that came and passed, which was not the desired distance Thorin had planned to cover and that very fact made him grumpier than usual. He was further frustrated —and the others as well— when, after they crossed the Last Bridge over the river Hoarwell, one of their ponies took fright at literally thin air and bolted directly into the river; a river swollen with the rains of the last few days, that came down from the hills and mountains in front of them.

Fili and Kili were the first to take action and darted forward into the rushing water, thinking of more the poor beast itself, rather than all the food and provisions it carried—for those worried the rest of the company. Before they could pull the pony towards the bank with them, however, the strong current washed away all its load of food. Four or five ropes were thrown in the water to help the two young princes get out, while Thorin had run dangerously close to the bank for fear of losing his nephews to the rapids.

"Grab the ropes!" they yelled at them.

Dwalin, Bifur, Gloin, Dori and the Ranger had sprung beside the king to help him pull the lads out, while the rest pulled the ropes back to bring them closer to the bank.

In the end, all went well; the princes were alive, the pony was saved, but the food was not. As the two young dwarves lay on their stomachs upon the grassy bank of the river trying to catch their breaths from their near drowning, several of the dwarves started to complain about the loss of food. They were silenced with a glare from Balin, who was rather relieved to see the princes safe than sit and worry about a smaller portion in each meal.

While Thorin was kneeling next to Fili and tried to warm him up with his fur coat, his eyes fell on the figure of the woman who was the first to his younger nephew's side and frantically fumbled to
take Kili's cloak off and give it to him. The king's gaze darkened considerably, but he deemed it wise not to comment when the situation was as dire.

Kili was too busy coughing out the water that had entered his lungs to notice all the people around him. Several pairs of hands smacked his back and shoulders, helping him save his respiratory system, yet his eyes worriedly jerked to his brother's figure that lay a few feet away with their uncle and Gloin by his side—thankfully Fili seemed to be better. His attention suddenly averted from his brother when from the corner of his eye he caught the woman fumbling with his cloak, which he had let her keep these past days, for there was this treacherous, late-spring chill in the air that made her crankier than usual. And the brunet would much rather part with his cloak than risk becoming the target of her temper.

"No," he said with raspy voice, coughing a little more water. "Keep it."

The woman's eyes went wide. "You'll freeze—"

"I said keep it," he insisted and then cracked a meek smile, much to his own surprise. "What harm is a little water to a dwarf prince? I'm not made of sugar."

"Yet that tiny semblance of brain you have seems to be melting away rather easily," she growled quietly.

Kili briefly considered if seething on the inside would help drying off his clothes any sooner. He shot the woman a dirty look which she paid back and wondered what was with this mood swing of hers. How she'd managed to segue from concern into angry irritation was simply masterful.

Shooting a dark look at his brother over her shoulder, she continued to mutter profanities under her breath, punctuated with rhetorical questions of the "You could have drowned, what on earth possessed you both?" kind.

The brunet took a second to study her face, wondering why she even cared a whit. Perhaps it was the cold, he concluded a moment later. Or perhaps it was those special days of the month that men weren't supposed to anger women, unless they wished to have their head detached from their shoulders. When he and Fili were lads of no more than forty winters, and having just become privy to certain pieces of information about the functions of the body, there was a running joke amongst their peers in Ered Luin claiming that women were untrustworthy, because anything that bled for five days and lived ought to be evil.

And right now, Arya wasn't done grumbling. Not even close. The rant seemed unending, "...trust two dwarves to save the day—"

It must be those special days of the month, Kili decided upon further contemplation and thought it best not to argue with her this time. Also, to warn Fili about it, so that he would avoid interaction with her for the next few days.

His uncle's heavy footsteps as he practically jostled the Ranger aside marked the end of this small, a bit one-sided conversation. Fili was already up and about, and Kili followed shortly after. For an inexplicable reason Arya's gaze followed him closely for the rest of the day, even if she tried her best not to let it. He definitely looked like a drowned rat at the beginning, both he and Fili, but soon changed into dry clothes and let the soaking ones dry under the sun.

Thankfully, that was the sole unfortunate event they encountered so far. The second happened a few hours after the near-fatal accident at the river, when they reached a clearing where a burned house's remains stood and Thorin had the brilliant idea of setting camp there. A dubious Gandalf motioned
him and the Ranger to follow him as soon as they were off their horses.

"A farmer and his family used to live here," the wizard remarked after browsing the ruins of the house.

"Until very recently," Arya added with a frown, eyes skimming over every surface, followed by her fingers and a little sniff here and there. What it was that destroyed the small house must have been quite big, apparently. What made her disquiet kindle was that the remnants were far too fresh for her liking. Bent down on her feet, observing the half-derelict fireplace and whatever debris had ended up in there, she pulled out a pot with a layer of a greenish liquid inside; lifted it, took a whiff and screwed up her nose at the smell. The other two watched patiently.

"How long?"

"Not four days ago," she said thoughtfully, then took a quick look around. "There's still food left here that's not rotten. I say we take what we can salvage and move on."

"We could make for the Hidden Valley," suggested Gandalf immediately.

Thorin turned to him so fast, he could feel the pull of the muscle in his neck coming from a mile away. "I told you already," he grunted, "I will not go near that place."

"Why not?" the wizard objected. "The elves could help us. We could get food, rest, advice," he insisted and the Ranger nodded in agreement.

"I do not need their advice."

"We have a map that we cannot read. Lord Elrond could help us."

"Help? A dragon attacks Erebor. What help came from the elves? Orcs plunder Moria, desecrate our sacred halls. The elves looked on and did nothing," the dwarf said bitterly. "And you ask me to seek out the people who betrayed my grandfather, my father—"

Arya let a surreptitious sigh. She wanted to ask Gandalf if he really believed he could make Thorin leave the prejudice and hatred behind. He wanted to, that much was clear. She thought about asking why he even bothered at all. It seemed a waste of effort.

"You are neither of them," Gandalf chided. "I did not give you that map and key for you to hold on to the past."

"I did not know that they were yours to keep," Thorin growled.

Scowling, Arya turned to Gandalf. "'Tis a lost cause," she whispered with a resigned shake of her head and proceeded to saunter away towards her horse.

The dwarves were unsaddling their ponies when the wizard stormed away, stomping quite furiously—in contrast to his usual, annoyingly calm self—among them.

"Is everything alright?" asked Bilbo. "Gandalf, where are you going?"

"To seek the company of the only one around here who's got any sense besides the Ranger."

"And who's that?"

"Myself, Mr. Baggins!" Gandalf burst. "I've had enough of dwarves for one day."
Thorin watched the entire scene frowning to himself, but elected to act like the wizard hadn't just stormed off to stars know where. "Come on, Bombur, we're hungry. Fili, Kili, look after the ponies," he ordered. "Make sure you stay with them."

"Is he coming back?" wondered Bilbo, feeling quite uneasy at the prospect of the wizard leaving. Balin, who stood beside him, shrugged his shoulders in complete unawareness.

"He will," Arya reassured—at least she hoped he would—and her look turned grim at the thought of Thorin's tenacity. Damn your pride. It'll be the fastest way to losing all your allies, she thought with a frustrated sigh while preparing to lead Urúvion to the trees. On cue, the horse nuzzled her hand. She laughed quietly. "Nú, mellon nin, you agree with me because I'm right, or because you want me to pet you?"

Urúvion whinnied and she chuckled again, complying with his wish and petting him.

Partly hidden behind his pony, Kili found himself peeking at her and felt his insides swarm with warmth when he saw the affectionate way in which she smoothly stroked her horse's mane and whispered to him in elvish. He couldn't help but marvel at how the words fell from her lips. It was somewhat fascinating, so to speak.

Despite her veneer of aloofness, deep down she seemed to be kind-hearted and amiable. Whenever she wanted. And with everyone else. With him, it seemed like her quick wit was in permanent ignition, ready to spring up at a moment's notice. Although this wasn't always the case, considering the way she rushed to his side after he almost drowned, or the fact that she was actually worried he'd freeze.

A faint smile tugged at his lips as his mind lingered on these notions. When he realised that, his brain sent out distress signals. And there was not enough scrubbing his hand over his mouth to match his mounting frustration.

Chapter End Notes

The lyrics featured at some point in this chapter are from a song called 'The Grace of the Valar' (aka 'Breath of Life') that was used more than once in the LotR films and sung by a different artist each time. The melody I had in mind for this chapter is the choir intro to Arwen's Song in the Houses of Healing.

Also, if it helps you visualise the scene better, the old tune Kili falls asleep to is the lullaby Mr. Tumnus plays to Lucy in Narnia.

Andelu i ven = the Road is dangerous
Immen dúath caeda = Shadow lies between us
Sui tollech, gwanna omen = As you came, you shall leave from us
Lû ah alagos gwinnatha bain = Time and storm shall scatter all things
Boe naer gwannathach, annant uich ben-estel = Sorrowing you must go, and yet you are not without hope
An uich gwennen na ringyrn e-mbar han = For you are not bound to the circles of this world
Uich gwennen na 'wanath ah na dhîn = You are not bound to loss and silence
Boe naid bain gwannathar = All things must pass away
Boe cuil ban firitha = All life is doomed to fade
elleth = female elf
Nú, mellow nin = Now, my friend
Night fell and, when they were all done with their food, Bofur burdened Bilbo with the task of taking two bowls of stew to Kili and Fili who had been assigned to watch the ponies.

"I'll help you," offered the Ranger, looking totally innocent. In truth, the annoying need of an overdue good deed for Kili after the long loan of his cloak the past few days was starting to become a pain in the arse. Perhaps he'd just rubbed her the wrong way. Perhaps he deserved a second chance.

Bilbo peered at her askance. He might not be the burglar Gandalf touted around, but was surely able to carry two bowls of food without aid. "You need not trouble yourse–"

"Please, I insist," she said with a forced smile, praying that he wouldn't question her motives, for she wasn't nearly as clear-headed as to offer a convincing explanation to herself, let alone to others. Her face flushed pink with embarrassment. The more she looked him in the eye, the more it became apparent that the knowledge was there, etched on his perceptive, conniving little hobbit face. She cleared her throat awkwardly, giving him a last chance to accept before giving up the attempt and going in search of a rock to hide her humiliation under—possibly herself, too.

Fortunately Bilbo got whiff of her pure intentions, bless her soul. He handed her one of the bowls of steaming stew, which she accepted with an almost imperceptible sigh of relief, and they ventured in the darkness of the nearby forest.

Into the distance they spotted the stiffened figures of the brothers side by side, their backs turned to them.

"What's the matter?" Bilbo asked at the same time the Ranger's hand was on the dwarf's shoulder, startling him.

Kili mistook it for Bilbo's. "We're supposed to be looking after the poni–" the sentence died down in his throat when he glanced over his shoulder, finding Arya instead. Call him crazy, but the ghost of a kind look seemed to flit across her face. With a little effort she could almost pass for non-threatening.

"We appear to have encountered a slight problem," added Fili, a little too worried to pay attention to the shocking spectacle of the Ranger carrying Kili's food in her hands. "There are two of them missing."

Arya's forehead crinkled in confusion. "What do you mean missing? How could you possibly miss them?"

"Shouldn't we tell Thorin?" Bilbo noted, and there was an undertone of reprimand in his voice. All he expected was a peaceful night's sleep, damn it, not trouble.

"Uh... no," Fili said nervously, "best not worry him. As our official burglar we thought... Well, we thought you might want to look into it."

Arya's ears caught something in a distance. "Hush!" she commanded under her breath. "I can hear something."
Four pairs of eyes snapped to every direction, until–

"Hey, there's a light," Fili whispered suddenly, pointing to a small clearing several feet away. It was well hidden within the trees, but the wind shook the thick foliage every now and then, revealing some sort of light.

The quartet shuffled quietly across the forest ground, the dirt blessedly muffling the sound of their footsteps.

"Eyes up, something's coming!"

There was a fallen tree trunk, freshly uprooted if anyone who'd lived in the Wild had to guess, and they dived right behind it when a shadow passed over them. Kili's arm pressed on Arya's shoulder, keeping her down and sheltered between himself and the trunk, fact which none of the two spared a second thought for. They were more focused on another raucous sound as they saw another big, fat shadow carry two of their ponies over a fire.

"What is it?" Bilbo croaked.

"Trolls," hissed Kili and Arya in unison.

"We have to do something!" Bilbo frantically mouthed to them.

"Yes, you should!" Kili said eagerly. "Mountain trolls are slow and stupid and you're so small, they'll never see you– It is perfectly safe, we'll be right behind you."

All Arya's goodwill to offer truce flew out of the window.

"If you run into trouble, hoot twice like a barn owl and once like a brown owl," Fili piped up, already pushing the hobbit further into the clearing.

"Are you seriously going to let him face the trolls alone?" Arya whispered with a dumbfounded look. "Mind the excess bravery," she said dramatically, "I'm swooning!"

Kili glared at her from the corner of his eye. "Tell me," he said wryly, "have you always been so genial?"

"Have you always been such cowards?" she countered.

"We are not cowards!"

"Then do something," she snapped back and made to spring out of their hiding place, closer to the clearing, until a firm grip on her arm hindered the attempt.

His eyes were wide with shock. "What do you think you're doing?"

She pulled her arm out of his grip, causing his to fall limply at his side. "I've got his back," she countered. "Now do something useful and go tell Thorin without loitering."

Begrudgingly, the two brothers marched back to the camp.

The Ranger crept up near the trolls and watched them with caution. They hadn't detected the hobbit yet when suddenly, after a small fuss, one of the trolls had him in his hand. She took the bow that hung on her back and fired an arrow to the troll's hand, making him squeal in pain, yet failing to drop the hobbit down. She shifted closer to aim again, but missed the other troll that crept from behind her.
Admittedly, not one of her brightest moments. She should have thought this through.

They were three giant trolls and she was one average sized human. The odds weren't really in her favour.

The troll kicked her on her back, causing her to stumble over some branches and, as expected, lose her balance. Her bow landed on the ground and broke with a cracking sound under his large foot. It was followed by its owner a moment later as she slumped down as well with a loud thud and an even louder groan. Quickly jerking upright, she drew her sword out and glowered at the trolls, ready to launch forward and attack.

"Let him go," she commanded.

"Who are you?" one of them asked.

"Does it matter? You'll be dead before you have a chance to enjoy my stimulating company."

The trolls shared a laugh and the two, who had their hands free, made a move to catch her. She succeeded avoiding them for a while, but when she was under one's feet, tangled between them, he managed to kick her again. Her vision blurred for a second as she smashed into a rock and a cut made appearance on her right temple. Oh, her mother would be very proud to see her if she was still alive. The daughter of an elf —creature noted as that of the most graceful race in the world— stumbling over branches and bumping into the ground like a heavy sack of flour. Immensely proud, to be sure, she thought sarcastically.

The troll lifted her from the legs in the air, his fat finger threateningly and alternately pointing at both their captives' upturned faces. "Are there any more of your fellas hiding where you shouldn't?"

"No!" both Bilbo and Arya yelled.

"They are lying," one of the others objected. "Hold their toes over the fire, make them squeal!"

Thankfully, a shuffling came behind the bushes and the brothers appeared, slicing one troll's legs and making it fall on its back.

"Drop them!" Kili shouted furiously.

"Ye what?" the troll holding Arya asked and wiggled his arm, shaking her along with it as if she weighed no more than a feather. The nausea was something to remember.

"I said drop them!" the dwarf warned in an even louder voice, twirling the sword in his hand.

Not two seconds later, the trolls were sending Arya and the hobbit flying toward the brothers, Bilbo landing directly on Kili and Arya crashing against his brother, his arm instinctively wrapping around her to prevent her from bouncing off of him and cracking her skull open.

Fili noticed the blood that was splattered across her cheek. "You're hurt," he said worriedly. "What happened?"

"It's nothing– I'm fine." She hardly saw in front of her for a moment there. Felt like a collision with a brick wall would have hurt less.

"But there's blood–"

"I said I'm fine," she dismissed, a little too harshly than what she aimed for, and off she went after the
rest suddenly rushed out of the trees.

As much as they sliced their feet or bums, the trolls barely felt any blow. In the heat of the fight one of them grabbed Bilbo, who had surprisingly managed to free the ponies in the midst of it all, and hauled him up in the air.

"Lay down yer arms," they warned, dangling him from right to left, "or we'll rip his off."

Kili went to attack again without thinking it through, much as the Ranger didn't a little less than an hour ago, so she was the first to rush forward to pull him back along with Thorin. He didn't seem to appreciate being yanked backwards. It took a murdering glare from the corner of his eyes to get the woman to release her grip on the neckline of his clothes and stop choking him, basically. Rightfully earned him something that could pass for an apologetic look, although he hardly noticed it. After an exchange of disbelieving looks with his uncle he gave up, albeit with great reluctance.

Their defeat was sealed when the rest dropped their weapons on the ground, which were quickly gathered by one of the trolls as the other two tied them up and began preparing them to be cooked. Bombur, Gloin, Oin, Balin, Bilbo, Thorin, Fili, Kili, and Arya were put into sacks and were left in a corner to wait their turn for the next skewer. The others had taken the first and were now spinning over a great fire only in their underwear, which did little to prevent the heat from burning their skin.

Being a woman made absolutely no difference. Considering they were all going to become a scrumptious meal, the gender didn't matter—although she most likely didn't have as much meat on her bones as the rest of her companions. The wound on the temple was still bleeding. Her sack was dumped between those of the two brothers and all the voices and groans were giving her a headache. At some point something about 'turn to stone' was mentioned, but her mental faculties had, unfortunately, abandoned her for the moment. Luckily for everyone, the hobbit was quick to catch that.

"The secret to cooking dwarves is... uh..." Bilbo wavered, brain working overtime to come up with a formidable excuse, "um, to... to skin them first!" It earned him a string of protests and colourful threats.

"That's a load of rubbish!" one of their captors exclaimed. "I've eaten plenty with their skins on."

"He's right! Nothing wrong with a bit of raw dwarf," another one eagerly piped up, grabbing poor Bombur and lifting him over his mouth. "Nice and crunchy—"

"Oh, no, no, no, not that one!" yelled Bilbo in a final attempt to play for time. "He... erm... He's infected!"

Three pairs of giant eyes narrowed their eyes and blinked down at him. "He what?"

"He's got warms," Bilbo said frantically, "in his... tubes! In fact they all have, they are infested with parasites— It's a terrible business. Personally, I wouldn't risk it."

It did the trick. The troll dropped Bombur down as if he had the plague. Then scuttled away from him like a damsel who had nearly shoved her new boots into cowpat. The cook landed atop the others who were stacked in the sacks, resulting in a choir of grunts of pain.

In the midst of protests about parasites and a thunderous headache, Arya managed to piece together whatever trick Bilbo was trying, but unfortunately focused more on trying to reach down the pocket in her boot where she hid her knife, whose presence, by the way, had gone unnoticed by their captors—not at all surprising, considering their mental efficiency— than helping Bilbo. Still, the
trolls weren't the ones currently trapped into sacks, so she had no right to comment on their efficiency. Anyhow, crushed as she was under the accumulated weight, which didn't make the situation any easier, her attempts to free herself only resulted in her vigorously wiggling around and bumping into Kili every other second.

"Don't move!" Kili commanded on more than one occasion and shoved her away, feeling much too miserable to reign his temper.

She didn't actually remember to have heard him at all, or even respond—not even when he called her 'big lump'—and carried on with her struggle to gain freedom. It was then that she took a glimpse of a pointed grey hat running behind the bushes and, with relief, realised that Gandalf had returned.

"Parasites— Did he say parasites?" Oin complained.

"We don't have parasites!" Kili's bellowing scream towards the hobbit deafened her poor ear that was inches away from his mouth. "You have parasites!"

Bilbo rolled his eyes in despair. Arya nudged Thorin's leg with her shoulder, who was a little preoccupied with biting the ropes in his hands to come undone, until he blessedly seemed to catch on. So he kicked Oin and she nudged Kili with her head, giving him an intense look.

"I've got parasites as big as my arm!" the company's healer tried to play along after the kick.

Kili heard Oin's words and glanced around nervously, feeling a soft nudge on his shoulder. He registered Arya's glare and his opinion of the parasitic colonies in his body immediately took a very sudden turn. "Mine are the biggest parasites, I've got huge parasites!"

"What would ye have us do then? Let 'em all go?" the troll wondered loudly and Bilbo hesitated to answer. "Ye think I don't know what you're up to? This little ferret is taking us for fools!"

"The dawn will take you all!" Gandalf's voice echoed in the small clearing like joyous bells.

The large rock he was standing on cracked under his staff, letting the sunlight to illuminate the clearing, and the trolls miraculously turned into stone. The miracle was followed by everyone's cheers about the wizard's fortunate appearance, before he settled to free them. Everyone except from Arya, who passed out.

Fili felt her head heavily slumping on his feet. "Ehm, Gandalf!" he called. "We could use a little help over here!"

The wizard strolled up to where the unconscious Ranger lay, cut the sack she was in as well as the ropes around her hands, observing the wound on her head.

"'Tis alright, the lass has just fainted," Oin's voice came out of nowhere as he approached, drawn to the afflicted like a moth to a flame. He looked quite unworried in contrast to the rest; sounded thus as well, "Let me fetch me smelling salts and she'll be up in no time."

Fili lingered there and watched almost reverently as Oin decided to clean the wound while she was still unconscious and wouldn't feel as much pain. Then he let Fili take over with the smelling salts, for he had to treat one or two others who had suffered mild burns from the fire and now sported blisters on their skin.

The blond dwarf was hovering over her like a hawk until she slowly opened her eyes and cracked a dizzy half-smile.
"You need to stay still," Fili ordered as soon as she tried to shift around, putting his hands on her shoulders to keep her in place. "Oin is afraid you might have a concussion."

Steadily snapping out of the groggy state, Arya glanced around and took in her surroundings. Then her gaze landed on the dwarf above her and she let his words soak in. "I am Arya. You are Fili, nephew of Thorin Oakenshield, and brother to Kili who, until further notice, behaves like an arse."

Oh, if she only knew what the future had in store in regard to that matter.

The prince muffled a chuckle in his throat and, fairly certain of her lucidity, extended a hand towards her and hauled her up to her feet.

Gandalf and Thorin had withdrawn a few yards away and were having a conversation about how the trolls had come so far south and her ear caught something that worried her. "Not since a darker power ruled these lands," were Gandalf's words that brought a shiver down her spine. There was a dark aura around them. She could sense it since the beginning of their journey, it was a feeling akin to someone watching them closely. She wished it was only a false alarm, but her instinct had never failed her.

Thorin correctly said that the trolls must have a cave for hiding during the day, so the company wandered around the woods to find it.

Fili shot a wary look at the woman as they followed the large tracks the trolls had left behind. She reassured him she was much better, able to walk and not dizzy, just a little numb. He didn't seem to buy it. He kept a distance to play it casual, but was far enough so he could still keep an eye on her. Surprisingly, his brother seemed to walk exceptionally closer to her than ever before. She must have given him quite a scare if even Kili got worried for her. He was famously reserved.

The gesture did not go amiss. Arya scowled, the memory of him sending Bilbo alone to the trolls still fresh. There was no chance in hell he'd go out of his way to concern himself with something as trivial as her well-being, so perhaps his sole intention was to mock her if she accidentally stumbled—yes, even Rangers stumbled every so often, nobody's perfect. Or, worse, he might be in one of his moods and was expecting her to stumble and fall on him, so he could have something to hold against her in the future. If the first, shame on him. If the second, he was in for a bloody long wait. She wouldn't for the life of her give him the satisfaction.

They knew they got closer to the trolls' cave by the vile smell that assaulted their noses.

"Blimey!"

"What is that stench?" Nori questioned, squeezing his nose shut.

Arya gave an eye-roll. "It's a troll-hoard," she said with a tired sigh. "What were you expecting? Raindrops on roses and steaming, crisp apple strudels?"

Gandalf snorted with amusement and along with Thorin entered the cave cautiously, leaving the others outside to rest for a while. Perched upon a small rock, Arya rested her head against the tree behind, with Fili at her side and her eyelids closed. Kili was talking with Balin and was discreetly monitoring them from afar.

"Are you sure you're alright?" Fili asked for the fifth time.

"If you ask me one more time," she grunted with eyes still shut, "I will kick you in the shin."

"Then I shall leave you to rest," the blond dwarf smiled innocently and trudged closer to the cave he
was so curious to see.

Kili saw that she had been left alone and, much to his dismay, could not overcome the pull towards her. His feet carried him there of their own accord. "I saw your bow—" he muttered awkwardly. "The... broken pieces on the ground, more so."

Arya looked at him in what he thought to be mild terror.

He suddenly felt antsy. Excessively so. This was a bloody disaster already. He hadn't prepared anything to say, he wasn't even sure why he even felt the need to speak in the first place. The funny thing is he wasn't even trying to bollix this on purpose; it happened naturally. One moment he was considering scuttling off and in the next one regretted it. Nothing made sense anymore.

She wasn't quick enough to conceal her genuine surprise at his coming to offer something remotely akin to sympathy for her loss. She gave a little shrug, "I'll make do with what I've got left; a sword, two daggers and, last but not least, your dearest brother who's offered his services as my guardian."

Although said in good humour, the brunet seemed to misunderstand her intentions if his scowl was any indication.

"Here, take my arrows," she offered. "They're of no use to me now and they should not be wasted."

Now it was his turn to be astonished by the gesture. He tentatively took the arrows out of her quiver and put them in his, mumbling an almost incomprehensible "Thank you." They sat there in uncomfortable silence for awhile, until he resolved to leave and find his brother before the already existing awkwardness ballooned to momentous proportions.

When those who had gone in the cave came out, three of them seemed to have acquired some shiny things. She didn't know the wizard to be in favour of theft, aside that those items were already stolen, but he seemed positively pleased with the fine piece of weaponry he had just acquired. Bilbo, on the other hand, seemed quite lost with the sword that was given to him.

Listing the fact that she had managed to stand up from the rock without aid as a small feat, the Ranger approached him with an eyebrow quirked. "Have you any idea how to handle a sword?"

"Do I look like I have?" the hobbit commented dryly.

Arya laughed breathlessly. "Splendid!" she then exclaimed with a wide smile, and Bilbo looked at her with curiosity. "You will be my apprentice."

"What—? No, there's no need—" Her raised hand stopped his uncomfortable babbling.

"You own a sword and ought to learn how to use it," she explained. "The roads ahead are fraught with danger, not laid with roses. You should not be defenseless."

"That is very kind of you," he smiled and subsequently gave a small bow. He thought her to be a weird woman. Weird in that she seemed much more content regarding weapons and training than any other female he had ever been acquainted with. And it filled him with dread when he realised that his upcoming apprenticeship would be opposite her. A woman, aye, but a Ranger nonetheless.

They rode for a few hours before Thorin finally ordered to camp, even though the sun was still high above the horizon. The Ranger thought this a good chance to take Bilbo for practice and some of the dwarves followed them to the small terrace to train as well, while Bombur and Bofur would prepare dinner.
Her arms felt heavy and sore, but she would neither admit it nor stop. A groan left her mouth when the tip of the blade pointed directly at her heart. Arathorn smiled as his niece pushed the tip of his nephew’s dagger from her torso. "You are both becoming more like your father day by day."

Aranethon grinned in response, proud for his uncle’s praise and seeing his sister frown upon her defeat.

"I would not grouch like father does, if my own daughter wished to become a Ranger," the young girl grumbled lowly.

"Oh, you’d better not let him hear that!" the young man warned with a delighted chuckle and the girl punched his shoulder. "Hey! That hurt!" he protested, rubbing the spot she had hit. "You know, for someone so small you have remarkable strength, nethig." She was but six inches shorter than him, by no means small for a woman her age, yet riling her was one of his favourite pastimes.

Arya’s look went fierce and she darted forward, lunging at him. He grinned widely, almost surprised it took her that long to attack. He knew his sister well enough to be perfectly aware that she didn’t put up with insults of any kind nicely. Every time he pestered her so much, they ended up sparring. Both too stubborn to admit tiredness, it sometimes led them to fight for hours even. As for the results, it was a tie. He won half the times, and Arya won the rest of them. It was her turn now, seeing as he resignedly dropped his sword on the ground with hands raised in defeat.

"If you hold your ears dear, you might want to stop for now," Arathorn advised.

His nephew nodded and strolled up to the fire to join the others. His niece, on the other hand, seemed quite reluctant to follow.

"Will you practice with me, my lord?" she asked with an innocent smile.

"The Chieftain smiled back and in a blink of an eye, his sword was swinging towards her. He had to admit it, her moves were promisingly nimble for a girl of four and ten winters, albeit weak compared to his—naturally. He wasn’t even using half of his strength, yet he wasn’t even remotely worried about hers. She would acquire it as time went by. It was her destiny to join them along with her brothers, he could see it in her eyes, despite whatever his brother brought forth as an argument. Not yet, of course, but in three or four years she would be ready.

Their duel continued for a while longer, until he deemed it wise to put an end to the training session. "Enough for now. You’d better get some rest before my dear brother starts growling at me for getting you exhausted."

She looked rather disappointed. "I am not exhausted at all," she objected. "Can I stay for a while longer, please? I will be there before father arrives, I promise."

There was a long moment of contemplation on his part, before he let a resigned sigh. "Be iest lîn. But for a few minutes only."

The reply almost made her squeal in excitement. She smiled briefly before she began lunging at thin air, imagining there was an opponent in front of her.

Arathorn withdrew from her training area and took a seat around the fire, next to his nephew, and watched from afar as she was trying to perform a strange move with the dagger behind her back.

The young man sat there in vigilance, expecting his father to return from the patrol, ready to notify Arya with their secret code of their father’s arrival so that she’d quickly jog over next to him. If he were honest, sometimes he couldn’t fathom her desire to join the camp. Most of the time, however,
his brotherly love prevailed and reckoned it safer to have her constantly around him than in a place where someone could hurt her. Not that anyone would get away with it without facing the consequences, regardless of whether justice would be served by him or Arya herself, but he would rather be close to her just in case.

His uncle's voice suddenly disrupted his trail of thoughts, "I will be glad to have you both join us in a few years. Some people might be able to sleep more peacefully at night."

"I would exclude father from this," Aranethon replied with a roguish smile, his gaze still lingering on his sister's fight with her invisible opponent. "I wager he'll get far less rest even than when Aradan was a babe and set the whole Valley on foot with his cries."

"Come on, we're going through the basics once more. Don't forget to move your feet," Arya warned.

The hobbit managed to fend off the first five attacks, but missed the last one. His sword slipped from his hand as the Ranger's blade touched his neck.

"Bilbo, focus. The enemy is not going to let you take a break during a battle."

"Yes, but you're not the enemy, are you?" he said somewhat heatedly. Part of him wanted it to sound casually insulting, but, judging by the smirk she gave, it appeared to be of zero effect.

The physical training, coupled with his tutor's benevolent notes every now and then had taken their toll on him. "Let's call it a day. I think I've had enough for one evening," he breathed out, wiping the sweat from his brow. She nodded and he put his sword back to its sheath.

To her surprise, Dori, Gloin, and Dwalin offered to be her opponents afterwards. She seemed pleased with herself for beating all three of them eventually. They did not. Still, no fight was without casualties. The sprained wrist, courtesy of Dwalin after toppling her, would take a day or two for the swell to reduce, yet the dwarf seemed to appreciate her waving it off.

"Would the fair lady care to train with us too?"

An ingenious twinkle immediately flashed in her eyes. "I would be honoured, my lord."

Fili was taken aback. "I thought we were past formalities as soon as we met. And now you take up calling me lord?"

"Well, you are a prince and you keep calling me lady, so it's only fair to be equally civil, my lord."

Kili's lively temper was stoked to life upon witnessing their frolicsome raillery. He craned his neck to the side and muttered a curse to the stars. "Oi," he called at them then, voice dropped a few octaves out of nowhere, and he sounded quite sombre, "are you quite finished cavorting with each other? We are trying to train here."

"Why, for once, can't you be a good sport about something? For a change," Arya muttered gruffly.

Fili scowled disapprovingly and shot him a look that was screaming "Lighten up, for heaven's sake."

To keep the arguments to a minimum, Fili motioned his opponent to start. Kili's comment was enough to put Arya in a bad mood. She didn't put her heart in it, but appreciated the competition, who proved better than she had thought him to be. Her sprained hand wasn't of any help. Some of the rest had gathered around to watch.
The younger prince's gaze was fixed on their moves, assessing, analysing, finding mistakes, weighing the odds. Considering his brother was one of the best swordsmen around, the Ranger held her ground well enough. Fili was near lethal with his twin blades but, boy, was she nimble. He attempted a feint to the left, but she saw right through it. Two or three times she switched hands between the attacks, favouring the other to wield the blade instead of the dominant one, but it did no good. They went neck and neck from start till a little before the end, when Fili got a little too confident for his own good and left his middle unguarded. Instead of a deathblow, he got away with a kick in the lower abdomen, too close to a sensitive area a little lower than any man would like to have a boot on, and promptly fell backwards.

Kili's wince and the massive sharp exhalation from the rest was their way of sympathising from afar, happy that it wasn't them who got a boot in that place.

"Far be it from me to say that her skill with a blade is unrivalled," Kili commented, "but I think it's safe to say, brother, that you got your balls handed to you on a plate."

The blond glared at him from the corner of his eye, not in the least appreciative of the pun. He had one or two things to say to that, but his voice was distorted from the strain and came out like a groan.

A minute later he had yet to stand. Kili was outright laughing by now, whereas Arya was genuinely concerned that she'd just deprived the prince of the opportunity to procreate. Oh dear. If that was anywhere close to the truth, Thorin would have her hanged upside down.

The woman offered her arm to pull the dwarf to his feet in apology. "I meant not--"

"Don't sweat it, love," Fili brushed off with a laugh. "That was the most fun I've had all week."

The term of endearment had Kili roll his eyes till they found brain. "I wonder if she is as good with the bow," he challenged, drawing the attention to himself. "We never had the chance to see her in action with hers before it broke."

The tips of her mouth curled. "You think you're better?"

"Oh, I am certain," he chuckled smugly, offering his bow. "Try to hit the middle of that tree trunk over there."

Arya complied and promptly fired the arrow, albeit with some difficulty, her hand being sore enough to cause some trouble while stretching backwards. It hit a few inches below the pointed spot.

"You're good," Kili said with a nod a little more condescending than she would've liked as he approached from behind. "You're not as good as you think you are."

She arched an eyebrow.

"You could use a few pointers, really."

Fili watched them with barely concealed surprise. If one wasn't aware of the circumstances under which the two met and the words and looks exchanged, they would probably misinterpret his brother's intentions. If anything, Kili seemed almost eager to tutor her.

"I am willing to afford some of my limited spare time to give you a proper instruction," the brunet continued with a crooked smile, completely impervious to the warning sign the arched eyebrows sent him.

Her glower was that of ice and fire combined, capable of cutting even through iron. She laughed
without mirth, "I have had the proper instruction since I was four."

"Undoubtedly."

Before she could comment on the sarcastic tone, she could hear his footsteps padding across the soft dirt. In the next blink of her eyes he was standing right behind her, hands taking her arms under his lead, adjusting them. "What idiot taught you to wield a bow like that? If you grip it any tighter your knuckles will pop. You need to relax your bow arm," he noted and rubbed it vibrantly until the muscles buckled.

The dwarf had just obliterated every sense of personal space and part of her started to panic at her lack of reaction. The physical contact only made her flinch, but he steadied her, thinking nothing of it. He failed to see it for what it was—genuine shock. "You try to be relaxed when you're about to shoot an orc down," she muttered.

"I am," he said confidently. "Your movements must be as fluid as running water. You're supposed to be an archer, not a boor who can't chop wood properly because his paunch is in the way."

"So motivating," Arya muttered wryly, all but affected by the cruel tutelage of the dwarf prince.

"Take a deep breath... relax," he whispered in her ear as his hands ran up and down, budging limbs and attempting to fix her stance like a sculptor moulding clay. Alas, it was in vain. "You're still too tense!" he cried in frustration.

She harrumphed. "Strange men breathing down on my neck usually has that effect."

It was aimed to make him feel all self-conscious and embarrassed, but he couldn't care less at the moment, focused as he was on the task. He took to rubbing her arms again, and only when they were relaxed to his liking did he command, "Now, fire. And try to have the arrow meet the middle of the target this time."

"Shut up, or my foot is going to meet the middle of your arse," she snarled. Fili, curious as he was, had come closer to hear better and promptly burst into barking laughter.

Even Kili half-smiled. Some of the girls back in Ered Luin would stutter or shift awkwardly from one leg to the other when he talked to them, just because he was a member of the royal family. The vast majority of the female population had basically put Fili on a pedestal and constantly scorned Kili for not always conforming to what the dwarf customs and traditions dictated. Naturally, they only slagged him off behind his back so as not to let their favourite know about their low opinion of his brother due to an old incident; Fili had once happened to hear their vicious words for his sibling and bluntly threatened to have Thorin exile them from the Blue Mountains. Kili had laughed it off, assuring him that malicious gossip was the least of his cares, and that's because he knew his brother would not hesitate to fulfill his threat. He'd learned to cope with the comments about his less than common dwarven mien, either by ignoring the dwarrowdams who seemed to have nothing better to do in their lives than badmouthing others, or by giving snarky replies to the dwarves who sometimes were far worse gossipers than their female counterparts, and channel his anger to training.

Now this was something new for Kili because, being known for his infamously sardonic sense of humour, not often he met someone able to keep up with him. All his life he had prided himself on his ready wit, and yet this seven-times-damned Ranger had outwitted him at every turn. The knowledge was more galling than he would've liked to admit. Deep down —though really, really deep— he delighted in her salty replies, for the simple reason that he acted the same when irritated or cornered. His pride and prejudice, however, would ensure he'd never own to that. What he could only appreciate was that she at least had the guts to say everything face-to-face, fact that made a small
bubble of respect for her to settle within his chest.

He had removed his hands, yet the ghosts of his touch floated about her arms. He did not abandon his spot, though, still standing literally less than two inches behind her. Arya was trying to oust the annoying feeling in vain. A moment before she was ready to fire the arrow, he breathed out and — purposely or not, she couldn't tell— blew a small puff of air on the side of her neck. It proved so unexpectedly distracting that her hand reflexively let go of the arrow. This time it did not hit the tree at all, but deviated toward a bunch of bushes to the left.

"I cannot wield a bow right now," Arya protested all flushed and overwhelmed with frustration. "My hand is messed up." That was a blatant lie. Her wrist had suffered a little sprain, but she had absolutely no intention of giving him the pleasure of having any semblance of effect on her.

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," he shrugged with a mockery of a smile.

It was a good thing Bombur had already put the big pot over the fire; tonight they would eat dwarf, not stew. A voice in her head screamed all manners of warnings that he was just goading her and she was heading directly for the trap, but she was far in over her head to snap out of it.

Kili's look showed a rapid transition from amusement to surprise and finally a mild case of fear, as she dropped his bow down and reached for her sword. She lunged at him, but his reflexes were quick enough to block her attack with his own sword. From there on, they both knew how this would go.

"Shouldn't we stop them?" Ori asked, a little concerned. He was one of those who had gathered to watch earlier.

"What--? No!" Fili protested. "I won't be deprived of the only form of entertainment available on this trip!" For other reasons, too. He caught the pouch with the five pieces of silver that Dwalin threw without even watching, and with a most wicked grin if ever there was one. Needless to say, having lost the bet, Dwalin did not look as enthusiastic as the young one.

"But they're going to kill each othe—"

"Nonsense," said the blond with a dismissive shake of his hand, observing each one's style as they sparred. "He is not aiming for the kill." The same couldn't be said about her. "He's even going easy on her."

And Fili was right; it was obvious from Kili's half-hearted movements that he wasn't really trying, wasn't taking this seriously.

The blond's remark unfortunately did not fall on deaf ears. If anything, it only served to infuriate her more. She feinted to move to the left but instead ducked, lunging at his leg with the flat side of the sword in a display of clemency. Kili jumped back in surprise, nearly losing his balance. Annoyed with himself mostly that she'd caught him off guard, he ventured another attack but she managed to block him. He charged again, yet retrieved his sword when hers nearly scratched his torso—and not the flat side of it.

At some point the woman grew vexed that so far the result was a tie and started to charge with greater force. They kept going at each other tooth and nail, not forgoing eye contact as if one would manage to disarm the other with the gaze, not the blade.

Just then his sword dangled so close to her neck, it nearly took her arm off.

Arya stole a glance at her arm, where a cut was now making its appearance below her shoulder, and
then moved her furious gaze to him who, judging by the surprised look on his face, had just realised that he'd almost hit the target. Anger rekindled behind her eyes as her head tilted to the side in warning. "You are dead meat."

Before he could even form any sort of apology, Kili found himself fending off blow after blow. The woman was now fighting to kill, or severely injure him at best. When her pace lowered for a mere second, though, he saw his chance and he took it, daring a step closer and charging, waiting for her block. When it came, he grabbed her right wrist —which was already sore from earlier— so hard, twisting it lightly, that it made her drop her sword away and let a hushed groan.

"Am I, now?" he sneered, pointing the blade to her chest. He was digging a big hole, he knew, but victory was bloody sweet.

And then came the downfall.

There was a hiss of pain when her foot crashed into his shin and before he knew, he was stumbling back in surprise, letting go of her hand. That second was more than enough time for her to pull her daggers out and start anew, spinning around to avoid the oncoming attack. In the next moment her blade whooshed so close under his chin, he had to lean back to spare his head. His next parry came a beat too late, but non too weakly. Then she whirled again and then ducked, blocking his own blow with a blind backhand behind her back. It shook the blade loose from his grip, but still didn't make it drop.

It earned her a few raised eyebrows from their audience. Kili harrumphed, deep down wanting to inquire about that move, but knowing that his pride would not let him anytime soon.

As the Ranger whirled again, the same dagger clashed ferociously against his sword, this time hurling it out of his hand. Then a boot kicked him on his midriff and, before he knew it, he was flat on his back with her sitting on top, her left foot pinning his right hand down and right knee pressing his other hand on the ground. And she just stayed there on top of him as though it was her natural habitat, chilling like a villain. Kili groaned, self-consciously, awkward and uncomfortable with his predicament.

Keeping the blades around his neck, she leaned closer. When she smiled, it was teeth and venom shrouded with soft eyes and wildly disheveled hair that hung like a protective drape around their heads, blocking the others' view.

"Well, well..." she drawled in a half-mocking manner, "look how the mighty have fallen."

It sent his senses into overdrive. The woman was ready to kill him and the single thought occurring to him in that moment was that, tragically, this must have been the first time his face ended up within an inch of a woman's in what felt like ages. Since before the whispers and comments behind his back began, when he was still too young and everyone expected him to grow into the stout, majestically bearded dwarf prince he was supposed to be, and the occasional dwarrowdam —those who fancied rubbing elbows with a prince and settled for the less good-looking one, seeing as the older didn't give a rat's ass about them— gave him the sweet eye. Well, tough luck. Always happy to prove people wrong, he was tall for a dwarf, couldn't grow his beard easily and, even if he could, it'd just be in the bloody way while trying to shoot an arrow. All that culminated in him becoming the greatest cynic in the family. The next time he'd find himself up and close with a woman, it'd take someone special to break him. Or he would just die alone.

Frankly, he'd rather die right now than have that woman sitting on top of him with her face an inch from his. I'm losing my bloody mind, he thought frantically and banished the unpleasant memories to the back of his head where they belonged.
"Get off of me," he grumbled, shoving her none too gently. The small bubble of respect that had formed earlier sadly popped into thin air.

She was happy to indulge him. Without further ado and with a spring in her step, she was off to the stream near the camp to clean her cut; her injured hand as well, for the cold water would only help in reducing the swelling. He stood up after her, embarrassed and furious at his degrading defeat, with a conviction that he must be losing his mind. Fili watched as he dusted the dirt from his clothes, gathered his weapons and stormed off to pout alone.

The young one dropped the bow, the quiver, and the sword on the ground and slumped down on his bedroll, catching a blond blur from the corner of his eye. "Not a word," he warned and Fili's mouth automatically shut.

They remained silent for a while, until Fili couldn't hold it. "Come on, you know she was not going to kill y–"

"Are you blind, or just deliberately electing to ignore what happened?" Kili seethed, clenching and unclenching his fists. "I hate that woman," he quickly added with a growl. "I honestly and unconditionally hate her."

The blond shook his head dramatically, rolling his eyes in mocking despair. "I would tell you who's being the blind one between the two of us," he muttered, "but I wish to keep my beard attached to my face."

Chapter End Notes

Nethig = Little sister
Be iest lîn = As you wish
"...unconditionally hate her," Kili growled.

Arya heard that last part of the two brothers' exchange on her way back to the camp and felt her gut clench at the sound of his words, caught somewhere between wanting to laugh at him or just near him. However, she'd be lying if she didn't admit that her mood turned a bit sour. She could understand his ego was wounded —hers would be, too, were she in his place— but she found his reaction a little... overdramatic, so to speak. But who was she to judge another soul for being dramatic?

"What do you even care for?" said the little voice in her head. "You already dug yourself a hole, there's no room for compunction now, so grin and bear it." The onslaught of slightly rueful thoughts made her cringe, and her attempts to shrug them off were rather ardent.

Bofur handed her a bowl of food after she sat silently near the fire, her face a mask of concentration. So hard she tried not to think about it that, in the end, it became the sole notion occupying her mind. Her attempt to find a mitigating factor that would justify, even partly, her actions, proved mercilessly futile.

Balin's examining eyes roamed about her face, seeing her so lost in thought. "Are you alright, lass?"

Her ears had shut down every sound from the people around her. Her eyes were so fixed on the shapes the fire created, someone could think it was her gaze keeping the fire burn, not the wood. The light of the flames licked her face and her features seemed drawn, as if she was either deep in thought or agonising over something.

The hobbit scrunched up his nose in confusion, rather curious about whatever had absorbed her so. "Miss Arya?"

Voices brought her back to reality as she slowly turned her attention to the few pairs of inquiring eyes. "Mmm?"

"Balin asked if you were alright."

"Yes. Yes, I'm fine, thank you," she quickly waved off and returned to her food with a great lack of appetite, until she resignedly gave up her bowl to Bofur and walked away.

"Is something the matter with her?" enquired Balin.

"Aye, why is she so distant? She seemed fine earlier."

"I have no idea," Fili shrugged his shoulders, mentally wondering the same as Balin and Dori. The woman wasn't a closed book, she was a sealed book.

"Perhaps she'd grown used to being alone and needs her own time," Ori ventured a guess.
"Or she's bored and will luckily bugger off," a certain someone grunted, receiving fairly surprised looks from everyone.

"Kili," his brother hissed and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Enough," even Thorin sent his younger nephew a glare and it was the cue for the conversation to come to an end. "Dwalin, take the first watch," he ordered and the stout dwarf nodded. "Kili, you have the next. Fili, you're after, and Ori shall have the last one."

After the watches were assigned the blond dwarf walked away from the fire, towards the rock where the Ranger was, and sat next to her. She still seemed rather pensive. They remained silent as he waited for her to say something, but she didn't, so he took the initiative.

"Troubles?"

She looked at him from the corner of her eye, cocking an eyebrow. "Ori's explanation was not enough for you?"

It occurred to him that their recent conversation did not go unnoticed and he reflexively smiled. "Not even remotely."

"Sorry to disappoint, but it is true."

"My tremendous intuitive sense of the female creature informs me that you are lying."

Arya let a small chuckle, but said nothing. Fili did not insist further, aware that his presence there alone was enough to unsettle her unperturbed stance.

"I think I may have been a little out of line," a ruminative voice said a while later, dispersing the silence.

Fili tilted his head in question.

"'Hate' is a strong word."

A little distressed at the prospect of her having heard what Kili said earlier, the prince placed a hand on her shoulder in a gesture of comfort. "He lost his temper and said that." At that moment he made a mental note to cuff Kili round the ear later. As if a cuff could shake the bricks inside his brother's fat head. Alas, life wasn't that merciful.

"I attacked first; evidently my temper is worse than his. He belittled my skills again and even managed to cut me," she pointed at the scar on her arm, "but that's no reason for me to make such a statement. Quite the contrary, I believe his skill with the sword is commendable. I simply... Hatred is no stranger to me—I hate certain creatures in this world, but for a serious cause. I am not particularly inclined to beget that feeling to people just because they were defeated by me in sword fighting and their pride can't take a hit." There was a pause then as she rubbed her nose pensively. "We'd be better off keeping a distance from each other."

Fili took a deep breath, letting her words soak in. "I know my brother, as I know that he doesn't hate you. He just doesn't like to lose."

"And I sympathise entirely," she said with a light shrug. "Due to certain events," she said and he could sense what those 'certain events' referred to, "I seem to have trouble taking kindly to defeat of any kind. It's not something that comes from arrogance; it's more likely fear—" Her voice died down as she frowned, angry at herself for revealing a little more than she intended to, and promptly shifted.
uncomfortably.

To say that he was surprised would be a gross understatement. He never thought she would disclose something like that, not to him in particular, but to anyone in general; especially something she feared of. From the little he knew her, it had become painfully obvious that she wasn't the most extrovert person when it came to emotions. He reckoned both she and his brother were too proud for their own good, although Kili would more easily forgive her pride had she not wounded his.

"Arya, he didn't mean it."

And in the fraction of a second, all the softness in her expression and voice vanished and were replaced by aloofness. "It matters not. It'll be wiser to simply ignore each other for the sake of our nerves; and your ears."

"Oh, please," Fili snorted. "Neither of you cares a whit about our ears so long as the other is near and available to bicker. I wager you two won't last to ignore each other for more than a day."

"Can't speak for him, but I shall definitely try. Now, would you please be so kind as to leave me alone? I'd like to wallow in self-loathing for a while." The dwarf chuckled, but couldn't quite tell if she wasn't being serious. He simply nodded and was already on his way when she spoke again, "Tell everyone I'll keep watch tonight."

He looked over his shoulder, blinking a couple of times in confusion. "Wh– Wait, the whole night?"

"Yes, the whole night." She saw he was about to object. "Please refrain from asking why, and no, you don't have to keep me company. You need to rest," she said and with finality turned her head.

Fili thoughtfully trudged back to the fire and informed the others about the change of plans in the watches. Some had a word or two to say, or rather grumble, but in the end they fell asleep within minutes.

Only Kili had stayed awake a little longer, his eyes fixated on the cloaked figure that remained sleepless in the distance. He wondered how taxing it'd be for her the following day. Her eyes were fixed on the night sky; every so often she'd scan the plain fields that surrounded them, then the forest trees, before her gaze would turn to the sky again. He was expecting her to seem bored, really, but the blank look was far more telling. He bet his left hand that she was wistful... sad even. Call it morbid curiosity, but he was itching to ask why in the world she was resolute to forgo sleep that night. The sea of raging hormones hadn't quite ebbed since they sparred earlier, however, so it'd be a few days until his wounded pride would let him address her again.

It was odd how her presence stoked to life such strange thoughts and feelings which he had never considered thinking or feeling. He shook his head in reprimand for allowing these notions to take up residence in there, and promptly turned his back to her, slowly drifting off.

That night, as so many others before it and plenty more to come, sleep made a point of avoiding the Ranger like the plague. The decision to let everyone rest was, from experience, a one-way road. After an hour or so sitting in one attitude, she found herself strolling about the camp to stretch her limbs, taking occasional glimpses of the area around them or of each sleeping person, until her pace ceased in front of Kili's form. Absentmindedly, she stared at the sleeping mound a few minutes more than it was socially acceptable for sane adults. Upon realising the extent of that oddity she skittered farther away than what simple embarrassment might have warranted, afeared of being caught. Damn the man. Damn his royal hide.

She sat with her back against a tree as the onslaught of thoughts returned. One, in specific, was
hovering at the edge of her conscious both in good times and bad.

Her cousin's whereabouts eluded her for the moment. Rumours had reached her kinsmen about strange creatures' ventures and instances of banditry near the Hills of Evendim. Last she saw him was when he had ordered more patrols around the Hills and the Lake, and that was more than two months ago.

Morning arrived and, one by one, the dwarves were roused by the Ranger. They made a small fuss during their preparations. Only she was ready and silently sat on a small rock, waiting for them. Her eyes were closed, as if trying to concentrate to hear something or rather tune out the small commotion around her. She did not expect to hear something else. Until she did; she heard the shuffling. They were expecting a visitor any moment now. There was a flurry sound between the trees, and before she found time to warn everyone the intruder made appearance, in the form of a crazed old man, dressed in brown cloak and hat, who burst through the trees and bushes riding a sled.

"Thieves! Fire! Murder!" he yelled and wiggled his staff above his head.

"Radagast the Brown!" Gandalf said with a relieved sigh. "What on earth are you doing here?"

"I was looking for you, Gandalf. Something's terribly wrong," Radagast panted quickly, earning an inquiring look from the other wizard. "Just give me a minute... Oh, I had a thought and now I've lost it!" He clearly was quite flustered. "It was right there on the tip of my tongue– Oh," he suddenly exclaimed and a brief sparkle glimmered behind his eyes, "it's not a thought at all! It's a silly old stick insect."

Just then a small insect sprang out of his mouth.

"That's it," Arya literally heaved. "Vomit's on its way up."

Fili unsuccessfully tried to stifle a chortle. At the sound of the voice, the Brown Wizard averted his eyes from Gandalf and noticed the face of the Ranger amongst others, scrutinising her with his gaze.

Her eyes twinkled with something she could not exactly place and she tried to smile at the weird fellow. It wasn't very successful. He looked fairly quirky, certainly not someone who had spent the past decades of his life surrounded by people. After a few long moments of extremely awkward eye contact, she watched the two wizards walk away to discuss something that seemed rather serious.

All the while she stood watch, carefully trying to discern shadows through the trees and hearkening to the ambient noises of the woods. Nothing seemed to be amiss, until her ear caught a strange fluttering sound in the distance, as though leaves and twigs were being trampled. She reflexively flinched and tightened the grip on her sword, quietly clicking her tongue to warn the others.

A howl.

Bilbo's head snapped up. "Was that a wolf? Are ther– Are there wolves out there?"

"Wolves?" Bofur muttered, bringing his axe close to his chest. "No, that is not a wolf..."

The howling sounded again, closer this time, and before anyone had time to react, speak, or even panic, a warg jumped above their heads and landed at the centre of the clearing. Thorin recovered first, darting forward and ramming his axe into the warg's neck, but another one appeared, this time behind him and the Ranger. Mild fear gripped Kili when the warg's claws got so close to the woman's face that they threatened to rip a good part of it off. And they would had he not been quick enough to shoot it down, so cool-headedly that even himself was surprised.
Arya, for her part, seemed rather unshaken by everything that was going on. The warg's nails had indeed managed to scratch her temple and open her wound anew, but nothing more alarming than that—she'd twisted her neck soon enough to avoid an even stronger blow, and that actually had hurt more. Still, one warg was not nearly enough to get her killed. Therefore, as apathetic she was when she first saw it, also was when she gave the final blow by slashing its neck.

Her first instinct was that these had been following them so far, but that wasn't entirely correct. A shadow and a threat had been growing in her mind, powerful and dark. She couldn't shed the notion that something greater was on the works, dangerous and unseen, and that was worse.

"Warg scouts," Thorin barked. "Which means an orc pack is not far behind."

"Orc pack?" Bilbo panted frantically.

The wizard looked around nervously. "Who did you tell about your quest, beyond your kin?"

"No one," Thorin insisted. "What in Durin's name is going on?"

"They've picked up our trail," Gandalf said pointedly. Thorin took the hint immediately. The same person who promised payment for his head was, in all likelihood, behind this attack too.

"We have to get out of here!"

Bifur and Ori sprouted up behind the trees, panicked to the bone. "We can't! We have no ponies," the latter squeaked, "they bolted!"

Arya prayed for Urúvion's safety. The Valley was near and surely, whatever Gandalf's grander scheme was, it involved leading them there eventually. But until then... well, here she simply cursed her everlasting rotten luck. They were doomed. There was only open space in front of them. No caves to hide.

"I'll draw them off," Radagast offered.

"These are Gundabad wargs," Gandalf warned impatiently. "They will outrun you!"

"These are Rhosgobel rabbits," said the Brown wizard with a wry smile. "I'd like to see them try."

The dwarves ran uncommonly fast, the Ranger noticed. They were moving as a pack, and only when the wargs where in a safe distance.

"Stay together!" Gandalf yelled.

"Move!" Thorin's command followed suit.

She was running behind the brothers, who often turned their heads to check on her. The reopening of the wound numbed her head and reflexes, resulting in her moving slower than normal. As soon as Fili took a glimpse of her half-closed eyes, he shook her arm to make her snap out of it.

It took great effort to remain hidden, as well as good timing which they did not have galore. Unfortunately, whatever luck they had didn't stay on their side long enough. In an abrupt turn Radagast led the wargs closer, and one of them must have caught their scent. Immediately they hurried to hide any which way, ending up stacked over each other under a large, flattened rock as the beast jumped on it and sniffed in the air heavily.

Arya flexed her fingers around the hilt of the sword, trying to gauge the time they had before getting
discovered in the worst sort of ways and come up with a plan to get away.

The moment Kili became aware of her newly improvised plan to use something or, even worse, herself as a diversion, he lost all sense of reason. With no sensible explanation in his mind as to why he did it, he retreated further into the rock, forcing her to step backwards so as not to collide with him. After Thorin's nod to take control of the situation, the prince darted out of their temporary hideaway and fired one arrow after the other, composed as he could ever be. Hurt, though by no means dead, the large creature promptly crashed in front of them along with its rider, but not before throwing a blasted tantrum.

"Bloody hell, someone cut the damn throat already!" a voice hissed and Dwalin and Bifur's axes were soon embedded into the warg and the rider's heads.

It was, of course, nowhere near effective as the sounds were already loud enough to draw the attention of the orc pack that suddenly changed their route.

"Run!" Gandalf shouted. "This way, quickly!"

"Move, move, move!" yelled Kili, clasping Arya's hand in frenzy and pulling her behind him as they fled, much to her genuine shock and immense displeasure.

She took a fleeting glance at the point where their limbs joined, protesting, "What are you doing?"

"Hurry up!"

"Let go of me!"

"Come on, we've got to take cover!"

"I know how to run without you holding my hand!" she grunted wildly.

On cue, Kili felt it slip away from his own. He anxiously turned around and saw her urge Ori and Bilbo to run faster. A new round of more intense running began as the howling of the wargs drew closer and closer. And there was nothing but blasted bare land with a few short trees, bushes and rocks; nothing suitable for hiding.

Out of the blue, Gandalf disappeared behind a rock, while the others were huddling closer together. Fili and Kili only were in a distance from the rest, as was the Ranger.

"There's more coming!" Kili shouted from his spot in panic.

"Kili, shoot them!"

"We're surrounded!" Fili yelled, next to his brother who was frantically shooting arrows one after the other.

"Where's Gandalf?"

"He's abandoned us," Dwalin barked.

"Hold your ground," Thorin ordered, as the dwarves gathered closer around the rock.

The Ranger swiveled to look at them as if slapped. There was no chance in hell Gandalf would have just left them there—surely, he was trying to find a way to help them. At the sight of a warg riding dangerously close, coming right at her, all thoughts of offense on the wizard's behalf were eradicated and everything turned into pure muscle memory. She grabbed one of the knives that were sheathed
on the belt around her hips and threw it right through the orc's head. Her hand was in the process of fumbling with the next one to throw it at the warg, but the beast suddenly fell dead by an arrow. Caught by surprise, her eyes sought her mystery rescuer that should be commended for his aim, only to find Kili setting eyes on his next target. And if his glower was anything to go by, she was certain he'd considered her as his next target, even for just a second.

Kili watched his companions gather around the rock, all the while counting them in his head but not finding the face of the woman amongst them. *Where has she bloody gone now,* he thought indignantly. As if his eyes were gravitating towards her, in the next turn of his head there she was, a few yards away, playing darts with a moving target. He could vaguely feel his entire left side go numb when the warg, whose rider she'd just killed, headed directly for her, mouth open and awaiting to devour her. His reaction came in a blink of an eye. The warg promptly fell dead and squirming, with an arrow wedged deep into its skull. The Ranger, for her part, seemed genuinely surprised when she turned to look at him, as though half-expecting another instead of him. As if anyone else in the company used bow and arrow... *So much for common sense,* he thought with a long-suffering sigh, unable to help the glower he sent her way.

To everyone's surprise, Gandalf's head poked through the rock at that very moment. "This way you fools," he yelled with indignation. "Come on, move!"

One after the other rolled into the cave beneath the rock, not really knowing what was expecting them down there but not contemplating it much either. Thorin remained at the entrance, waiting for the others to get in first, fact that had the orcs wonder how the count of their potential meals dropped so suddenly.

Arya had by now retrieved the knife from the orc's head, skittering away from the plain fields and approaching the entrance. At one point she caught Thorin's thundering voice urging Kili to run faster.

Twisting her head to the side, there he was, making his way to the rock with strides longer than what was healthy for his leg muscles, and a warg on his tail. Her pace and direction promptly took a different turn from its set course. It was a startling realisation, so to speak. Because the moment she started making choices based on his stupid decisions to fall behind for heroics, she'd given him a hell of a lot more power over her life than she was quite comfortable ceding to a perfect stranger. She chose to attribute it to a feeling akin to remorse because of the other day.

So hard a grip she had on the knife, her knuckles were ready to pop out of the skin. She leaped in the air and, with a moderately successful flip, landed bum first on the warg's back, inches away from the orc rider's crotch—*that was close.* Needless to say, he wasn't as prepared for the impact. She rammed the blade into his thigh and kicked him off the rider's sear halfway through growling. At her, his luck, the skies, nobody would ever know.

Kili kept running as if the devil himself was upon him, dragging a ton of sticks and twigs that kept tangling in his legs as he whooshed through the shrubs. He didn't pay much attention to what was happening a little farther away behind him. He thought the woman had taken cover long before him. Until he noted his uncle's strayed gaze, risking a quick glance over his shoulder—*Chaos.* There was no orc, just Arya, sprawled on her back, blindly trying to stab the warg on his tail with a knife and failing spectacularly.

That brief glance was enough for Thorin to get whiff of what Kili considered doing. In the same moment he run, seized the young one by the arm and all but shoved him under the rock. The Ranger had gained his nephew time and he couldn't be more grateful, but if she wanted to die doing it, it was her choice. In the midst of bouncing on its back with only the grip of one hand at the fur, she
managed a deep slice at the neck, bringing the warg to an abrupt halt in the process of which she was thrown off of it, Thorin thought it ended there.

She mistakenly thought the same. Yet the victory was bound to be short-lived. As she went to stand, the beast, in the throes of death, wriggled forward and clutched her in his mouth, until the sensation of teeth tearing into flesh became unbearable.

The moment Thorin stepped foot on the ground, fifteen pairs of eyes fell on him, looking expectantly. Fili was ready to ask of her whereabouts when a snarl and a cry of agony came only seconds apart; he flinched. Kili thought he missed a heartbeat or two considering what might have happened. Out of reflex he made to climb back up the entrance to go get her, but Thorin stopped him once again.

Stuck between the warg's teeth with only one hand free, Arya offered a silent pray and reached down to grab the knife from her boot, impaling it between the eyes with all the remaining strength she could muster. The beast let a final growl and flipped back dead, sending her flying towards the entrance, bouncing against the stony sides as she went—the only good thing to come out of all this. At least she wouldn’t have to run there.

She tumbled down the hole in a mess of bloody clothes and tangled limbs, and unavoidably collided head-on with Kili, who was unfortunate enough to be standing closer to the entrance than any. The sheer force of the collision sent him flat on his back with her splayed on top of him—because that wouldn’t get old fast. Her temple crashed against his jaw, eliciting groans and curses from either party. Her mind was fervently urging her body to crawl away from the dwarf under her, but she had gone limp. As bizarre as it sounded, she felt like a shapeless jellified puddle of flesh and blood that was ready to flow literally at every direction.

Everyone was relieved to see she didn’t bite the dust so soon. Thorin looked as concerned as a rock—as far as his sentiments regarding her went, she considered it an improvement. Gandalf, Bilbo and Fili, who had rushed to their side first, helped her off Kili and settled her to a sitting position to collect a damage report. There was a small mess of cloths and bottles as Oin tried to stop the bleeding, but any attempt failed, for the cuts were many and deep.

Meanwhile, Kili was already up to his feet, dusting the dirt from his clothes with a vengeance the likes of which he’d rarely experienced before. Positively ready to rain holy hell down upon her, he took a moment to catalogue her injuries. Apparently, there were quite a few. Then he noticed her unfocused gaze and wondered if her crashing into his jaw had earned her a concussion on top of all.

"You idiot. You barmy idiot," he growled and menacingly stomped over to where she was being coddled. "You are a moving trouble!"

"I just saved your life," Arya objected, yet there was hardly any strength left in her voice, so it came out weary and hoarse. She briefly wondered how ungrateful people were these days.

"You could have been killed!"

"That would be less trouble for you then," she sneered.

"Are you completely mental, woman?" He let a husky, crazed laugh. "Why do I even bother to ask... of course you are! I knew you were reckless and irresponsible, but not to that extent! You fu--" He obviously had more, rather colourful adjectives to add, but was interrupted by a dead orc falling in the hole, followed by the sounds of horns.

Thorin browsed the arrow that was stuck in the orc's neck. "Elves," he grumbled in disgust with a
glower at Gandalf, who purposely avoided his gaze. He then tossed the arrow aside, as though merely the touch of it scorched his skin.

"I can't see where this path leads," Dwalin's voice came from the back of the cave. "Do we follow it or not?"

"Follow it, of course!" Bofur exclaimed and they all started walking behind Dwalin.

"I think that would be wise," Gandalf's muttered cryptically. He then looked at the seated Ranger, whispering, "Dear, I hope you don't mind me leading."

Wincing and groaning in pain, she eagerly gestured him to proceed, "Be my guest."

"Daft woman," Kili hissed in a breath. He had been glaring at her for the entire time, a wild gleam in his eyes.

"Are you quite done?" Arya said hotly. "A simple 'thank you' would suffice, you know."

Kili was about to answer, but Gandalf urged them to move so he put it off for later. The wizard and Bilbo trudged forward, leaving the brothers back and Arya under their care. Surely she might not be able to walk, but not even in a million years was she going to ask for help from him.

"Put your arms around my neck," said Fili.

"I am perfectly able to walk, thank you," she said, emphasising the last two words. Kili sneered at the jab. She then made a move to stand up, only to embarrassingly fall back with a groan.

Kili's patience officially hit rock bottom. He rolled his eyes, leaned down and scooped her up before she even knew it.

"Wha–?! You bas–"

For a moment she's startled, grasping at the neck of his tunic a little too tightly for balance. Applauding the smooth move with a wink, his brother gathered the woman's scattered knives from the ground and busied himself with trying to muffle his shortles behind his forearm as they set to go.

"Put me down!"

The protests were intentionally ignored. He wasn't bothered in the slightest by her erratic wobbling to get free of his hold, up to the point where the curses right next to his ear became old. "We do not intend to remain in this hole until you decide to see reason and let someone help you."

"I did not ask for help," came the growling reply.

"True, although I wouldn't want your evil spirit to haunt me or any other poor soul in case you die on the way walking," Kili commented sarcastically, "so you'd better stop flailing about like a squab that's learning how to fly."

Arya was seething. Without thinking it through, her hand balled into a fist and punched his arm with remarkable strength, considering the injuries she'd undergone.

His eyes took a glimpse of the spot he received the blow and then of her and, as calmly as he could manage, asked, "Precisely when did you hear me asking you to punch me?"

"I always hear 'punch me' when you're speaking, but it's usually subtext," she grumbled, followed by a very eloquent string of expletives in elvish.
Under other circumstances Kili would smile, or even laugh at the quip. Though finding something she had said amusing and laughing at it would probably be too much for his pride to bear. So he'd simply settle for an unseen smile. "If you're going to call me every name under the sun, do it in a language we both understand," he said seriously. "There's no point in insulting someone if they don't understand what it means."

"Believe me, I take pleasure in it either way."

Fili had a hard time repressing laughter at the sight of them bickering like an old married couple. The occasional muffled chortle would escape his mouth only to be met with their matching glares and crawl back where it came from. Overall, though, all of his appendages remained safe and intact, which was a success.

"Let me down," Arya pleaded for what felt like the hundredth time. "We barely fit through the pass as it is."

Kili was unyielding.

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she snapped. "We've bumped into the rocks fifteen times already!"

She could feel his shrug in the few inches her body rose and fell. "You should have thought of that before you jumped on that warg," he said pointedly.

Against his ironclad will, she resigned to her fate. To her surprise, after that last comment he paid more heed to any sharp, cutting edges on either stony wall and the occasional, thousand-year old squelchy moss growing on them, holding her a little closer every time the gap narrowed down and seeing to cram them in in such a way that he'd be the one to take the worst of the impact. Arya was almost moved by the gallantry. Almost.

At the end of the path, after literally squeezing themselves through slits of rock to get through, they came to stand over a small cascade that gazed over the valley. While a jaw or two fell in awe at the magnificent view, Thorin looked ready and absolutely tempted to murder someone once he faced the landscape.

"The Valley of Imladris," Gandalf announced. "Here lies the last Homely House east of the sea. In common tongue, it is known by another name–"

"Rivendell," the hobbit finished the sentence, enchanted by the breathtaking view.

"This was your plan all along," Thorin accused hotly, feeling betrayed to say the least. "To seek refuge with our enem–"

"You have no enemies here, Thorin Oakenshield. The only ill will to be found in this valley is that which you bring yourself. Not to mention that only a few people outside the elven race have laid eyes upon this place."

"Oh," the dwarf spat out sarcastically, with little heed for niceties, "should that make us feel special?"

"Mayhap it should, yes."

The king didn't bother to shield his anger any longer. "You think the elves will give our quest their blessing? They will try to stop us!"

"Of course they will," Gandalf agreed, his look a sign for Thorin that there was no need to point out
the obvious. "But we have questions that need to be answered and, also, an injured companion who needs immediate care."

Thorin scowled at that and shot a sulky look at the figure of the Ranger, who was being carried in his younger nephew's arms.

"If we are to be successful, this will need to be handled with tact. And respect. And no small degree of charm," Gandalf remarked pointedly. "So this is why you will leave the talking to me."

The dwarf resigned to his fates. With hesitant steps he followed the wizard as the company made their way to the elven city.

Except Gandalf, only Bilbo and the Ranger seemed satisfied with what Thorin surely considered a predicament. Arya, for her part, was surprised by how pleased she was at the prospect of some respite; she was being assigned missions around the clock for the past few months. All the weariness and tension those entailed decided to come to the fore now.

Much to his dismay, Kili found himself quite taken with the natural splendour of the Hidden Valley, but was startled to the core when he became aware of the new occupant taking up residence in his shoulder—Arya's hand. He looked a little to the side and watched how her eyes glided over trees and rivers and airy buildings, a half-smile tugging at her lips, apparently oblivious that she was absentmindedly using him for support. He made great efforts not to jar her a lot when the path became uneven, because most of her wounds were still open. At one point her stiff body relaxed completely and her head slumped back on his shoulder at a weird angle. She must have fallen unconscious, although Kili avoided voicing his concerns, seeing as Thorin was already simmering with anger. Either way, he began treading even more carefully. That strange feeling overwhelmed him again, and a shiver was sent down his spine every time her forehead gently rubbed against the stubble on his jawline.

Upon their descend on the small square before the great stairs of the house of Elrond, Lindir was the first to greet them.

"I was not informed of your arrival," said the elf with mild surprise.

Gandalf offered his trademark cryptic smile. "We were not expected, really."

"My Lord Elrond is not here at the moment."

Speak of the devil, horns were heard from afar as he and his fellow soldiers returned from the hidden passage where they had gone for patrol. Another small greeting ensued between the wizard and the Elf Lord, who cordially welcomed him and the dwarves in Rivendell to eat and rest. Thorin also had a small part in the conversation. Because it wouldn't be a proper first meeting if he didn't drip some poison towards their host, after all, would it?

Elrond's examining eyes skimmed over the company until they spotted something rather interesting. A dark cloaked, female figure laying in one of the dwarves' arms, that is. He did not expect to see her so soon, for it had been only five months since her last visit. And although this hardly counted as a visit, he did definitely not expect to encounter her this way—unconscious, with clothes soaked in blood. He immediately ordered Lindir to take her to the healing house.

Lindir nodded obediently and walked closer, only to have Kili give him a threatening look and retreat a few steps.

The protective gesture did not go unnoticed; for Elrond saw many things and read many hearts. He
offered a light smile at the young dwarf, which grew concerned when he saw him tighten his hold of her. "There is no reason to fret, master dwarf," he appeased. "She has always been perfectly safe in my hands and will be returned to you as good as new."

Kili flinched at this. Always been safe in his–*Did he know her?*

The thought crossed the others' minds as well.

Even if he had been taught from a young age not to trust that race, Fili put his hand on his brother's shoulder, meaning to let the elf take her. Only after he shot another glance at the Elf Lord and was partly convinced by his placid face and smile did Kili give in.

Lindir regarded him with apprehension and, not to lie, mild distaste. He wasn't so used to seeing someone of Dwarf kind handle a person that didn't belong to their race so delicately. Dwarves were known to be sturdy creatures and, as the legend had it, made of stone. Yet this one was hesitantly passing the woman to him as though she was made of glass. The dwarf even had the nerve to give a warning glare once the delivery was completed successfully. Lindir, for his part, was not deterred in the slightest. He was acquainted with the lady for a good part of three decades now; there was no need for glowers to take the hint to be careful. He gave a very subtle eye-roll because he was above expressions of that kind, but he could feel the dwarf's gaze following him until he was out of sight.
Lindir had carried the woman to the healing houses as fast as his feet could take him, sighing dramatically. He knew the young one for years. She had the bad habit of not returning from her travels without one or two scratches; always liked to change the decoration. Now the wounds where the warg had bitten her were bleeding ceaselessly and she was quite pale from the blood loss, which contrasted rather noticeably with the purplish bruises that began to form on her skin. Elrond was standing above her, also not surprised. He glanced at his side, his hands and forearms covered in the woman's bright crimson blood, and beckoned a guard to take a message to someone.

Not much later, a man burst through the doors of the healing room with a horrified look on his face. He watched the other healers bustling about and around the bed, handing supplies and emptying buckets filled with —almost exclusively— blood and filling them with fresh boiling water. He cast a wary glance at Lord Elrond who discreetly nodded back, motioning for him to stay there, and did as asked. He could see her sallow face, yet the rest of her was hidden by the healers' figures as they worked quickly to clean the blood, both the dried and what still was gushing out from her wounds.

An assistant stood by the bed beside the healers and he would occasionally drop something into a bowl; something white that made a small thud when it hit the bottom. His eyes closed for a second and he huffed in anger as he realised that these objects were remainder of what seemed to be warg teeth. The distinct, metallic smell of blood was carried through the air in the room, and made him wonder how much she was yet willing to spill. She might not care for herself, so he took it upon himself to care enough for the two of them.

The sound of the teeth hitting the bottom of the bowl ceased and he saw a hand hold a needle and thread, ready to safely conceal her punctured skin. After a few minutes that felt like hours, Elrond stood up and walked to the corner of the room to wash his hands out of the blood. Some of the healers gathered around her and wrapped some bandages around the wounds, while the rest headed out of the room, carrying sheets and towels that had turned red from the blood in contrast to their original white state.

Lord Elrond approached the gloomy-faced figure that stood stiffly in the corner. "She'll be fine," he said comfortingly. "It will take a few days for her body to replace the blood she lost, but she'll be fine."

"You know her for the past three decades. Do you honestly think she will stay quiescent for those few days?" the man pondered quietly and Elrond made a grimace of exasperated fondness. "Is there a particular reason she had to end up like this?"

"I am not aware of her plans. What I can only tell you is that she travels along with a group of Dwarves and a Halfling," said Elrond, earning a questioning look, "and Gandalf."

The man's face and expression softened. It had been a long time since his last encounter with the wizard—the latter had requested his and Arya's aid in dealing with a small problem that dwelled in the western lands of Rohan, which had ended in a little skirmish, so to speak. "Oddly, this is an explanation far more adequate than it sounds."

"Indeed," the elf agreed. "In the meantime, you should eat while she rests. You won't be of much use to her if you tire yourself out."
The man nodded reluctantly and with heavy steps walked out of the room.

The dwarves were extremely disappointed with a lot of things in the elvish realm. First and foremost, the outrageous lack of meat in the meals. Although, despite their inherent disgruntlement, they were famished enough to devour anything offered to them, even if it was green and elvish. Second was the—according to them—truly poor selection of music at dinner, which was a total contrast to the lively jigs they were used to sing and dance. Third was the smells—that one opened a can of worms. Apart from the fact that they were urged to bathe and were given clean clothes to wear—which they refused to accept with the reasoning that they were perfectly able to wash their garments themselves—being used to earthlier, muskier smells, they looked askance at the range of soaps available. Dwalin, especially, was on the warpath upon discovering that he trailed a scent of a field of lavenders everywhere he went. And the list went on and on.

The fourth day of their sojourn had rolled in relative boredom, as had the previous three. The company had been granted access to limited activities, such as strolls down the infinitely long corridors and the overly green gardens, or even training out in the fields, which had been a rather heated experience for those who decided to try it out, since there were a few pesky elves that wished to compete with the dwarves who used weapons akin to theirs—namely Kili and his bow. The young prince was all too eager to prove himself worthy of his elven opponents, if not better. Some of the dwarves attributed his eagerness to pride and had nothing but encouraging words to offer. Fili, however, was not to be fooled. His brother's demeanor might be caused by pride to some degree, but it was also a way to defuse all his tension and worry about a certain someone, whom no one had been allowed to see so far. Every time someone of the company inquired about her condition the first two days, the elves would mumble a vague answer that she was still on the mend and should by no means be disturbed. It quickly pushed them to resign from their attempts and simply wait for her to awake.

Kili didn't like that. He didn't like not knowing. Every time he coincidentally passed by the infirmary on his way to the training field, he would find a way to pester the respective elf who was responsible for the ill, until they would kindly send him away to the fields.

Rumours had begun to spread amongst the elves in regard to one of the dwarves and the unnerving concern he showed for the injured Ranger. Thankfully for both parties, those rumours failed to reach the ears of the dwarven company's head or some of the staunchest members, for neither Kili nor the elves would like to become spectators of a quarrel of epic proportions with the one and only Thorin Oakenshield. By a stroke of luck, apart from those elves that had noted Kili's fairly odd behaviour, only half a dozen others had noted it as well—those being his brother, Bofur, Dwalin, the Elf Lord, a hobbit and a Man, who had yet to reveal himself to any of the guests. None of those dared to question the dwarf prince's frequent strolls near the healing houses or squarely address him about the matter. Hell, he didn't even dare to question himself about this irrational case of concern.

When dinner time of the fourth day came to an end, most of the dwarves retired to their temporary lodgings. For there was a brief exchange near the end of the meal between Gandalf and Thorin, until the dwarf beckoned Balin to follow them, and so did the wizard with Bilbo a moment later. They left the room without a question, while the rest settled in their bedrolls. It was not long before the first snores surfaced.

Some, however, sleep had not claimed yet. Fili, for example, was laying quietly on his bedroll, with stomach bloated after gobbling down in one single meal a larger amount of greens than that he'd had in his life so far. He was patiently waiting to digest it to fall asleep as almost everyone in the room had. His brother was also awake, but not even remotely close to falling asleep.
Kili was nervously wiggling his toes, trying to defuse a tension he didn't know where stemmed from.

On the other hand... alright, there was a small chance he knew what caused it.

He was thinking about the woman. Again. It wasn't his fault, really. His mind simply refused to let the thought of her slip away once it settled there. And this state of unawareness was grating on his already frayed nerves. His thoughts were a tumbling mess. Yes, he loathed her and was certain that the feeling was reciprocal, but still couldn't figure out why she'd taken such a trouble to save him. Was it out of duty? Or something else? Another of his musings concerned her disturbing familiarity with the elves. Her mother was one of them, he was aware, but he realised there had been no mention about where she came from. All these notions were buzzing about his head like a bunch of bubbly bees for the past four days and nights, and he'd be damned if he didn't vocalise them to someone soon.

"How did the Elf Lord know her?" he pondered aloud, shifting his head to the side and facing his brother with a lingering look.

It took Fili a small, yet rather powerful belch to manage to voice his reply. "If you have some patience until she recovers, you can ask her in person," he muttered languidly, rubbing his stomach and sensing another belch on its way out. "What you did back then was very nice of you. She seemed much more comfortable in your arms than she would have been in mine." He thought he saw the hint of a smirk on his brother's face, but was too drowsy to be sure. "You still owe her an apology and thanks, though."

"For what?" Kili snapped, sounding strangely offended.

"A thanks for saving your life by endangering hers and an apology for all the insults you tarted her up with in that hole," Fili said calmly, ignoring his brother's sudden burst.

"I owe her nothing! All I said was true. She is stupid to jump on a warg and nearly get herself killed to save me."

"It's only right and proper that you d--"

"Will you two stop squabbling over a pair of cheeky eyes so we can bloody sleep?" The angry voice of a sleepy Dwalin echoed in the room and made the two brothers put a swift end to their little chat.

Fili's eyes were slowly closing and, soon, sleep claimed him. His brother, on the other hand, could not just find rest so easily. He drifted off after an hour or so of shifting around, and all his dreams were of the stupid woman that saved him.

Bilbo found himself sighing in relief when the blasted little gathering was over. He didn't even know why he was called to be present, for it was something that did not concern him directly. The map belonged to Thorin, Balin was his advisor, Lord Elrond was the one who knew how to read it, and Gandalf just had to meddle with everything. Why he, a mere hobbit, would be dragged into this?

After a lot, lot of effort Gandalf had done the impossible; he had convinced Thorin to allow the Elf Lord to examine the map. Bilbo still wouldn't bet his life on whether the process of persuasion hadn't involved magic. It had been a rather heated discussion until the Dwarf King blessedly conceded and some light was subsequently thrown into the case—quite literally, considering that moonlight was required to read the map.

From a point and onward Bilbo had lost them. But there were many glances between the wizard and the elf that had him suspicious. They left the place with the weird crystal table where Elrond
managed to read the map, Thorin and Balin returned to the company, Gandalf disappeared from everyone's sight without an explanation—as usual—leaving Bilbo alone to his own devices.

Despite feeling a little tired and that the hour was rather late, his Tookish blood was stoked to life. It was his first time in Rivendell, the first time he was seeing elves from so close, first time he was talking to them. He was not going to waste the opportunity to explore the magical place he had only heard in tales, especially now, in the peace of the night when no one would disturb him.

In the end he put off his exploration until the following evening, for there was another thought going about his head—how was the Ranger? The Elf Lord had mentioned nothing all this time he were with them, and none of the other three seemed to have enough mind to ask him about it. Balin had proved to be one of the kindest around, so Bilbo was surprised that he did not ask anything now that Lord Elrond spoke to them in private. Even Thorin, who wasn't the most courteous person in the world, ought to have inquired after her.

Bilbo really wanted to know how she was faring, so he decided to pay her a visit and take an answer to the question himself. He wandered in the halls for quite awhile trying to steer towards the healing houses, happy that his step accompanied faint music coming from a distance. At that moment he reckoned that this house was a perfect house, whether one liked food or sleep or story-telling or singing, or just sitting and thinking best, or a pleasant mixture of them all. Merely to be there seemed to be a cure for weariness, fear, and sadness.

He came down to a small hall, peering into each room only to discover that they were all empty. Only one door was closed, the last one down the hall. He opened it carefully and stepped inside, trying to adjust his eyesight in the darkness. The only light in there was that of the moon that created strange patterns on the walls and floors where it entered from the open windows.

Out of nowhere a hand landed on his shoulder; big, heavy palm. Bilbo felt his heart leaping to his mouth. He turned, and found his vision blocked by the figure of a very tall man.

"May I help you?" a serious voice whispered in the dark.

The hobbit needed a few seconds to calm himself, when he realised that this was probably one of the healers that looked after her. "P– Please, I mean no harm," he muttered so fast, the words seemed to come out in the wrong order. "Forgive me for the late hour, I did not wish to disturb." After a few torturing seconds that stretched uncomfortably long, he felt the grip on his shoulder loosen. The breath that was stuck somewhere between throat and lungs finally went down.

The man walked back to the bed, to the only spot next to it that was illuminated by the light. "I doubt you disturb her," he said quietly, "for I doubt she can even hear you. She is sedated."

Bilbo felt the distinctive pang of worry one felt for a friend's well-being. They had arrived several days ago, it was deep into the fourth night now and she still had not awakened. "Will she recover?"

"I've known her to pull through worse," the other answered simply, as though it was sufficient information. "I take it you must be part of the company of Dwarves that's paying a visit?"

"You are a hobbit. I am very aware of that."
He watched as the tall man shifted in his seat, bringing his head into the light. "You are no elf." The words sprang out of his mouth like water in a fountain. "Pardon my word," he said quickly, "I thought Rivendell was an Elven town—never expected to encounter a Man here."

"You are no elf either," the other argued in a good-humoured manner. "And yet here you are."

Bilbo regarded him apprehensively. "I meant no offence—"

"None taken," the man reassured. "Your puzzlement is reasonable. Rivendell is an Elven town; it is also home to those who seek a little peace and quiet."

The hobbit nodded thoughtfully, then noticed one of the man's hands curled around Arya's and his other resting on the side of her forehead. "Oh..." he muttered under his breath, pursing his lips and feeling even more embarrassed. He knew her family had perished, but she had never mentioned that. Not that she had to, anyway. By all means, she didn't even know them well enough to do so.

"Oh," he repeated wide-eyed, as the gravity of the situation sank in, "I did not know that Lady Arya was— That she had a husband. It wasn't my intention to intrude, I am truly sorry—"

The heartfelt apology was cut short by the strange man's low chuckle. He was surprised that the little fellow knew her name. Without doubt, Gandalf had something to do with that, because Arya wouldn't put that information out into the world even if she was beaten to within an inch of her life. "You have apologised thrice in the course of mere minutes for actions that didn't even occur," he said with amusement. "You are right in not knowing that she has a husband, for I am no such thing." He seemed to hesitate for a second, before adding, "I am only her Chieftain."

"Her Chieftain?" the hobbit parroted. "Then you are a Ranger, as well?"

"Round your lands they know me by another name. Here, in Rivendell, they call me Estel." It was the closest to the truth he had the luxury to afford. For a moment he had the passing thought of revealing his given name, but Arya would probably wake on the spot and beat him with his own belt.

"I'm Bilbo Baggins," said the hobbit, and when he had nothing more to say, the conversation felt a little stale. "Well... I shall leave you in peace now," the he said politely. As the man moved slightly, more light fell on his face, and suddenly Bilbo was struck by the similarity of the two faces. "It was nice meeting you, Estel."

The man smiled, gave a small nod in reply and watched as the hobbit exited the room. Then he laughed to himself, reflecting on how quaint the Shire-folk were.

A few hours later, halfway through the fifth day, Arya woke and found herself lying abed. At first she thought she had slept late, after a long peculiar dream that still hovered on the edge of memory. But the ceiling looked strange; it wasn't the wooden boards that an inn's room would normally have—it was flat, and it had dark beams richly carved. And, slowly, reality began to sink in. This was the healing houses of Rivendell and the beaming light that was putting a considerable effort into blinding her was nothing more than the sun shining bright outside. She lay a little while longer looking at patches of sunlight on the wall, and listening to the sound of the waterfall, then attempted to sit up.

"I would advise against it," a serious voice spoke, startling her.

She whimpered. "It is good to see you again, my lord."

"Do I want to know?" Elrond inquired, pointing to her wounds.
She gave an innocent look, akin to those she used as a wee child to get away from awkward situations that would decidedly lead up to a scolding, and flashed a smile. "I might have met with a warg's teeth by accident, as it were."

"Of course," Elrond smiled back. "Your wounds are mending fast, but they are still mending. How does the side feel now?"

Arya palpated her ribcage and then attempted a few movements, but winced when her back stretched. "Tolerable, I suppose," she answered thoughtfully.

"Good," Elrond nodded. "You still need more rest."

"It feels like I've slept for ages. How long has it been since we got here?"

"Four and a half days, more or less."

Oh, bollocks. "The company?"

"Pillaging the kitchens without remorse."

Arya stifled a snort, then her eyes turned frantically back to him, filled with worry. "Urúvion?"

"Safe in the stables."

A relieved sigh escaped her and she nodded. "I think it'd be wiser to leave him here for now."

"Be iest lîn," Elrond nodded. "We have prepared your old room for you and I think there is someone here you would very much desire to see," he said, then called an elf to help her.

Even with the help of the elf maid that had come to her aid, she was fitted into clean clothes that successfully covered the bandages all around her body with quite the effort. Her entire body felt stiff and in fact was, and it would be a tad difficult to move around for a few hours. But there was no need to have someone coddle her all the time, so she kindly thanked the elf and dismissed her from her duty.

Strangely, she found herself to be quite hungry after so many days of inaction and decided to pay a visit to the kitchens to stuff her empty, growling stomach with some food—providing that the dwarves had left any. Spending a large amount of time in the Wild, patrolling borders and whatever else was assigned to her to keep an watchful eye on, came with certain facets of less than luxury nature, one of which was food. She was used to eating stale bread and cheese, a few fruits thrown in every now and then, and on the rare times she'd have to venture a visit to the local village market, delicious dried meat. Rivendell offered a few more choices, so she was happy to take the opportunity and fill her stomach with some vegetables and milk as well.

When her hunger was somewhat under control, her feet carried her down to the stables to reunite with her horse, having smuggled a nice treat for him from the kitchens that he immediately discovered by sniffing at the hands behind her back; a rather admirable feat, for her stink from all these days on the road might as well cover the scent of the apple in her hands.

On her way back from the stables, she met a curious hobbit that had probably succumbed to his true nature and ventured to exploration. A shudder ran through her, though, when she realised where exactly he had come to stand as the sunlight was reflected on the steel, well-polished blade.

"The shards of Narsil," she said quietly, creeping up behind him and pointing with her hand at the platter.
The hobbit, standing on tiptoe in front of the statue, lost his balance and stumbled forward. Good thing it was onto the statue and not the marbled floor. "Bloody hell!" He turned around, clutching his beating heart, and found the Ranger standing there all tall and intimidating. "Can I get a warning next time?"

"'May I have a warning, my lady'," she corrected with all the seriousness in the world, and continued, "'No, you may not.'"

For a terrifying second Bilbo stopped breathing, fearing that he'd gravely offended her, Lord Elrond, all the Elves there, and possibly Middle Earth itself with whatever wrongdoing was that he'd done. Then he saw her shoulders starting to shake with laughter and let a long-suffering sigh. He had a gut feeling that that woman's sense of humour would surely send someone to an early grave.

"Do you truly find pleasure in sneaking up on people and scaring them out of their wits?"

"Possibly," Arya replied with a cryptic smile. "I also wanted to see if my apprentice remembers our lessons."

Bilbo grimaced. "Couldn't forget even should I wish it." He gave a small smile then, "Allow me to say how glad I am that you're safe. We were very worried."

"'We' as in...?"

"The company, of course."

Arya laughed through her nose, this time with no mirth, and put aside the comment as well as the answer she had prepared for it. "Would you like some company on your walk?"

"Be my guest," he said kindly, turning his gaze back to the platter in front of him. "Shards, you say?"

"Ah yes," she mumbled, as if she had forgotten that the conversation had began from this subject. "The shards of the sword of Elendil lie before you." Seeing that he was aware of the name, she went to elaborate further, "The great king of Men, born in Númenor. High King of Arnor and Gondor and ancestor of the Dúnedain." The part that he was an ancestor of her family she refrained from pointing out.

It seemed that she was learned in old lore, as well as in the ways of the wild. Bilbo was completely content with her voice narrating a story whose roots went back thousands of years ago. It felt almost as if he were there when they turned about and moved toward the mural that loomed on the wall opposite of the statue. She spoke of how Númenor fell and its people moved to Middle Earth, settling mainly in Arnor and Gondor. She had then delved into further detail concerning the mural, talked at length about the great War of the Last Alliance that had claimed the lives of an inconceivable amount of souls, be they Elves or Men. He could practically hear the sound of swords clashing against each other and desperate battle cries echoing around, although his eyes were pinned on a bizarre object — a ring, more likely — that the terrifying form of Sauron wore on his finger, above rather heavy armour.

But something disrupted the flow of his imagination and all the battle cries went silent at once. In fact, they were now replaced by the singing voice of a woman, whose figure seemed to move closer and closer.

The elf that made appearance out of nowhere spoke in elvish and after a minute, the Ranger turned to him with a look of apology and a huge frown. "I'm afraid time passes quickly when the audience is so attentive," she smiled. "Dinner will be served soon and this kind lady insists on preparing me
properly for it."

The elf maid gracefully crossed her hands behind her back and lowered her head to hide a chuckle.

Bilbo almost laughed at the eye-roll that accompanied the Ranger's last words and bobbed his head respectfully. "Of course, my lady. Thank you for the tour." She nodded and he watched as the two women strolled down the corridor.

"After nigh on three months, don't you think you can give it up and call me by my name?" her voice echoed down the hall, her back still turned to him. *People not even remotely benign as you know it*, she thought with a frown.

A light blush coloured his face and he smiled to himself, deep down wishing she'd stay. She was the only one in their odd bunch that he felt most comfortable around, apart from some of the dwarves. Only then it occured to him that he'd failed to mention meeting her Chieftain. Funny how fast had his circle of acquaintances grown in a few weeks' time.

Two elf maidens were sitting on either side of her, assigned to help her. The Ranger's acquaintance with Limwen and Gwirithiel went just shy of three decades back. Glad to finally have some female company, she was now comfortably sitting in the tub till only her mouth and up was not sunk in the water, enjoying the very relaxing bath they had prepared for her. The tub was in fact a natural hot spring, placed in the outer layers of the mountain, and its mineral water had evident results in the healing process. She hardly restrained herself from rubbing her skin raw, and no one could blame her. After the events of the past days and compared to the two fine scented women beside her, she positively smelled like a troll with all the dirt and grime glued on her skin.

Folk said old habits die hard. Arya in the hot springs of Rivendell was the very embodiment of that saying. She poked a foot out of the water, moving it idly from side to side. The movement left a trail of luminous ripples behind. She chuckled. Even after all these years, it never failed to amuse her. Her head promptly slumped back and she let a sigh of content. Absolute *bliss*.

And then–

"Strange company those dwarves, don't you reckon?"

Arya could nearly see that bliss popping into thin air like the bubbles in her bath.

"Indeed," replied the other voice. "They denied the rooms Lord Elrond offered them and occupy a large chamber all together."

"My lady, how can you put up with them? Their snoring is so loud!" laughed Gwirithiel.

"Can't say I paid it much attention," the human shrugged. "I suppose one can get used to it."

"I could look past it if it came to a certain two."

The other elf flashed a mischievous smile. "Are you speaking of the two young ones?"

Arya looked at her with her interest suddenly piqued. "It never occurred to me that you felt an affinity for dwarves, Limwen."

The elf blushed, irking Arya even more for a mysterious reason. "Hardly an affinity, my lady," she replied. "Mere curiosity, if anything."
"Although one has to admit," Gwirithiel piped up, "those two are rather good-looking for dwarves."

Unwillingly, the thought lodged itself in the Ranger's mind. She supposed they were good-looking, considering. She could only speak for herself, though, so Dark and Brooding won the prize. Her eyes immediately started from their sockets. "Am I drunk?" a voice in her head questioned with genuine disbelief upon realising she'd just admitted that Kili is handsome.

"I suppose they are," was all she said, very grudgingly at that, trying her best not to betray her real thoughts.

Silence of several moments ensued, yet the two elves were undaunted. Despite her innocent look, Gwirithiel was intent on eliciting details. "The blond one seemed quite nice and regal compared to the rest."

"Oh, I really liked the other. The rather sulky one who was carrying you when you arrived, my lady. Cíwon kept complaining about how much that dwarf pestered him about you every time he was on duty in the infirmary."

Arya almost did a double take. Kili? Kili pestered Cíwon about her progress all these days? Had they poured something in his drink, or was he slowly losing it? She shook her befuddled head when the voices sounded anew.

"Word has it that he seemed very protective of you." Limwen had fixed her with her ever so scrutinising gaze. "Is he a good friend of yours?"

The human arched an eyebrow. Undeniably, it felt good to be looked upon with sympathy and respect, instead of suspicion and mild hostility, but blast the elves and their curiosity. The elleth was fishing for information that Arya wasn't particularly willing to give, whether it flattered Kili or not. "I wouldn't say so," she said with caution.

"Strange that he only has stubble, whereas the rest of his kin are blessed with such great beards," aforesaid elf said with a thoughtful look. "It doesn't look bad on him, not at all."

Arya cast another wary glance at each of them. She bet her daggers that Thorin would willingly kill his nephews than have them socialize with two elves. "Forgive me for crushing your hopes, ladies, but those two are the King's nephews. I'm positive that he would not accept anything but dwarrowdams of noble standing for his nephews' companions."

The two elves tried really hard to sound affronted. "We would never!"

"I should hope so. We don't want a war at our feet," the Ranger jested with finality and the two elves took the cue to drop the matter.

Upon the bathing session they escorted her to her old room, where they treated her leftover wounds with all manners of balming unguents and wrapped them up with bandages. They got her hair in a braid, helped her wear the dress that was laid on the bed for her, and once she was deemed decent for their dinner standards, they excused themselves and left her to her own devices.

In all honesty, Arya would take her trousers and tunic any time of the day. She found dresses quite uncomfortable for everyday outfit, because they weren't warm enough for winter, too warm for summer, and nigh impractical to wear the rest of the year when wandering in the Wild. The dress itself, however, was an admirable specimen of the elven sewing prowess—marked one's entrance to another level of sartorial greatness. Looking down at herself, she sighed loudly and forced her feet out of the room, trying not to poke a finger through the sheer embroidery across the sleeves and
ripping a hole in it by some tragic mistake, because stars help the poor bastard that would have to face the seamstresses and tell them their work was ruined.

Her heart almost leaped up to her mouth when a hand pulled her by the arm. She turned around and, before her brain even processed the image, she was hurling herself against him.

The force knocked all the breath out of him. It felt like crashing into a moving cart on a downslope.

"I've repeatedly told you not to sneak up on me like this," she smacked a hand against his shoulder in reprimand, yet continued to hold onto him as though the end of the world drew near.

"How could I ever resist giving you a fright? Need to sharpen our reflexes, don't we?"

"Speak for yourself!"

On cue, their arms disentangled and they studied each other. He, with concern that made his eyes look darker than usual, and she, with worry that made creases spread across her forehead. He looked tired, thinner and older, although the stubble on his jaw was rather tasteful compared to his once clean shaven skin.

"What is the matter with you?" she said angrily, gesturing toward his middle. "Do I need to be constantly on your side so that you don't peck at food like a sparrow?"

He simply nodded towards her, without a word.

"You're so thin," she emphasised, "if you turn sideways and hunch a little, you'd look like a longbow!"

"My eating habits are not very different to yours," he said pointedly. "And I may have one or two far more interesting topics in mind for starters."

"No time for my travelling tales. There are more pressing matters," she declared and lowered her voice to protect her sayings from any prying ears. "Oh, I'm so glad you are well," the relief was obvious in her tone. "Nearly three months without word from you—I thought something happened."

"Your propensity for tragedies is legendary. A ladybug would crawl on my hand and you'd think it poisonous," he snorted and she rolled her eyes. "Now, what is it you wish to speak of?"

"Have the others returned?"

"Not yet," he said gingerly. "Why?"

The woman glanced around nervously. "You should hear what's been whispered around Emyn Uial and the shores of Nenuial. There have been disturbing reports."

"What kind of reports?"

She scoffed. "The kind I don't want to believe."

He placed his hands on her shoulders, surprised to see her eyes darken with fear. Fear was a sentiment that seldom accompanied her and it unsettled him to see it in her now. "Arya, please. You are constantly on edge, still on the mend from a warg attack, I'm certain you haven't slept in a while except for the four days you were unconscious and, above all, you are always concerned about something. Are you deliberately debilitating yourself?"

"What—?"
"You have to stop worrying about everyone and everything so much."

"I do not worry about everything," she snapped. "I worry about you, because I'm afraid of losing you—simple as that."

"You will not lose me, as I mean not to lose you either. I almost did twice," he gave a glare there, "and have no intention of risking a third time." He then sighed and put an arm around her shoulders, patting her back comfortably, "Often I find myself missing the days when we were children."

"The past is the past," Arya shrugged. "We have one too many a problem now to dwell much on what's come and passed."

Aragorn sighed quietly and shook his head. "Not even your father was such a doomsayer, and he was gloomier than the skies at winter most of the time. I honestly can't fathom who you took after from."

"Perhaps Grandma had a grumpy cousin," she said with a shrug. Not a second later, they were shaking with laughter at their old inside joke. When the laughs dissipated, whatever lightness deflated dramatically fast. And her face turned grim again. "Do not turn a blind eye to the troubling tidings from the North."

"I do no such thing," he said solemnly. "But you are equally important as that."

"Don't bother your head with me—I'm fine. We must be on our guard," she said with caution. "You must send word to the rest. Soon."

An alarmingly mellow voice that turned louder by the minute roused the two brothers from their afternoon nap, much to their chagrin. Fili opened his eyes and literally recoiled at the sight of the elf standing before him all tall and noble —and slightly impatient after his seventh call to rouse the two dwarves— waiting to escort them to the dining room as instructed.

Still bleary-eyed, Kili straightened his clothes and nodded a silent thanks to the elf, although he'd much rather be left alone to roam about the place—maybe pass by... say, the healing houses, for example.

Contrary to him, Fili didn't have the good grace to hide his discontent at —what he thought would be — another dull dinner, much to the elf's evident disapproval. Every night for the past five days he'd been dreaming of scrumptious, juicy pigs on spits roasting slowly over the fires. He sighed dramatically; just thinking about it made his whole mouth fill with saliva. He dearly hoped there would be some meat served tonight at dinner, for his stomach warned him that it had absolutely no intention of digesting any more greens.

As the brothers followed the elf down the numerous corridors and rounded a corner, they heard whistles of voices whispering in the dark. The visual came seconds apart. They caught glimpse of two people conversing quietly in the shadows; one was a woman with long hair in a braid falling down her waist, and the other was the figure of a very tall man—he had to be of the race of Men, his ears weren't pointy. The woman's face was hidden from view, but Fili had pretty strong inkling as to her identity.

And his instincts proved spot on.

Kili felt his heart skip a beat at the sight, relief overwhelming him that Arya was finally up and about, yet his face remained as stony as a rock. She caught their sight over the man's shoulder and Kili couldn't help but notice the change her face suffered. Her exceptionally fine dark eyes twinkled with
amusement, judging him quietly, intently. Or maybe he was just losing his mind.

Her gaze turned fully in their direction and the unknown man reflexively took hold of her hand, but the elf who escorted the two princes to the dining room made no move to halt. It needed Fili to ask very politely for a brief stop for the elf to oblige. The blond dwarf cracked a relieved smile and waved a hand at her, forgoing a more congenial greeting seeing, not wanting to offend anyone.

Between her amused look and Fili's hand wave, Kili went from relieved to confused to angry and all the in between stages without letting nothing on. He said nothing, did nothing, and just stood there all stiff like an iron rod and aloof, watching the pair's entwined hands like a hawk.

The look of disapproval was hard to miss. Aragorn stifled a glare, wondering what was his problem, but then remembered that they were dwarves. They pretty much had a problem with everything.

"I'm afraid those gentlemen wish you joined them for dinner."

Creases of confusion formed on her forehead and she gestured in the direction of the dining room, "You won't come?"

"I already ate. But I shall see you later," he whispered grudgingly and gave her a gentle push towards the two awaiting dwarves, although not before he planted a kiss on the top of her head, his glowering gaze not even budging an inch from the dark-haired dwarf as he did so.

Chapter End Notes

Be iest lîn = As you wish
elleth = female elf
The man who escorted her disappeared down the corridor in rather swift strides. Arya was midstep when Fili basically pounced on her —propriety be damned— and started to pat her shoulders with a force that was all but gentle.

"Why, if it isn't our very own guide in the flesh!"

Practically trembling after each pat, she winced from the vehemence of his excitement. It was like being caught in the throes of an earthquake. When her shoulders decided they had had enough of those pats for the day, she nimbly extricated herself from his grip and stepped out of grabbing range —just in case. "If you don't stop trying to have me keel over, I might need to revisit the healers."

Fili immediately murmured an apology, even though they both knew he did not mean it truly. "Have you been allowed to walk so soon?"

She shrugged and gave a wan smile. "Lord Elrond works wonders."

His gaze then landed on her new garment and his lips tugged into a broad grin.

Arya raised a finger in warning before he could open his mouth and blurt out who knows what, "No comments on the attire."

"Begging your pardon, m'lady, 'tis just that I'm not really used to seeing you not dressed like a gravedigger."

Kili looked like he might stab himself in the eye to spare himself the spectacle. If this was his brother's attempt to compliment her, it was downright lame. Which was rather odd, for Fili was known to be rather smooth with the ladies.

Arya leveled the blond with a deadpan glare. "Gravedigger? Well... you're flattering me," she muttered dryly. "I wasn't aware that I was supposed to go wandering over valleys and rivers, mountains and ravines, dirt and mud, in wind and rain and snow, clad in a silk chiffon dress."

Kili caught his mouth just in time before it broke into smile. He could sympathise by how wry she could be to make a point. Fili, on the other hand, was outright laughing.

There was a subtle clearing of a throat right about then, courtesy of the elf who was at his wit's end with the constant delays, and the three quieted down and followed obediently.

The blond seemed genuinely pleased to see her, whereas his dearest brother didn't even condescend to bother himself with common courtesies—namely greet her, or even just nod, if uttering a word or two was too hard for his nibs. Hours prior to this moment she had made a deal with herself to try and behave at least nicely to him, seeing as he'd carried her from the Hidden Pass up to here. As Fili motioned her to walk beside him she gave Kili the tiniest of smiles, to test the waters, to get him to be less grumpy, with no result. She didn't try to guess why he was so morose; there was no way she'd ever understand how his mood and mind —or what possibly existed of it— worked. Besides, there were plenty other, far more serious things to reflect on than the mood swings of a dwarf prince.

The fact that she would not be escorted to dinner by the man who glowered at him earlier —not to
even mention the kiss on the top of her head, sight that had an ever so slight nauseating effect on his stomach—strangely put Kili a little more at ease than he was moments ago. Without wanting or planning it, his eyes strayed a little from the designated path and gave her a once-over. He despised himself for it, but couldn’t help to not notice that she... *ahem*, scrubbed up well, so to speak. Did he truly daresay she was merely tolerable? Granted, she might not be pretty in the conventional way, or possess the flawless to the point of *annoyance* beauty the Elves did, yet there was something in those dark eyes of hers—a shrewd twinkle of sorts—that made the women he had seen in his life rather pale in comparison. And she might have no beard like dwarf women had, but he could not imagine her with one. It would look fairly odd on her face.

"Did I just admit that she is more than tolerable?" he thought frantically. "Has the world come to that? Stop staring at her." He really tried, yet his eyes didn't seem to cooperate with the mental command.

A dramatic sigh eventually evaded his lips that even Thorin in his most brooding days would envy. Whether caused by frustration or annoyance, Kili couldn't say. His conflicting and confusing emotions were always keeping him on edge in her presence and his brother made it worse by making it a point of always having them be irritatingly close to each other. This time was even worse, as her scent was enhanced from the bath she must have had. Even if totally averse to elvish soap smells as a matter of principle, to him she looked so clean and radiant, and smelled so nice that he wanted to poke his eyes with his fingers just to spare himself the flagellation Thorin would impose on him should he ever suspect him capable of such thoughts.

"My dearest brother, here," the blond began with a sly grin and tapped Kili's shoulder, "wouldn't let an elf pry you off his arms when we arrived. Not even after the Elf Lord assured him you'd be safe."

Kili scowled. "Had you been in my place—"

Fili arched an eyebrow in challenge, the large grin still spread from ear to ear. "I *would* have been in your place, brother dear," he interrupted him, "but our Ranger apparently deigns to have no other arms around her except yours."

His brother rolled eyes at the *totally* intended pun.

The blush that coloured Arya's face was unmistakeable. "He did not give me a chance to choose any other's arms, Fili. Nevertheless, I am grateful for what he did," she said reluctantly. "I must admit that I could barely stand."

"Can we please stay silent and go to this so called dinner?" the brunet grumbled and soldiered on ahead of them with clenched fists and a murderous look, more at ease with the escorting elf as a companion than those two.

They finally reached the dining room and the ellon sighed in relief that he'd carried through with the task he was assigned. As soon as she made appearance, a few smiles broke here and there. She even received a pat on the shoulders by one or two. Thorin merely gave a stiff nod when she plopped down on the chair beside him, occupying a table along with Gandalf and Elrond.

Fili was observing his brother as they went to take their seats around the two small tables in the room, wondering about his blatant sulking, and had a thought or two perfectly suited for the reason.

"Do you reckon the man was her betrothed?" he asked casually and watched as Kili slowly twisted his neck and sent him a sideways killing glare. "She obviously was very happy to see him, he seemed a tad displeased to leave her with us," he babbled on, "and they looked quite nice together, I have to adm—" He was suddenly interrupted by a hand in front of his mouth—his brother's courteous
way to say 'shut up'.

"I don't know and I don't care," the younger growled with a wild look.

_Mahal, I woke the beast_, Fili thought with amusement. "Aye, I can see that you don't," he hissed sardonically. "An unspoken attraction usually feels like this, worry no-"

"Attraction?" Kili cut him off, earning a few scolding glances from the elves around due to his uncalled-for high volume in his voice. "For that skinny little brat? Have you lost your mind?"

"Hey, I was just making an observa-"

"Just go sit over there," Kili ordered sharply, not able to abide his brother's absurd comments anymore. He ungracefully slumped down a low stoop at the other table, all the while grumbling something under his breath. "Attraction," he huffed angrily, making a mocking grimace. "That's ridiculous."

Fili moved to the other side of the table, all the while chuckling to himself and shaking his head. It was going to be a _long_ night.

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Thorin was about to voice what everyone was wondering the previous four days. "And might I enquire how you are familiar with our hosts?" He actually felt very uncomfortable to even utter the word with grand civility, just because he was accommodated in their territory.

Two sets of eyes belonging to the other occupants of the table fell upon her, assessing her reaction and weighing chances.

"My brothers and I were born in Rivendell," she replied curtly, "but lived here only for a while. Also, both my mother and father were born and raised here- Well, born with a difference of quite a few centuries, but that hardly matters."

She wistfully smiled to herself, recalling her parents' first meeting. How had they never come to meet in Rivendell, since they both lived here, but managed to meet in the middle of the wild was beyond her. Still, it made her deeply sad thinking that their lives were so quickly parted by the veil of death.

Thorin scowled. "You said your father was one of Men," he said suspiciously, feeling somewhat deceived.

Kili was watching from afar and it was the first time in their presence that her smile had reached her eyes and seemed so genuine. He noted it as a rare sight and actually felt a bit sad that, whatever it was his uncle had said, made that smile last only briefly.

"Yes, he was," Arya stated. "Your point being?"

"Why was he born _here_?"

Her expression turned serious and grim. "You're asking a more indiscreet question than I believe is appropriate."

Thorin went stiff and his gaze hardened. A very lively warning was on the tip of his tongue, but he held himself back from replying. He did not fail to notice the severe change in her mood, though, as if he had touched a sore point. But then he recalled who her ancestors were; and he had to admit it _did_ make sense for her line to be in need to live under protection. The North, where the home of her forefathers was and where her own home was supposed to be, had been crippled and waned into
abandonment centuries ago.

Completely unaware of the knowledge Thorin held of her family’s identity, Arya scolded herself for being naive enough to actually believe that by now his opinion might have changed. The whole company would always keep in the back of their minds that she was of elvish descent. The only exception to this rule would probably be Bilbo, who did not seem to have any problem with the Elves—quite the opposite, the small hobbit was fascinated by them. Even Fili, who was open-minded in contrast to the other dwarves and did not consider her ancestry as something that rendered her untrustworthy, could possibly have his opinion changed by a speech from Thorin listing the reasons why they shouldn’t trust her. She doubted Fili would ever speak ill of her, but she had learned to always have reservations.

Gandalf cleared his throat in an attempt to prevent something none of those present would be inclined to witness, and Arya took the cue to not pull at that thread more.

"These gentlemen must be happy to have such a spirit in their company," Elrond noted, but his eyes warned her not to lose her composure around the dwarf king.

Oh, the irony.

Thorin barely refrained from snorting out loud, and only limited to give a condescending half-smile when the elf turned to him. Arya, in turn, barely held back full-blown laughter. A smile returned to her face, although it wasn’t nearly as sincere as before. This time it neither graced her features nor made her eyes beam.

After light conversation about various matters, Thorin seemed unable to keep the polite mood on for longer. "Excuse me," he mumbled angrily under his breath and left the table.

To be fair, Arya was more than surprised. The dwarf deserved a winning trophy for being able to act civilised amongst so many Elves and enduring their questions and comments thus far. She was secretly waiting for the moment his anger would burst.

It was after popular demand that a while later she decided to abandon the table and join the rest. Plopping down as less painfully as she could with Bofur’s help, she sat in the empty space he ushered her to and her eyes passed over everyone who had a seat around the table. One of them, who by now had become a master at ignoring her, didn’t even deign to look in her direction as she took a seat. Instead he seemed to be lost in his own small world as he stared ahead of him with a somewhat sheepish look.

Much like a hawk, Arya continued to watch the object of her focus who, in turn, proved to have eyes on another. She slowly moved her gaze to where Kili was staring. What she thought before to be a sheepish look was no sheepish at all. With the harp in front of her, dearest Limwen was occupying a strategically placed chair directly opposite to the prince and made eye contact with him at every chance. And not only eye contact, but smiles, too.

But, no, no, the good part hadn’t come yet.

The good part came when, for an ungodly reason, Kili decided to reciprocate. He made eyes at her, flashing a smile equal to that of the beaming sunlight and able to blind everyone in the range of a few yards, and then winked. He actually winked. At an elf. A race that the dwarves, not to mention Thorin and his family in specific, supposedly hated.

You really have a way with the ladies, a voice in Arya's head grumbled sarcastically, while at the same time she wondered where did the urge to tip over the table and break it upon the dwarf’s fat
head come from. There was plenty of food spread at her disposal and also companionship, even though she was definitely no part of it—one might call her ungrateful if she didn't appreciate those things for what they were. Yet for reasons unknown, the light exuberance that was diffuse across the terrace did not bode well for her.

The exceedingly dry expression on her face was akin to Dwalin's. A spectator of the prince's flirtatious antics for a while now, his amusement could be described most accurately with the word 'nonexistent'.

As Kili turned his attention back to the table, he became aware of Dwalin's look and the smile immediately disappeared. "Can't say I fancy elf maids myself," he blurted out a little too quickly, in a rather futile to exonerate himself from what he thought would follow, save the fact that his uncle stood a few yards away and definitely within hearing range.

The sarcastic nod and the arched eyebrows were more than enough evidence that the burly dwarf did not buy a single word from what was coming out of the prince's mouth. Same applied to Arya; purely out of instinct, she could tell he was fibbing.

"Too thin," the brunet went on.

Bofur was shaking his head next to him, in a way that said 'say it one more time and you might believe it yourself'. He was also glancing over the Ranger every now and then, observing her quiet seething with suppressed urges to either lunge at Kili with the first silver plate she would find in her way, or storm out of the room.

"...and they're all high cheekbones and creamy skin—"

In her mind, Arya had already grabbed his head and was shoving it into the platter of pies — preferably those with the most cream on top— time after time after time after time. On the outside she deflected so well, it surprised even herself.

"Not enough facial hair for me," the prince concluded. "I want my woman to have a great beard."

Well, somebody should have a great one since you don't. There she went again. Anger as smooth as velvet and caustic as molten steel. Did she really dislike him that much? He certainly was a pain in the arse from time to time, but had also carried her all this distance from the Hidden Pass and, as she was informed, often inquired about her while she was on the mend. She ought to be polite to him, right? Well done there, a wry voice echoed in her head and made her wince. Such thoughts are the epitome of politeness.

But, truth be told, he hadn't even thanked her yet for saving his life. So she had every right to be... well, less courteous than what the norm obliged. Basically, she should be ignoring him like she had said.

"Although that one, there, is not so bad," Kili's tentative voice brought her back from the little world of her musings. He was currently pointing towards someone that stood behind him.

Before she had the time to raise her eyes and look at said person, came Dwalin's deadpan reply, "That's not an elf maid."

Many things happened in that moment. Kili froze on the spot, his expression going from smiley to thoughtful, and as realisation dawned, he seemed unbelievably tempted to go in search of a huge rock and hide under it. His cheeks and ears had gone crimson from the embarrassment, and everybody around the table had broken into fits laughter.
"Oh, that's funny," he muttered with a wry grimace.

Arya could barely hold it together. Right then she did not care a whit that he hadn't thanked her yet. It was not as if she sought his gratitude—well... maybe a little. But she had kept the snide thoughts to herself and, oh, how the tables were turned.

For a moment she forgot about whatever troubled her. For a moment she laughed so hard, she almost sprayed the wine she'd been sipping through her nose. It was not his expression that caused it, nor his embarrassment; just him. For that disturbing moment she could make out why Fili insisted on there being an affable side to his otherwise dark and brooding sibling, why everyone in the company liked him so much.

It was just for that moment, though. As soon as her brain realised the thoughts it conceived, she was startled. No, she was not supposed to want to laugh with him, nor complimenting his beaming smile. She was supposed to ignore him. She was supposed to want to ignore him, just as much as he was supposed to want to ignore her—just like most people around her wanted. To avoid a new round of thoughts that would befuddle her even more than she already was, she stood up and moved to withdraw to the peace of her room. A small nod was her sole greeting to the dwarves before she walked to the other table.

It was then when Bofur had the brilliant idea of hopping on a table and starting to sing in his tremendously lyrical voice, much to the elves' woe. Arya had never seen Thorin more pleased when Bofur intercepted the funerary melody that was played and switched to a much livelier jig. The dwarf king was positively delighted now that the elves' uneventful, prudish dinner was boycotted, and he couldn't hide the evil grin from his face. It only served to excite everyone. Soon, food was flying to every direction. A pie, in particular, with direction somewhere between where Lindir stood and where Elrond sat, exploded precisely above Arya's head.

Her instinct was too strong on its guess of where that came from.

With a murderous glare she swiveled around to look at the thrower, who stared back at her wide-eyed, guilt oozing from his very pores. Clearly, he was not willingly aiming for her. Removing the edible parts from her face and dress with as much decency and composure was left in her, she turned to Gandalf who seemed to be laughing under all that grey facial hair, and Lord Elrond, who she could not decipher whether he was amused. Probably not, though.

"I'm afraid I won't be able to enjoy the rest of this merry celebration," she said quietly, then raised her gaze to the elf behind the table.

Lindir's look was bordering on sheer aversion. He let an exasperated sigh as the woman glanced at him. There's only so much one could take, even elves.

"I want you to know that if you throw food on his face," she discreetly pointed at Kili, "you shall have my immense support in case any admonition is to fall upon you." If the elf wasn't by nature such a gentle soul, she was certain that the guests would've been strangled and cremated by now.

The words meant nothing to the dwarves, who didn't pay much heed to them, but it must have been something funny, for nearly half the elves present laughed none too discreetly. Said gesture was probably what they desired to do all this time that the dwarves were so foolishly wasting the food, but simply dreaded the repercussions.

The dark look didn't abandon her face, even if the crumbles were off her hair. She bade everyone a haste goodnight and swiftly left the room before another stray pie might lose its direction and find her face this time.
After the fussy dinner the dwarves returned to the large room to rest. There was a light breeze in the Valley that night, so they decided to light a fire using elves’ furniture as tinder. A circle formed around it, and before they knew it they were halfway through a proper feast. At first Kili had joined them in the small gathering, but when the spirits settled down and most of them dozed off, his mind could not find peace. It was a one-way road, he decided in the end and strolled down the corridor in search of a way to pass his time. For example, find someone that would help him explore the place; that harp-player elf maid from dinner, maybe.

But all the elves seemed to have magically disappeared, even though their faint singing voices could be heard from afar. He never found a soul, so he ended up aimlessly roaming around the empty halls all by himself, until he spotted the lights; small and bigger lanterns, fluorescent, flickering comfortably in the silence of the night and gaining more and more height as they rose to the skies. His pace had ceased and Kili was left staring at them as though spellbound; part of him genuinely believed he had strayed into a dream.

Hours could have passed as he stood there gazing at them and he wouldn't know. For a brief moment he found himself wishing to be granted a longer stay at Rivendell just so he could fully relish the serenity it offered, though he was quick to shove that to the back of his mind, fearing he might be caught for his thoughts.

Suddenly it occurred to him that it was usually this time of the day that queries and doubts of the extent of his self-awareness surfaced, hell-bent on annoying him and disturbing his peace of mind. Recalling all the events of the day one by one, he realised he had come to feel strangely. And not good strangely. It felt like his stomach was tied into a knot.

At first he tried to convince himself that his distress was caused by the place, or even the fact that they’d been eating green stuff that was supposed to pass for actual food for five days in a row. The horrifying truth, even if he decidedly refused to acknowledge it, was that it was caused by the sight of a certain someone with an unknown man.

"What if Fili was right and he's her betrothed?" a voice questioned. "Why do you care if he’s her betrothed? What if he is? Stop thinking about her, you fool," a second voice commanded, when a familiar scream echoing down the hall interrupted the flow of his thoughts, as if she knew he was thinking about her.

He could bet his left hand that it was her. Curious and at the same time worried, he switched direction and headed towards her room in haste, determined to enter and check on her.

However, another figure showed up and reached the doorknob long before he even approached.

If someone watched from afar, it would seem as though Kili hit an invisible wall—so abruptly his pace ceased. As soon as his brain regained command of his body, he hid behind a large pillar to avoid being seen and watched in horror as the man knelt beside the woman on the floor, grabbed something out of her hands and tossed it away. He couldn't see what it was but heard the noise it made upon its landing. For an unfathomable reason his heart clenched at the sight of them hugging each other again and made him grasp the stony pillar with spite, digging his nails into the cold stone. He could see them talk, yet the words were lost to his ears, for their voices were very low. Call it morbid curiosity, but he couldn't find it in him to move away.

Aragorn opened the door to her room and chaos descended upon him. There was a body tossing and turning before him like a fish that was just pulled out of water, wielding a knife, of all things.
Ten years ago, just before they departed from Rivendell to return to the camp in the North, he had given her this knife. Her initial refusal had been absolute, to put it mildly, claiming that it belonged to him and only him. But he knew her buttons all too well, he knew how to play her, so in the end she found herself accepting without even knowing how. It had never crossed his mind that she'd get hurt by it. Yet there she was, squeezing the sharp blade as thin lines of blood rolled down her fingers and stained the floor and her nightclothes. With shocking speed he rushed to take it out of her hands before the bloody fool cut a finger or two, and promptly tossed it away.

The movement startled her. She jolted awake with a gasp and, without a second thought, her fist went directly for his jaw.

He grabbed it just in time. "Easy there."

The familiar voice helped her regain her bearings. "Wh--?"

He moved back the few strands of hair that were stuck on her face and helped her sit on the bed. "'Twas only a nightmare," his serene voice reassured.

Not a single word left her mouth as she rubbed sleep off her eyes, wiping a few beads of sweat with the back of her hand in the process. She looked down at her bloody palms, frowning, then at him, alternating her gaze in confusion.

"Man cenich?"

"I d-- You..." Slowly, everything started to come back. "You fell off a cliff and I couldn't reach y--" Her eyes widened. "You di--" Her voice cracked and she swallowed tightly.

"It's alright, I am here."

She was far too immersed in those fearful notions to realise that she'd been slurring her words for the past minute or so.

"Arya, it was just a bad dream--"

"No..." she drawled as her mind struggled to sort out her thoughts. "No, no, it wasn't-- This is not something that's happened in the past! What if this actually happens?"

He rubbed her back soothingly. "Calm d--"

"I am calm!"

"Clearly," he said dryly. "Never let it be said that my second-in-command wound up mad as a hatter because of a dream, of all things."

"Do not take this lightly! If anything happens to you, I may as well wind up mad with grief. What else would I do? Become the Chieftain?" She scoffed. "If I were you, I wouldn't hold out too much hope," her rising voice echoed around the room as the tone turned more and more pointed. "I can readily name a few people who will be quite opposed to that."

He had learned long ago to stoically await for the rant to end. "Are we really going to have that conversation again?" he sighed once she quietened.

Arya had developed reactions to this particular statement galore. They ranged from deadpan expressions to muttering unintelligible curses while rolling her eyes backwards in frustration until they found brain. Needless to say, her current one tended towards the second end. It was common
knowledge that she disagreed with the choice he'd made. Exile was not a choice for someone like him. Neither was to fall into darkness with all that was left of their kin.

He gave a wry smile then. "And if anything should happen to me, you shall find yourself a good lad, have a son or daughter, and everything will go swimmingly."

That was met with an arched eyebrow. "Is that so?"

"There, mission accomplished—line continued."

She scoffed. "I am deeply sorry to disappoint you, but that is impossible."

"How so?"

"If something happens to you, it means that I'll already be six feet under. No harm shall come to you as long as I draw breath—not even a scratch if possible. Unless, of course, it is someone's wish to go through hell and back."

He brushed a wisp of hair away from her face, chuckling. She was one of those scarce people that could make him laugh. He thought about who would be so lucky to face her wrath once it burst, or so ignorant to trigger it. "Colour me flattered," he said graciously. "But until then, I promise I won't go about telling people that you may be losing the plot."

Arya glared at him and he chuckled lightly. It was then that she noted that he was dressed and carried his weapons. "Are you leaving?"

"I was on my way to say goodbye when I heard you. Be careful for the rest of your journey and try not to get yourself killed," he said dryly, "if you please."

"How fortuitous, I was about to tell you exactly the same thing."

"It is you who's travelling to stars know where to do heaven knows what, not I."

She let a small laugh and patted his shoulder, "You're a smart one, you'll figure everything out soon."

"Remember that I will *always* find a way to come to your aid if need be. Come hell or high water, no matter what godforsaken corner of the world you're in, you can depend on that. Whatever the danger, I'll be there to stop it. Whether you see it coming or not."

There was a strange gleam in his eyes and Arya thought he was hinting at something she was still too drowsy to piece together, although she couldn't quite put her finger on it. Before she could reply he pulled her in an embrace and kissed the top of her head.

"Good luck in whatever your venture is," he sighed. "I have a hunch that you'll need it."

She watched him go with a rather quizzical look. "Namárië."

Kili's stomach heaved every time the man brushed her hair with his hand. He almost ended up with a semi-permanent wince on his face when the man hugged and kissed her head yet again. It was so sweet, it made him throw up a little bit in his mouth.

He did not risk revealing himself and remained hidden as the man walked out of the room, while Arya reluctantly moved off the bed and closed the door.

"Who the bloody hell does he think he is? I could wake her up and calm her as well!" the prince
thought indignantly and then huffed, feeling the veins in his temples pump a little too much blood up to his brain. "Stop thinking on it. On her. You have no business here or, most of all, with her." He could not understand why he was torturing himself so much by thinking about her.

"I'm officially out of my bloody mind," he muttered with a resigned sigh and stomped back to the room where the others were. The aforementioned inflow of blood slowly blossomed into a fully fledged headache that had him rub his temples viciously every so often. The conversation going on around him wasn't of any help either—any attempt to tune out all the voices was in vain. He waited stoically until a troubled sleep claimed him, taking him to a dreamworld that was more a grim, warped version of reality than an actual dreamworld.

Chapter End Notes

Man cenich? = What did you see?
Namárië = Farewell

For those who might find Aragorn's adulthood wrong: I know he was about 10 years old when the company arrived in Rivendell, but the 17 year gap between Frodo inheriting the ring and the beginning of the quest is not included in the movies. So if you do the math by the films' dates —added to the fact that in the Two Towers, Aragorn told Eowyn he was 87 years old— during the Hobbit's events he would be about 28 years old.
The medallion calls

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Arya rid herself of the long nightgown with an admittedly relieved sigh. She donned clean clothes with extra care not to leave bloody marks on them, gathered her knife from the corner of the room and wiped the blood off of it, and set heading to the healing house to tend to her injury. Not a soul was there, so she took her sweet time to clean the cuts, put some salve on and bundle a bandage over them. She then strayed a little from her path—not that she had any particular path to follow, but anyway—and wandered in the halls for a while, occasionally gazing at the night sky when there was an opening above her.

"Isn't it a little late for a night stroll?" Thorin's hoarse voice startled her to a halt.

Arya regarded him pensively. "Perhaps it is an early morning stroll. It depends on one's perspective, really."

The dwarf snorted on account of her making a fair point. "A word, if I may?"

With a nod of evident puzzlement she led him to a small glade in the large garden, away from potentially prying ears and eyes.

So far Thorin believed he was acutely aware of the extent of dangers that could present themselves during this quest. Recent events had sadly refuted that belief. The very thought of losing one of his nephews took up residence in his mind the moment he saw the warg chasing Kili and the thought decidedly clung to it for the rest of the week. Also, the fact that it had been her to save Kili, instead of him or one of the company, made him feel even worse. His distrust for her had emerged tenfold upon witnessing her familiarity with the Elves. Of course, this was to be expected since her mother was one of them, but his opinion towards the particular race would not be bent so easily. In any case, no matter how he felt, his nurture constrained him to behave honourably to Kili's savior. And his opportunity arose now that she was alone.

"I believe thanks are in order," he began curtly, "for saving my nephew's life."

"Ah, so nobility does oblige," Arya noted with mirth. The great King under the Mountain had stooped to the manner of commoners. Shame there was no one around to witness this, for it must have been a monumental sight. "I told you my help would be fortunate at some point."

"Indeed," he agreed seriously. "Yet you could have been killed, which would be very unfortunate."

Her head tilted to the side in question. "I do not understand," her brow furrowed in confusion. "Since when has my well-being made it into your list of concerns?"

"Since my nephews would risk their lives to save you."

"I never asked of anyone to give their lives for me, least of all your nephews," she defended. "If my life is destined to be taken, it shall be taken. No one can prevent that."

"They would try to save you," Thorin objected, "no matter what."

"Why?" she asked, perplexed.
"Each for different reasons."

"Would you care to be less ambiguous?"

There was a brief silence that radiated his obvious hesitation, but his voice was stern when he spoke, "It is not my place to elaborate. Perhaps you will understand one day in the future." He hoped she never would. "Therefore, I expect you to be more careful from now on, for the sake of us all."

Arya narrowed her eyes in complete and utter confusion, paying no heed to the warning that hid behind his sayings. "You speak in riddles, Thorin Oakenshield."

He saw her completely unaware of the meaning behind his words and, admittedly with relief, changed the topic. "We were able to read the map the night before. The others are informed," he added. "I'd rather we didn't delay more here now that that problem is solved. We'd better depart before dawn, so that no elves will stop us."

A nod of understanding was her sole reply. "I know a way out of here," she then informed him quietly.

"I know a way out of here as well," Thorin countered, a undercurrent of sarcasm in his voice. "Do you happen to know a secret way out of here?"

"Three, to be precise," the Ranger replied dryly and proceeded to reveal what exactly she had in mind. Before something else was to be uttered, she was already watching him walk away from her. "With all due respect," she mumbled thoughtfully, "I doubt Kili would give his life for me."

Thorin ceased his pace for a moment, seeming to waver over something even with his back turned, but eventually resumed his stroll in silence and, oddly enough, slouchy, as opposed to his usual strut. He had not the mental strength to cope with this right now, for his mind was already burdened with a conversation he had overheard not too long ago.

His words were eerie and Arya wished not to burden her mind with them, too; she had enough thoughts of her own. Instead she was content to sprawl herself on a small bench and blink her troubles away while watching the sky. When she deemed she'd had enough contemplation for one night, she returned to her room to prepare, seeing especially to the replacement of her missing weapon due to the troll incident.

Dawn was about to come when everyone gathered at the start of the small path the Ranger had pointed. Thorin's eyes meticulously studied Kili, who seemed distant and weary, despite turning in earlier than most others. After his nephew he observed the young woman, who was more reserved and pensive than usual. Unable to find a link that connected the moods of these two and happy to be gone from this place, he asked her to lead the way out of Rivendell.

Although rueful that her stay was so brief and did not coincide with that of her cousin's for more than a few days, Arya considered herself fortunate to have seen him at all.

She was surprised by Thorin's request to lead, yet gladly jumped at the opportunity, for it meant moving to the front of the line and remaining there; preferably alone to take the time and sort her thoughts out. The gloom of the weather seemed to reflect her mood that morning and, brooding as she and the sky were, she drove them out of there, taking the path to the High Pass.

After an exceptionally silent and uneventful hiking of a few days, punctuated only by short breaks for food, rest and relief of their bladders, as well as recounting of stories of old and legendary warriors, certain people were bound to get involved in yet another unfortunate incident.
As dusk drew nigh the company made camp in a small clearing, a few yards away from a stream that eventually led up to a small cascade—a fortunate opportunity to gather adequate water supplies for their trip through the Misty Mountains. The dwarves and the hobbit had formed a small circle around the fire that was lit, all slumped on the ground from mild fatigue and humming in low voices.

First placing her new bow and quiver down, Arya had removed her cloak and bodice and remained only in her tunic. The tightness of the bodice made the wounds where the warg had bitten her quite itchy. Absentmindedly she pulled two bandages out of her little pack and unrolled them, the fingerless gloves she wore doing a fairly good job in covering those that were already wrapped around her palms.

"Are you injured, lassie?" Bombur asked as he stirred the tinder to rekindle the fire.

"You should have Oin check your wounds, Miss Arya," Ori piped up, earning a nod from the aforementioned dwarf healer.

The Ranger shook her head in regret. For nearly a whole week she had managed to keep it secret. What could she possibly tell them now? That the wounds were caused by her own knife from her own hands? They would consider her crazy, and she was really not in the mood for long explanations to prove otherwise. She should have the proper focus to have walked away before taking the bandages out. It was solely her fault, or rather her mind’s.

"Thank you, but it's nothing, really. I can handle it myself," she brushed off with a smile and the dwarves nodded, not paying further heed to the matter.

Swiftly she disappeared behind the trees near the stream, taking her gloves off and unwrapping the bloodied bandages that covered her hands on her way there. The relief she felt when she dipped her hands in the cold water was indescribable—if the small moan that escaped her lips was any indication. With a clean piece of cloth she started to clean the dried blood, depositing the clean bandages on the ground next to her, until her solitude was disrupted when steps came from behind. With deft moves she wrapped the old ones back to cover her palms, hoping that the intruder would not pay attention to them.

"Be a good lad and fetch some water," said Gloin and clapped the younger prince on the shoulder.

As Kili walked toward the small stream with the two flasks in his hands he observed the kneeling figure near the bank. He scuffed closer, eyes narrowing at the sight of her enshrouding something over her palms. A better peek revealed long pieces of white cloth that was stained brown. He frowned. "Why the bandages?"

"Lovely. Out of all people... She glared down at the bandages, scowling at the betrayal."

"Why the sudden care?" she wanted to retort, but the words never left her mouth. "Courtesy of the beastie chasing after you," she dismissed in hopes that he would flee.

"You had no injuries in your hands from the warg," he said suspiciously, dropping the flasks on the ground and taking her hands in his. "What happened?"

In vain Arya tried to snatch them out of his grip. "I said nothing. Let me go."

"I asked you what happened."
"These are my hands, which subsequently makes it no business of yours." If she had simply cursed before when the others saw her, now she just wanted to make herself disappear. She wondered how opposed he'd be to that.

"Tell me what happened now," Kili insisted, more firmly this time.

"I said, let me go."

He shook his head in a warning motion, raising an eyebrow. "Don't make me ask a fourth time."

"Don't make me tell you to let me go a fourth time."

They continued to glower at each other for the better part of the next minute, each trying to impose his will upon the other, until Kili's patience evaporated and he pulled her hands toward him to unfold the bandages. She pulled them back, struggling to get free from the iron grip. In the seconds that followed either party put up a valiant fight, with no one able to dominate, until they tottered with such force that the gained momentum sent them backwards into the stream, splashing water all over. She ascended on the surface first and he followed suit.

"Why do you alw—" he coughed out the excessive amount of water that had inserted his lungs, "have to wreak havoc?"

Soaked to the bone and gasping for air, the woman looked at him with affront. "It hurts me," she panted, spitting water in the process. "Your stupidity physically hurts me!"

"We ended up in here because of you and your obstinacy!"

"Oh, really?" she blurted out, sarcasm dripping from every word much like the water that dripped from their clothes. "Nobody told you to come and talk to me, you insufferable twit!"

She was caught off guard by Kili grasping her arm none too gently and marching out of water. He kept glancing past his shoulder at her, eyes daring her to resist—he expected no less. She, of course, did resist. In truth, he was concerned she took more than ten seconds to do so. He let a prolonged grunt when a boot landed hard on his left instep, with such force and precision that even a blind man could tell it was premeditated. His grip reflexively loosened, giving her just enough time to pull her arm away and wade out ahead of him, glancing back every other second and growling a barrage of profanities under her breath. At that point Kili's glare was so palpable, it could melt the skin off of one's body. She was all but discouraged, if the defiant look in her eyes was anything to go by. He muttered a curse to the stars before covering the distance between them in two strides, snatching her by the waist this time and dragging her along with him to the bank. Somewhere between her frantic attempts to slip away anew and his mighty own to hold on to her, his foot caught upon a root at the riverside and he fell forward, landing atop the woman.

Now, one might suppose that there was a romantic or passionate element in the dark and brooding dwarf lying on top of the even darker and more brooding Ranger. In truth, the ordeal could more fittingly be described as exceedingly embarrassing and, most unfortunately, spiky, for the pair had landed respectively head and bum first on a gorge.

Mumbling expletives which ought not to be repeated, Arya hastened to roll away from the bush and the dwarf, or rather from the literal and figurative pain in her arse. Before she could move another foot away a hand clutched her shank in a vice grip, though her kicks seemed to not affect the owner of that hand at all. In the midst of a punch near the groin and a boot heel in the face and growls that risked alerting every living being in the vicinity of their presence there, the dwarf employed all his strength to crawl above her and lean his weight over her —just like she did when they had fought—
to make her stop flailing. Finally, he captured her hands and unrolled the bandages to reveal angry red gashes that were scabbed over and starting to bruise. His stomach twisted in protest.

He gave her palms a once-over as one might something breakable, fingers hovering over hers, unable to decide what to touch, what to inspect, first.

_What in the name of the hell?_

"What in Durin's name happened to your hands?" he exclaimed, outraged.

"'Tis but a scratch," she said, each word punctuated with an abortive attempt to extricate herself from his grip.

"A scratch?" he cried in shock. "Your hands are halfway through mutilation!"

"No, they aren't."

"Then what are these?"

"I've had worse," Arya growled. "Let me go."

"Not until you tell me how you acquired these." It was equal parts morbid curiosity as it was concern that made him so persistent.

Her head tilted back as she rolled her eyes and let a weary sigh, "None but myself is responsible." He was ready to yell, but she tried to wiggle the hands that were held prisoners inside his to stop him, so he let her continue. "Even in Rivendell, I have the habit of sleeping with a knife under my pillow. There was one night I was having a nightmare," she admitted, "and the knife just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time."

How could this woman get injured even in Rivendell was truly beyond him. It didn't take long to put two and two together, recalling exactly which night she must have been referring to, even if she had no idea that he did. So it was the knife that made that weird clacking noise when the unknown man snatched it from her hands and threw it away.

Her head cocked impatiently from side to side as she huffed, "Can I have my hands back now?"

"No," he said simply and held them tighter in his, leaning to his side and grabbing the clean bandages she had left lying on the ground. For a brief moment it seemed like she would actually obey him, and the thought alone felt oddly out of character.

He was quickly rebutted by the very badly disguised scowl on her face. "Can you at least get off me?"

To his embarrassment, Kili realised how they must seem from afar, and how's that for a pretty picture? He stood up pulling her with him a little more gently this time, never letting go of her hands, and carefully began to wrap the bandages around them. Only then did he become acutely aware of their predicament—their clothes were soaked through and through. He did his best not to let his eyes wander. Her tunic was sticking to places it shouldn't and, due to the blasted chilled water, certain... things were poking through it rather prominently. The horror.

It was also that exact moment that Fili's voice emerged through the woods. Impeccable timing, as always.

"Have you two killed each other yet?" he cried, fairly curious at their long absence. He peeped his
head out of a tree, dumbfounded by the sight and, mostly, the state of their clothes—especially Arya's tunic that clung to her torso like a second skin. The shocking part was that they were holding each other's hands. The hilarious part was Kili's efforts to avert his gaze from the white, practically transparent fabric of her tunic. An enormous cunning grin crept on the blond's face and he wiggled his eyebrows devilishly, "Or you are obviously doing something much more interesting. Have I interrupted something?"

Each gave him a glare and Kili lowered his face back to the task, reflexively stepping in front of her to preserve whatever modesty there was left to preserve. Completely undeterred from the spectacularly dripping attire and his brother's lame attempt to shield her from view, Fili walked closer and observed him as he finished the wrapping.

"What's the matter?"

"Oh, except that she lacks half a brain," Kili mocked as he took the flasks off the ground and filled them with water, "not much."

"Look who's talking," Arya sneered.

"I'm not the one who sleeps with a bloody knife under his head," Kili growled.

It was what needed for her restraint to pop into thin air. "Of course not," she shot back sarcastically. "You are the one who cannot keep his large nose out of other people's business!"

The brunet's face changed ten shades—all of them ranging between red and purple. He stomped over to her with a finger pointing warningly, "You daft, insolent--"

"Easy there, hothead," the blond, calm as ever, stepped in his way to prevent him from doing something he would regret later and gently pushing him backwards. He then turned to the woman, observing a tiny silver buckle that hung around her neck from a leather string. "There is something on your neck."

Her hands hovered over said area and took the chain, eyes going wide in absolute shock as she examined it. "No... No, no– Why? Why?" she tossed her arms about in despair, positively ready to drown him in the water. "Why do bad things happen to good people?"

The brunet wisely refrained from scoffing and vocalizing his doubts about whether she actually meant herself.

Fili, on the other hand, was keeping a wary eye on her, taking a few reflexive steps back when she started cursing under her breath. "What's wrong?" he dared to ask.

Arya downright ignored him; instead, she stomped over to the other dwarf present and punched his shoulder, growling, "Why do you have to make my bloody life so miserable?"

"How exactly did I achieve that?"

"Arya, what's the matter?" Fili insisted.

She ignored him again and almost pounced on the brunet. "There was a silver pendant hanging here," she hissed and wiggled the leather chain in front of his face.

"And?"

If looks could kill, she would have killed him ten times by now. "In case you didn't notice, it's gone!"
"Your point?" Kili growled.

"My point is that it was here before you showed up. It obviously fell from the chain when we fell into the water, and now I've lost it!"

"He'll replace it," Fili appeased and patted her shoulder in an attempt to preempt another fight, "worry not."

"It was an heirloom of my family!" she exclaimed wildly, turning to him. "It was the only heirloom of my fam– It cannot be replaced!"

"It wasn't my fault that we fell into the stream," Kili snapped. "Had you shown me the cuts in the first place, none of this would have happened!"

"So this was my fault? You bas– You are–" Despite being on the brim of eruption, Arya managed to restrain herself. It really took some effort. "You know what? Here is a brilliant idea. Why don't you dip your head under the water and I'll count to one thousand?" she roared, eyes throwing flames at him, before she began to stomp across the bank in search of the lost pendant.

"Why did I even care about you and your bloody hands?" Kili wondered with a frustrated shake of his head.

At that point a greatly amused Fili struggled to think of a girl his brother —according to his sayings— hated and simultaneously bothered his head about to such an extent, yet couldn't find any. "Come, brother. I wouldn't want you to kill each other."

He heard Kili grumble something under his breath and they returned to the camp in silence, one with acrid mood and the other ready to cackle.

"What took ye so long?" Gloin complained.

Then some observed him more closely, noting that he rather looked like a drowned rat.

"Why are you sodden, lad?"

"Did you fall in a bloody pond?" another exclaimed.

Kili shot the inquirers a weary look as he handed the two flasks back to their owners. He fumbled with the laces of his tunic, took it off along with most of his clothing and placed everything by the fire to dry, and then headed directly for his bedroll. He tucked himself completely under his cloak, not wishing to hear or speak to anyone for the rest of the night.

"What, now?" Dwalin's hoarse voice grumbled.

Fili made a noncommittal sound, motioning them to not start this conversation for everyone's benefit.

Bilbo had other plans as soon as he noted her absence. "Where is lady Arya?" he asked.

"She lost something and is searching for it," the blond prince replied and left the topic there.

After a considerably long and quite tense hour Fili decided to return to the crime scene. He saw Arya on her knees, searching the ground inch by inch, with a wide frown on her face. "Any luck?"

"Luck has forsaken me long ago," she muttered, not bothering to look at him. "Whyever would it remember my existence now?"
"I thought you could use some help."

Arya turned to him with a long-suffering sigh. "There is a waterfall down from here, Fili. Unless there is a chance for the pendant to grow actual limbs in order to swim back to me, I'm quite positive it is lost."

He offered a comforting glance, though it didn't seem to comfort her at all. So he did what he was best at. "You'd said something about trying to ignore my brother, I believe?"

"I'm trying. I'm just failing."

Fili chuckled quietly. Mentioning his brother perhaps wasn't the wisest thing to do, but he would never miss a chance to hear her grouch about Kili. It was all too fun a sight to miss. "I warned you that you two wouldn't last to ignore each other for more than minutes."

Her hands came to land on her hips. "Pray, tell, why is that?"

"Because fighting with each other is what feeds you."

Her brow furrowed. "You are aware that you don't make any sense, aren't you?"

"I make perfect sense. You're just not keeping up." Her apathetic stance made him want to smack his own head. "Oh, come on," he said, throwing his arms about in exasperation. "The attraction between the two of you is brighter than the sun."

Arya gulped in utter terror. "Certainly," she sneered, "provided that it's midnight!"

With a harrumph she stormed off to the camp, the blond dwarf in tow trying to catch up with her. If she wasn't so focused channelling her anger towards his brother, Fili would've been elbowed in the ribs the very next moment upon mentioning anything about attractions of any kind.

"Did you find what you were looking for, lassie?" Balin asked as soon as he saw the two of them approach.

A gloomy scowl shadowed her features as she glared at the mount of a cloak that hid Kili underneath. "No, I did not."

Bofur noticed that her clothes were soaked as well and did not need more to put two and two together. "Did you two go for a night bath?" he asked with a dirty look, pointing alternately to her and where Kili lay, not catching the warning nod Fili sent his way.

There were a few laughs when they saw her face turn red.

"We had a small accident," she recovered quickly, trying to maintain what dignity was left in her. "Although he could certainly use a bath," she muttered then, low enough to pretend it was meant for her ears only, loud enough for all present to know exactly who it was meant for.

The company refrained from eating anything that night apart from some bread and fruits, in order to store their food supplies for the long road that lay before them.

Arya walked away from the fire, grabbing her spare pair of clothes in the process. After searching a few minutes around, she found a large rock to hid behind and change, for she was already shivering from the cold breeze. She then climbed on a tree away from the sleeping figures of the company's members and perched herself upon a thick branch, her eyes immediately drawn by the night sky.
Often she came close enough to lamenting the loss of her former habits, of the days when she was fine enough alone with only the company of the stars to keep her sane. She still hadn't got used to constant company. Her spells of retreat into the familiar comfort of isolation were more frequent than her companions were used to. Yet habits die hard, and long-learned loneliness is not easily breached.

Absently her hands traced over her lower neck, where her mother's pendant was hanging for the past thirteen years, while the memory of the night her mother gave it to her was revived in her mind.

"Arya, come down! Now!"

The young girl deftly climbed down the tree, reluctantly obeying her mother's words after the third time she had called her.

"Glad you could condescend to grace me with your presence," said the woman, one imposing eyebrow raised as her daughter scurried before her.

Arya flashed a grin and gave a half-serious bow. "Always a pleasure."

Persiflage was common among their family, a trait all three of her children had inherited clearly from her, for her husband was ever the brooding type, a trait that ran in his family and was inherited at least by their two older ones. "There is something I want you to have."

"What is it?"

She opened a small, carved box and a silver piece of jewelry made appearance. "This belonged to me for years." Gently taking it in her hands, she offered it to her daughter. "It is something I have cherished greatly. And I think time has come for it to be passed on to the next generation." There was a brief pause here and she smiled to herself as if she recalled something amusing, prompting her daughter to cast her a suspicious look. "But let me tell you a story first..."

It was not of great value, like the Ring of Barahir that Aragorn wore. Arya had just grown emotionally attached to it, since it was the only concrete proof that her family once existed in real life, beside her memory alone. And it was also the most precious item she carried on her along with her cousin's knife. She had seen to always make great use of them both, and neither of them had disappointed thus far.

A distant shuffle cut short her trail of thoughts. She twisted her neck towards the camp just in time to watch Kili don his belt over his trousers and move to sit by the fire next to Thorin. Something stirred in her stomach at the sight of the young dwarf's bare upper half. She could hear the two of them discuss silently, but elected to pay no mind to their words and instead sink into thought again.

Kili's face peeped out of his cloak as he gingerly checked around to see if everyone was asleep, gaze eventually coming to rest upon his uncle—his turn to keep watch obviously. The prince threw the cloak off himself and strode near the fire to put his dried clothes on. Halfway there, his eyes skimmed over each sleeping mound, rounding up a person short.

"Where is she?" he asked, the tunic still hanging on his forearm.

Thorin wrinkled his nose, as though he'd stepped on horse shit first thing in the morning. "I don't see how her whereabouts should concern you."

For an odd, nagging reason Kili wanted her to be within his sight to know that she was safe. She had managed to cut herself in Rivendell. Now that they were in the Wild, who knows what trouble she'd
find to run into. "I shall go find her," he sighed, determined to frogmarch her back to the camp if necessary.

"Perhaps she desires not to be found."

"But if she's away--" the sentence was cut short at the sight of his uncle's dirty look. It had been awhile since he last found himself on the receiving end of one of those.

"Sit down," Thorin ordered a little too gruffly than intended. He remained silent for a while, waiting for Kili to settle himself beside him, and decided to cut to the chase. "I do not want you to get distracted by her, or she by you."

"I am not distracted by her," his nephew protested.

"Then why all this haste to find her?"

Kili's mouth fell open and, dumbfounded, he stared at his uncle unable to comprehend his nonchalance. "Something may happen to her!"

"She is a Ranger," Thorin objected, making the last word to come out somewhat resentful. "There is no situation she could not handle." He skipped to throw a 'supposedly' somewhere in there. "And if something happens, she'll let out a scream, we'll hear it, be up to our feet."

Yet the young one's mind was already made up. And it was not to be unmade. He jumped to his feet, donned the rest his clothing, deftly tied his bow and sword upon his belt, and set course to the opposite direction.

"Kili, I pointed something out to you."

"And I heard it," the brunet replied with a curt nod. "I am just going for a walk." Technically, it was true.

Thorin snorted gloomily as he saw his nephew lope towards the woods near the stream.

Kili reached the place where they had fallen in the water and began searching the ground thoroughly, but sadly with no results. He started to trudge across the bank, following the current of the stream with wide eyes and scanning every inch of the water for a glimpse of something silver.

He roamed for entire hours and dawn was almost upon him, when in his next step a light tinkling reached his ears. His foot moved back and he saw a small piece of silver jewel, deep in mud and almost buried in the dirt. It was that. It had to be that. He realised he had deviated quite far from their camp, sure that she had abandoned any hope to find it the moment she took into consideration the strong current of the stream, as well as the waterfall a few yards ahead. She must have been rather impatient to lay all the blame on him after that and given up the attempt, he thought. Yet if she had moved a little further, her eyes —those quite fine dark eyes, as the little, bothersome voice in his head reminded him persistently— would have seen it and destruction would be avoided.

Doing his best to ignore the evil notion that was planted in his head about her eyes, the prince thanked his good luck for making him step on the pendant, or else any effort to find it would be futile. He rinsed it in the water and then scrutinised it in his hands, distinguishing some patterns and a few words in elvish he could not understand. It was definitely that, he was certain now.

So this is what caused the great mayhem, he thought in amusement. His heartbeat increased as he imagined her reaction. Though in mere seconds, other feelings prevailed upon those. "You don't care about her reaction. You won't care about her reaction. You only want to make her apologise for
what she told you," he corrected in an attempt to reassure himself about the honesty behind his thoughts.

Strong, calloused fingers clasped the pendant tightly as he took the way back, anticipation bubbling under his chest like boiling water.

Upon his arrival, the sun was barely above the eastern horizon and a few others were sluggishly starting to pack things up, sleep etched deeply in their faces. Arya was still absent.

Kili considered his options thoroughly. Much to his dismay, he found that there were not that many, so he reluctantly resigned to go straight to Thorin and ask whether she’d appeared at all since he left. He halted dead in his tracks not a moment later, as though the very thought of her made her materialise right in front of him. He opened his mouth to talk, but the look she gave discouraged him from the attempt. She did seem outright livid, so that might not be the best of timings. He thought to wait until the night when they’d set up camp; then he’d give it to her. His palm tightened around the silver pendant under her heated gaze, mouth struggling not to curl into a smug smile and foil his plan. He discreetly tucked it inside one of his pockets, something more than eager to hear her thanks and apology for her words in the evening.

Arya, on the other hand, was not livid. Not anymore. She’d gone through all five stages of denial and finally come to terms with how things were. She had also told Fili that she would ignore his brother for the sake of everyone’s nerves and, mainly, her own. And that was precisely what she intended to do from now on. Her nerves weren’t made of steel, and she certainly had no inclination whatsoever to test how many Kili-involving-incidents they would endure.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, yes, I know, Kili finding the pendant was very predictable, but it's going to pay off in the long run. Also, it's just a simple piece of jewelry, not magical or something, and it has nothing to do or bears any resemblance to Arwen's Evenstar necklace.

Hats off to anyone who catches the Monty Python bit ;)

As he prepared his things Fili had the privilege of being a witness to a ridiculous game of cat and mouse. Kili's aspirations to become a stalker were never more real, whereas Arya took pains to avoid him at every turn, and with quite the haughtiness at that. Therefore, when opportunity knocked, the blond took full advantage of it.

Believing she'd successfully weaved herself out of Kili's eyesight, Arya let a little too much of her guard down. That was her big mistake, for she'd reckoned without her host. There was no time to scoot off or even pretend she was in the middle of something serious, basically because she was all ready to go and did nothing more than waiting silently for the rest when the blond dwarf crept behind her back.

"Are you being serious?"

She wasn't startled, only shut her eyes in frustration upon realising how much she missed her days of solitude. Turning her head, she let another long-suffering sigh like back at the stream. "I told you that I was going to ignore him."

The dwarf looked at her askance. "You do know that he did not mean to make you lose it, right?"

"Still," she shrugged, "it is lost."

"It merely was an unfortunate turn of events," Fili tried to reason. "Why can't you see the underlying meaning of the gesture? He was worried that you were hurt."

Sensing the absurd direction this discussion was taking, she leveled him with a glare. "I fail to see why he should concern himself with my well-being."

"Arya, he cares—!"

"Thin ice, Fili," she hissed, using thumb and forefinger to emphasize how dangerously close he was to getting tackled to the ground. "Thin ice."

The dwarf abandoned his attempt to reason with her. From what he'd learned about her so far, he'd figured out that she could be more stubborn than a dwarf if she wanted to. He walked away with downcast gaze and left her to her own devices.

It was still early morning, yet they were all up and prepared to begin their hiking again and follow the Great East Road through the Misty Mountains. Their breakfast was quite frugal, as they kept all their supplies for the difficult days and nights that were about to come.

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*Bilbo was standing in the small balcony and gazed over the Valley and the beauty unfolding before his eyes in all its magnificence. He failed to hear the light footsteps approaching.*

"*Not with your companions?*"

*The deep, slow voice startled him and he turned to face the Elf Lord standing there all mighty and impossibly tall. "I... I shan't be missed," he stammered and the words came out quite bitterly.*
"truth is that most of them don't think I should be on this journey."

"Indeed?" Elrond inquired and fixed him with an examining look. "I've heard that hobbits are very resilient."

The hobbit blurted out a half-hearted laugh before narrowing his eyes in disbelief. "Really?"

The elf nodded in the affirmative, studying him more closely now. "I've also heard they are fond of the comforts of home."

Bilbo smiled cautiously. "I've heard that it's not wise to seek the counsel of elves, for they will answer with 'yes' and 'no'," he said in a low voice, casting a conspiratorial glance around.

Elrond gave away no emotion nor reacted to the hobbit's words. Bilbo's face expression faltered for a brief second, thinking he had offended him, but let another awkward laugh when he saw him smile.

"You are very welcome to stay here, if that is your wish," Elrond said with a small pat on the hobbit's shoulder. "Although, I believe you should know that Arya is fervently supportive of you."

He strolled off then and Bilbo was left behind to mull over his words, deeply grateful for whatever the Ranger had said to him. It managed to lift his spirits a bit. He remained there in the small balcony, having as his only company the sound of running water from the waterfalls and the merry chirp of the flying birds, and pondered about what else this journey had in store for them.

Arya glanced over her shoulder at the hobbit and often caught him looking behind. "You can visit again upon your return," she whispered to him.

Startled, Bilbo turned to look at her with something akin to nostalgia. "It was really beautiful," he said and cautiously added with a small sigh, "The Elves were so nice. I did pity them, though, for a moment there." To her quizzical look he explained with a gesture towards the company, "Anyone who saw this lot bathing surely will have nightmares for the rest of their life."

"What do you mean?"

"They took a bath in the fountains, of all places," Bilbo sighed with frustration. "In the buff."

The woman tossed her head back, shoulders shaking with silent laughter. "Oh dear. A bunch of naked dwarves bathing and cavorting in Rivendell's pristine fountains—how come she always missed the best? 'I am so sorry you and my mother's ever prudent kin happened to witness this, although it serves one or two nosy elves right," she said with a roguish smile. "Though, I'm afraid we ought to move on. Thorin's already giving us the side-eye. Let us not give him another reason to frown upon us, shall we?"

He nodded, putting his feet to the task immediately. "I do not believe he thinks of you as an outcast."

Arya scoffed. If he were present at their table during the dinner in Rivendell or at the small conversation she had with the King later that night, he'd surely understand that the dwarves had no trust for her. It was simply in their nature to be leery of people outside their own race and she wouldn't get to change that. "Thorin Oakenshield will never consider someone like me part of his company, regardless of what he says or how he acts. Unless a miracle happens."

He sighed again. "Well, at least you know how to swing a sword. I'm still the one who looks more like a grocer than a burglar."
"And what is wrong with that? Grocer is a respected profession," she said in earnest. "Though I'd like to apologise for neglecting your sword training all these days. We can start again at your earliest convenience."

"Please," he waved off. "You were injured and we all were in dire need of rest, so it is perfectly alright," he reassured and then took an apple out of his pack to eat, not really looking forward to starting his training again.

She left him to enjoy his snack in peace and kept walking silently behind him.

All week long as they travelled, the feeling that something bad was going to happen had been blooming them. The present day was a perfect example of it. The weather was foul, as usual. Raining every morning had turned the road into an endless puddle of mud. The result of this was constant grousing on the dwarves' part, Thorin being grumpier than usual and sulking all the time, Bilbo staying as quiet as humanly possible so as not to provoke the king's temper, and Arya's nerves hanging from a thread.

Implementing the usual distraction once more, she shut all the voices down in her head. She was deep in her thoughts when it began to rain just before dark fell over them, prompting her to put on her hood and tighten the cloak around her shoulders. It was obviously going to be one of those cold nights, wet and windswept; the kind that makes people anxious to find a shelter to hide.

The path they'd taken today was a rutty one, to say the least. It was small, narrow, craggy, and dangerous stones lay on every step. It fit no more than one person to walk at a time, so they formed a line and paced carefully. Thorin was leading alongside Dwalin, and everyone was silent, paying heed to their steps. Suddenly, the storm that was brewing all day erupted when a bolt of lightning tore the sky in two. The sky began pouring all its rage upon them.

Too immersed in the dark landscape the enormous mountains created, the hobbit failed to watch his next step. His surprised scream blended with the sound of a thunderclap when his foot slipped over the edge, but quickly found himself pulled back on stable ground by the Ranger's hand.

"We must find shelter!" Thorin's husky, urgent voice came from the front.

The sky was suddenly illuminated by a lightning bolt, bright enough that it could pass for daylight. Another rumbling thunderclap followed.

"Look out!"

Before they even knew what was going on, an enormous rock crashed against the mountain directly above the path.

"Hold on!"

Question was, onto what?

The mountainside promptly started to collapse on their heads.

"This is no thunder storm. It's a thunder battle!" screamed Balin, gesturing towards the two huge stony figures that collided with each other with a deafening clatter. "Look!"

"Bless me, the legends are true!" exclaimed Bofur, his voice a mix of fright and amazement. "Stone giants!"
Rather large rocks fell down on them, scraping their bodies in the most painful ways. The path cracked and its width became extensively smaller, and the Ranger put her arm in front of the hobbit to push him behind her.

And as if that wasn't enough, the ground beneath their feet started to shake. Suddenly, the mountain began to split in half and several faces froze in utter horror.

"What's happening?" yelled Kili.

"Kili!" Fili yelled back.

Yes, she had promised to ignore him, but it was impossible to continue when natural instincts kicked in. Her heart leaped into her mouth when he began to move away. "Grab my hand!" she cried, tottering dangerously close to the edge in a desperate attempt to tug him along.

The brothers nearly lost it when she slipped off the path. "Arya, no!" they both bellowed and, in frenzy, Fili managed to pull her back literally at the last moment, while a panicky Kili gawped at them as more and more distance was put between them.

The giant's leg, where the rest stood, collided with a rock and Arya saw them jump into another seemingly steadier path. For a second she was relieved, but the feeling didn't have time to settle; it was immediately replaced by fear and giddiness. She felt herself slowly, but steadily, slipping towards the edge as the giant fell into a vortex of restless moving, causing every sense of orientation to fly out of the window.

The others watched the leg tottering in front of their eyes and irrevocably heading to crash on the mountainside.

Arya briefly scanned the place they would be smashed—provided that they were lucky enough so the giant wouldn't collapse before they reached the steady part of the mountain. They could survive if they were quick and careful, for there was a dimple where they could land. What she had failed to notice in all this turmoil was the protruding sharp jag of a rock in the spot she was about to fall, with a great chance of cutting her in half in the best case.

"Jump!" she urged the others.

She clutched Fili's hand, who was almost ready to slip forward, and pulled him back as the giant's leg leaned towards the mountain. Luck hadn't forsaken her after all, seeing that she caught a glimpse of the sharp rock and jumped slightly higher than the others to avoid it. The leg crashed onto the mountainside, splinters flung to every direction, and the huge stone man fell to debris down into the dark abyss.

"No!"

Horrified at the thought of losing one of his nephews, Thorin hardly paid heed to his step as he darted forward, crying Fili's name desperately in the cold air.

Everyone followed after him, rushing to the spot where the giant had collapsed with little care for the heavy rain that soaked their clothes, no matter how thick they were. Thorin experienced a transition from horror to surprise to relief, all in the space of one second. A rare smile lit up his wind-battered face upon seeing everyone alive and he hastily made way towards his nephew.

Arya felt a bunch of rock chunks plopping heavily down on her, enhancing the bruises and cuts she was sure that were already spread across her back. Kili had sprung forward after Thorin's cry, one step too close to trample over those who stood on his way to follow his uncle. His tension flew away
the moment he faced Fili sitting upright with a lost look on his face, probably wondering how the hell did they survive. The two brothers uttered words of relief and crushed each other in a tight embrace, a few seconds longer than it was socially acceptable, until male pride kicked in and there was a mutual, untold decision that such affection was a bit too much for dwarves their age. Fili then moved to help poor Bombur who was stuck on the ground, while Kili grudgingly acknowledged he was too close to having a breakdown after searching for another figure in vain.

Amazing how being in the brick of death exposed someone's priorities, as well as concern for those who were endangered.

After moments of panic that felt like hours, Kili found her sprawled upon a rock, facing down. Her body was spread clumsily on it, limbs either hanging aside or stretched to all directions. He scooted to her side and frantically shifted her in his arms to turn her to face him. It wasn't very helpful that she didn't react at all, and he felt his heart pounding at the unnerving lack of motion.

In a daze, Arya felt someone grab her shoulders and shake her violently. Her eyes snapped open and she jerked upright, facing a pair of very familiar eyes of all things.

"Thank Mahal!" Kili exhaled sharply, a breath he hadn't realise he was holding.

She was still quite nauseated and his strangely kind attitude wasn't helping at all. "Am I dead?" she asked, eyeing him warily.

"No," he sighed in relief, "you're alive--"

"I'm alive and you're happy about it?" Her eyes narrowed in doubt. "This is definitely the end times," she muttered with conviction and, to both their surprise, he found himself laughing quietly before helping her up to her feet.

"Where's Bilbo?" Bofur suddenly yelled. "Where is the hobbit?"

All fourteen eyes searched around in vain, until Dwalin pointed to an edge where Bilbo was hanging. He, Bofur and Arya frantically ran to him, crying in unison, "Grab my hand!"

Bilbo was struggling to hold himself steady and reach one of the hands hanging above his head, though every attempt was futile. Then Thorin jumped down the cliff himself, grabbing the hobbit and helping him up to the others. He would slip further down if it wasn't the Ranger's hand along with Dwalin's and both his nephews pulling them back as well. Once he was safe, he looked at her and clapped her slightly in the shoulder as thanks. She was quite surprised to receive such a gesture from him and returned to the spot she had landed before to collect some of her scattered stuff.

"I thought we lost our burglar," Dwalin panted out.

"He's been lost ever since he left home. He should never have come," Thorin accused gruffly. "He has no place amongst us--"

"Bloody hell," Arya snapped, "save it for when we're not standing on the edge of a cliff with rock giants fighting above our heads!"

Thorin felt his anger rise but decided there was no time for petty arguments. Well, this and she was partly right, for they still were in danger. With a brisk turn of his head, he fortunately caught a glimpse of the opening of a cave a little down the path and nervously hurried to shove himself to the inside.

"We have to find somewhere else to stay for the night," he heard the Ranger say behind him.
"Why? This looks safe enough," came Dwalin's protest. He was quite tired and worn to have the
courage to keep searching for another cave with the giants' battle raging out there.

"It is too close to the High Pass," explained Arya, her eyes gingerly flickering around, although she
limited only to say that.

There had been relative peace and no other recorded event of importance had come to light since the
last battle that had taken place in Dimrill Dale—a valley on the east side of the Misty Mountains,
otherwise known as Azanulbizar—for most of the surviving orcs had fled further to the north to
plague numerous abandoned places all over Eriador. Yet word had it, that a considerable number of
goblins had escaped Moria's downfall and now hid and thrived in an underground kingdom placed
deep beneath the High Pass.

For a mere second Thorin seemed to dither and considered following her lead, but he couldn't bring
himself to risk another fatal meeting with the giants. "Search to the back," he eventually told Dwalin.
"Caves in the mountains are seldom unoccupied."

The husky dwarf obeyed immediately. "There's nothing here," his voice emerged from the back after
a minute.

"Thorin, Gandalf brought me along for a reason. Please, heed my words, we must move on and find
shelter somewhere else. The area near the Pass is not as safe as it once used to be."

"Should you be able to find something better, be my guest," he grumbled, the exhaustion obvious in
his voice. "We shall rest here until your return."

She fought off a whimper aloud and simply crossed her arms over her chest, muttering rather
grudgingly, "Very well."

Some of the dwarves were slightly annoyed by their leader's rude attitude towards the hobbit earlier,
though none seemed to be now. Yet she was something more than irked by his inability to cooperate
and made a point to it by doing abrupt moves while rearranging her weapons and cloak, suppressing
the urge to start throwing rocks with the king's head as a target.

Not moments later Fili leapt out at her side, a coy look flitting across his face. "Thank you for
holding me back there."

"I wouldn't let you fall. The last thing I need is another loss weighing on my conscience."

A weird smile formed on his face. "Two, if we count that one's brother in."

Her hands paused what they were doing and she felt small tweaks in her stomach. "I know how it is
to lose a brother, Fili. I've lost two," she mumbled darkly. "I would never wish that feeling upon
another soul."

"Is this the only reason you scrambled to bring him with us?" he asked thoughtfully. "So we could
die together?"

Arya wasn't sure about the sincerity of her thoughts, less so about that of her words. So she said
nothing. She'd reached the point of doubting the motives of her own actions. Her mind was a
tumbling mess and, oddly enough, it had nothing to do with the swirling of the giant's leg. She
genuinely forgot to give him an answer sunk as she was into her thoughts.

Fili watched as she mechanically pulled her hood back on and started to plod towards the entrance,
curious that she dodged the question. "Where are you going?" he demanded, drawing his brother's
attention in the process.

"To find a place for us to rest for the night, where I shan't have the feeling that we are being tracked."

Kili nervously circled them, blocking her path like a boulder. "You mean to go out there all by yourself?"

"He's right," Fili piped up. "We are coming with you."

A silent witness to the little exchange, Thorin decided it was time to intervene in order to spare himself something akin to a second panic attack. "You're going nowhere," he said with a deadpan expression. "Take out our bedrolls."

She refused any potential offer of a cohort with a glare before an argument erupted.

"But-"

"Bear in mind that I've survived alone for quite the time before meeting you. Now, if you'll excuse me." Walking past Fili and slinking away from Kili in a swift motion when he tried to stop her again, she exited the cave and left them bewildered.

"Get some sleep," Thorin ordered starkly. "We start at the first light."

Balin took him aside, his head tilted to the side in confusion. "We were to wait in the mountains until Gandalf joined us—that was the plan."

"Plan's changed," Thorin said dourly. "Bofur, take the first watch."

"The knucklehead," Kili thought for the hundredth time and shut his eyes, letting an exasperated sigh. Every time sleep was about to claim him, he would see the very same thing. Arya walking across the narrow path, slipping on the rocks and falling into the darkness. "No, no. You are the knucklehead," he corrected himself a while later. "You should have followed the bloody fool wherever she's off to." He had reached new levels of worry, which he didn't know he possessed, and was constantly shifting awkwardly from one side to the other.

As if these thoughts and the feeling of extreme uneasiness were being broadcasted to the rest of the world, Fili found himself mere seconds away from kicking him in the shin. All the huffing noises Kili made every other minute echoed in the silence of the night almost as loudly as the thunders outside, pulling him out of the sweet dream world every time he was ready to drift off.

"With that blasted sighing of yours, it's a wonder anyone in the cave sleeps at all."

The brunet fidgeted a bit and his eyes flickered over the sleeping mound with the blonde mane next to him. "What?" he murmured, startled.

"You're about as subtle as a sledgehammer is what I'm saying."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

Fili took a deep, calming breath. "Brother dear, for the past seventy-seven years I've been unfortunate enough to share a room with you, and there hasn't been a single night that you didn't sleep like a log. Now she is going away for an hour—you're like a bear in a trap. Stop worrying," he whispered drowsily, "she will come back."
Kili snorted, keeping his expression impassive. "You know not whereof you speak."

The blond scoffed. "Typical response of one in denial. Are you pining from afar, as well?"

"I most certainly do not pine anyone from afar!"

"If not now, I wager you will someday." Fili risked a glance at him, and this time he outright laughed. "Now, save the moody stare for somebody else. It has stopped working on me since long ago."

The glower remained, even after the warning. "Sometimes you are truly insufferable."

"Maybe," the blond prince yawned and turned his back to him. "It is for your own good, though."

The Ranger was unable to find another safer place and she decided to return, resign seamed all over her face. Bofur was startled at first when a hooded figure entered the cave, but relaxed as soon as he realised it was her. "Not a good day to search for shelter, is it?" he said quietly.

Her eyes flickered over the king's figure, sending a glare so severe that he could possibly feel something poking him, and she let a disheartening huff. "Finding anything remote to that round these parts would be very fortunate," she mumbled. "And luck is a concept that seems to be in constant clash with my very existence."

At that, Bofur coughed not so discreetly to hide a small laughter. He recalled a memory of some weeks ago, when they discussed about her with Fili. The lad was right, she was quite the company to have in a long journey, despite her being grim at times and look as if she carried all the burdens of the world on her shoulders.

She was still tense from the confrontation with Thorin and her anger had not subsided in the slightest, on top of a big bubble of frustration due to her unsuccessful attempt to find a better place for them. So she offered to keep Bofur some company until sleep came to her, if it would at all, and placed herself on his opposite next to the entrance before taking off the tight bodice that still made her skin painfully itchy. It was a matter of principle to keep her sword and knives on her belt, though, so as to always be vigilant and not linger over strapping them on, lest any danger hovered over the horizon; only her bow and quiver she set aside for practical reasons. Putting the star-shaped clasp that held the cloak around her neck into a small pocket on the side of her boot —the same in which she held her cousin's knife— she let the cloak plop on the ground and then tiredly slumped back on it.

"What did you do before the quest?" she asked, keeping her voice very low to avoid wake someone up.

"Ah," Bofur said and flashed a bright smile. "I'm a toymaker, m'lady. One of the best," he continued shyly, although there was a hint of pride in his tone, "if I may add."

Arya lightly bobbed her head, not at all surprised at how fitting it sounded. "It suits you," she praised. He was always in an optimistic mood; it was equal parts annoying as it was enviable.

"Dear old cousin Bifur and meself were crafting mechanical toys. Very famous in the market of Dale, they were."

"My little brother adored those. Once, my mother had bought him one—a small pony with a rider on top of it. I remember him carrying it everywhere," she laughed under her breath, good memories flooding her mind, though after a few moments her laughter faded. "He was holding it even during his last moments."
The dwarf brooded about the young woman's past. She had lived through bad situations in her life and she was not supposed to. He gave her a sympathetic smile and watched the sleeping figure of someone who was laid down next to her unconsciously shift closer and sprawl his head on her stomach.

With eyes wide in terror Arya looked askance at the sleeping form of Kili, wondering after how long that should start to be considered a threat. Apart from the obvious loathing he harbored for her—as per his own words—she had no doubt there were moments he simply wanted to throw her into the nearest river and let the water do all the rest. However, his fairly relieved reaction upon seeing that she wasn't injured earlier had befuddled her tremendously. That, coupled with the current frown on his face and elevated heartbeat—signs of a bad dream most likely—managed to pull whatever strings had remained in that cavity in her chest that apparently wasn't that hollow after all. All too familiar with nightmares herself, she took pity on him and made no move to roll him away.

The symmetry of his face was disrupted by those two recalcitrant curls that had got in his eyes; it irked her. Fingers brushed them out of the way, but that didn't wake him. Mechanically her hand slumped on his chest, not knowing where else was an acceptable place to go, and he still did not wake. His hand came to rest on top, pressing hers onto his sternum, and she felt his heartbeat slowly return to normal after a while.

She didn't know what came over her, but... would it be that bad to just let him sleep there and not disturb him? It would be only for a night after all, and no one would pay mind to it in the morning, mainly because she'd take care not to let anyone else witness this... this downright shocking sight. And all this because she couldn't find it in her to move him away just yet.

"The lad likes ye, y'know," Bofur whispered suddenly, allowing a faint smirk to creep up to his face. A titter evaded her mouth and she made a dismissive gesture. "Doubt it. 'Tis just that I'm probably warmer than the cold ground and he's craving a soft pillow."

She was unbelievably tempted to wake Kili up so that he could reassure Bofur himself, but decided against it. Kili was using her as a pillow now and would return to hating her in the morning. This was simply the order of things and she doubted it'd change soon.

Bofur was about to inform her that she had used Kili as a pillow already a couple of times, but saw her eyes slowly close and thought it better to let her rest.

Still caught somewhere between dream and reality, Kili felt his head laying against something rather smooth and warm than the cold, stony ground he had fallen asleep on. His eyes opened in tiny slits, facing a small, familiar hand entwined with his own on his chest first, of all things. With a sigh of relief he realised Arya had finally retur-

"Why in the name of hell are we holding hands?" he thought frantically. "Where did that come from?" This was news, and pretty disturbing at that. What on earth had possessed them both? Aside from the hands it was also a little alarming that he was actually sleeping on her, and it made him wonder how he'd ended up there without her kicking him away in the first place.

The part that mostly alarmed him, however, was that his cheek was squishing something. Something soft and round. A blush covered his face and he shrunk back in genuine fright upon realising what it was. He sharply removed his head from that part of her body, slightly lifting it to face her and proceeding to thank all the gods he knew, for her eyes were still shut. Had she been awake and found him hovering over that area, he definitely didn't wish to know the way she'd choose to kill him, although he was pretty certain it'd be a very torturing one.
Arya, now, was anything but asleep. In fact, she felt him fidget around so nervously that he ended up squishing places he had no business being so close to.

"Do you have ants in your pants?"

The whisper, as subtle as it was annoyed, had Kili still on the spot like a child caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"Unless you plan to stop bouncing your head on me," she continued with eyes still closed, trying to sound strict, "move your arse away."

Angrily he looked up and offered a silent curse to the skies that couldn't be seen, yet for a preposterous reason that originated from the deepest places of his subconscious, he did not move — as she most kindly pointed out— his arse away. Thus their sleeping arrangements were maintained, except that his face now was in a secure distance from touching forbidden places again. Just about then he thought his human pillow shook with a breathless laugh, although he couldn't quite put his finger on it, seeing as he was already half-asleep again. Little did he know that all this time she was trying to focus on the disconcerting sound her fingers produced as they rhythmically tapped the stony ground—a rather difficult task, considering the company's loud snoring that easily rivaled some of the thunders.

Bofur was dawdling from one side of the cave to the other and missed the whole scene between the two. When he eventually returned to his spot next to the entrance, a shuffling noise came from the back. The Ranger's eyes gingerly popped open and cast a wary glance at the dwarf on watch who paid it back, both wondering for the source of the noise, until they saw the hobbit hurrying to pack his stuff as quietly as he could.

Bilbo loaded the bag on his shoulders, grabbed his walking stick and silently weaved his way through the sleeping members towards the cave's entrance, careful not to make any noise, only to find Bofur and the Ranger staring at him inquiringly.

"Where do ye think you're going?"

The hobbit hesitated at first, but set his jaw straight once he pondered on the events of the day. "Back to Rivendell."

"No, Bilbo, don't leave." It held a far more pleading tone than the one she was aiming for, but she didn't seem to care much.

"Ye can't go back now. You're part of the company," Bofur said eagerly. "You're part of us."

"I'm not though, am I?" he asked bitterly. "Thorin said I should never have come and he was right. I am not a Took, I'm a Baggins. I don't know what I was thinking—"

"What your last name is has hardly anything to do with who you are," Arya told him with a solemn look. A thought crossed her mind right then, and she seriously considered the moment perfect to walk over where Thorin lay and smack the back of his fat head; a mighty smack for the high and mighty King under the Mountain—it sounded exquisitely fitting. If he had kept his mouth shut or, even better, never said what he told Bilbo outside the cave, none of this would be happening right now. "Please, stay. Do not take Thorin's words to heart—they were spoken in ire."

Perhaps they were, perhaps they were not. Bilbo didn't know how to interpret them, although he had inkling of what might have triggered the dwarf king to speak as such, recalling a conversation he had overheard in Rivendell and the information he got from it.
"I understand why ye want to leave," Bofur fervently insisted. "You're homesick--"

"No, you don't!" the hobbit snapped in a low voice. "None of you do. You're dwarves. You are used to never settling in one place, not belonging anywhere!" He immediately regretted his words and awkwardly cleared his throat. "I-- I am sorry, I didn't--"

"No you're right... We don't belong anywhere," a whisper left Bofur's lips as he shot a pensive glance at his sleeping comrades. "I wish you all the luck in the world," he suddenly turned to face him, a kind smile tugging his mouth. "I really do."

The hobbit turned to bid goodbye to the Ranger. "I am truly sorry... but I don't think the Wild is a place for someone like me." He somehow felt like he had disappointed her, because of the fact that she believed in him; believed he would follow through the quest.

"I honestly think you are mistaken. You are free if you wish to leave, though," she said softly and smiled at him as he was ready to walk out of the cave, until a light caught her eye. "Hold up, there..."

Bofur noticed it as well. "What's that?" he pointed at the hobbit's waist.

Bilbo looked down at his middle, where his sword was glowing blue. The realisation came later than panic. He could feel it taking over, paralysing him.

The ground rumbled underneath them.

Every second stretched to eternity, or so it felt to Arya, who realised unfortunately too late that the sound her tapping fingers made was because the ground was hollow. The first thing that came to mind was to free herself of Kili's capture. The prince was roused by a hand shaking his shoulder violently. He locked eyes with her, still caught somewhere between sleep and reality, disappointed to be woken. For the briefest of moments he cracked a lopsided smile, trying to remember what his latest dream was about, until he saw her horrified expression and her face avert from his own in alert.

Arya's eyes hastily searched the cave to find the king who, as she suspected, wasn't so much asleep as one would hope. Her earlier warning confirmed, she raised an eyebrow and shot him a look that was pure I-told-you-so.

It did not take Thorin more than two seconds to spot her spiky gaze. It made him dread any sort of snipe about certain people not heeding their guide's advice, more than anything, that would undoubtedly follow at some point. He was something more than tired and had no desire whatsoever to have his mistakes rubbed in his face.

The ground groaned and shuddered again as the sand started to slip into orifices. The two of them paused, their attention on it as if transfixed by the motion.

"Wake up," his booming voice startled everyone that was still asleep. "Wake up!"

The ground was cleaved in two. Bilbo lost his footing almost immediately and everyone else followed soon after. Deep caverns and darkness engulfed them like a tomb.

Chapter End Notes

Title taken from the well known song by The Rolling Stones. The greatest song ever. Well, in my humble opinion at least.
They rolled through large tunnels in a mess of thrashing limbs and all kinds of weapons and clothes being tossed about, punctuated with grunts of complaint whenever a tumble was followed by a harsh bounce off of the stone walls. At the end of the ordeal awaited them a relatively small round cage, in which they landed one on top of the other. Splendid. As if the bruises and hits from the thunder battle a few hours ago weren't enough. Luckily, Bilbo was the last to fall atop everyone along with the Ranger and didn't get squashed under the accumulated weight. Unluckily, it resulted in Arya being the first to get grabbed and towed away by a pair of extremely disgusting hands.

"Look out!"

Before they could even turn a group of goblins swarmed towards them, circling them like hawks hunting for prey. It was a beastly sight, the lot of them.

"Take your bloody hands off," Arya growled, blindly kicking and slashing at any limb available of whoever attempted to touch her.

Three goblins seized her from the arms, threw the knife away and slapped her on the face to compensate for any cuts they or their comrades had suffered. "Master will be pleased with her," said one as he trailed his finger over the redden mark that formed on her cheek.

"Don't touch her!" Fili grunted furiously.

The warning was all but heeded. The goblins proceeded to shove and kick them over small, ramshackle bridges, leading them before their king. They were clustered in a stranglehold and stripped off their weapons, which were collected in a great pile.

The Ranger was standing next to Thorin, not bothering to hide her distaste for the horrid audience, until something shiny among the pile of weapons that did not resemble a weapon at all caught her eye. Her jaw fell at the sight of the numerous silver spoons, forks, candlesticks, glasses and other loot of elvish making. "Oh, for crying out loud!" she mumbled with a fed up eye-roll.

"Just a couple of keepsakes," Nori shrugged innocently.

In her head she hadn't stopped cursing the fates all the way down there. Her new bow and quiver with the arrows had scattered during the fall, and now the goblins took away her sword and daggers. At least she had the foresight to always keep her cousin's knife in that small, hidden sheath on her boot, so that no one else could ever take a hold of, or even see it. For if it was found... well, that would not end nicely.

To his mighty surprise, Kili found himself with a blind grip on her wrist to prevent anyone from snatching her away. He felt her clenching and unclenching her fist, the bones of her hand budging vigorously, ready to spurt forward, grab her sword and go into a killing spree. She was oblivious to his grip. The cogs in her mind were already spinning, working to come up with a plan to escape, when her attention was drawn by the atrocity of what seemed to be the goblin king—and she was being forgiving with the term. It was a most hideous sight, if ever she'd seen one. His oozy dewlap, directly proportional to the revolt stemming from her nightmares, was idly dangling and wiggling back and forth and side to side like a bag full of jelly.
"Who would be so bold as to come armed into my kingdom?" he sputtered. "Spies? Thieves? Assassins?"

Close enough, in all three accounts.

"Dwarves, Your Malevolence."

"Dwarves?" the king asked suspiciously. "Well, don't just stand there. Search them!" he ordered. "Every crack, every crevice!"

The look on Arya's face might as well pierce through two feet thick iron. Her temper was just shy of frayed as she tried in vain to repel the filth around her, unable to help the thought of what items she could shove up their very own cracks and crevices.

The dwarves' snarls could be mistaken for those of wargs when the goblins began searching them. Kili thought that his brother's likeness towards her was rubbing off on him, but couldn't deny being a step away from suffering a meltdown at having been a spectator of several pairs of hands groping her in places she shouldn't be touched. The retaliation was automatic, if anything. At some point he might as well be punching his own arm and he couldn't tell.

"Touch me once more and I swear, 'assassin' may very soon enter my list of qualities."

Bollocks, Kili cursed to himself, closing his eyes and clutching her hand even tighter. If she just for once kept her pretty mouth shut and stayed hidden, there was a small chance the goblins wouldn't take her away. But it was her so, no, that was not in fate's imminent plan to happen. Also, the fact that she was taller than all of them and her head stuck out like a lone pine in a boundless plain did not help any either.

"What are you doing in these parts?"

The audience remained as silent as tombs.

"There's also a female amongst them," a creature announced eagerly, breaking the silence. "Human, she seems to be."

"A female, you say?" The goblin king's face lit up, his eyes filled with a beaming gleam. "Bring her forth."

His subjects rushed to haul said woman forward, only to find resistance from five separate dwarves trying to pull her back, on top of her shoving away anyone that dared to pull her forward. Alas, any attempt was woefully inadequate.

"Take your bloody hands off!" Kili barked furiously, elbowing and punching every goblin that got in his way.

But the creatures outnumbered them and eventually snatched her from the dwarves' grip. They slammed her on the floor with a loud thud, constantly kicking her to roll in front of their master's feet.

Once she was where requested, a grisly hand clutched her middle and she found herself hovering mid-air, faced with his nibs himself. The atrocity of a king looked her up and down with a nothing short of perverted look. Arya, for her part, was too busy gagging at the smell. Obviously she didn't expect him to smell of honeysuckle, but that stench truly breathed new life into the word rotten.

"Are you going to reveal what a bunch of dwarves and a human female in their midst do here?"
"You'd better tell me," warned the king, gradually tightening his grip around her, "before I start to torture her."

It was as though their mouths had been sewed shut.

"Very well. A few minutes with us might change your mind." The crowd promptly erupted in cheers and a wicked smirk split his face as he pointed to the woman, "Start with her."

The Ranger let a long-suffering sigh, looking over her shoulder to Thorin and mouthing "Not a word." She could see his jaw drop a little in equal parts genuine puzzlement and mild dread, but even he felt somewhat alarmed by the fact that she was going to be tortured to give information. Fleeting looks of concern had spread on most of the dwarves' faces as they considered the cruel intentions the king had for the woman, dreading what was to follow.

Rather pleased, the king browsed his new trophy. "Tell me, are you any kind of a fighter?"

The woman faked a laugh. "You take your bloody hands off and I'll show you."

A chuckle broke out of the goblin's mouth. "Now listen to that, she's threatening me!" he said with pure delight. "Aren't you a wee pretty thing. How about we make her prettier, eh? Shall we... say, draw something on her?" he postulated, prompting all the goblins to cheer in excitement, and then turned to her with a disgustingly evil smile, hoping for the first signs of fright on her face. "Still unwilling to speak, then?" Apparently, she was. "You will suffer."

Arya bared her teeth at him. "If you're expecting me to blink, it's going to be a long day."

The challenge was set, the king accepted it, the audience cheered again, and Kili totally lost it. A straight face and his temper could only be kept for so long. Defying danger and whatnot, he flung himself against the king like a madman as the latter squeezed the woman like a lemon to get juice out of it. It took both Thorin's hands and few of the goblins to stop him.

Moving on with his plan of torture, the king reached to grab a sword from the collected pile and flounced back, his figure menacingly looming above her. The dwarves cried out in protest when the goblins held her hands and legs, roughly tugging at the sleeves and the lower part of her tunic up. Then they pulled, each one toward himself, causing her lean figure to stretch remarkably to all directions. The irony was tragically funny, seeing as it was that sword that drew the lot for the task. He dragged her own blade in an excruciatingly slow and painful manner across her partly exposed arms and midriff, forming scratches at some points and slashes at others.

Her face betrayed nothing. Every hint of emotion was well concealed under a façade of gritty, resolute apathy. Only her clenched fists and gritted teeth could be taken as a sign of pain. If anything, she was outright furious. But it was true; she was overwhelmed by a searing pain every time he found a new spot to leave a scar or a deep cut on. In retrospect, she ought to be thanking the fates that they were using her weapon and not one of their own, for they oft dabbed their blades in poison like orcs did.

"Speak, girl!" the king ordered harshly.

Arya spat his already ludicrous face in disgust.

For an odd reason her spunky attitude caught Thorin by surprise. He wondered if even half the Men he'd been acquainted with in all his years would be brave enough to endure what she was submitted to without willing to spill the beans and save their hide. It was a rare feeling he got, akin to that every
time his nephews did something praiseworthy, although his pride proved too strong to let it show.

"An answer, or your head," he said with finality. "I assume you have a preference."

The crowd erupted in encouraging yells. Again, she remained silent.

When the king took a harder grip of the blade, threateningly scraping the skin of her neck, Thorin had to use help from both Bifur and Bofur to hold Kili back from launching against him, while Dwalin and Oin did the same for Fili. It'd be of no use to let them attack, seeing as they had no weapons on them and would probably end up dead along with her. Not all dwarves, though, were moved by the sight of the goblin getting ready to take her head and life.

A wince of concern flitted across Arya's face. No intention did she have to die in his hands; she had escaped far worse situations and would by no means let this poor excuse of an interrogation get under her skin. She didn't know how or why, but chance for escape would present itself again. This really wasn't the most convenient of times to afford dying.

"You're a stubborn one, aren't you?" said the king with a twisted smile. "Since I'm feeling quite merciful today, I shall bestow a favour upon you—a quick death. Any last words to share with the audience?"

"Consider washing yourself every once in a while," Arya said dryly. "It'd do you more good than harm."

The king's previous twisted smile gave its place to a furious scowl.

"Wait!" Thorin roared and strutted forward.

The blade ceased barely an inch above her neck. The king stared in question at the speaker and made a vague hand gesture. The goblins promptly dropped the woman down, rather unceremoniously if anything. She cursed upon impact. In an unnerving fit of kindness, Thorin put his hands under her arms and went to help her up, although he was too cautious to avoid any further contact, eye or not.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?" he muttered angrily.

"Buying some time until I or someone else comes up with a way to get out of here," she grumbled through her teeth.

This time he forced both himself, by sheer force of will, and her, by giving a light shake to her arms, to look each other in the eye. "This is your idea of buying time?" he said dramatically, and she could almost see that passing thought of a new round of exasperation for having agreed to her coming along.

Unable to hide her surprise the Ranger made to disentangle herself from his grip, only to have the goblins' hands suddenly grab a fistful of her hair, and doing that in her stead. They sent her to the ground anew and kicked her all the way back to the dwarves as though she was their plaything to kick around. She managed to snatch some of them by their necks and punch away her frustration, but more kept coming and pushed her down. She was slumped on all fours like a wounded animal, body close to giving up under the weight of all the goblins above her, when a pair of strong arms mercifully dragged her out of the stifling pressure, forcing the creatures away from her. She finally hauled herself up, spitting and wiping the blood from some of her wounds in the process, and glanced at the proverbial rescuer.

Kili's eyes were rigorously scanning her body, gradually losing the number of cuts and scratches that marred it. He pulled her behind his back and took a hold of her hand again, white gathering at the
corners of his eyes as he shuddered in anger. The dwarves beside her offered looks of sympathy, whereas the goblins kept gawping at her with twisted smiles. It made an excellent job riling her.

Fili sneaked his way beside them and squeezed her shoulder. "Are you alright?" he asked, genuinely worried. She only gave a curt nod.

"Well, well, well... look who it is. Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror, King under the Mountain, as I live and breathe. What a surprise!" The goblin gave a mocking bow. "Oh, but I'm forgetting. You don't have a mountain, and you're not a king—which makes you... nobody, really. I know someone who would pay a pretty price for your head," he continued with a snide smirk on his face. "Just your head, with nothing attached. Perhaps you know of whom I speak. An old enemy of yours; a pale orc, astride a white warg."

The Ranger's eyebrows knitted together in thought as her brain scrambled to piece together all the information. According to Balin, Azog had sworn to wipe the line of Durin. Therefore, a bounty on Thorin's head meant that both his nephews' lives were equally worth and were in jeopardy, lest their kinship became known. Her grip on Kili's hand suddenly tightened, as did the one on Fili's arm, and the two brothers shot her quizzical looks for which she refused to give explanation.

Thorin's look was the definition of loathing as he glared at the huge goblin. "Azog the Defiler was slain in battle long ago," he said venomously.

"So you think his defiling days are done, do you?" the king scoffed with a mocking laugh and proceeded to send word to Azog of his prize and commanded the goblins to start to sing.

Arya wondered what was worse, with her opinion divided between being trapped, forced to hear the goblins' appallingly gruesome singing, or the fact that Azog would unleash a blasted attack against them.

One of the creatures was running through the pile of the weapons and, upon finding Thorin's sword, Orcrist, he squealed like a cat whose tail was squished. Silence ensued as the song was cut in half.

"I know that sword, it is the Goblin-Cleaver!" the king yelled and recoiled back to his throne in fear. "The blade that sliced a thousand necks! Slash them! Kill them all!"

Mayhem and chaos didn't do justice to what ensued. All the goblins lunged at them, whipping and beating them to the ground. The Ranger was trying to repel all the creatures around her, kicking away as many as she could. Every goblin smacking one of the dwarves, she kicked or punched it away. She saw them whipping someone violently and her wrath burst upon noticing the distinctive blue tunic. She launched forward, grabbing each goblin that stood in her way and strangling it with her own hands so viciously that someone might think they were made of cream.

Kili was trampled on the ground when he spotted her making her way towards him, but at some point stumble and fall down with a group of goblins wielding whips rushing to get to her. A dozen others started to tug so fiercely at her hair that the dwarf thought they were going to tear it off her body, possibly along with her head. He was already halfway there, shoving all those who were above him, before he even realised what he was doing. He crept to where she was trampled under disgusting feet, punching and kicking as he went, and leaned his weight above her to shield her from the strikes. He paid no mind to the fact that his back was starting to get torn to shreds, for his clothes were obviously thicker compared to the tenuous cloth of hers. The only thing he felt was the front of his tunic getting drenched from the blood pouring out of the wounds on her back, as well as her haggard breathing—or what could remotely be described as breathing—that was muffled against the ground.
Arya felt a weight on her back right before she got enmeshed in someone's embrace, and the pain from the whips suddenly ceased. A brief second later his groans were piercing her ears and she felt his body twinge against hers as he used himself to shield her. That bloody idiot.

"You thickheaded imbeci–" she tried to yell, frantically struggling to roll on her back, yet only managed to have him push her harder on the ground.

Suddenly, everything stopped. A dazzling light filled the inside of the mountain, accompanied by a force that brought everyone on the ground. She looked up and thought to seeing Gandalf's figure in the source of the great force, walking to their place. "Take up arms!" he yelled. "Fight!"

The dark-haired dwarf moved off her, and with quivering forearms she crawled next to the pile of weapons to put her daggers in their sheaths and take her sword in hand. A less haggard Kili supported his weight on his knees, taking a glimpse of her tie her weapons on, relieved that she still had even the ability to move, let alone walk. Everyone was trying to help whoever was standing near them to get up and in a rioting uproar the dwarves grabbed the weapons and began to pass them to their respective owners.

The goblin king glanced at the new addition in his kingdom, the figure of a tall, bearded man with a pointed hat, although it was something he carried that made his eyes bulge. "He wields the Foehammer!" he screamed, frightened. "The Beater!"

A stout goblin along with two others suddenly yanked Arya and tackled her to the ground, making a point of whipping her her back repeatedly.

Kili was thrown his sword from his brother when he heard her shrieks. His eyes went wide with shock when he saw the goblins brutally thrashing her on the ground, and her writhing and twitching violently in pain. The part of the tunic that covered her back was now ripped off and large whipping scars were formed under it, while the cloth had turned into a vivid scarlet from the blood stains. The rage that was stoked within his chest found a way out and finally erupted as he rushed against the goblins, avidly parceling them in pieces with phenomenal vengeance.

Seeing her trampled on the ground and his brother fighting three goblins above her, Fili ran to their defense. He grabbed her waist, sprawled her over his shoulder and followed Gandalf, who was yelling and urging them to run. He needed not be told twice to comply. Thorin was now slicing a part of the goblin king's arm, sending him down the bridge into the deepest caves, and the rest were putting a valiant fight to get away.

It all happened so fast, she didn't realise she was being carried on someone's back before cracking an eye open and facing a mane of blond hair.

"How about you put me down so we can both fight?" a wry voice commented in Fili's ear and he briefly glanced at her in surprise.

The hesitation in his eyes and moves was almost palpable, though eventually he took her off his shoulder. He wasn't sure if she was well enough, still feeling the warmth of her blood that poured all over his hands, but it would be obviously profitable if they both fought. And the growls of the goblins that followed them through the infinite bridges sounded closer and closer by the second.

They were divided into groups that ran in two different bridges, each one of them handling the number of opponents he could. Arya's eyes swiftly searched around for the two brothers and found Fili marching behind Dwalin, sending some creatures off the bridge, while fear flushed in her when she did not find his brother. That fear turned to full blown horror as soon once she spotted him, alone in the front of the line and arrows literally swarming in his direction. Genuine surprise flitted across
his face when he managed to repel them with his sword, although one was flying directly to his abdomen—he didn't have enough time to avoid it. She didn't fiddle further and immediately hurtled forward, enfolding her arms around his waist and crossing her daggers in his front.

The arrow hit straight on them and forcefully bounced off, while a fairly surprised Kili glanced over his shoulder to seek his mysterious savior. He had a pretty darn good idea who that might be, judging by the delicate bloodied fingers around the daggers. "You are--"

"Yes, yes, reckless and irresponsible, I know," she huffed with an impatient nod. "Can we fight later about it?"

Kili felt her drawing her hands away. You are unbelievable, he thought with an incredulous shake of his head, and promptly grabbed a ladder next to him. Thankfully she put two and two together at once, shoved the daggers back into their sheaths, wielded her sword with one hand and braced the ladder with other. The plan proved fruitful, the blade slicing the goblins' heads stuck between the steps as they pushed forward.

They reunited with the rest of the company that were on the other bridge, everyone swinging their swords or axes around, and goblin heads and limbs seemed to fly to every direction. At some point they found themselves flying on a moving bridge, trying to jump to the other end. Fili and Arya were the last to make the leap and she was thankful that Dwalin was waiting to pull them forward before the wooden boards started to collapse below them.

"Come on!" Gandalf urged, wresting a huge rock with his staff.

"Push!" Dwalin grunted.

The rock rolled in front of them, smashing and plastering the goblins on their way and turning them into not recommended for eating jelly. It bought them some time to escape to another bridge, only to be ambushed by other goblins that crept up through small caves around the mountain. They came to an abrupt halt when the goblin king sprouted in front of them, casting pieces of the wooden boards everywhere.

The Ranger was on guard for the back of their group, scanning the number of goblins surrounding them. Dwalin, Thorin and Kili lurked beside her, all three's swords and axes in vigilance.

"They are too many," muttered Kili and then grabbed her arm to push her behind him in case the goblins attacked. Bloody hell, this woman made him fear for the worst that could happen.

She glowered at the creatures with a warning flourish of her sword. "Have a little faith," she muttered back, eyes dark with lethal intentions hidden behind them.

"You thought you would escape me," the king yelled, battering his animal skull mace in front of Gandalf. "What are you going to do now, wizard?"

Gandalf poked the king's eye with his wand and slashed across his paunch.

That did the trick.

Arya felt the ground under her feet starting to reel. Before she could register what was going on, the king fell dead with a cut throat and the bridge collapsed because of the amassed weight, crashing on lower scaffolds. Their falling was intercepted by the constantly constricting sides of the mountain, but the bridge eventually smashed on the bottom. All smithereens of the once called bridge landed upon their heads, pushing them down, and everyone grunted from the weight on them. Gandalf was the first to rise from the debris, dusting the pieces of woods away from his cloak.
"Well, that could've been worse," Bofur's ever optimistic voice emerged through the ruins.

All the dwarves practically screeched when the bridge shattered in pieces with them under it, after the dead goblin king landed on top of it. Arya had ended up under Dwalin, groaning in pain at her wounded body squashed between him and the broken wood pieces. It was remarkable how she was still alive and had not suffocated under all this weight.

"You've got to be joking," Dwalin grumbled.

"Get–" a muffled groan came under his head, "Get off... of me, damn you." The stout dwarf turned his head to see the woman crushed under his back. He quickly shifted around and stood up, pulling away the boards that weighed her down.

Kili was a few feet away and struggled to step away from the pile of wood, trying to regain consciousness of his surroundings. He lifted his gaze up and saw the whole goblin town march towards them, sheer panic flooding behind his eyes as he shrilled, "Gandalf!"

"We can't fight them, they are too many!" Dwalin panted as he pulled a doubtfully conscious Nori with him.

"Only one thing will save us, daylight. Come on, move!" urged the wizard.

Everyone was covered in bruises and large cuts but needed not to be told twice, their feet flying to quickly find an exit. Kili pulled his brother out of the wreckage, all the while searching for the woman. He turned around and saw her lay with her back against the ground, slightly immobile and grimacing in pain, and with some help from his brother they pulled her out of the ruins.

The pain in her back was out of this world, so to speak. Every single fibre of her body ached—felt like someone was slowly carving lines with a heated blade. The voices of the goblin army approaching blurred in a buzz as a hand caught hers and pulled her along through a large tunnel. Her vision became blurry, causing her feet to stumble multiple times on the way out.

Kili felt her grip loosen and swiveled around just in time to see her legs give up under the weight of her own body, which wasn't surprising considering how much blood she'd lost. Without a second thought he draped an arm around her waist to have her use him for support, and more or less began to drag her along as they went. At some point he felt something wet seeping through his fingers and, with a quick glance, he spotted something decidedly red. The slashes across her back were literally oozing away blood all over his hand.

Kili winced worriedly. "Come on," he encouraged, "stay with me."

His voice seemed to be the last hanging thread connecting her with consciousness. "Oh please," she sneered, "you don't even care if I never open my eyes again."

Perhaps the time and place were not right for banter, but he was, at any rate, happy to indulge her. He flashed a smile, "Of course I do."

"How come?"

He supported more of her weight so she'd stop hobbling along and risk tripping over her own feet. "Because otherwise I would have to start talking to people who actually like me."

Arya snorted. "And I'm sure there are plenty of those."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," the dwarf countered with a cheeky grin. "Who needs
It might be the dizziness, might be the fact that, if all went so pear-shaped, she could bleed out within the next few hours, but for some ungodly reason Arya was amused. Why she so much enjoyed trying to outwit him was beyond her. Perhaps it was but an odd form of revenge for his taunts; she wasn't really certain. Later on she'd probably plead temporary insanity due to blood loss.

"Come, now," Kili urged between pants of effort, not letting her budge without support, "we must hurry."

She drew herself together and her feet made their best effort to comply.

After an exceptionally frenetic sprint across the tunnel, they found the way out and stepped out to the mountainside, under broad daylight and into fresh air. They hopped and bounced over rocks and larger boulders, hurriedly jogging and panting, in order to put as much distance as they could between the goblins and themselves. They came to a much needed stop while Gandalf was counting them.

Still holding her by the hand, Kili sat the injured woman upon a rock, very cautious not to touch the scars on her back - which proved rather difficult since they were spread all over it. It was a leniently ghastly sight with all those wide, diagonal whipping marks.

Thorin took a glimpse of her ripped and soaked in blood tunic and strode over to her. "Do you feel well?"

Her eyes locked with the dwarf king's, curious and suspicious about the unexpected inquiry regarding her well-being. He looked messier and more disheveled than ever, although the cuts and scratches on him were nothing compared to her own. "If I meet again with the bastards that did this to my back," she growled and a cloud of gloom gathered above her form, "I'll shove their bludgeons so far up their arses, they'll have splinters in their stool."

Some of the dwarves cringed, shocked to hear a woman use such foul language, while one or two others preferred to focus on the fortunate fact that she was already back in her old warlike spirits. There were also those who didn't hear anything and were too busy panting and trying to catch their breaths.

"I suppose that answers your question," Fili commented under his breath, nodding at Thorin.

Apparently not in the mood for small talk, the king merely nodded and turned his back to them to check the rest of the company. It was then that Kili ripped a relatively clean piece of cloth from his clothes, poured some water on it from his flask, and gently started cleaning the blood from her wounds.

"Ow," she hissed, trying to remain still, but the friction between her skin and the cloth made twitching impossible.

Kili frowned. "Does it hurt?"

He was rewarded with a glare the likes of which he'd only earned before from his mother. "No, I'm just getting off on it," she muttered sarcastically. "Yes, of course it hurts, you--"

"Mind yourself," the brunet prince retorted, applying more than necessary force on her back and making her wince. "I can make it hurt more."
Her mouth was ready to blurt out something, most likely offensive, but Fili had the fortunate timing to scoot closer with the look of a disappointed tutor. "My brother is right for calling you an idiot sometimes."

"Thank you!" Kili quietly exclaimed from behind, as though he had just found his right in this unfair world.

"You didn't have to suffer this," the blond pointed at her body, sounding rather angry, "to protect us. You fool."

"Let's examine my failings at a more convenient time, shall we?" Arya groaned. "It was the first idea that came to mind. I couldn't just stand in the corner like a flowerpot and do nothing." Fili let a long-suffering sigh which came in perfect sync with his brother's eye-roll.

"Where's Bilbo?" Gandalf asked suddenly. "Where is our hobbit?"

"I thought he was with Dori--"

"Don't blame me!" Dori immediately protested.

"Where did you see him for the last time?"

"I think I saw him slip away when they first collared us," offered Nori.

"What happened exactly? Tell me!" the wizard demanded.

"I'll tell you what happened. Master Baggins saw his chance and he took it. He has thought of nothing but his soft bed and warm hearth since he stepped out of his door.

The Ranger shrugged in frustration. Not about the hobbit, but rather Thorin's tendency to burden his misfortunes to others. She knew Bilbo was rather close, for she had heard the shuffling behind a tree and managed to catch a glimpse of him appearing—quite literally—out of thin air, although her eyes might as well play tricks on her.

"We will not be seeing our hobbit again," Thorin growled, mockingly underlying the word 'our'. "He is long gone."

Arya jerked upright from where she sat, not caring much that Kili had yet to finish tending to her wounded back. "How can you even dare accuse him of wanting to return home, when all you seek is to return to yours?" she protested in exasperation. "You should also consider making such allegations only after you take a look at those who surround you. Bilbo is here."

Thorin took a few menacing steps towards her. "I don't see him anywhere," he grunted stubbornly.

"In fact," Bilbo's voice emerged somewhere behind them, "I am right here."

Everyone gasped and Arya didn't debate long with herself to let a smug smile reach her face. Thorin felt the time was just right to give her a murderous glare.

"Bilbo Baggins," Gandalf laughed kindly, "I have never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

"Bilbo, we'd given you up!"

"How on earth did you get past the goblins?"

Kili and Fili exclaimed respectively. Bilbo, however, forwent a direct answer; instead, he quite
nervously shoved something into his pocket, so quick, it almost went unnoticed by most. Gandalf was the first to notice. Second was the Ranger on her way back to the boulder, although she caught only but a glimpse of his hand moving.

"It doesn't matter," Gandalf said with a moderate smile, drawing the attention on him. "He's back."

Thorin, however, being the stubborn mule he was, had another opinion. "It matters," he persisted. "I want to know. Why did you come back?"

The hobbit let a small sigh. "Look, I know you've always doubted me. And you're right, I often think of Bag-End. I miss my books, my armchair, my garden. See, that's where I belong. That is my home. And I came back, because you don't have one," he said in earnest. "A home. But I will help you take it back if I can."

The little heartfelt speech was designed to yield even those made of stone. Bofur's kind smile proved rather contagious, yet awkward silence filled the air. Thorin's scrutinising gaze examined the hobbit for the briefest of moments and then bowed his head slightly, as though in a silent gesture of respect, regretting the words he spoke before.

At that moment Arya wished she was artistic enough to immortalise the sight of Thorin's hint of a smile on a drawing—a rare sight, if ever there was one, no doubt. Alas, her painting skill was not honed enough to take one's likeness. She gave Bilbo a warm smile, one that she didn't know she was capable of until now. If only there were more people of like mind and character to him, the world would be a better place. She had not forgotten the mysterious object he had in possession, though, and made a mental note to recall it later for further thinking.

It was also right that moment that her ears pricked at a distant sound.

Kili felt the muscles of her back stiffen against his hand and glanced at her warily. A storm was brewing behind her eyes, raining fear and anger, and she startled him when she yelled, "Run! Now!"

All peered curiously at the Ranger, wondering if she was going into shock, before the howling and the growls reached their own ears as well.

Chapter End Notes

Title taken from 'Highway to Hell' by AC/DC, and altered slightly.
Needles of the past

Howling and growls tore through the air like bells heralding an imminent invasion.

"Out of the frying pan..." Thorin muttered angrily, feeling like a spell of bad luck was cast upon the company and the quest itself.

"And into the fire," Gandalf finished the dwarf's sentence.

"Run!" the Ranger shouted, reflexively clutching Kili's hand in hers. Now it was her turn to drag him along, even if her back protested painfully against the fervent movement.

Immediately the rest made a mad dash for the opposite direction, struggling to put as much distance as possible between the enemy and themselves. The ground made the experience difficult, at best, being slippery as hell, with rather large stones lying here and there, ready to welcome any foot that could possibly stumble on them. Unfortunately, the wargs' four legs made every possible result quite bleak. Nearly half the company were still in such a distance that they would inevitably come face to face with the beasts.

Still at the rear end of the group, Arya looked around and ahead of her, counting more heads than she could have hoped for. What drenched all hope was the fact that Bilbo was not one of them. With a quick glance over her shoulder, she spotted him not far behind with a warg on his tail. Her eyes widened.

"Sword out!" In times of urgency, usually her vocabulary was reduced to the essentials.

With a jump over his head, the warg landed on all fours right in front of him, sending Bilbo halting midstep and nearly tripping over his feet. A step backwards and his back collided against the trunk of a tree. He registered the Ranger's holler a little too late. The beast was already bolting towards him and, by way of some cosmic coincidence, his survival instinct kicked in. A moment later the warg fell dead with the blade spiked into the head, between its eyes.

There wasn't a single spot where an axe or sword wasn't drawn and rammed down a warg's neck or head. Growls could be heard possibly to the other side of the Misty Mountains as they fell to their deaths. It was a lost cause. They were outnumbered; the more they killed, the more were coming.

And as if that wasn't enough, to make things marginally worse, a cliff was waiting a few feet away.

"Up into the trees," Gandalf yelled, "all of you!"

The moment Kili felt her hand slip away from his, panic took him over. He turned around to see her run back, urging the last of those who had stayed behind to climb on the huge pines.

His luck being what it is, Arya caught him somewhere in her field of view almost stopping to look for her. "Move!" she barked at him.

Despite the obvious hesitation, a deeper instinct advised Kili that he'd be better off complying. He grabbed a large branch, swirled around it to climb on the tree and immediately clasped his brother's hand to haul him up after him.

Thorin had stayed last on the ground along with her, watching in relief all the dwarves shinning up the trees like cats. "They're coming!" he warned her.
Arya grabbed the first branch in her way and climbed up too, continuing her way over to the others by jumping from bough to bough. Again, her counting was off by one. Her head jerked around, eyes searching for the hobbit. He was exactly where she'd last seen him.

He was left staring at the warg's carcass lying before him in a stupor, not quite believing what had happened.

"Bilbo!" a hiss came from her mouth.

He jumped a foot at the voice, but found no running companions around him.

"Up here!" the voice exhorted. "Climb quickly, come on!"

The Ranger's face was a welcoming sight after the shock of it all. As soon as he made to run to the tree she was on, his sword pulled him back. Of course it had to get stuck now, the damn thing. When it finally came out with a whoosh, blood spurted out of the wound and splashed his face. Bilbo winced at the vile taste and, forgetting his manners for a moment in his rush to save himself, spat it out with a vengeance he didn't know he possessed.

Kili felt definitely a few body parts go numb the moment he saw the woman roll over the tree she was on. Part of him thought she was about to faint from being pushed to her limits a few times in the span of mere hours, another part thought she might have been hit with an arrow or something and would keel over to the ground and bleed to death.

He should have known better than that.

Just to give his anxiety a nice kick-start, he watched her legs wrap around a thick branch for better leverage and then her upper body hang upside down from it with arms stretched to pull the hobbit up. Kili wasn't sure she'd make it; Mr. Baggins wasn't as lightweight as a feather. With relief he realised that pulling the hobbit up wasn't her plan at all.

The upturned figure of the Ranger clasped Bilbo's hands and, having swung back and forth until she'd grabbed him, gave her enough momentum to toss him to the lowest boughs of the neighbouring tree. The collision hurt like hell, but it was admittedly better than turning into a chew toy for wargs. He clutched the bough as though his life was depending on it—which, in fact, was—and climbed up just in time before enormous, sharp nails sunk in the trunk. Arya lost no time climbing higher, then jumping to the tree that Thorin and Balin were. More than once she caught Kili glaring at her from a few feet away; she could almost see the silent judgement oozing from his very pores. She rolled her eyes and turned around and then—

Arya believed the nightmares were the worst, but they felt like a child's play compared to the rage that overtook her. Nearly every time she fell asleep, it was like reliving it—in all its visceral glory. Honestly, reliving it didn't even begin to describe the present state.

The minute they stepped foot there, she could smell it in the air. Her husband's awfully grim look was more than enough to confirm her suspicions.

"Raid," was all the explanation he offered.

"Ever so succinct."

He glared at her from the corner of his eye. "I told you settling so far off the camp was not a good idea. You must ride back at once."
"We must all go."

Immediately she went after their store of weapons, and he followed suit, while their older children were busy ransacking the house in search of their latest offshoot.

"Where the hell is he?" Aranethon fumed.

Arya's eyes scanned every corner as she wildly moved from one room to another, calling out for him, "Aradan, we must leave!"

The boy peered out of the kitchen. He might be of relatively young age, but smart enough to sense something was awry when everyone was aflutter.

"There you are," his sister breathed out in relief and pulled him in an embrace.

"Move," their older brother exclaimed impatiently, "we have no time for this!"

His sister made a face and glared at him, which he bluntly ignored.

"I thought you wouldn't be back for another two weeks," said the young one quizzically, a vague feeling overwhelming him as he noticed his siblings' similarly terrified looks.

Arya knelt in front of him, her hands working fast to drape a cloak over his shoulders. "We're leaving."

"Why?"

She never had the chance to answer his question and tried to hide the dread and fright that burst like a storm behind her eyes as the screams and cries from outside reached their ears.

"Bloody hell, Arya, hurry up!" the oldest yelled.

She swiveled to face her little brother again, grabbing his hands tightly. "Do you remember the knife Aranethon gave you?" He nodded. "Have it at the ready." He bobbed his head 'yes' again, a vast amount of questions floating behind his grey eyes. "I don't normally say it... but if they try to hurt you, hurt them back. Yes?"

The boy pulled the knife out of its sheath as their mother stormed into the room, bow and arrow in hand.

"Stop loitering, we're leaving," she announced and motioned them to run towards the barn.

However, Arya had different plans. She followed her mother to the barn, almost dragging her brother behind her, but stopped dead in her tracks when her mother gestured her to mount the horse. "I'm staying."

"What?" her brother blurted out with wide eyes.

"Arya, I won't say it twice," her mother warned impatiently, her features far too creased, a deep contrast to the usual tranquility her face seemed to emit. "We are leaving now."

"No. They are too many for father and Aranethon alone." Her heart kept pounding under her chest, as though it could sense what was coming.

"Then I will stay. You two go—"
"No!"

"Arya!" the older woman erupted, swatting a hand on the wooden wall with a force that was left unused for some time.

Her daughter took her aside, away from the young boy standing there not knowing how to react or what to do, really. "You think he'll stay still without Aranethon around? I don't know how to take care of him! He's just a child—I'm barely an adult myself!"

Whatever resolve Ithíriel had, it quivered at this.

"I don't have your wisdom. The odds to survive are greater with you—"

"Do not speak like that."

"Leave," Arya persisted. "Now, while you still have time. We can handle this."

And if there ever was a perfect example of jinxing something, that'd be it. A bigger lie had never been spoken. Perhaps Arya's young age and little experience in life made her put too much faith in her luck. Call it a momentary lapse of judgement, if you will. In retrospect, she'd learn her lesson the hard way.

"Take the bow and ride hard," the young woman breathed out, inwardly praying that this was not the last time she saw them. "Go!" her voice echoed loudly in the small barn and she stormed out of the room.

Her mother did nothing to change her mind, certain that any effort would be futile. Instead she grabbed her son's hand and pulled him beside her as she saddled the horse, feeling prickly anger bubbling like stormy clouds in her eyes.

Aradan tightened the grip on his knife, constantly glancing at the wooden door, not so much aware of what or whom they expected to face. He only knew it was something bad. He had never seen orcs in his life, only heard stories about them and their terrible feats.

His sister had just moments ago followed her father and brother, not even daring to think about the outcome for the three of them. They had no time to escape, even on horseback. But if that meant it'd buy the others the necessary time to get away, she was willing to accept any fate that was decided for her.

Her father's heart nearly gave up on him the moment he saw her coming back. Endangering his son's life was already too high a risk. "What the devil do you think you're doing here?"

"We have to buy them time," she countered.

"Go with your mother and brother, now!"

Yet the decision had been made and she was too proud to back off now. "Three is better than two."

Her look darkened and her brother's loud curse about her stubbornness did nothing to deter her. When they faced what had remained of the place, the scenery was that of wild fire burning every house down, burned or killed bodies laid everywhere and cries filling the air for seconds before their owners being silenced forever.

The village wasn't a big one. It took mere minutes to burn it to the ground and kill half the residents. None of them expected such big a force. There were far more than what three Rangers and a few
villagers with swords or hammers could handle. Hiding places were scarce. Whatever chance they had to ambush them was down to about zero. The young ones took their bows and started firing arrows, one after the other, although little result that effort brought.

A skirmish erupted, but luck was not on their side. Swords and blades clashed within crashing thuds and guttural yells, the numerous sounds of blades whistling through the air and heralding death.

Her father's cry rang painfully loud in her ears and Arya swiveled around wildly to see what had transpired. She watched the knife sinking in her brother's lower torso in slow motion. Of course, the knife did not deter her brother in the slightest as he pressed further into the group of orcs. It was her turn to let a shrill scream when another two blades were rammed on his back; and then her voice died in her throat and whatever words she managed to utter came out slurred and hissing. The sight of the hook that the pale orc used as a hand ruthlessly piercing her brother's throat again and again until he was unrecognisable had her transfixed. His desecrated, dead body flicked back and slumped heavily on the ground, thick red blood gushing out of his throat and mouth, pooling around him and wreathing him in a crimson halo.

Mind? What mind? She had lost every semblance of logic in the course of mere seconds that stretched out to harrowing eternity. Never was one supposed to attack with clouded perception and eyesight blurred by tears, but she honestly did not care a whit as her feet launched her body forward.

The pale orc stared at the young woman with a dark look, reflecting on what she could be used for once captured. She met his gaze for a moment, sheer loathing spilled out of her eyes and death from her sword. Certain she was that she would never forget those abnormally blue eyes, awash in pure evil. Her sole intention was to put a blade through him and twist it so viciously, again and again and again until he turned into chopped meat, disregarding her survival, but there was her mother's scream that brought her to her senses and drew her attention away from him.

Ithíriel had watched this unfold from afar; her first-born son. She tried to shield her youngest and he, in turn, used his knife or fists to repel the disgusting creatures, but what could a boy of eleven winters do against an army of orcs? What if his mother was an elf? Numbers worked differently.

"Get your hands off him!" she screamed, but to no avail. So tight she held on her son, that it took five of them to pull them apart.

In the meantime, the fight was raging. The dead body of his older son lay before him and Aranion had lost his mind. Parents were supposed to be buried by their children, not the other way round. Although he highly doubted that there was going to be a burial for any of them, for their death was guaranteed. His gaze worriedly moved towards his daughter, who was mercilessly sowing death above her brother's corpse, shielding his body as though she expected him to come back to life any moment now. It was that moment that his wife's screams reached his ears and he saw five orcs carry her along with his youngest son, both of them tied up.

How many lives could a man save at once? He didn't know which one to try and save first, his wife and son, or Arya? He shot a glance at the latter; she met his eyes and wildly motioned him to help the others. He debated at first but, seeing she was still intact and unharmed, he hurtled towards the others. He didn't have enough time to react, though, as a sharp blade pierced him from behind. The cut wasn't very deep to kill him right then, but he knew he would eventually die with one way or the other.

It was a strange feeling that washed over him. Not fear... Rather hopelessness and despair—far worse than fear. He didn't register his move to try and crawl over to his wife and son, until many muddy feet harshly slammed his body on the ground, his face at such an angle that he could clearly
see his daughter desperately trying to fight off the filth around her. So this is how it ended.

And there was when he deeply regretted his mistake. He should have them stay in Rivendell, despite his wife’s desire to live a life less secure by offering help in the villages around as a healer. She was always so kind and thoughtful of others and fervently wished to give aid to whomever needed it, but neither she nor him had counted on something like this to happen. Yet danger sprouted up in the most unexpected of times.

Arya was left all alone to fight all the orcs that swarmed in her direction and noticed neither her father being hit nor her mother and brother being tied up.

The pale orc saw the man plump on the ground and ordered two of his servants to keep him there. The father was obviously one of Men; a Ranger, in fact. His dead son was one of Men as well, as was probably the captured little boy too. The mother, however, was an elf. He did not like elves, though, they were too hardy for his taste. Weird family these people were. It did not happen so often, a union between two races. Nevertheless, the least of his cares was that. In the end they were all meat and would taste, more or less, the same.

All the family was almost extinguished, except for the young woman, who was still putting up a fight in vain. He noticed that she was of the race of Men too. A wide, evil smile was spread on his face as he stroke the white mane of his warg and ordered it to dart forward, thinking that now was the time for him to come to the fore. Muffled screams eluded from her father's mouth, who still had his face slammed onto the hard ground. The large white warg skimmed over the young woman and its rider's mace hit her, sending her flying in the air.

The young boy was almost shuddering to get free and save his sister, but they slapped his face and tightened the grip on him. His mother could feel mad grief taking her over upon confronting the dead body of her older son, her husband stabbed on the back and now her daughter being battered on the ground like a toy.

Arya landed a few feet away and the pale orc strode over to where she lay, completely limp and unconscious. "Burn them all!" he ordered in their language, the evil smile still staining his face. "Everyone but her."

Immediately complying, the orcs tied the three living up and gathered the other dead from the village, who were destined for food, in a large pile. They also tied up the young, unconscious woman and hang her from a large wooden bar.

Her parents could see her hanging from the wooden stick clumsily, like a puppet. They knew what was coming, how things would end for all of them; neither of them had the heart to even imagine what they were going to do to Arya.

The pale orc walked closer to the unconscious woman and trailed a finger over her face.

"Don't touch her, you filth," her mother viciously spat out.

Azog walked toward the elf and grabbed a fistful of hair, forcefully yanking her head back at an angle than her neck could easily break should he put more force. "I could do to you what I will do to that whore of a daughter you have, but humans are more fragile and break more easily than elves."

"Don't you call her that!"

Azog averted his gaze from the elf to the source of the voice, surprised to see the child, of all people, withstand him. His heavy hand collided against the boy's cheek. The boy screamed in pain, his...
vision almost blurring, but didn’t cry. A grim chuckle left the orc’s mouth.

"Stay away from him!” the father growled when the orc moved to strike his son a second time.

That actually worked. The pale orc abandoned his post next to the boy and instead strolled up to the man, grabbing his neck in a strangling grip. He let a snarl and the orc tightened the grip more, draining all the blood from the man’s face and making him blanch. "I would keep you alive only to watch the special treatment your daughter will get, but we’ve been eating only maggoty bread for nine stinking days. I won’t deny them the pleasure now that meat is back on the menu," he said, releasing his head with unnecessary force, and turned his attention back to the unconscious young woman. He let his finger travel from her face down her neck, slowly; calculatingly. "Now, this is a pretty little thing,” he exclaimed and his troop cheered with excitement.

Groggy as hell, Arya ventured her eyes open to face a repugnant chest, marred with scars all over it, and then lifted her gaze up to a much more abominable face—definitely not a good medicine for her dazed state.

With his back turned to her, Azog didn’t notice she had regained consciousness. "We’ll have some fun," he exclaimed and the orcs cheered in excitement again. He then turned to her with a taunting look, only to receive a spit directly into his eyes. A scowl spread on his monstrous face and he let an evil laugh before backhanding her.

The taste of blood in her mouth was instant. She let a guttural groan.

“And a tough one, too!” he laughed darkly.

Despite the fact that they came muffled behind her clenched teeth, some of the curses she hurled at him he could understand. It only served to make him laugh harder.

“Take your bloody hands off, you bastard!” her father screamed again, with whatever strength was left in him.

The pale orc looked his way and smiled an evil smile, revealing sharp razor teeth. "You still have a little fight in you, even halfway dead," he said. "I like that."

"Then you’re going to love me," another voice growled and, oh surprise, it came from the girl before him.

Several things happened at once. His finger was still trailing paths around her jaw and neck, maybe straying a little further below only to frighten her to submission, though it did nothing but push her into defense mode. She turned with her hips and threw everything she had left into the kick, walloping him right between the legs.

Her father tried to wriggle his way out of his bonds, only to have his captors press the wound on his back, making him screech painfully as more blood gushed out.

"Leave him!” Arya yelled at them. As if it’d make much of a difference.

Their leader’s patience, as much as he could possibly afford, had abandoned him the moment the pain down below became evident. "Kill them," he ordered with a wave of his hand as though he was batting a fly away, not taking his eyes off the woman, just to enjoy seeing all that bravery crumbling to pieces.

The orcs immediately obeyed. With eyes wide in absolute horror, Arya watched on, unable to do anything but scream her lungs off. A few slow moments and one muffled scream later, she saw the
covered in blood bodies of her parents plump on the ground, lifeless.

"No!" an agonising yell left her mouth and the whole wooden bar she was hanging from shuddered from the force. "Ada! Ada!"

"Put them over the fire," the pale orc commanded again. He came closer and grabbed her head from the jaw, forcing her to watch as the bodies of her parents and older brother, amongst other people, burned in a pile. He felt the muscles in her face twitch frantically as she cried and struggled to get free from his grip, fact that roused an almost sadistic satisfaction inside of him.

Her eyes shifted to her younger brother who was yelling for her. His heartrending voice was tearing her flesh apart and she cried along with him—the only thing she was able to do. The wooden bar shuddered violently once again as she yanked down the chains.

"Don't you dare touch him, you filthy little gobshites!" the shrill yell came directly from the depths of her throat the moment the knife loomed over his torso. To hell with propriety and manners. When one's brother was about to be slaughtered like a pig, who would have the clarity to control their mouth?

The creatures smirked at her and a muffled cry coloured the air before his voice and soul faded away forever. All voice left her. She was reduced to silent sobbing, until the pale orc slapped her again to make her shut it. He didn't have to know elvish to understand that the words she spat out were some of the worst curses that could be uttered in that language, and let the sadistic satisfaction flood his body once again.

She was unable to control the contents of her stomach spilling out at the sight of her family and several other people being devoured. It was a pain the likes of which she could only wish upon her worst enemy. Grief and sorrow, or wrath and rage did not do justice to her emotions even remotely.

Yet many things, either for good or for bad, did not go as she thought they would. No one heard her prayers that day. The orcs did not get the chance to torture, humiliate or play with her that day, or any day since. Her little brother's trinket proved to be no lucky at all. And above all, she did not keep the promise she'd made to herself to let no one hurt him.
An unexpected ride

Chapter Notes

There's an f-bomb in this one. Sorry for that, but I just had to.

The memory lodged itself into her mind like a splinter of respectable size in the foot, painfully reminding you that it's there with every step. Not that it had ever gone completely, but this time it came back with the force of a thousand stabs at once. The invisible blades were sharp and embedded deeply in her already scarred flesh, opening wounds that would never be fully healed.

Oblivious to it, her hand clutched the thing closest to her. Unluckily, it happened to be Thorin's arm, of all things. For a brief moment she glanced back at Gandalf, who stared at her with pursed lips, looking fairly alarmed. She thought he was trying to convey something to her, to stay calm and not do anything brash.

The wizard did not fear for a misstep of hers. He was more worried about Thorin, if anything.

For that brief moment Kili's eyes caught hers. Her anger was bubbling just under the surface. It was that moment when he realised that she didn't hate him; not even close. The looks she gave him all this time seemed friendly compared to the one on her face now. This wasn't the woman who travelled with them all this time. Not the woman who his brother jested with and had such a beautiful sound for laughter. She was the Ranger the stories from his childhood told of; silent and grim as a moving shadow and bearing the strength and mettle of her forefathers. Then his gaze moved a little to her left, towards a large rock where a white warg stood proud and menacing, and the sight made his jaw fall.

Thorin felt a hand squeezing his arm and, startled, raised his eyes to the offending limb only to find the Ranger at the other end of it. She was glaring somewhere past him and he could almost feel the anger seeping from her grip, not understanding what upset her so. A loud growl, heavy paw steps and a familiar roar made him turn in the direction she was staring at. He was stunned to shocked silence.

"Azog?" he gasped.

The white warg let a loud growl as if in a manner of greeting.

"It cannot be," Thorin breathed out, shaking his head in disbelief.

Azog spoke in a language that only a selected few were familiar with and the wargs hurtled towards the trees in a frenzy. The beasts jumped, trying to catch them from the branches, scraping the trunk, biting and barking.

Thorin almost lost his balance when two of them jumped near to pull him down, but the Ranger managed a slash at one of their heads and the other retreated momentarily, giving her just enough time to pull him away from their clutches.

The tree had started to sway dangerously. Each claw gave it more and more momentum and eventually the roots came on surface, causing the tree to lurch onto the others behind. Everyone
threw themselves onto the branches of the other trees, clasping them tightly to hold themselves upright. They all ended up on the last tree, the one that stood, literally, at the edge of the cliff.

Arya jumped on it third-to-last, landing on a branch next to Fili with success, though not without casualties. In her struggle to get hold of the trunk, her back scraped over what felt like a million branches. She cursed upon impact.

Kili felt his heart fall into place the very moment she regained her balance. The woman was reckless as sin. The real question here, though, was where all this sudden concern stemmed from. Maybe it's the male's instinct to protect his female, an annoying voice answered in his head. He goggled comically. Not his female. Definitely not his female. Just the female. The only female in the company. Hence the concern.

"Gandalf!" the Ranger yelled at him desperately to do something; anything.

He did come up with an idea. He stretched out a hand and grabbed a pine cone, then sparks appeared out of thin air and lit up the cone.

Arya's eyes brightened just about when she'd lost all hope. Hell, sometimes she loved magic.

Those flaming pine cones were soon distributed throughout the company, flying inches above their heads when some of them tossed them against the enemy. Soon, blazing fire was scorching trees and ground alike. The beasts withdrew, whimpering every time it came close to searing their fur and flesh.

Cheers erupted amongst the dwarves. The Ranger refrained from joining in.

Fili looked at her as if slightly offended. "We are saved!" he exclaimed.

"Do you know which phrase sums up my life with great precision?"

The dwarf looked at her in puzzlement.

"Anything that can go wrong, will go wrong."

Fili gave her a dry look, "I'm sure you're exaggerating--"

And if there was a perfect example of jinxing something, that'd be it. The ground beneath the tree began to shake, the tree staggered and soon the trunk was careening towards the cliff, hanging onto the ground from two or three roots only.

"You were saying?" she yelled back, trying to clutch a thick bough to steady herself.

Simultaneous attempts to hang onto the trunk were made, and nearly half of them failed spectacularly. A dozen branches broke, unable to support the weight of all the people at once, and two or three dwarves found themselves slipping down with nothing to hold them back.

"No!"

"Gandalf!"

Ori managed to grip the leg of one of his brothers literally at the very last moment. Luckier than most, Kili was perched horizontally on a large bough, though watched in horror his brother dangle back and forth right before the branch he was holding onto broke. The sight had Kili paralysed with absolute fear. Just shy of abandoning his steady grip to dive down after him, knowing there was no
chance to live upon impact, nine hundred feet below, he saw Arya swinging her legs and wrapping
them around Fili's waist, catching him. There was a strangled cry when her back twisted roughly
from the added weight.

The Ranger hauled Fili upwards, struggling to bring him as close to the trunk as possible so he could
get a hold of it, rather than hanging from her. Kili watched with baited breath as she mercifully
managed to give him enough momentum to propel him forward onto a bough, although dread had
already coiled in his stomach like a giant snake.

Thorin witnessed the entire scene from afar, unable to affect events in any way but being a helpless
spectator. The moment Fili slipped, he thought he saw his whole life flashing before his eyes. He'd
be damned if any harm found either of the boys; damned. And then, out of nowhere, the Ranger
snatched him mid-air, bless her. On his other side was Ori hanging from Dori's leg, who in turn was
hanging from Gandalf's staff.

As despair set in, he became subject to the effects: loss of reason, anger.

Arya watched as the king stood to his feet and began strutting forward with sword in hand. It was a
lot to take in just in one moment—the others' voices mixing in a cacophony of screams, the falling
tree, her destroyed back, and on top of all, Thorin moving to attack Azog. She thought he had some
common sense. Apparently, he was happy to prove her wrong. She could well understand his desire
for revenge, the reason he wanted to finish off the orc once and for all, but now was anything but the
right time for it. In circumstances like those, feelings should be suppressed and logic ought to prevail.

"You idiot," she muttered in shock. "You fucking idiot."

The white warg leaped on the dwarf, crushing him on the ground. A large cut quickly split his
forehead and Thorin groaned in pain.

Arya shut her eyes in exasperation. She felt something touch her hand and swiveled around to see
Fili's hand clasp hers, a horrified look on his face. She turned around just in time to see his brother
yelling as he saw his uncle fall hard against the ground, and could feel nothing but sympathy towards
them both. No one deserved to watch their family suffering.

Just when the dwarf king shakily stood on his feet again, the great white warg pranced towards him
again. The battering he took this time didn't come from its claws, rather its rider's mace, and it was a
powerful blow if anything. The company erupted in earsplitting cries and curses.

Arya winced—that ought to have hurt a lot. She hauled herself upwards to lean her weight better
over the trunk, The dwarves' cries for their leader were earsplitting as the warg clutched Thorin
between its teeth and sent him flying over a rock. The dwarf slammed heavily on it, unable to take a
grip of his sword that had landed a few feet away.

Whimsically enough, the flat rock he'd been slammed on seemed like a shrine ready for sacrifice.
That was the only thought that crossed Thorin's mind as he lay there battered and bleeding. He
couldn't see clearly, everything had turned into blurry shapes and bright lights than burned down the
mountainside. An orc was standing above Thorin, ready to take his head per Azog’s order, when
Bilbo's scream emerged through the chaos. The hobbit had got in the orc's way and began to stab the
foul creature with unprecedented vengeance, until its arms slumped limply on either side and its
breastplate looked more like a sieve than anything. On cue, four wargs plodded closer to attack him,
until another person rushed forward and blocked their way, eyes still harboring the same furious gaze
as years ago.
"Small world after all," the Ranger commented dryly, swinging her sword with a flourish. A wry smile found its way up to her lips and spite blazed in her eyes. "Not even death is willing to take you, eh?"

The pale orc's eyes narrowed at the mockery. He would ask her who she thought herself to be and dared to come between him and his prey, but then she spoke again—words in a language he hadn't heard in a very long time.

"Who are you, girl?" The snarl of a voice sounded like the sparking of a thunderstorm.

"You murdered my family," she growled back.

His wicked smile brought a tingle down her spine. "I've murdered very many families. You'll have to be more specific."

Arya saw white from the rage. The nerve of his! The scumbag actually had the audacity to mock. We'll see if he continued to mock when she shoved a burning rod up where the sun doesn't shine and twist it until it came out the other side.

True enough, the woman's voice rang a remote bell, although Azog couldn't quite put his leftover's hand's finger on it. Still, it mattered not; he'd simply order his cronies to bring him two heads instead of the dwarf's alone.

Before his minions had time to react, Fili, Kili and Dwalin were rushing against them, slicing the beasts' necks and heads and spilling blood everywhere. But they were unfortunately the only ones who'd managed to get away from the tottering tree and were soon outnumbered by the many wargs that surrounded them.

Arya was standing two or three feet ahead of Bilbo with sword in hand, fuming, as though her lungs were engulfed in the same flames as the trees. She could feel the temperature in her head rise; long gone was the cool night air that slightly soothed the pain in her back. Everything was ablaze. The moment she thought that hope had forsaken them, squawks came from above. What–

Leaving the breath of surprise she was holding, she shot a quick glance to the sky. As things were, Gandalf had done his miracle again. Bless him and his magic tricks.

The birds rushed in to their aid and began to slam the huge tree trunks over the wargs, or toss the beasts down the cliff. They clutched the dwarves in their claws from the tree and flew away, dropping them on other eagles' backs. Arya saw one come right at them and moved out of the way to let it take Bilbo. Another lifted a motionless Thorin from the rock, whereas she started to wave her hands animatedly for them to take the three dwarves standing beside her, hoping that the birds would understand and she wouldn't need the wizard as a translator. The two brothers went to grab her hands and pull her with them, but she pushed them forward and watched as the large bird clasped them in its claws.

When every dwarf and the hobbit were safely removed from either the ground or the tree, it was her and Gandalf's turn. The wizard jumped directly from the tree to a bird's back that flew below him and the Ranger ran to the edge. On one side, there was fire blazing and orcs waiting and, on the other, a cliff who knows how many feet high. Basically, it was either vicious death or just plain death. The choice was obvious.

It was the leap of faith.

She jumped in the air and, after a few moments of freefalling that felt like eternity, her body clashed
against soft feathers. A gasp left her mouth the moment she latched herself onto the bird as if her life was depending on it, and she risked a glance over her shoulder to see a roaring Azog swing his mace in anger.

Minutes later, or maybe hours, the eagles were flying high over the mountains, under the faint gleam of the moon that was hidden behind dark clouds.

They were saved. For now.

Arya's energy was burned to a crisp. The will of her mind was not strong enough to prevail upon her body. It was too hard. Too hard to move, too hard to even think. What she could only think of was that she actually fancied flying. It was peaceful, liberating even, and the tight grip she had on the feathers gradually loosened, much to the poor bird's relief. Until her momentary peace of mind was cut off by a voice.

"Thorin!" Fili had cried.

Fear seeped out of his voice. She wanted to offer a comforting word, shout at him that he'd be alright, but found barely any strength left in her lungs. She had survived the hit of Azog's mace years ago, when she was almost a child. Thorin was a tough man, twice in width and possibly three times as heavy; the odds were in his favour.

Kili's worried gaze strayed briefly from his uncle, searching for another face. He caught a glimpse of long black hair flapping in the wind, but lost it after a moment. When he caught it again, he saw her lay her head carefully upon the bird while trying to keep a painless hold on its feathers. The eagle squawked lightly in response and started to gain height, until it flew higher than most. He frowned. She looked quiet and full of thoughts, calm like a gentle wind in the spring, when mere minutes ago she was seething. He was familiar with both aspects of her rather well by now, Kili thought.

Flying proved generally enjoyable, if not a little intimidating for certain people. Arya was most certainly not one of them. Pent up emotions were boiling inside her like water in a cauldron that was placed over the fire for far too long; they were ready to erupt.

One by one the eagles swooped to Carrock and set their passengers down. Gandalf was already leaning above Thorin and whispered words that only he understood in some old language. Bilbo was nervously waiting behind them and the dwarves did the same on the other side. The Ranger stood behind everyone, trying to get her insides to calm down.

Thorin finally opened his eyes and inhaled sharply. "T–The halfling?" was the first thing he uttered.

Gandalf gave a crooked smile. "It's alright. Bilbo is here and he's safe."

Dwalin and his nephews ran to help him up, but he pushed them back. "You!" his husky voice accused. "What were you doing? You nearly got yourself killed!"

Arya stared at him in quiet astonishment. Not of the good kind.

"Did I not say that you would be a burden?" Thorin kept yelling. "That you would not survive in the wild? That you had no place amongst us?" He paused and, surprisingly, the tips of his mouth curled upwards in a what could be perceived as a rare smile of his. "I've never been so wrong in all my life."

In the midst of the dwarves' cheers, the Ranger almost did a double take. Was that Thorin finally
acknowledging Bilbo as part of the company? Courtesy and appreciation did actually belong to the dwarf king's range of emotions, after all, even though they probably made themselves known once in a blue moon. Shame there wasn't any wine at hand, for the occasion certainly demanded a drink.

"I am sorry I doubted you," Thorin continued and reached as far as to embrace the hobbit.

"No, I would have doubted me too," Bilbo brushed off with a wave of his hand. "I'm not a hero or a warrior... Not even a burglar."

The eagles had been circling around the rock for the past few minutes and squawked merrily, the sound mingling with the dwarves' laughter as Gandalf thanked their king for the help they offered and bid them goodbye.

"Is that... what I think it is?" the hobbit asked with an incredulous look when his eyes caught something in the horizon.

Gandalf turned at the direction of where Bilbo was staring at. "Erebor. The Lonely Mountain. The last of the great dwarf kingdoms of Middle Earth."

"Our home," Thorin muttered, more to himself than addressing someone, voice trembling. It had been quite awhile since the last time he allowed himself to show any other emotion beyond anger or silent disappointment.

The dwarves started to applause and clap each other on the back, as though they had discovered gold. In a sense, they had. Unfortunately, Arya couldn't relate. She was too busy dragging her legs towards the edge of the rock in anticipation of what was coming. Not five seconds later she was on her knees, doubled up with disgust as bile rose up her throat and reached her mouth.
Kili turned around gleefully, waiting for her to stroll up to them and make a witty comment about his uncle's unorthodox apology to Bilbo, only to spot an extremely pale face and one hand pressing firmly against her stomach as her knees gave up and her throat produced an ungodly retching sound. "Gandalf!" he yelled, almost propelling himself to her side in less than a second.

His scream unavoidably drew attention. Confused frowns spread on everyone's faces.

"What's the matter?" asked Thorin before he swiveled to see one nephew run after the other to the edge of the rock. He slowly pushed in the small circle some of his comrades had created, to watch in surprise the Ranger kneeling at the edge and paying homage to the air and rocks below.

Long after her stomach emptied, her body refused to give up, causing her to heave again and again, bringing up nothing. Spitting, trying to remove the vile taste from her mouth, she realized someone was supporting her.

The wizard approached unhurriedly, his countenance a stark contrast to the faces of equal parts shock and disgust of those who had gathered around.

"What's wrong?"
"Is she hurt?"
"Did she get poisoned?"

Every question drove Kili closer to the brim of panic. If his heart could talk, it'd curse him for causing it to beat so fast. The hand rubbing circles on her shoulder blades was of no help, apparently, and he could feel her body shuddering violently beneath it.

Ori had to add the finishing touch in the chaos, "Is she going to die?"

Kili glared at him half-seriously from the corner of his eye. "Really?"

Thorin rolled his eyes. "She won't die," he sighed tiredly. "People do not die of vomiting."

"Ah," Arya raised a finger in objection, taking in the first proper breath in what felt like hours, "give it a minute." Even after it seemed to be over, she could still feel a hand holding back the mess of her hair.

"Easy," a voice murmured.

Still breathing hard, she tried to turn her head to look at him, but the mere movement set off another wave of dry heaves.

Gandalf still seemed strangely undisturbed by the sight. "She is fine," he appeased and pushed the two brothers back from her to give her some space.

"She's what?" Fili scoffed.

"She's not fine!" Kili erupted. "She just retched her guts out—I doubt this qualifies for fine!"
Arya shot him a confused look, wondering since when he gave so much as a damn about her health.

On cue, Thorin pulled Kili away from the woman. "Oin, check everyone's wounds," he ordered then. "Start with the Ranger. Those of you who are not hurt, help the others."

As expected, Kili didn't budge away. It took a stern glare and a hand restraining him again to hinder his plan. "There are others who require aid as well," his uncle told him quietly, and then motioned Fili to remove him from near her.

With a hesitant pace Fili came closer and took his brother out of their uncle's grip. It was more than obvious that Kili was on edge, and how often his gaze strayed towards her did not pass unnoticed. He, too, was watching as the wizard helped her lay down and Oin and Thorin huddled up around her lying figure. With swift moves, sign of his year-long experience, Oin cleaned the wounds on her back with a wet cloth, which gradually turned red, and then went to smear a salve over. After applying a generous amount over the wounds, the dwarf handed it back to Gandalf, who was engaged in a private discussion with Thorin.

"What's the matter with her?"

Gandalf raised his eyebrows in amusement and offered him a warning shake of his head. "I do believe the present moment is not the most appropriate to ask of this," he whispered in the dwarf's ear with his ever benevolent, scheming look.

"And why is that?"

Arya was sprawled on her stomach, staring at empty space, although her ears never went out of business. It was the safest road to lasting vigilance. "You are aware I'm right here, aren't you?" Her voice sounded flat, albeit a tad amused as the king turned around with a slightly offended look.

"I am, yes," Thorin said curtly. "Your point being?"

"If one is about to gossip another, it is customary to do so behind the latter's back, not within hearing range."

The dwarf tried to hide the sneer that threatened to appear on his face. "That was not my intention." Now he sounded more offended. "I only inquired after the cause of your sickness." There were other, additional questions he had regarding her bizarre reaction to the pale orc, but she was lucky enough they weren't one of his top priorities at the moment.

"I have a sensitive stomach. Nothing for you to bother your head about."

The king snorted thoughtfully and went about his business.

Oin took to smearing the salve over the scars of the lashes, expecting her to scream any moment now. She only hissed at contact. The pain had diminished into a numbing sensation being spread all over.

"Lassie, are ye certain you're alright? Ye should have blown our ears off by now," Oin observed.

The Ranger let a snort that made her scars twinge, and she regretted it immediately. "No worries," she gritted through her teeth, "pain is no fresh tidings."

"Pain may not be, but those cuts are pretty nasty."

She gave a dismissing wave of her hand. "It is fine, honestly."
The healer was not to be opposed, this was his duty and it needed to be fulfilled. Determinedly he produced a small bandage out of his cloak and brought it in front of her face. "We need to wrap it around ye."

Arya's eyes flashed with embarrassment. "I can take over from here myself," she mumbled quickly. "Thank you."

The dwarf nodded, clapped her shoulder and then jogged away to tend the rest injured members, leaving the bandage beside her.

"I believe you could also use this, dear," Gandalf's voice chirped from behind. She swiveled around and saw him hold a white, clean piece of clothing. "Lord Elrond's offer," he added with a smile.

Arya felt too tired to even crack a smile and just limited to nod at him.

"Your cousin would not be particularly inclined to watch you in this state," the wizard said loud enough only for her to hear.

She pointedly raised an eyebrow. "Lucky for me then that he shan't be informed about it. Now, if you'll excuse me," she deadpanned and retreated to a more secure place to put some salve on the cuts in her front and wrap the bandage around her torso.

The eagles returned after some time, carrying supplies for the company thanks to Gandalf's past affairs with their lord, Gwaihir. The dwarves hurried to form a wide circle around where the food was deposited. Soon, a fire was lit from the dry boughs the birds had brought along with the food, and the meat was ready to be placed upon the fire. Once the meal was ready and cooked, Thorin had Kili distribute the food to everyone, just so that his nephew would avoid any interaction with the Ranger. By the look on her face it was clear as day that she wished to stay alone, and Thorin was more than willing to grant that wish. Focusing mostly on his younger nephew, however, led to him failing to notice that his older nephew had gone to her aid.

Fili peered curiously into the spot he had left her earlier, but didn't found her there. Well, she couldn't have gone too far, he thought; the rock was barely a few yards wide. His eyes searched around and caught a glimpse of something that looked like skin. Horrified, he was ready to turn about and give her the proper privacy to change clothes, but her voice stilled him on the spot.

"No sense of personal space whatsoever?" she remarked casually, while tying up the vambraces around her forearms.

The dwarf pursed his lips, internally cursing his luck that he was caught. Under normal circumstances he would have turned on his charm by now, but this time he just felt guilty. "I am honestly sorry," he apologised with a frown of regret, "I didn't mean to-"

She appeared on his right side in a matter of seconds, all dressed up in the new tunic. "Let's not have that happen again, shall we?" she tapped his shoulder.

Fili exhaled loudly, a breath he didn't realise he'd been holding, relieved she wasn't mad at him. Still, it was beyond his boundaries of solemnity to not comment on this. "No worries, I won't risk having someone grow a spine and use it to beat me to death." His brow immediately creased in thought. "Actually, he'd do something worse if I ever saw you naked, but it wouldn't be proper to say that in front of you."

Arya turned to face him with a quizzical brow, absentmindedly scratching some small cuts on her arms and wincing from the acutely painful sensation. "I don't know who would care enough to
defend my honour and the like, but heaven knows I would scalp you," she warned sweetly before strolling closer to the fire. She noticed that food had made appearance out of nowhere and the dwarves were eating, laughing and discussing merrily. Admirable what effect can a bowl of food have on people's moods.

With a slice of bread and cheese preceding him, Bilbo sneaked up on her. "Would you like something to eat?" he offered, happily chewing something that she presumed to be meat, judging by the remains he held in the other hand.

Her appetite could not be in lower levels. "Oh no, no, thank you," she said softly. "Maybe later. Some water would be good, though. I'd like to get the taste of bile out of my mouth." Before she even moved to search for her flask, the hobbit had already brought it to her.

Apparently, some of the dwarves were in the mood for talking.

"Feeling better?"

"Peachy," she said with a wry smile. "And you?"

There were murmurs of both gracious and condescending content, though she caught but the half of them all.

The moment Kili spotted her amongst them he was already setting to talk to her, but the hobbit swiftly got there before him. Despite his irritation, the dwarf was glad she was fine and donned a new garment, as opposed to the old one that had turned into a tatter. As soon as Bilbo moved away Kili tried to earn her attention anew, only to be again interrupted by the incessant chatter of the company.

"Would you all please be so kind as to quiet down?" he cried out dramatically after the onslaught of voices, stunning everyone present into perplexed silence.

Even Arya stared at him in question for the briefest of moments, wondering about his little burst, yet quickly coerced her eyes away from him. The dwarf was a moving riddle, sometimes even worse than Gandalf. And that said a lot.

After an uneasy silence of a seemingly endless amount of time the dwarves returned to their merry discussions, erasing the small event from their minds. And Kili's attention was thankfully drawn by his brother, who plopped down beside him.

A little farther from them, Dwalin approached the woman with something that could pass for a playful look and tapped her shoulder. Her eyes squinted in suspicion.

"Should thank yer luck ye didn't visit a town a little south of throw up," he commented as he quite ungracefully gobbled up a piece of roast rabbit.

Her eyes went wide. She wasn't offended in the slightest. Quite the opposite, without realising it, she found herself laughing. The sound had drawn the eyes of those around, and she quickly cleared her throat, trying to compose herself. "Should thank my luck, indeed," she agreed half-seriously, then gestured toward a certain dark-haired prince. "I'm sure this one would have no second thought about kicking me off the rock if that happened."

Being only two feet away, Bofur naturally overheard. He and Dwalin briefly glanced at each other and promptly shared a sly chuckle of which she did not get the meaning.

"I wager the lad'd rather kick all the rest of us off the rock to get you all to himself," Bofur
commented under his breath, and he was mercifully not heard from either party involved.

The lighthearted atmosphere was bound to be short-termed. Arya soon walked as far away as the rock's length allowed, eager to slip past everyone and avoid potentially awkward eye contact or conversation. She lay down near the edge and fixed her eyes on the horizon, occasionally throwing small stones down the rock, until she'd get so tired that sleep would come easily. She didn't move from that spot at all.

"Kili," Dori called, "can you pass the water?"

From afar, the young prince looked as if he was sleeping with his eyes open. With gaze pinned on the woman's back, he didn't catch a word.

"Lad?" Bombur tried for the second time.

Again, nothing.

Fili rolled his eyes and elbowed him, receiving a very quizzical look and a surprised cry.

"What was that for?" Kili protested in a high-pitched voice, soothingly rubbing his ribs.

"If yer eyes didn't put down roots on someone's back," Dwalin commented dryly, "you'd know."

Haughtily scowling at the reactive blush that turned Kili's face red when Dwalin spoke, Thorin grumbled something inaudible through his teeth and tossed the flask of water in question over to Dori. A mortified Kili lowered his head, eyes finding the ground beneath his feet quite interesting all of a sudden. Before he realised it they had once more strayed a bit and came to land on the brooding figure that lay a few feet away.

"Are you trying to move her with your eyes or something?" Fili asked seriously.

"Hilarious," Kili replied dryly, although his mood became more lighthearted as minutes went by. "And I owe you an elbow, do not forget that."

Fili noticed the look and sensed the subsequent scolding they were about to receive from Thorin, so he immediately proceeded to change the topic. The rest of the day rolled just like that. The dwarves were talking and cheering in high pitched voices, the hobbit was wandering about and stared at the mountains and forests that surrounded Carrock, the wizard was participating in every discussion and the Ranger was laying silently alone.

Night fell upon them and everyone found a place on the rock to lie down. Hardly anyone could harm them up there, so they decided not to have someone keep watch during the night. Light snoring and even breaths could be heard from every spot, with the exception of two.

Arya had not moved from her spot. She only shifted from her side to her back and again on her side, seeing as the scars on her back were scratchy and annoying. Sleep would not come to her. Only thoughts and images did; those that would always haunt the hallways of her mind. It made her struggle to stop the wheels of her mind, which was highly unlikely to happen as they were actually unstoppable. "Thoughts are hard things to control, and especially the ones in your head, neth," her big brother used to say and always reminded her of it when her head looked ready to explode from thinking too hard.

Following her example of insomnia, Kili was still awake with his gaze locked on her. Under the dim moonlight that gave the impression of a gossamer glow on her face, he could see her drawn features
as she stared at the night sky. She was antsy; excessively so. This time, though, he was determined to get up, sit there and talk to her. And if, Mahal forbid, anyone woke up and even considered approaching her first, he'd make them regret the damn moment.

"You should be asleep."

The voice made him jump a foot in surprise. He frowned, unused to being caught off guard, seeing as he'd always prided himself in his lightness of foot. "No, you should be asleep. You're injured," he said softly, "you need to rest."

"I can't."

"Why?"

"For numerous reasons."

"Fortunately, I have nothing but time."

She tilted her head wearily from side to side and sighed heavily, "Can you please leave me be? I did nothing to annoy you this time."

"You did, actually. Those marks should not be on your back," he chided. "Or front, for that matter."

"Look, I know I owe you a fight, but now is not the time."

Kili frowned again, wondering what made her so edgy. She seemed very glum and doleful, not to mention the vomit incident early on in the day. It had brought him to the verge of anxiety. "Are you feeling better?"

"Yes."

"You're not convincing me."

"I am not trying to," she sighed.

He obstinately took a step closer. "So you're fine then?"

"Do I look like I am?"

His inquisitive eyes raked over her. "Not really," he muttered thoughtfully.

"Now that you have your answer, leave."

He ignored her request yet again. "Do you want to talk about—"

"No."

"Is there anything I can do—"

"No."

"Do you want me to—"

"Go back to sleep and leave me alone? Yes."

"I was going to ask if you wanted me to keep you some company," he said pointedly and, on cue, sat closely behind her, cross legged, holding back a snort at the way she was huddled up.
Arya saw the movement, but paid no attention. She thought that, by ignoring him, he would eventually give up and scuttle off.

For a mysterious reason Kili wasn't particularly inclined to watch her sulk and frown like this. He tried to come up with something to distract her, and soon an idea popped into his mind regarding something that was long overdue. His hand fumbled in one of his pockets for the chain he'd used to hang said item. A few moments later it was swinging over her head.

"I trust this belongs to you?"

Her head moved slightly to take a good look of what was dangling above her face, eyes going wide at the sight of it. "How did you-?" she whispered in disbelief, twisting her neck to face him. "Where did you get that?"

"I searched for it," he said matter-of-factly. "And if you had cultivated the virtue of patience as much as I have, you would have found it before me."

The astonishment overcame the slight offence she took as her gaze alternated between him and the pendant. "I... erm, suppose I should thank you?"

"There is no need-"

"Thank you," she cut him.

Although he wanted to smirk at the exclamation of gratitude that bordered on defiance, he tried to keep a solemn face.

She would have asked him why he even bothered to search for it hadn't it been for the onslaught of thoughts. So she made a mental note to ask in another moment, when her mind would be in order. After giving her this she believed he'd leave. Apparently she was mistaken, because he did not.

Kili saw her eyes turn to the night sky again. She twitched a little bit before finding a position to be comfortable enough, for the wounds on her back were still fairly painful. Following her example, he lied down and stared at the sky as well.

They sat, or rather lay there in awkward silence that lasted several minutes before a small group of words decided to leave her mouth, "Do you know any constellations?" She wondered what prompted her to say that, or even speak at all.

"The one in the shape of 'w' is Wilwarin," in a swift move she had gently grasped his hand, pointing up, "and this is Valacirca. Varda placed them in the sky to welcome and enlighten the first Elves that woke in Cuiviénen thousands of years ago."

Kili had barely registered the moment his hand was captured. Much to his woe, he discovered that this kind of captivity wasn't very disagreeable to his tastes and that he rather enjoyed it, basking in the warmth the friction created and finding an answer to a question of several weeks ago. Her hand was a little coarse —expected since she used weapons on a daily basis— although not as much as his.

"The one that looks like an eagle is Soronúmë," she went on, her hand leading his and tracing invisible lines in the air, right where the wings should be. "Varda traced it in the sky before the Awakening." She let a small sigh then. "My mother taught me and my brother about the stars and..."
constellations when we were young. I was trying to teach them to my other brother as well, but he was always complaining that they were too many to remember them all and that I was confusing him."

Her wistful gurgle of laugh triggered the strangest reaction. The tips of his mouth curled upwards, his perpetually intimidating eyebrows relinquished some of their intensity, and his look softened.

As she turned to him, she couldn't help but catch the first signs of a grin. The moon gazed down upon him like an indulgent lover. He was almost... glowing? She wondered whether it was because of the moon's radiance, or the smile itself. "You should smile more often. Your whole face lights up," she said casually.

Once again, Kili found himself totally unprepared for the woman's brutal honesty. If this went on, he was in danger of losing count of the times she caught him off guard. "I will try... I guess?" he said reluctantly, feeling slightly awkward with the turn of the conversation when at the same time he was focusing all his power on returning his flushed face to normal.

His gaze wandered for a while, until his attention was drawn by the airy fabric of her new tunic weathering in the night breeze. Then he looked closer; her shivering was almost imperceptible, but she seemed rather unfazed by it. He, not so much.

"Where is your cloak?"

Arya shrugged indifferently. "Probably altered in order to serve as goblins' breeches, if I had to venture a guess."

He scoffed. "You're cold."

It was an assertion, not a question, and she didn't even bother to debate it. But no, she wasn't cold. Her body might be, but she couldn't feel anything beyond exhaustion; neither pain from the wounds nor cold from the breeze, only weariness and a dire need of sleep.

Another strong shiver pierced her and Kili wondered what was keeping him back, seeing as he'd already made up his mind. With no warning whatsoever he scooted closer, and she flinched in alarm.

"What are you doing?"

He pulled her body closer to his to have her tucked in his coat, mindful of her injured back, and then slid his arm under her head so she could use it as a pillow. "It'd be very unfortunate if our guide fell ill halfway through our journey."

"We have to cling to one another so that I won't fall ill?" she inquired, forehead creased in confusion. "In what world does that even make any sense? Couldn't you just lend me your coat?"

He clutched at his heart dramatically, adopting a hurt expression. "And you'd let me freeze, then?"

"Your chivalry is just shocking."

Kili laughed under his breath. Even in a sulky mood and half-beaten, she was a good sport. "It is pure survival instinct, mind you," he brushed off. "Besides, you need to be warmed up and body heat is a sublime way to achieve this. I won't let you freeze."

Arya kept a wary eye on him as he spoke. She was still reserved regarding his changing behaviour, but couldn't deny her surprise at the courtesy he essentially showed under all the layers of offensive teasing. It was almost surreal for them to facilitate a decent conversation that did not involve any
expletives from either part. What scared her out of her wits, though, was that his embrace had a calming enough effect on her that all the hurtful thoughts evacuated her mind for a few redemptive moments. These actions were not consistent with the arrogant, peevish dwarf she’d met in Bag End, but perhaps someone whose character she had misjudged. And Arya had always fancied herself an excellent judge of character; she didn’t like being rebutted.

"Who are you and what have you done to Kili?" she asked, bewildered.

His body stilled momentarily as he heard her utter his name aloud in his presence for the very first time. It felt oddly… intimate. She froze, too, as soon as the same realisation hit her. Lost somewhere in their own vast worlds of thoughts, they failed to realise they'd been staring at each other for quite the time.

Kili was first to snap back into reality. "Meaning?"

Arya counted her blessings that he'd broken the intense staring contest, for she worried that much more could be shared in silence than where words were involved. "Since when do you care about my physical integrity and temperature?"

"Now, don't flatter yourself," he brushed off. "I am a gentleman born and bred. I would never let a woman get cold, even if it's you."

He barely refrained from grinning when he saw her face turn a little red in response. He had meant for that last part to sound casually insulting and it hit her just right.

"Starting to delude ourselves now, are we?" that annoying voice in his head popped out of nowhere. "Who are you trying to trick, you fool? You were of course trying to woo her." His eyes promptly bulged. For the love of all that was good and pure in this world, he was losing every semblance of common sense. That was absolutely impossible—Bloody last thing he wished to do. Woo the particular woman, that is.

"How thoughtful of you," she said wryly.

He raised an eyebrow. "I'm nothing if not charitable."

She suppressed the fervent urge to elbow him in the ribs as his speech of stern affection continued.

"I tend to pity those who have puked all the food they've eaten the past months as though they're possessed." In his eyes, this was the sole way to weave himself out of matters of heart—at least when it came to this woman—unharmed. He felt angry with himself and the damn voice in his head, not her; still, taking it out on her was so much easier. He should be alarmed by how much he enjoyed having her so close to him. And his body language was rather betraying at the moment.

Arya rolled her eyes and sighed in frustration, "And back to your bad old self." Once again she'd been deluded. He probably didn't even care whether she was cold. Perhaps his grander scheme was to mock her because of her earlier incident.

"Though I have to admit," he smirked, "the sight was spectacular."

She looked up to him, all the while gauging the distance between them. He definitely was within range if another wave of nausea decided to pay a visit. "If you enjoyed it that much, I'd be happy to repeat it and have your face act as the target this time."

It was obvious from her face and tone that she was jesting, but he couldn't oust the small tug of worry that settled in his chest at a potential repetition. "On a second thought, it might not have been
that pleasant."

"I figured so," she said curtly and turned her eyes up to the sky, the flash of worry in his own not
going unnoticed. Well... perhaps he did care after all, though only a little, for sure.

He felt his heart sink when the gloomy look smeared her face again. In an impulse of the moment, he
took her hand in his and slowly started to stroke her knuckles with his thumb. "Why don't you try to
sleep?" he asked quietly.

Her chest rose and fell quickly as she breathed, and a frown formed on her face from the stretching
of her sore body. "I am trying," she snorted. " Seems a part of me is afraid of what I might see,
though. Not to skip the fact that my back stings like hell."

Fairly speechless from the sincerity of her sayings and the fatigue in her voice, Kili felt sorry but not
pitiful. He let go of her hand and placed his on her stomach, starting to draw circles with his fingers.
Then he locked eyes with her, only to face one of the looks that he would store in his memory as
priceless.

"Are you trying to kill me in your own weird ways?" she asked in utter confusion.

He cracked up, unable to prevent himself from wondering if she always was so skeptic and
suspicious of other people. "I am trying to get you to sleep," he said quietly.

She scoffed. "Good luck with that."

Still, to be completely honest, she didn't mind the movement of his hand at all. On the contrary, she
was quite enjoying it. It wasn't something significant, but it was soothing and might succeed in
making the pain subside and putting her mind at ease, at least for a short while.

"You're tickling," she noted a few moments later and, much to her dismay, he removed his hand,
thinking that it irked her. He couldn't be more wrong. And she made that perfectly clear when she
clutched his hand and placed it over her stomach again. "It was a statement, Kili, not a complain.
Learn to distinguish."

The only reply he deigned to give was a content smile, which she thankfully could not see, and he
indulged her with his ministrations. They didn't speak further and quickly slipped into comfortable
silence, each sinking into their thoughts which, quite frequently, surprisingly, and disturbingly,
focused on the other. Arya even managed to doze off after a couple of hours, with fingers either
drawing funny patterns across her stomach or stroking the knuckles of her hands, while Kili fell
asleep some time later.

He woke once or twice by a mass of hair tickling jaw, lips and nose alike to the point of triggering
sneezes, but he thought it wiser to keep his mouth shut and not wake her, for fear that a
misunderstanding would ensue. Dawn was not far, so he resolved to stoically endure the tickling for
the remaining hours of the night. It wasn't like he'd make a habit of sleeping like this every night for
all his years to come, after all.

Chapter End Notes

neth = sister
I've used some constellations of our world that are visible in the northern hemisphere
(where my country is) during the summer, and found their counterparts in the skies of Middle Earth. So, according to my research, Wilwarin is Cassiopeia, Valacirca is Ursa Major, and Soronúmë is —most likely— Aquila. I'm not sure if the movements of the celestial objects in Middle Earth are similar to ours, so if you know something more, feel free to correct!

Title taken from 'Fade into you' by Mazzy Star.
Thorin Oakenshield woke before the sun rose over the horizon, first of everybody else. He might not share the hobbit's sentiments that the worst was behind them, considering Mirkwood still stood as barrier between them and Erebor and it was also a matter of time for Azog to pick up their trail, but... well, he supposed it could be worse.

And if there ever was a perfect example of jinxing something, that'd be it.

He learned what could be worse than all that when he noticed the sleeping bundle of two a few feet away. Thorin clutched a hand over his heart, almost hearing it fluttering to get out of his chest and fly to hell. He wore his brooding face anew as he moved over to stand in front of the sleeping pair's feet, watching with furrowed brow and pursed lips, as though a really bad scent tingled his nostrils.

Gandalf had silently joined him a few moments after he woke, but he'd paid the wizard no mind at all. If he did, he would have got en extra dose of indignation because of his amused look.

"I warned you about the presence of a woman amongst us," Thorin hissed under his breath.

"I can only assume she got cold during the night," Gandalf justified, "and your nephew was kind and thoughtful enough to keep her warm."

Somewhat startled from the not so subtle voices, Kili stirred a little, but remained asleep. When nothing more was heard, he tightened his grip on the source of warmth in front of him, as though to make sure it wouldn't budge away.

Thorin's murderous gaze landed on Gandalf again as he wrinkled his nose in distaste. The wizard was all but affected. Several minutes went by and, slowly, one or two others awakened, but lolled on their spots for a while, wanting to enjoy a peaceful morning after a long time.

Arya woke when the first beam of sunlight reached her closed eyes. It seemed to be a nice morning, what with the birds twittering merrily around Carrock and the light, welcoming breeze weathering the large rock. Something warm was touching her cheek but, despite being somewhat rough and scratchy, it was quite a pleasant addition to the whole waking extravaganza.

"Great nap," a drowsy voice whispered into her ear.

Well, as far as naps went, it was pretty darn comfortable for someone who had taken a lashing a day ago. "Mm-hmm," she mumbled in her half-conscious state and buried herself further into the warm bundle that surrounded her.

"Ahem."

The very strict, somewhat sarcastic clearing of a throat coming from somewhere above had both Kili and Arya's eyes pop open in perfect sync. And if there was a last thing either of the two would ever wish to see first thing in the morning, that would be Thorin standing there positively ready to murder someone, with Gandalf beside him, smiling his usual secretive smile—an unsettling sight, if ever she'd seen one. Then their gazes strayed from their audience towards themselves, and they took in exactly how they were sleeping; his face was slightly to a side of hers, his lips directly over her cheek and Kili could even feel the blood pumping to her face as it slowly turned red. He imagined —no, in
fact, he was certain— that his skin had the exact same shade of red and the whole situation made his heart drum like a scared rabbit's.

They promptly propelled themselves backwards, away from each other, their faces a decent shade of beetroot in equal parts shock and embarrassment.

Arya straightened her clothes in a hurry, momentarily forgetting the number of wounds she had, and her attempt not to grimace right then and there as the wounds twitched painfully when the skin stretched failed triumphantly. As her brain, or at least what part of it functioned right then, cursed and swore an internal monologue that would make every drunkard at all the inns in Eriador proud, her mouth had the urge to speak up for herself and justify all this. What she only managed to utter, though, was not even remotely eloquent as the curses in her head.

"I... uh... I'm– Excuse me," she mumbled awkwardly when, at the same time, another dialog took place internally. "What on earth...? For the past ten years you can't bloody sleep, and now you found the chance to do it, you twit?" she scolded herself as she made way through their audience, treading nervously as far away as the rock's width allowed, eager to find a hole in the ground and hide in it. "And with him, of all people? Well done." She found a corner away from prying eyes, sat down and took several deep breaths to calm herself.

It didn't work.

Her heart was still beating furiously. She let a frustrated huff and viciously pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to hold her temper. Rangers had no particular inclination to cuddling, and she had just risked life, body and dignity as it was.

Kili, on the other hand, was in a worse situation. At least Arya didn't have someone who'd tell her off for the next hour. But he had. Said someone was standing right before him, ready to snatch him from the ear and drag him back home. His uncle might not speak, but that glower only forecast a lecture the likes of which he'd never received before. Until logic prevailed and he started to think rationally. They had only slept next to each other. Alright, he admitted to himself, clinging to each other. So what? She had lost her cloak, was cold, and he had been the kind prince his mother and uncle reared him to be and tried to warm her up. Nothing more, nothing less. Was there any harm in that? He hated how such a simple thing caused so much inner and —probably— even greater outer turmoil.

Surprisingly, Thorin remained silent. Nor did he scold. Not until Gandalf wandered off and left uncle and nephew alone. "Care to explain?"

The young one didn't even dare to turn around and face him as he gathered his stuff from the ground. "Explain what?"

Thorin crossed his arms over his chest, taking an offensive stance, like a wolf ready to attack.

"'Twas nothing," the young dwarf brushed off. "She was just cold."

"Kili, I've warned you about—"

"She was just cold," the prince repeated, a little more defiantly than what was warranted. And he honestly believed that. She wasn't a distraction to him. How exactly could she be a distraction? If he were honest with himself, sometimes he couldn't follow his uncle's suppositions; they sounded completely out of place and sense.

"Very well," Thorin's strict voice sounded before he stomped away.
As soon as all the dwarves and the hobbit were up and about, came the flaming question. How would they climb down the rock?

Seemingly lost into his thoughts, Gandalf hardly paid any heed to them for a while. Therefore the answer came from the ever vigilant Ranger, who was ready and had packed her things up—or at least whatever of them had survived. She gestured toward the edge, where lay the beginning of a rather worn path with one too many steps leading down, and fourteen jaws dropped in response.

"Ye've got to be kidding," Dwalin almost questioned, not certain if he could bear hearing the answer.

"All these steps?" Fili complained immediately afterwards. "For real?"

"It'll take us hours to get down there!" She wasn't sure who was that, probably Nori.

"There has to be another way," Gloin protested in the midst of a choir of displeased grumbles. "A shortcut!"

The human put her hands on her hips and arched an eyebrow in warning. "There is," she said blankly. "Just choose the spot where you'd like me to throw you down."

Some fumed at this, some other laughed, but eventually they all had to accept it. During the difficult descent, Arya decided that the safest place for her would be next to Bilbo. He was always so kind and polite, in contrast to certain others —and, no, she didn't want to put name labels here—and he seemed very eager to hear any of her stories about the Wild.

The other pair of the company that was ready to engage in a promising conversation were the two brothers, who guarded the end of the long line. All the way from the top, Fili was observing his brother who fidgeted around like a nervous dove and stole sneaky glances at the third-in-line walking pair in front of them. "Do I want to know?" he said with a tired sigh.

Kili didn't actually catch the words, but heard the voice. "Mmm?" he turned to the source of it with the look of a lost puppy.

"What's going on?"

"What's going on?" Kili repeated in confusion.

"Something happened," Fili pressed. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened," the younger denied a little too quickly.

"Damn it," the blond fumed, unable to take it anymore, "you have tripped thirty times since the top, every time because you were looking at the back of her head. What happened?"

The younger adopted an impossibly innocent look, averted his gaze and mumbled something inaudible.

"I didn't catch that."

"I, erm..." he bit his lip nervously, "may have slept beside her again." He avoided entering into detail of their exact sleeping position. He would never hear the end of it.

Fili pursed his lips in order not to bark a laugh and simply turned to look ahead.

The younger's brow furrowed in perplexity at his brother's fairly suspicious reaction. It made him bristle. "Are you not going to comment on this?"
The older flashed a devilish grin, "Stranger things have happened."

Kili was left staring at him with trepidation, fearing the unknown and feeling very vulnerable all of a sudden. It wouldn't be too long before his fear came true, unfortunately.

"Master Baggins!" Fili exclaimed with a mirthful grin. And even if the call addressed only one, it mainly affected two certain others.

The hobbit stepped to the side to let the two pairs trespass him, then searched for the source of the voice with a curious look. The Ranger lingered next to him awkwardly, pupils dilated by a mild fear that made her gut twist slightly.

"Master Baggins," Fili caught up with them, his brother in tow, "we never had the chance to talk about the Shire. I would be delighted to hear about the culture of Hobbits, if you don't mind."

Bilbo seemed a bit lost. He did definitely not expect that. "Of course," he agreed as the dwarf placed himself next to him and gave Arya a gentle shove towards the back of the line, next to his brother.

"I'm certain you will find an interesting topic as well," the blond said with a wicked smile and flounced ahead in the company of their burglar, ignoring the murderous look on his brother's face and basking in the desperate one on the woman's.

They were both sure of it while walking side by side—the awkwardness between them had maxed out. Arya looked at anywhere and anything but the dwarf beside her and Kili had found his boots exceedingly interesting all of a sudden. It drew his attention, though, when he saw from the corner of his eye her hand trying to scratch her back above the bandages.

The gesture was enough for him to break the barrier of uncomfortable silence. "Are you alright?"

"As one can be," she said absentmindedly, rather focused on her back and not on the fact that she actually spoke to him. "'Tis just so miserably itchy, I've half a mind to tear the skin off and spare myself the struggle."

His mouth had a tendency to curl, though his concern proved too much to allow a full smile. "Should we get Oin to check you?"

"No, no," she dismissed and drew her hands away from her back. "It's fine."

Kili was in no way convinced. He could see she was in pain, he saw that the scars were clearly bothering her, and her politely expressed obstinacy rendered him incapable of doing something about it. He would've offered to check her wounds himself, though she would just probably give him a push and make him descend the rest of the steps with a rather spectacular tumble.

"I didn't know Fili took such a keen interest in other peoples' cultures," her voice suddenly snapped him out of his thoughts.

Eyes bulged and his pace faltered so that the woman wouldn't get to see the increasing amount of blood that flowed under the skin of his cheeks. Kili was acutely aware of the exact purpose of Fili's sudden interest in Hobbit culture and it made him want to pluck his own hair out. "Aye," he growled under his breath, trying to fight the serious impulse to launch forward and smack his dearest brother on the back of his head, "he's full of surprises sometimes, the little rascal."

His silent cursing for having been left behind with her proved rather creative. Yet luck didn't seem to have forsaken him completely, for they thankfully did not exchange a word for the rest of the route. They merely walked side by side, both doing their best to avoid each other's eyes.
When they finally made it down those godforsaken steps in the middle of pretty much nowhere, they met a river, across which a ford of huge flat stones led to the grasslands beyond where the eye could see. There was a small bridge there, serving as crossing path from one side to the other, and the company decided to make a short break from their trek.

"Look how clear the water is," Bofur sighed.

Bilbo cocked his head to the side in question, though he quickly caught on. "You don't actually mean it..."

"We stink," Fili complained next to him, sounding a tad affronted. "We haven't had a proper bath since we left Rivendell. Sweat, dirt, blood, goblins... The pinnacle would be pissing ourselves, and I'm not willing to wait for that to happen so I can have an excuse to bathe and wash my clothes!"

The hobbit raised a hand to stop him. "Too much information, Fili," he mumbled dryly. "Too much."

"Come on, lads, just a brief dip!" someone behind them shouted impatiently and all fervently agreed. Not a minute later, half of them were already in the process of taking their clothes off and searching among the remaining supplies for the soap bars.

"That's it, I'm off," the Ranger whispered to the hobbit once the sight became a little too inappropriate than what she had signed up for.

She was certain Azog and his stooges would hunt them, though she highly doubted they'd manage to reach them within a day. Flying away with the eagles had the most valuable advantage of putting a considerable distance between oneself and their foe. The dwarves didn't seem to give much thought on this but all the same, it was her duty to scout the area just in case. And these lands were no less dangerous than the ranges and woodlands of Eriador.

At his questioning look, she explained, "I'd better have a look around. Someone has to watch over these gentlemen's bums while they cleanse themselves."

Bilbo coughed loudly to cover his amused chuckle and nodded. She disappeared in seconds, not giving further explanation to anyone else, since they were all rather focused on the running water of the stream. And he was left staring at the place she had been in awe, wondering if she actually possessed the power his ring did, completely vanishing into thin air at will.

Before anyone had even taken his clothes off Fili and Kili were already naked and running, and soon all of them were heading for the water like a flock of rather chubby bighorn sheep -with the exception of few. After their bath was over, the dwarves spread their wash out to dry in the sunshine and lounged on the riverbank naked, waiting for themselves to dry as well. The hobbit gulped in embarrassment and averted his eyes.

"Where is Arya?" Fili asked with concern when he noticed she had not been around for the past hour.

Kili found himself nervously glancing around, inwardly scolding himself for not realising he had lost her from his field of view.

"She went to have a look around," Bilbo motioned between the trees and quickly turned his back to them. "I'll just be sitting over there by Gandalf," he muttered uncomfortably, gesturing towards the wizard who was quietly sitting under the shadow of a tree, smoking his pipe, "not... being naked."

Fili shook his head in amusement watching the burglar scuttling away. "Odd little fellow," he
laughed quietly.

"He's not the only one who's being odd today," Kili pointed out, his scrutinizing gaze pinned on the other's head. "I hope you learned a lot about Hobbit history."

"Oh, you have no idea," Fili flashed an impossibly wide smile. "Hobbits are quite fascinating creat-

"Yeah, save it." Kili cut him off, ready to snap, but his nose got a whiff of something interesting that chased every other thought out of his head. "Do you smell that?" he asked.

"Smell what?"

"I don't know..." the younger trailed off, then closed his eyes and inhaled again, deeper this time. He had distant recollection of a bar of soap their mother had paid a fortune to buy from the local market a few years back, seeing as the merchant claimed it to be made with oils from the East, the lands around the sea of Rhûn. She had been adamant that only very important guests be allowed to use it. Needless to say, it had yet to be used. Kili had actually forgotten its very existence until now. "Something like that fancy soap mum had bought, remember? Like oranges and... argan oil."

"Oranges and argan oil," the blond repeated thoughtfully as he studied his brother's face. "Did you find anything that looked like pipe weed and smoke it?"

Kili rolled his eyes and that was clearly the end of it. His mind had stilled on the strange smell that came from somewhere in the middle of nowhere, however, although there didn't seem to be any orange or argan trees around.

After their clothes dried sufficiently and the company was decent again, Bilbo joined them along with Gandalf. They formed a small circle under the shadow the trees offered and took the leftover food the eagles had brought them back in Carrock out of their packs.

"Fili, go fetch some water," Thorin ordered.

The young one was limited to hand gestures, having a full mouthful of food in. "Let Kili go," he complained when half of it went down. "He's finished already."

Thorin nodded and Kili stood from his seat, leveling Fili with a glare and not forgoing a much-deserved kick in the shin on his way to the bank. He also stole one of the two rabbit legs Fili had in his hands, the greedy bastard, and stomped off. A voice stopped him after five steps.

"Laddie, we just washed here," Oin noted, earning a questioning look.

"Aye," Dwalin agreed, "I'd rather not drink from the water your uncle dipped his bum in."

The comment kept the whole company laughing for more than was socially acceptable for adults in regards to their king.

Speak of the devil, even he had to force back a smile. "And you're the one to talk about personal hygiene," he commented dryly.

At once his nephews, even at a distance, shared a look. It felt like ages since Thorin came so close to making a joke. Fairly surprise, Kili quickly walked away from their little circle towards the gurgling waters of the stream, wondering about his uncle's sudden change of mood. Surely he did not think they were out of danger now. If anything, the stakes were raised. Kili allowed himself to become complacent for the night before, but that was it. The night passed and the new day dawned, dragging more challenges along with it.
He made his way through the trees, munching the meat in his hand, thoughtful yet pleasantly surprised to find the scent of orange blossoms lingering still. He arrived at a part of the stream where the water was clear enough for his taste. Halfway in filling the fourth flask and as he ripped the last piece of rabbit meat off the bone, the sound of bubbles drew his gaze a few yards away from where he stood. His hand reflexively went for his knife and he swiftly turned to the source of the sound, cursing to the skies for not bringing his bow with him.

And then it happened.

The moment his eyes faced the spectacle before him, he halted, cursed, and reevaluated his choices, all in the space of one second.

By some unhappy coincidence, there was Arya, emerging on the surface with her head slightly tilted, her hands tangled in her hair and, thank all the Valar, her back turned to him. She moved her hair to her front, leaving her shapely back gloriously bare and exhibited in front of him, its contours highlighted by the sunlight that sneaked up leisurely through the tree leaves. It was an image that, without a doubt, would haunt him to his grave.

All that flogging back in Goblin-town had turned her back into a macabre canvas of dried blood and lacerations that weren't inflamed—yet—by mere chance. Though, wherever numerous sets of bruises or marks did not adorn her body, he noted that she had healthy, light coloured flesh, which reminded him of the winter sunrise for some reason; warm and welcoming. He watched droplets of water slip across the smooth skin, marked here and there by freshly acquired gashes and either small or large scars from the past, blending with dried blood and painting the water around her a pale pink. True enough, without her clothes on, it was easy to see how taut her figure was. She wasn't nearly as slender or weak as he had presumed her to be, although she certainly didn't have the physique he was used to in a woman. Her limbs were longer and her lithe torso was unlike the stocky frame of dwarven women.

All these observations did not take more than two seconds. But poor Kili probably should have swallowed that last piece of rabbit before he even made his way to the ford. At least he managed to keep it in. Too bad it went down the wrong way and caused him to start coughing uncontrollably.

Once the Ranger completed the quick scouting around the area, making sure no one had followed them or was in a distance able to cause trouble, she took the path back and reached a small, secluded behind the trees, clearing where the stream ran through. Well, she could obviously make the most of this opportunity and take a bath herself, since the others were probably still occupied with theirs. It wouldn't take her long, she thought, just a quick swim. It would be good to clean her wounds properly as well, not just with a wet piece of cloth like back in Carrock.

She knelt by the bank, carefully took her clothes and bandages off, and lowered herself slowly into the water. Despite that the recently formed scars would make bathing difficult, to say the least, the coldness of it soothed the broken skin somewhat. The rest of her body didn't agree as much.

Happy thoughts, she repeated the words in her head as a distraction every time she came close to start swearing like a pirate. Quietly groaning under her breath at the stinging sensation, she willed herself to dip entirely underwater to wash her body. It was not what one would describe as clean. She positively felt like a moving filth, with her skin being at some points stained with mud and grime, and at others with lines of dried blood. But she had grown used to it all these years; travelling around the lands all the time usually had that effect.

In the current predicament, smuggling a bar of soap from the Elves proved a rather farseeing act. Ironically enough, she would've preferred losing the soap and not her cloak in Goblin-town. Now,
after a good and quite painful scrub, it was the first time since their stay at Rivendell that she actually felt somewhat clean.

She had grown used to the cold water and gone slightly numb from it by now —the only positive result of this was that she felt close to no pain— so she decided to go for a last dip and wash her hair as well; the tangled and full of dirt hair. Sometimes she'd considered cutting it off to be spared the tedious task of washing their length down, thought which she regretted in seconds, for her mother had always been fond of her hair. When it was thankfully decent enough and she felt her skin beginning to turn slightly blue from the cold, she brought it in front of her to quickly comb it through with her fingers —another quite tedious task for her liking— and be done with the whole bathing experience. It was then that an odd sound came from somewhere near and her first reaction was to gauge the distance between her and the bank, and also how long it'd take her to run to where her daggers lay.

The startled woman turned around abruptly prepared for the worst, but was instead met with the very red face of a dwarf prince. She wasn't certain whether it was embarrassment or anger that caused her body to burn. How bloody long was he standing there?

"Enjoying the view?" she growled sarcastically, wrapping her arms around her front to cover whatever she could, trying to save what last pieces of dignity were left in her.

If Kili wasn't nearly choking to death, he would be something more than mortified, he decided. Far more than in Carrock, hours ago when Thorin and Gandalf caught them sleeping like that. "I--" he managed to breathe out before a new round of coughing began, yet he still made no move to walk away. "Came--" Cough. "To fill--" Another cough. "The flasks!"

The offending piece finally decided to abandon the wrong position and painfully scratch its way down his stomach. He took several greedy breaths to bring his lungs back from the verge of collapsing. And then took in the gravity of the situation. His hand swiftly jerked up to cover his eyes to avoid looking directly at her, and he wished he had another pair of hands to cover his ears too, so as not to listen to the extraordinarily creative curses she threw at him both in Westron and Elvish. "Kill me. Kill me now."

Arya dipped back into the water from the neck down, barking, "Get out of here!"

The prince found himself gathering in frenzy the flasks he had previously dropped to the ground when frantic yells began anew.

"Did I start that sentence with the words 'If it pleases your Highness'? Bugger off, now!"

She was not the only one to have rights on anger, though. The dwarf was starting to see red and he didn't even know why. "Couldn't you at least have warned you'd take a bath here?" he growled.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she shot back with voice reaching extremely high volume and levels of sarcasm, "I was not aware that I had to announce to everyone the place I was going to bathe!"

"When you are the only woman around, you should!" Without thinking it through, he turned to face her. "What if something happened and you were all alone in the river without weapons near?" he bellowed again, clearly enraged at her recklessness. The moment she was ready to retort he was already on his way back to the camp, leaving her no room for dispute.
Her angry voice continued to echo through the trees behind him and he grimaced in response. No one would even realise it should anything happen to her—they'd probably see her body floating by them down the stream and the water painted red with her blood. Kili cringed at the visual.

Fili watched as his flushed to the bone brother rushed in like the wind, dropped the flasks to the owners' laps and stormed off to the stars know where. "What's the matter?" he asked worriedly.

"Ask your dearest friend!" Kili flared in a loud, wry voice, his face the colour of a ripe peach as he tossed his arms about in exasperation. "Apparently she has decided to transform into a naked forest nymph and didn't even bother to warn any unsuspecting males in the vicinity!"

Bilbo blushed for no obvious reason, Gandalf cracked a half-smile and some of the dwarves guffawed. Only Thorin's look remained steely enough to break through iron.

"Did ye take a good peek?" Dwalin teased him, to which Kili responded with a terrified look, almost like a deer before it was shoot to death.

"W– What?" he sputtered, blushing even more, if possible. "I most certainly did not! 'Twas like torture!"

"Laddie, ye've seen Bombur naked," Bofur pointed. "Compared to that, I think ye pretty much enjoyed yourself back there."

"Oh, hilarious!" the mentioned dwarf sneered and threw a boned piece of rabbit at the back of his brother's head. "As if you're a sight for sore eyes!"

"I did not enjoy myself!"

"No need to get testy," Bofur piped the spirits down. "Was the lass so bad to look at?"

"No!" Kili argued. "I mean, I don't know!"

"So she was nice then?" his brother asked with a devilish smile.

"Yes!" The prince's eyes went wide once he realised what he said. "No– Oh, shut up! Stop asking inappropriate questions!" With that and some incomprehensible grunts of frustration he jogged away, more than eager to find something to shoot himself with.

A good two minutes later the Ranger showed up with damp hair and clothes, as well as the exact same colour hue on her face as Kili, dreading the suggestive, bawdy comments that would likely storm upon her from certain someones who had zero qualms about making them. Yet nobody mentioned anything and that had her wonder if Kili, who strangely enough was absent, even recounted the incident in the first place.

The trek began again and Arya, more than willingly, forced herself to occupy the end of the line to avoid glances or words with anyone, Bilbo included. She already felt awfully guilty and couldn't even tell why. The dwarf had walked in on her and just stood there, watching her bathing. In what world did it make any sense for her to be the one who felt guilty about it? I'm going mental, she thought with a resigned sigh.

Kili took a quick peek over his shoulder, spotting her almost immediately as she walked in silence with her gaze lowered to her feet, and he felt miserable. Not four hours ago he was praying for her not to speak to him at all simply to avoid the awkwardness, and now he was lowering his pace to catch up with her, struggling to find the right words to begin. This was so twisted. He secretly hoped
she'd speak first, although this was highly unlikely considering it involved the two of them. She also had every right to not wish to speak to him—not that she was very eager to do so in general, but he thought that, since the night before, they had got to a point where a few words would not ignite a fight. On the other hand, maybe he was wrong.

From the corner of her eye, Arya acknowledged his presence next to her. He was standing there like a regretful puppy, with his tail between his legs, and for a moment she actually pitied him. But it was exactly that; only for a moment before anger flushed her. "Didn't you get enough of me in my birth day attire?" she mumbled angrily, turning her head fully to face him.

Marching forward a few steps ahead of them, Fili coughed not so discreetly to muffle a chuckle, earning a very matching set of glowers from the two.

The brunet shuffled awkwardly on his feet, still undecided as to how to approach the matter. The icy look she shot him moments ago had made the fuzz on the back of his neck stand still. "I... I'd like to apologise for... erm–" Curse the annoying, awkward stuttering. "I really didn't mean to..." He mentally slapped himself for doing it. It made him sound like an adolescent minx. A few seconds passed, during which he cleared his throat and decided to be forward. "I did not spy on you while you were bathing, really."

The blond couldn't even begin to describe how entertained he was by the conversation, if someone could call it that. He loudly cleared his throat and coughed again to suppress a rumbling laugh. "Would you like to contribute something to the conversation, dear brother?" Kili demanded sharply and, not waiting for an answer, turned his attention back to the woman. "Look, Arya, I honestly didn't see--" in vain he tried to avert his mind from certain parts of her anatomy that no decent young lad should be contemplating, "much... I swear--"

He was once more interrupted by Fili, who coughed out 'stalker' under his breath.

"Seriously, brother," Kili warned, pulling his most stern face, "you should ask Oin to take a look at your throat. If the cold you have gets worse, you could die." The emphasis on the word 'die' did nothing to discourage Fili. Much to his chagrin, the latter only rewarded him with a broad grin.

"Can we simply forget what happened?" Arya said with a tired wave of her hand. "It's water under the bridge now and, honestly, I don't have nerves of steel to cope with every little incident that will make us bicker like children."

Kili seemed to be in accord with that. He let a breath he didn't know he was holding up till now and nodded in agreement. She nodded back and they kept walking next to each other in silence, not exchanging a single word.

Until Fili considered it the right moment for a joke to break the icy tension. The mischievous glint was back in his eyes—not that it had ever left them, actually. "You are aware that you ought to restore her honour and marry her, right, brother?"

Despite the strong urge to smack the blond dwarf upside his head, Arya laughed under her breath upon seeing his brother's face turn a bright crimson. Now this was an opportunity that deserved to be seized. She would certainly regret it for the rest of her days if she kept it inside. "Don't lose any sleep over that," she dismissed looking at Kili, a little more patronizingly than he'd like, "you won't have to restore any honour or marry me. After all, no man, or dwarf for that matter, would want to marry and spend the rest of his life with a merely tolerable woman. It would hardly encourage marital affection."
With an innocent smile and three large strides she strutted ahead, a little too smug than what was socially acceptable for adults, to continue beside her safest choice of a companion—Bilbo, that is. The two brothers were left behind, Fili with a dumbfounded look and Kili stunned to shocked silence, looking as though an entire pork leg was suddenly caught in his throat.

Chapter End Notes

Title taken from 'Back in black' by AC/DC.
It had been a good few hours since the fateful bathing incident. It had been less than a good few hours since the quip. And Kili had yet to recover from the initial shock when he realised that Arya, in some bloody magical way, knew about that particular comment of his. He had not only changed his opinion entirely in the course of the journey, but now regretted even making such a comment in the first place. Yet it was him and his luck, so of course she had to have heard it.

Fili shot him a consoling glance, sadly unable to go back to the unfortunate moment where his brother clearly forgot about the time Fili had told him to think about something six times before opening his mouth. Or, for greater efficiency, just shove an apple in his mouth. Either would do. Alas, time could not go back. Was it really necessary that she knew of this? Why those two never had the timing needed for a temporary ceasefire? He sighed and stared at his brother who was walking beside him, looking awfully miserable as he kicked small stones that lay on the path.

Arya, on the other hand, was in an extraordinarily good mood and walked alongside of Bilbo, narrating stories of old and not so old. She didn't mind what Kili had said all this time ago—everyone was entitled to their opinion, especially on subjective matters such as beauty. It wasn't that she sought to have a dig at him and planned for this to happen; she simply saw a chance and took it, relishing at the loveable pout on his face when she glanced at him over her shoulder. Suddenly, her eyes went wide. "Loveable?" she thought with trepidation. "'Loveable' and 'Kili' in the same sentence?" She wigged her head to shoo the evil notion away, having no recollection of drinking something in the morning that would render her mind capable of such thoughts.

Yet the bad seeds were already planted and her good mood slowly turned sour. She had been so preoccupied with the events of a few hours ago that she actually and quite stupidly forgot about the hours that possibly separated them from the orcs. Her pace suddenly ceased, as did the story she was telling Bilbo. She took a glimpse of the high rocks a few leagues away, then quickly made her way towards the front of the line.

"I'm going to have a look around," she said lowly for both Gandalf and Thorin to hear. The king nodded in agreement and raised a hand to stop their small procession.

"You should take someone with you," Gandalf noted, and both the dwarf and the Ranger looked at him in question. "You are injured. A helping hand could be of use."

Her eyes sparkled with something that made Thorin scowl, thinking that he'd have to send Fili or Kili along, who had the second sharpest reflexes after her. But it came down as a total surprise to him when she called out the burglar's name.

"What, me?" the hobbit protested. "Why, thank you for the invitation, but I don't see how—"

"That's exactly the point," she said simply. "You should tag along and learn for your benefit."

After long seconds of silent protest, Bilbo shrugged his shoulders in resignation and followed her across the path that led somewhere between large rocks above them.

"Do you reckon one of us should go after them?" Kili muttered worriedly, earning an eye-roll from Dwalin that made the prince shrug innocently and add, "Just in case."
The Ranger was leading the way up to the mountain crest with the hobbit in tow. "Now, stop sulking," she scolded. "What kind of burglar are you if the elementary eludes you?"

He employed his most convincing glower and she laughed under her breath.

"First of all," she began in a low voice, "eyes and ears always open, for everything. A sound, broken twig, a footprint on the dirt, a scent– Anything that can mark the presence of danger around."

The hobbit nodded and began a careful scrutiny of his surroundings, until a clipping sound startled him. He reflexively recoiled, which had as a result him stepping on a bushy confluence of small twigs and cracking them under his foot.

"Second, focus and try not to flinch," Arya appeased. "Learn to distinguish the sounds. What we heard just now was the owl over there," her hand pointed at a tree branch high above their heads.

His eyes widened slightly. She hadn't even looked around to see where the sound came from, let alone what produced it, and she simply pinpointed the source. It was indeed an owl, just like she said.

"Third, trust both your instincts and your senses. For example, do you feel that something dangerous is close right now?"

Bilbo raised an eyebrow sardonically. "I've been constantly feeling something dangerous around for the past few weeks."

"Good start," she smiled encouragingly.

"What?" His eyes widened. "Do you feel it?"

"Ah," Arya flashed a smile and smugly wiggled her eyebrows, "the perks of being related to an elf."

He could not comprehend her relaxed attitude the moment she was technically telling him that danger lurked near. For a moment his face faltered and he went to flinch, but then remembered her advice and tried to compose himself. Not long after, they reached the top of the large hill that gazed over the mountain crest and hid there, behind thick rocks.

"Are they near?" he asked nervously. "Do you feel them near us?"

"Now it'd be best to use your senses and not your instincts."

After a short debate with himself Bilbo gathered the courage and peeked behind the rock, all the way towards the vast mountain ranges that lay before them. He managed to distinguish some moving dots in the distance that came closer and closer, accompanied by low growls.

"They're not exactly subtle, are they?" Arya mused and the hobbit tightened his hold on the rock as he kept watching them from afar.

"Are they all scouts?"

The Ranger's brow furrowed in thought. "I can't tell for sure."

"If we keep running and they chase us, what are our prospects?"

"Against ten of them and shorthanded? I'd call our chances roughly even." There was a pregnant pause before she turned to him. "Against a pack of trained hunters astride wargs, and Azog's whip
behind them... I'd say we're about a dozen skilled hands short of having any bloody prayer of surviving that."

Speak of the devil, the pale orc came into focus with his warg roaring the rest into a halt. He sniffed for a few moments, trying to pick up the scent, and Bilbo immediately sealed himself behind the rock. The woman gestured him to keep an eye on their surroundings and took a turn to peek at the now retreating wargs along with their riders, while he checked at his other side. And promptly felt his stomach heave at the sight of a huge, dark, furry... thing in the distance.

Arya felt something tug at her arm and shifted her attention from the orc pack to a blanched Bilbo gesturing spasmodically towards a spot not far behind. "Yes, I saw it."

"Well... if you're not concerned about it, far be it from me to panic."

The woman gave a nonchalant smile. "You'd better not let it see you—"

"Me? Why only me?"

"You shall go back to the others to warn them—"

"And what are you going to do?" He fixed her with a slightly accusatory look, "You said we came here just to have a look around."

"I'm here. I'm looking. But someone must tell the others."

Once more he debated with the annoying voice in his mind. He could not leave her behind, it wouldn't be honourable.

"They split up and may pick up our trail should they come closer. So hurry," she deadpanned. "I'll find you later."

And that was enough debate for one day. Feet carrying him as quickly as they could, he took the way back to where the company waited for them.

As soon as he was gone, Arya started to follow the warg that strayed from the pack in their direction, by way of the trees. It certainly had the element of surprise, even if it involved the orc catching her scent to step into the trap. Her ears caught the sound of heavy steps a few minutes later as she prowled across the thick tree branches, and she froze, the breath she was ready to take caught in some place between throat and lungs. What she'd give to have her bow with her right now...

Oh, he had definitely caught her scent. He was sniffing heavily, both him and the warg.

Arya silently picked a pinecone and threw it a few feet away. It tumbled on the ground, ending up colliding against a small rock. The enemy's attention was immediately drawn towards it. She picked another one and threw it again, this time to another spot. This went on for awhile, each time the sound coming from a different spot on the ground. The orc was ready to blow his horn and notify his master, but he was dead before he even finished the thought. One of her knives was rammed into his skull, and as he slid off the warg she swiftly landed upon the beast's back, impaling one dagger directly into its head, the other slashing its throat from the side. This time there was no fight on its behalf, nor struggle. A low howling left its mouth as it drew its last breath, which might as well be that of a wolf's.

The beast's carcass slumped limply onto the ground, ready to be devoured by the ever voracious vultures of the mountains, and she landed next to it; unfortunately on her back, because one couldn't have it both ways in this life. Lips and eyes fell shut as she groaned under her breath from the surge
of pain the fall sent to her nerves, and cursed the blasted moment she'd lost her bow in Goblin-town for the tenth time that day.

In the meantime Bilbo gained upon the company, who were quite impatiently waiting with swords and axes at the ready.

"Did you see anything?"

Still panting from all the running he had done this past hour, he could barely procude a coherent answer. What he could only do for the moment was frantic gestures with his hands about something, which no one was able to interpret.

"It's the pack?" Thorin asked quickly. "How close are they?"

"Too close," he breathed out. "A couple of leagues, no more—"

"How many?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen—"

Dwalin glanced at the king sideways, his look warlike as ever. "If we're lucky and it's on the lighter end, we might actually be able to fight them off."

"'If we're lucky' is not a notion that's worked well for us recently, now, is it?" Bilbo wondered sarcastically, still not having managed to lower his panting down to normal breathing. "That should be the least of our concerns. We have another problem."

"Did they see you? They saw you—"

"No, that's not—"

"Ah, what did I tell you? Quiet as a mouse," Gandalf interrupted him again, and the hobbit huffed in frustration. "Excellent burglar material!"

"No, listen—"

A low commotion suddenly broke out amongst the dwarves regarding Bilbo Baggins's efficiency as a burglar, which under other circumstances would be rather flattering but now only cost them precious time. Only the princes and one or two others peered at the small path curiously, wondering and waiting for the Ranger to appear any moment now.

"Will you just listen?" the hobbit snapped. "I'm trying to tell you there is something else out there—Arya saw it, too. She told us to run—"

Only then did it dawn on them that they were one person short. Kili's head snapped upwards from where he kept staring at the ground in thought, as though someone had pinched his backside. His eyes sought her form, but didn't find her anywhere.

"Where's the lass gone?" someone asked.

All voices piped down and fifteen pairs of eyes glanced curiously around and then to each other.

"The pack split up and one was heading this way—"

And at that moment Kili gained the knowledge of how his stomach doing a somersault felt like.
... stayed back to keep an eye–"

She's lost it, thought the younger prince with utter conviction. The woman didn't have an ounce of mind in her head. Someone had to give her a lesson on how to think rationally, if at all.

"What form did it take? What you saw," Gandalf suddenly asked thoughtfully, "was it like a bear?"

"Ye–" the hobbit reflexively went to answer but stopped mid-sentence. His brown locks waved a little when he shook his head in confusion, "Yeah... but much bigger. How– How did you know?"

Gandalf remained silent while some of the dwarves favoured going back and others countered that they would come face to face with the pack if they did.

"There is a house not far from here," the wizard reluctantly revealed, "where we might take refuge, but the owner will either help us or... he will kill us."

Thorin rubbed his temples viciously, trying not to snap at the wizard and the darn options he seemed to have made a habit of offering. "What choice do we have?"

"At this point, none," the wizard said simply. "Run!"

"Wait," Bofur stopped them, "what about the lass?"

"She said she'd find us later–"

"You cannot be serious?" Fili barked. "We have to wait for her!"

Thorin groaned inwardly, his eyes hooded with discontentment. He had to worry about his company; that was thirteen people. There was no spare room for a fourteenth person, especially the likes of her.

Arya was running as fast as her legs could afford, hopping over rocks and fallen trunks, and breathing steadily in and out to prevent her heart from hopping out of her chest as she approached the small path between the rocks. A guttural roar was following not too far behind. Fifteen heads she met when she rushed out of the path and into the clearing, panting her lungs out, surprised they were still there.

"What the–?" she breathed out, looking separately at each one of them.

"You're seriously mental, aren't you?" Kili rushed to her side, his eyes immediately falling on the back of her tunic that sported a dark red spot.

"How did it go?" Bilbo asked after him. "Did you find the rider?"

"I did," she replied in haste. "But what are you still doing here? I told you to run!"

"You're bleeding!" Kili exclaimed in dread, tugging at the hem of the tunic. "What happened?"

"Oh, nothing special, we just had a cup of tea and a little friendly chat," she spat out sarcastically and pulled away from his arm, suddenly aggravated with something quite vague, only to have Kili reply with an angry sneer. "What the bloody hell do you think that happened? I killed it!" she snapped and half of the dwarves narrowed their eyes in doubt. "Yes, despite all my lady parts, I managed to bring both the warg and the orc down. Now, can you please quit stalling and run?"

They didn't need to be told thrice. It felt as if they were flying through groves, plain land and above small stream that were found on their way, their feet kept motivated by the not so far away howls of
the pack and the added roar of an unknown beast that only Bilbo and the Ranger had seen and Gandalf knew about.

Soon enough, in the distance, they could see a large house placed in the middle of nowhere. A great, both in height and strength, fence surrounded the estate and obviously protected it from intruders.

"Into the house!" Gandalf yelled. "Quickly!"

The huge beast they were running to get away from emerged with an earsplitting roar through the trees and chased them till the door. The dwarves bumped onto each other, pushing with all their might and weight to open it, until Thorin had the prudence to remove the piece of wood that kept it sealed and they finally made it into the house. The giant bear, however, darted against the door, large fangs protruding menacingly from his mouth as it struggled to get inside and tear them to shreds.

The dwarves eventually managed to shut the door and subsequently the bear out, all trembling from both fear and the mighty effort. Bilbo had taken his sword out, ready to defend himself if needed, in case the beast broke the door down, although he didn't hold out too much hope. Only the wizard and the Ranger stood at the back relatively calmer than the others, although still with a grip on their swords.

"What was that?" Ori stuttered in shock.

"That is our host," Gandalf replied. "His name is Beorn. He is a skin-changer. Sometimes he's a huge bear," he continued as he took a stroll around the place, "sometimes he's a strong man. The bear is unpredictable, the man can be more easily dealt with. However... he's not overly fond of dwarves."

The company gulped in a choir of melodic sounds, some paling from fear, some grumbling under their breaths that they were forced to seek accommodation there.

"Now," Gandalf announced and took his hat off, "get some rest, all of you. We'll be safe here tonight... I hope."

Arya's eyebrows knitted together in confusion at the expression of doubt that graced his features. "We won't?"

"That remains to be seen," were his sole words before he left her standing there alone.

The dwarves started to explore the large house, wondering how big this bear-man could actually be. The chairs, the table, the plates and glasses were too big even for the wizard and the Ranger. Each of them occupied a small space on the wooden floor that was mostly covered with hay, lay their weapons and cloaks, and then plopped down themselves to rest as Gandalf had advised.

Gloin had suggested they warm the place up, glancing ardently towards the big hearth, but Gandalf shut him down, arguing it would be unwise to act so without leave of their host. They were already using his house as accommodation without his consent.

"Why don't we light just a small fire?" Fili complained under his breath. "Why..." he trailed off when he noticed how his brother's gaze was pinned on someone else at the other side of the room, and especially on an area ten inches below the face. "Kili," he called.

"Mmm?" Kili muttered, oblivious to his eyes' actions.

"In Durin's name, stop staring at her!" Fili scolded, giving him a light smack on the shoulder. "Didn't you take a good enough look hours ago?"
The brunet frantically averted his eyes from his earlier object of focus and looked at his brother, blushing furiously from the base of the neck to the tips of his ears. All joking aside, he looked more like a poppy than a dwarf.

"Seriously," Fili continued, "you have to control your urges— Ow!" A light groan left his mouth and he rubbed the spot where Kili's boot landed forcefully against his arm.

A while later, and after his brother's supposedly subtle suggestions that totally failed at being subtle, Fili took the blanket Kili offered and lay it down next to them, turning the spot into a makeshift bed for their human.

As soon as her body became horizontal, Arya let a long-suffering sigh, secretly basking in the temporary safety the house offered. Immediately Kili felt more at ease, even though he didn't know what or who was the cause of her contentment. He didn't even know why he was doing all this. Maybe as a gesture of apology for the not at all flattering comment of describing her as merely tolerable, he thought; but still, if he didn't apologise out loud, how was she supposed to figure this out? Such thoughts were nagging him for quite the time before he dozed off, not noticing how she had swaddled herself with his spare blanket and breathed deeply in and out.

Soft snores echoed in total harmony from every corner of the house, where each member of the company was asleep. It was deep into the night and only the moon cast some light through the huge windows. Their mysterious host that could transform into a bear kept some animals inside his house, so the company was forced to share the lodging with them. Small lambs, dogs, ponies, and all kinds of animals that someone could find in a farm.

Bilbo felt extraordinarily restless for such a late hour, while everyone else slept like logs, and fidgeted nervously under his blanket. An overwhelming need fueled him and he carefully took the ring out of his pocket, placing it in front of him to examine it under the moonlight. It felt odd. Never in his life so far had he encountered such a strange object. It was so simple crafted in comparison to other, more intricate in design rings he had seen worn by Elves, Dwarves and Men, yet he didn't know what made this one so different, so special. He marveled at how unique it was.

A muffled sound distracted him from the silent scrutiny of the ring, and he quickly shoved it inside his pocket again before lifting his head to search for the source. He caught a low hiss and his gaze reflexively landed on the laying form of the Ranger, who was tossing and turning. Suddenly, she jumped upright with wide eyes and a hand choking a growl off her mouth, and he lay back on his hay pillow so as not to be seen. He could hear her heavy breathing and then light —almost inaudible — footsteps as she stood up and walked to the next room.

Bilbo wavered for a few minutes. He watched as she placed herself on the large bench at the side of the table, the lone burning candle upon it illuminating her weary face. She let a tired sigh and her head slumped forward in her hands as her elbows rested on the table. He could hear a soft humming a while later, which he acknowledged it to be in the language of the Elves.

"Did you like it?"

The hobbit's eyelids flickered and he smiled when the enchantment of the elvish song ceased. "It was beautiful," he praised, still lingering under the door case. "What was it about?"

The Ranger removed her head from her hands' shelter and looked at him. "A great love of old," she said softly, "between an elf and a mortal." She shook her head to snap back to reality and some locks of her dark hair wiggled lazily in response. "Pardon the clinkers by the way, my singing ability is
woefully inadequate. Not in the mood for sleep?"

"I do not feel particularly comfortable to sleep with mice tickling my feet," he quipped and she chortled in response. "Arya, what is this man who owns the house? How can he transform into a bear? It is not... Well, it's—"

"Impossible?"

"Exactly! I cannot believe it!"

"Try," Arya said lightheartedly. "Far too many creatures inhabit this world. Some of them are good, some of them are bad, some nearly extinct. I reckon the owner of the house belongs to the last category, otherwise it wouldn't sound so strange to you that skin-changers actually exist."

"So fascinating," murmured the hobbit in quiet awe. Minutes of pensive silence passed before he decided to vocalise his thoughts that had taken a rather creative turn—result of a vivid imagination. "What do you think we'd be, if we were like him?"

"If you were a skin-changer? Hmm," Arya rubbed her chin meditatively, "let me think..." A few seconds later a playful twinkle shone in her eyes. "You would make an excellent bunny."

"A bunny?"

"Do not feel aggrieved," she appeased. "A bunny is adventurous when he feels like it, but is always timid, trusting and smart. And sweet, I have to admit."

Bilbo felt his cheeks turn ridiculously pink. The term took him a while back, the first time he'd attempted to put his confectionary skills to use. Being a perfectly competent cook for all his life, he had expected the endeavour to come off really well. Needless to say, no more attempts were made since that day and the recipe for the glazed cake was thrown into the fire. He could still remember two of his female neighbours calling him a 'walking, bunny-shaped pastry' upon witnessing the results—the endless amounts of ingredients stuck on his face that made him look like he had grown sugary ears.

With a light wiggle of his head he shook off the admittedly bittersweet memory and deigned to smile at the Ranger's generous compliment. Although he still did not fancy the thought of a bunny so much. "What about the dwarves?"

"Mmm... Balin could be an owl, given his wisdom and age– He is the eldest, isn't he?" He nodded in the affirmative. "Dwalin could be a wild boar, judging by his uncanny snorts—"

The chuckle Bilbo was desperately trying to hold back managed to escape, earning a loud snoring as a retort from someone in the next room. "What about the royals?"

"Well..." Arya began with a thoughtful look and glanced at the king, who slept by the large hearth along with his nephews. With all the dark hair and furs, it did not take long to figure it out. "Thorin would do justice to a big black wolf. He growls far too often to bear a strong resemblance. Fili, now, with that golden mane of hair would undoubtedly be a majestic lion—"

"A lion?" Bilbo cut in, positively astounded. "Have you seen a lion?"

She stole a glance at him and the tips of her mouth curled. "It may not sound plausible to you, but I've had my fair share of travels during the past ten years. I may have seen plenty of wild animals which are described only in books."
"Yes," he continued in disbelief, "but a lion? An actual lion?" His mind couldn't even process it. "Where?"

"In the East," she replied once her laughter piped down. "Not six years ago, I happened to travel to Rhûn. That is where I saw such wildlife."

Bilbo was listening, equal parts bewildered and fascinated. Oh, how he'd like to travel himself to these lands and see the cities and people with his own eyes. "Why did you travel there?"

"Tis a big world. Most of us live and die in the very place we were born and never get to see any of it," Arya replied easily, then cracked a mischievous smile. "This was the not-so-successful cover for the purpose of that particular trip," she admitted. "It wasn't one of my best travels, I must say."

"How so?"

"There are many different nations and kingdoms of Easterlings living in the vast lands of Rhûn. They range from civilised empires to barbaric horse nomads of the open steppes. Let's just say that the people I came across with, even though supposedly civilised, were not exactly friendly."

"Ah." The deep tone of her voice, as well as the pointedly raised eyebrow made the whole scenery somehow more creepy. "What else did you see there?"

"Oh... the most beautiful animal I have ever seen—a pard." Arya noticed how his mouth gaped and laughed breathlessly. "You know what it is."

"I know because I've only read about this," Bilbo protested. "In bloody poems! It's supposed to be imaginary—"

"Well, clearly," she smiled, "reality begs to differ."

"What did it look like?" he asked with the eager expression of a five-year-old and a beaming smile. "Is it as they describe it in books?"

"Unbelievably strong, although it might not look like it; swift and quick as a shadow, waiting for its prey to make just one wrong move to pounce and destroy it."

The hobbit sat there and studied her face and eyes carefully while she spoke and made various gestures with her hands to make the description livelier. "You could be a pard if you were a skin-changer," he said suddenly. "You already move about stealthily enough to give someone angina."

Arya tossed her head back, laughing. "If that's meant as a compliment, colour me flattered," she said humbly, a hand pressed over her chest as she gave a light bow. It was weird, she thought, for someone else had said the exact same thing in the past. She could not bring herself to agree, but was at any rate pleased by the praise. It was truly an honour for a warrior to be compared to such a ferocious animal. No matter that the one she'd come across back then almost devoured her in one gulp, it still was a memory worth to be stored in mind forever.

They remained silent for a while after that, until she felt his gaze pinned on her figure, as if he was examining her.

"What has you so thoughtful?"

He had been caught in the end. "Nothing," he brushed off, "it's just that... you seem– No, you actually are too young to have travelled so much." The words brought a smile to her face, although he sensed nothing genuine behind it. It was a painful one.
"Age should not be decided by the number of winters one lives to see. It should be measured by what they've seen and done. And to tell you the truth," she sighed, "I don't feel that young."

"Isn't that good, though? Most of us live and die in the same corner where we were born and never get to see any of this big and beautiful world," he mimicked her words and she laughed quietly. "You are not most of us."

"And neither are you now, master Baggins."

He nodded skeptically, but still smiling. "Isn't this what drew you to the life of a Ranger in the first place, though? The dangerous travels, all the new things you can see—the freedom?"

"They may have been at the beginning, but now that I've grown older and lived through some events, I believe it is something else."

"What?"

"The solitude."

Bilbo shook his head as he contemplated her words for a few moments, noticing an almost tangible sadness framing her figure. Until her brooding expression suddenly turned into a ingenious smirk. 

Arya had caught a faint sound from the next room; first it was a footstep on the wooden ground, then a low grumble, and then someone angrily whispering something in a language unknown to her. "So," she continued casually, "what were we talking about before that little break?"

The hobbit blinked a few times in surprise, but indulged her, "Erm... the dwarves and the animals they'd turn into—"

"Lovely! Who's next? If memory serves me right, the last one was Fili."

"You said he'd be a lion. What about Kili?"

"Oh," she said sweetly, drawing out the vowel for effect, "I bet he would make a great puppy."

Bilbo looked at her askance. Before he found the chance to say anything, another voice jumped in.

"A puppy?" Kili growled at her, materialising out of thin air under the door case. "Did you honestly just compare me to a puppy?" He might have woken a few minutes prior, but it didn't take him long to pick up on the topic. Affronted didn't even begin to do justice to what he felt.

"Haven't you been taught that eavesdropping isn't appropriate for a prince?" she wondered.

Kili wasn't in the mood for banter. One more scathing comment, and he'd go for her. Seated on her opposite, Bilbo could feel the muscles around his mouth going for a smile, but caught it at the last moment. He really didn't want Kili to see him laughing; in fact, he wanted to spend the rest of his life with all his limbs attached to his body. "Hey," he snapped his fingers, "keep your voices down before you wake everyone up. That was a joke, obviously." He turned to the woman with an eyebrow raised, half-fearing that she wouldn't play along. "Wasn't it?"

No answer. Arya slowly relaxed into her seat, savoring the moment and grinning like a cat, her eyes never leaving the dwarf's.

"Was it?" Kili challenged, glaring back.
Yet she just sat there, chilling like a villain, unwilling to let even a word out. The woman seemed to have a knack for making that particular dwarf go ballistic. It actually was quite an entertaining sight, Bilbo mused.

"Well?" the prince insisted and ducked his head slightly, making his glower seem much more menacing under those intense eyebrows.

"Since when my opinion matters to you?" asked Arya, disturbingly calm and unperturbed, entwining her hands in front of her and resting her chin atop them.

Realising his mistake a little too late, the scowl cut Kili's face deeper. Damn that woman. Damn her dark eyes. "Hilarious," he said with a deadpan look. "Believe me when I say I could not care less about your opinion—got better things to do with my time." Then he turned on his heel and almost stomped back to the other room.

"Now that he's gone?"

Arya turned to the hobbit, looking as innocent as a lamb. "You know," she whispered, risking a conspiratorial glance around, "I think he'd make a fairly good pard."

Bilbo arched an eyebrow in surprise.

"Well, I think it's time for me to find another place to sleep." Probably find a salve or something to apply on her back, as well. "The wounds have already stained the blanket Fili laid down for me; I'm not sure our host would appreciate my making a bloody mess on his floor."

His eyes softened at the grim declaration that she—in a disturbing way—managed to make it sound... well, less grim. Before he was able to retort she had already disappeared behind a door. His feet carried him back to his blanket then, though not before stopping for a visit on his way there.

"She called you a pard."

The whisper an inch away from ear made Kili flinch funnily. Startled to the core, he turned to see the burglar hovering literally above him like a spider's web hanging from the ceiling. "What?" he asked in confusion.

"I said, she called you a pard," the hobbit repeated stoically, like a teacher pointing a finger to his student's face. "You should be very pleased with yourself."

Kili had half a mind to tell him to sod off. He didn't, of course—Bilbo was nowhere at fault. "What the bloody hell is a pard?" he snapped.

A low rumble broke the silence and the two of them worriedly searched for the source. Dwalin had started snoring.

"If anyone wakes, you take the blame," Bilbo warned and Kili waved his head impatiently. "It's like a giant cat," the dwarf scowled immediately, "but a warg would be a snack to it."

The shadow of an impressed look flickered on his face as his anger ebbed away, and the dwarf lowered his head back to the pillow. He made a mental note to stop jumping to conclusions so fast.

With light footsteps, akin to those of the mice that strolled around and kept tickling his feet earlier, the hobbit returned to his spot and swaddle himself with his blanket. He felt good. Why, exactly, he couldn't tell.
Bilbo snapped out of the strange dreamland made of darkness and his gold ring, inhaled the fresh morning air and briefly basked in the warmth the blanket offered him. Voices could be heard from afar, quiet and grumbling, arguing amongst themselves. Realising he must have overslept, he cracked an eye open, which widened considerably when he saw a giant bee comfortably perched upon his nose. He shooed the strangely giant-sized bug away from him, only to be attacked by another one on his way to join the others.

"...without Beorn's help!" Gandalf pointed out. "We'll be hunted down before we even get into the forest— Ah, Bilbo, there you are."

The hobbit nodded 'good morning' to everyone. Before he could even ask what was going on he caught someone scooting closer from the corner of his eye.

The younger prince had accidentally ended up standing right beside him, eyeing him with a curious look. "Is Arya still asleep?" he whispered.

A frown of confusion was Bilbo's reply. As far as he recalled, the Ranger had ventured to another part of the house and, judging by Kili's quizzical brow, had yet to appear.

"I don't think she's here, to be honest," Bilbo whispered back to him. "She disappeared somewhere after you turned in."

Kili's forehead crinkled further with worry after the new information, although he quickly employed a neutral expression when he noticed his uncle's glare.

"I shall go first," the wizard announced, "Bilbo, you'll come with me."

Said person didn't seem very pleased as he awkwardly scooted closer. "Is this a good idea?"

"Of course," Gandalf offered. "Now, the rest of you wait here, and don't come out until I give the signal. Do not crowd him, better come out in pairs." After mere moments of contemplation he turned around to add, "Actually, Bombur, you count as two so you should come out alone."

The chubby dwarf nodded thoughtfully while munching on a carrot, not sure if this was a random comment or an insult. In any case, he had no problem with his weight and his lovely wife was proud of his belly.

"You're nervous," Bilbo noted once he and the wizard were out of the house and cautiously treaded the path that led to the yard.

Clearing his throat once more, Gandalf seemed offended. Although when his attention was drawn by the growl someone made as an axe was brought down to a big trunk, he might have felt an ever so slight pinch of discomfort. "Nervous? Nonsense," he brushed off and swiftly employed a charming smile. "Good morning."

The atmosphere during breakfast was heavy to say the least. After the necessary introductions had been made out there in the yard —in the midst of some threatening moves as well, if someone took into consideration the huge axe which the bear-man used to chop wood— Gandalf convinced Beorn that the company meant no harm whatsoever. The man hesitated at first, although he eventually gave his consent to provide accommodation for a few days, even if most of the company were dwarves, a race not so much of his liking as he pointed out—*that sounds promising*, Bilbo had thought dryly. Therefore the dwarves, half starved and worn down, were currently stuffing their mouths with overgenerous amounts of food, for the lack of it, combined with all the running, had taken a severe toll on them and their girth.
He looked around as he placed himself on the bench, again noting the woman's absence, as well as everyone else's curious glances around who were starting to wonder if she had actually left them. Gandalf had also skipped to mention her as part of the company to Beorn earlier, which had roused rather strong suspicions about her leaving and which in turn were discreetly rebutted. Still, she had yet to appear.

"So you are the one they call Oakenshield," the bear-man said in his baritone voice as he walked around the large table and poured milk into the cups. "Tell me, why is Azog the Defiler hunting you?"

Thorin's appetite had been sated, so he just sat in the corner with crossed arms, observing his nephews in front of him as they ate quietly. He felt fairly startled when that name was mentioned. "You know of Azog?" he inquired. "How?"

"My people were the first to live in the mountains, before the orcs came down from the North."

Bilbo raised his eyes from where they had been looking at so intensely all this time, that being the plate with food in front of him. "Are there others like you?"

"Once there were many."

"And now?"

The man took a deep breath and frowned. "Not as many," he said dryly. "They killed most of my family, but some he enslaved."

The remnants of what once seemed to be manacles around the bear-man's wrist caught his gaze and the hobbit swiftly averted his eyes before he'd get caught.

"Not for work," the man explained, "but for sport. Caging skin-changers and torturing them seemed to amuse him. Caging people and putting them to fight with the skin-changers amused him even more."

"And how did you get away?" Bilbo interrupted again, prompting fourteen mouths to pause their movement and the bear-man to turn sharply to him. Discomfort settled in the pit of his stomach like a brick. By no means was his intention to offend their host, but his curiosity got the better of him.

Beorn cast his eyes on the little fellow, looking him up and down, until the hobbit fidgeted nervously in his seat under his gaze. That was when he decided to answer. "It was hell, that place. Sitting there in your own filth," he said quietly, eyes briefly falling shut, as though he was reliving it. "Most cells they didn't bother to clean," he continued. "They just left the bodies to rot if people died in there. Sometimes ate them, too."

A shiver ran down Bilbo's spine. For the first time ever, he pushed his plate of food away.

"'Twas on a day, just as miserable as the rest of them, that the pale scum and his minions marched off to stars know where to spill some more blood. A few days before that they'd brought a new prisoner in the cell next to mine."

"What happened?" one of the dwarves, the blond one, asked in awe. Equally engrossed in the story, the rest listened to him without even raising their forks to eat.

"Smart little bugger," the man said with a hint of amusement. "Picked the lock of the irons with a bone, managed to kill two guards, and the next thing I know is someone trying to set me free. I cannot recall much more of that day. What I can only remember is that I woke up somewhere in the
mountains the morning after, with a piece of flesh and muscle in my hand."

"You— You killed him?" Bilbo sputtered, visibly upset, until the wizard motioned him to keep quiet. Even the dwarves were surprised to see their companion protest against a man at least ten times his size, but Bilbo did not feel very much at ease spending the next few days around him. "The man who saved you?"

The bear-man's gaze hardened, eyes hooded with displeasure as he grunted, "Who said anything about murder?"

"And who said it was a man?" another thoughtful voice chimed in out of the blue, its owner visible to no one.

Fifteen pairs of eyes sought out its source. Right on cue, the Ranger stepped out of the dark corner she had been standing and attentively listened to the conversation so far, holding a furry ball in her arms that gave a low purr and leisurely wiggled its tale.

"Storm?"

Chapter End Notes

Information on lions and pards can be found on Tolkien Gateway. Though, you should first search for the lions and at the ‘see also' section you'll find the pards too.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Day, night, he could hardly tell what it was anymore; to be honest, he didn't give a damn. He'd lost count of time in this rotten cell out in the arse end of nowhere. He was bound. Bound by iron chains, digging into his skin, chaining him to a wall like some bloody beast. He snorted. The irony wasn't lost on him.

Of course he thrashed and kicked at first, screamed and shouted later, but the only thing that returned was his own voice, echoing off unknown walls. So he laid there, minutes, hours, days, years, he did not know, all in one unchanging deafening silence.

His anger was permanent, ever present, never fizzled out. Just like the sickening smell of piss and shit in that place. And then-

The fresh smell of flesh had him perk up. Many a time he'd thrown rocks on the stones and called at the person on the other side of the humid, mouldy wall, perhaps to try and see if his voice still existed, but no answer came. Considering his heightened senses, one might think he'd be able to catch a whisper, but only the sound of breathing would come from the other side; sometimes steady, others laboured. He wondered why the new prisoner didn't respond. A shame. He could have warned him of a thing or two.

An uncertain amount of time later, he could hear them marching out of the fortress. Another raid to collect new victims, no doubt. He had a few days of peace and less stench to look forward to, at least; weeks, if lucky enough. So he sat there in silence and watched the orc guard strolling up and down the corridor with his abhorrent hunchback weighing on one side. Up and down, up and down he went, and it must have been hours later that after a walk to the other end of the corridor the orc did not return.

Suddenly, he felt it. Something different. Something odd. A change, an invisible itch. He looked around, unease filling his body and making his muscles tense up, and from the darkness, it emerged.

The shadow of someone on the corridor wall; not the orc, for this form was tall and slender and definitely not hunched. Steps sounded. Another orc darted against the unknown form, who ducked swiftly, avoiding the first blow. And then fought back. Like hell. For a moment he wondered if this was another skin-changer. But then again, all his kin had been slaughtered already. He would have sensed a skin-changer from the moment they brought him in. No, no... this was a human.

He mustered whatever strength he had left after weeks of fighting and starving to death, and, to his horror, every fibre of his body slowly began to turn. He could feel the animal instincts taking over. He was halfway through the transformation when the door of his cell opened and the dark shadow barged in like a thundercloud. His eyes went wide when, in the leftovers of human clarity, he noticed it was a woman. He sensed her excitement, and her hunger—as if she were a beast finally freed to confront its tormenters.

One thing she was thankful for that she wasn't in the beginning was the rotting skeletons of those who occupied the cell before her. It was morbid to have them for company, but they played their part. Chained to a wall meant that one had to get creative. It took her a few days to get over the initial shock for her brain to start working again towards something. Then another day to come up with it. And about two hours and a sprain wrist until, in the fourteenth attempt, the tiny bone clicked
into the keyhole of the irons in her hands and they fell on her lap. She pushed them off of her as though they scalded her. She stood up then, staring into the abyss around her, legs shaking, arms aching.

After that, her mental faculties abandoned her. She tried to reach into her mind, grasping and clawing for reason. Where was she? Why was she here? Did she stand a chance, or was all this in vain? She didn't know, her mind as empty as the world around her, dark and cold and full of fear.

The orc guard lay dead with a rib bone wedged deep into his neck. Thick black blood was still trickling down her forearms. She felt like death.

The moment the second guard went down, in the throes of anger, she noticed the man that was chained up to the wall of his cell. The sight had her pace falter; a moment of lucidity, perhaps. A moment she was still able to care. Strange. The lives of her most beloved people had found a most degrading end over a week ago, before her very eyes—she thought she'd shed the ability to feel any emotion.

She stared, transfixed. Whatever triggered the thought of not forsaking this life, what triggered her will to survive, it was the same that made her give a damn for that man's fate. Perhaps he still had a family to go back to. Without a word, she moved forward. As her feet carried her closer she could tell something was off. Curiosity made her risky, so she dared to take a closer look, when a huge paw with nails the size of her hand made her recoil in fear. She didn't manage to go far, and in the next moment it whipped its hand in the air and snatched her arm. The sudden flow of pain brought her to her knees and her throat felt raw from screaming. She used whatever strength she had left to pull herself back. Tears pricked her eyes as the pain intensified, until she remembered what she was holding in the other hand and landed a strong blow at the creature's paw, causing it to free her arm. With eyes wide in terror, she crawled away in a pool of blood, watching as it rose in its two back legs and let a earsplitting roar. It was pure survival instinct that made her toss the heavy orc blade next to it and run for her life out of that godforsaken place, squeezing her injured arm to avoid leaving any trail of blood behind.

She didn't believe she would ever get to see that creature again in her life. Not four years later, when she was assigned a mission to the East, she'd come to know that life was truly unpredictable.

"Storm?" the rumbling voice sent vibrations to everyone's ears and repeated whispers of the word were heard from one corner of the room to the other, accompanied by suspicious glances towards the man and her. "So the fly of death hasn't landed on you yet?"

The Ranger shot him a dark look. "You'd wish that, wouldn't you?"

"You've put on weight," Beorn remarked.

"You're shedding," she replied pointedly. "Old age finally catching up to you?"

A few heads turned curiously to the woman and then looked at each other, wondering silently but unanimously about the odd familiarity.

Suddenly a rumbling chuckle erupted from the depths of the bear-man's throat, and he placed his large hands on her shoulders in what could pass for an embrace. Given their sizes, it looked like he was crashing the woman along with the cat in a bear hug—no pun intended.

"I should have known you'd come!" He patted her back and she winced and twitched from the pain of her scars, but did nothing to stop him. "He's been restless for days," he added with a pointed nod
toward her arms and freed her from the embrace. "How come you weren't the first to greet me along with the wizard and the halfling?"

"How come you didn't smell me earlier?" Arya countered with an arched eyebrow.

"I assure you, the scent of a troop of dwarves can cover yours by a mile," Beorn commented dryly, with little care as to whether or not he'd insult his guests. Tough luck if they're insulted.

Arya repressed a chortle, then looked down at the cat and petted it between the ears. Avoiding making any other comment on dwarven hygiene, Beorn strayed away to see to his animals, while the company's mouths were all hanging ajar, in wait for explanations. One or two awaited an apology for the smell-centered comment, which they would not get even in a thousand years.

"You did–?" Bilbo was unable to breathe, too busy choking in his milk.

"You know him?" a wide-eyed Fili finished the sentence for him.

"I had a life before this quest, if you must know," said Arya and kept petting the grey ball of fur she was holding. It purred happily.

"You're the one...?" Kili asked in disbelief. "You saved him?"

"Well... technically, I just threw him a blade and made a run for it. Although it still wasn't without casualties." She placed the ball of fur on the table that slowly took a turn to glance at each and every one of the occupants. Some of the dwarves looked at it askance, others just glared at it. But their attention was drawn when she pulled the upper part of her arm out of the sleeve of her tunic. By the looks of it, it seemed like four nails had sunk into the skin and took part of it as they came out. "You should have seen it when it was still fresh—the muscle was nearly visible."

She spoke so offhandedly, as if discussing the weather, that the most squeamish of them were unsure if she was messing with them or if she was serious.

"Of course, now it is well healed—"

Bilbo felt his legs weak. Had he been standing, he was sure they'd be quivering. "How can you be so nonchalant?" he interrupted at some point with an incredulous look. "There is a piece of your arm missing."

Arya simply shrugged, "It could be worse."

"Did ye fight him then?"

"Yes, because I am so crazy as to fight a man who can transform into a massive bear and rip me to shreds."

"You said it," Kili muttered with an innocent shrug.

Unfortunately, she caught that and glared at him from the corner of her eye. Kili was all but affected. He leaned back, one arm resting on the table, and an arched eyebrow dared her to contradict that.

Arya groaned as he sat there, brashly collected, continuing to stare at her several seconds longer than what her face could take. "If your lordships excuse me, I ought to take care of this mess," she announced in a sudden hurry, pointing at her back and the red spot of blood that adorned her new tunic. Inwardly, she was already plotting revenge.
"Need any help, lass?" Oin offered.

"Oh no, thank you. If anyone was to help me, I'd rather it was him." Kili gulped the very moment her finger pointed to him. "He is, sadly, the only one who's seen me in the buff and, take no offence, I honestly don't wish to add more people to that list."

Fili was dying inside. He hid his laughter behind the braids of his mustache, trying so very hard not to be too obvious. Kili blushing—now that's a sight for a strong stomach. To his detriment, there was a moment where Kili actually believed that she meant every word of it and made to stand up to follow her, but Fili spared him the public shaming by mouthing 'don't you dare' just in time.

"Why did you call her 'Storm'?" Bilbo suddenly addressed their host, whose dealing with the animals was over.

The bear-man briefly seemed confused. "How am I supposed to call her?" he asked.

"By her name, perhaps?" Fili offered. "You know, 'Arya'?"

Gandalf fidgeted uncomfortably in his spot, but maintained his composure, sideways glaring at the dwarf. "He did not know her name," he said quietly, avoiding glances with the rest. "Not until just now." Oh, she would definitely not take this well when she found out.

The same question played in everyone's minds, though none dared to vocalise it. The woman was just plain weird and they had to accept that, no matter how much curiosity itched their guts.

"Alright," the hobbit conceded, "but why 'Storm'?"

"Well..." The bear-man savored the word and came to sit by the large table on his giant chair, a thoughtful look on his face as he wondered how to approach the matter with precision. "The origins of the name elude me, although I can imagine why someone would call her that. Have you seen her fight?"

"Of course," some of them said in unison like the question alone was stupid.

The man snorted. "If you had, you wouldn't ask me why. Far from the jolly, innocent woman one has in mind, isn't she?" He let a low chuckle, as if he only was privy to a joke. "Best not let size fool you," he advised and the conversation ended there.

The silence that ensued broke suddenly when the furry ball tried to sip some milk from what had been left in Kili's cup, practically shoving its face inside it.

Kili hit one paw with his hand lightly, shooing it away. It was of no help. The cat probably thought he wanted to pet it and didn't bother. "Would you mind?" he nodded at the bear-man to take the cat away, then pulled his cup to his chest possessively.

"It's a cat, Master Dwarf," said the man amusedly, "not a warg."

"I'm having my doubts," Kili winced and glowered at it.

The animal meowed warningly and gave a brief flash of its teeth, responding with a similar glare, if that was even possible. A glare that Kili thought indicative of absolute haughtiness for anything else alive and breathing upon this earth.

"Watch your words," Beorn growled. "He can understand you."
"What's with it?" Ori peered curiously.

The cat jumped beside the apples that lay gathered in one spot upon the table, rolled one with his paw only to satisfy a passing whim, then turned and picked his way delicately among the honey cakes, dry fruits and cups of milk, coming to stand before Fili. It sniffed him, then sniffed Thorin who stood inches away, ready to pounce when he came upon something or someone that took his fancy. Not seeming very pleased, he gave a light shake of his furry head and continued his stroll over to Bilbo.

The hobbit had his suspicions in the beginning. He recalled a time of a good three decades ago, when his mother had given him a cat as a present for his birthday. He then remembered some funny moments, such as when his father almost sat on the poor creature because it had almost the same color as the armchair, and some bad moments, such as when it died of old age. He had promised to himself then to not get attached to an animal ever again, when death was so cruel and would take them away. When his parents died, however, he changed his opinion. So the moment the grey ball of fur took a hesitant step forward and looked at him with those grey eyes, he was sold. He let it sip some of his milk and in turn, the cat let him pet the spot between its ears and purred satisfyingly.

"The last time Stor-" Beorn took another turn around the table and came to stand above the hobbit, watching the cat eating quietly. "The last time Arya happened to visit, I had just taken in this curious little fellow. I think they fell in love."

Someone choked on his milk. Fili didn't even have to look to know who it was, and he blindly reached to pat his brother on the back. Thorin's eyes were fixed on his nephews and he saw Kili much too eager to avoid his brother's glance. He didn't like that.

"He used to play with a lost button all the time back then," the man continued, "so I let her name him after it."

"She named it 'Button'?" laughed Bofur, finding the name rather humorous.

"I can hardly believe he took that name without protest," Bilbo chimed in.

"It's Mr. Button, Master Baggins. The title counts," Beorn said pointedly and some of them scoffed. "I reckon at some point she attempted to kidnap him. I did not let her of course, therefore she promised that one day she shall return to him and their romance shall kindle anew."

The whole table apart from one or two shook with laughter, and soon the company's faces had turned red from the lack of air.

Even the bear-man seemed less fear-inducing than usual. "He never forgot her," he recited poetically, "he has been waiting for he-" He cast a weird look at the dwarves' suddenly odd expressions and pursed his lips, "She is standing right behind me, isn't she?"

"Oh, don't let that stop you," a merry voice encouraged as the Ranger entered the room with clean bandages and her tunic still dripping from the washing. "Keep digging!" She seemingly might be joking about this, yet deep inside didn't like the fact that information was shared about her person. It could prove fatal. Even the most petty of information could be fatal.

The rest of the breakfast rolled in relative silence. Their host disappeared without an explanation, as did Gandalf after him, thus leaving the company alone in the rural estate. The Ranger thought this a good opportunity to take the hobbit out in the yard for practice, and they were soon followed by some of the dwarves. Fili, in particular, offered to help her in training him.
Bilbo cast a weary glance at the blond dwarf and then a warning one at the woman. "I trust you."

Arya smiled. "I'm touched."

"I don't trust him," the hobbit mumbled, nodding towards the dwarf.

"Don't," she raised a finger to shush Fili, who was ready to object.

The training session commenced and this time Bilbo had to face not one, but two opponents, and quite skilled ones at that. Arya was not very pressing, but Fili constantly nodded at her to strike faster and more forcefully.

The prince saw he had trouble with two opponents at the same time and decided to offer him some help. "Left!" he warned, feigning to the left and striking right instead. "And... now you're dead!" he announced and Arya laughed at his mirthful manner.

"But you said left!" Bilbo protested.

"I said left, my eyes went right." The hobbit made a humphing sound and scowled, and Fili patted him in the back comfortingly. "Worry not, it takes time. We did not learn all these moves in a few weeks. You're doing quite well."

Some time later, the Ranger found herself sitting silently on a branch of a tree, observing every little movement Fili and Bilbo did below her. The dwarf was searching around for her, twin swords in hands, ready to attack the moment she showed herself, while the hobbit was supposed to cover him. They had no idea she was directly above them.

A small shuffling behind a tree was heard, earning the blond dwarf's attention immediately. He was so focused on the source of the sound and didn't notice the figure jumping down the tree behind him. That, until he felt the cold blades of her daggers embracing his neck and saw Bilbo lying on the ground a few feet away with a resigned look on his face. The hobbit crossed his arms under his head and closed his eyes, announcing that he might as well remain leveled and take a small nap under the shadow of the tree.

"Sorry to disappoint, but you'll have a hard time trying to catch a Ranger off guard." Just then, she caught another sound behind her. A foot was stepping ever so slowly on small twigs on the ground so as not to be heard, and a mischievous smile formed on her face. She kept one dagger around Fili's neck and in a swift move, the other one was scratching the neck of his brother, who was standing behind her in utter surprise, wielding his sword in a loose grip. "So would you."

"Do you have eyes on the back of your head?" grumbled Kili, unable to believe she had heard him approach.

"No, it merely is a skill that stems from concentration."

He'd tried his best to be quiet after his brother's nod to join in and attack her. Mahal, he had been even quieter than the time he and Fili were trying to reach the cupboard where their mother kept the pastries. "There's no way you could have seen-"

"You weren't concentrating."

Kili scowled.

The woman resisted smiling in satisfaction. "There is also the sense of hearing beside that of the eyesight," she noted seriously. "You should use it sometime as well."
The prince simply glared at her and they engaged in another spectacular session of sword fight. Thankfully, things flowed considerably more peaceful this time, as none of the commotion of when they had last sparred was repeated. But they were all the same fighting as forcefully as back then, though both determined to keep their temper at bay - at least, as much as they could. Bilbo and Fili were sitting and watching them in amusement, while two or three other pairs started to train a few feet away.

As the training went on, with the most impressive pairs being Kili and Arya, and Dwalin and Thorin, and then Fili and Kili when she decided to call it a day, it got Bilbo thinking of the night before.

"Who would win in a fight between a wolf and a pard?" he asked suddenly, prompting the human beside him to turn her eyes to him.

It didn't take long for her to jump on that track of thought, and she reflexively glanced at Thorin currently clashing swords with Gloin. "Why are you asking?"

"I know they are both strong but—" A moment of inner debate. "Well, it's not like I've ever seen a pard, anyway." He shrugged. "Who knows."

She didn't reply and he did not insist. Instead their attention shifted to the fighting pairs in front of them. Every so often she'd lean closer to explain various moves the dwarves made or planned to make.

The sun was at the highest point in the sky, marking that midday was already upon them. After their training, all slightly tired and sweaty, they gathered inside the house again to have lunch. Their host had returned, Gandalf was still missing, and the food had already been mysteriously prepared. The dwarves' jaws fell when they saw that the animals were the ones that made all the preparations.

There were naturally many grumbles about the lack of meat on the table, but were quickly shushed by the Ranger, who warned the company to mention nothing about meat in front of Beorn. Unless they wanted to become cooked meat, of course. She was the first to finish her meal, since she ate a far smaller portion than the ever hungry and never sated dwarves and hobbit, and walked up and down the house in pursuit of a task to save her from dullness. Bilbo was the second to finish his meal.

Beorn, affected by the liking the Ranger had for the hobbit, decided to join him in a game of chess. He had seen the little fellow ogling the board with the carved in hand animal figures and found the sight extremely amusing. They sat across each other, with Arya coming to lean on the wall behind Bilbo as the dwarves kept eating and the game began. Bilbo was astounded at the detail in which the figures were crafted. The king had the shape of a bear, the queen was an eagle, the bishops were otters, the knights were rats, the rooks were snakes and the pawns were hedgehogs.

Two pawns were already out before competition really kicked in. Beorn had to admit, the little fellow might fool the eye, but there was strategic thinking in that golden head of his.

Rook is out.

The atmosphere in the house might fool anyone, but, in truth, it was like a taut string waiting to snap.
The Ranger's downcast gaze rose to the table and she looked at the dwarf in question befuddled. "The Old Forest Road?" she asked after having fallen silent for awhile.

Thorin cocked his head to the side, glaring at her from the corner of his eye. "What of it?" he said with an edge and tiredness in his voice that gave away his frustration at her taking a dim view of his plan at every turn.

"You haven't been to Mirkwood in a while, have you?" said Arya with an amused shake of her head. "Surely you must have heard the rumours about the Old Forest Road. Fell things creep beneath those trees."

"Pawn is out."

The king scoffed and crossed his arms in front of him, deciding to humour her. "Pray tell, what road should we take then?"

"The Elf-path," Arya suggested, while at the same time Beorn said "The northern pass" without averting his eyes from the game, as though stating the obvious. "Knight was out."

Unfortunately, the harm was done. Thorin's face had already changed ten colours. "I will not use a path that passes even at ten leagues' distance from that bastard's halls—"

"Bishop is out."

The Ranger let a stiff sigh. "So you'd rather take the Old Road and put your and everyone else's life on the line?" she asked wryly. "You do realise how foolish this is?"

"I happen to care about my peoples' lives," Thorin yelled, jumping to his feet so abruptly and with such speed that one might think something had bitten him in the bum. "It was another who abandoned us, as you may recall."

Silence fell upon the room suddenly, as quick as wildfire. Bilbo found himself stealing a glance at them, wondering how fast that could escalate. Call him crazy, but he could feel something bad coming. Trying to tune out the voices, he lowered his head back to the board and the game, hoping for a peaceful resolution.

"Why do you insist on laying the blame on him?" Arya wondered.

A hand landed on the table with vehemence and the wooden surface creaked from the force of the swat. "I will not have a ragged Ranger questioning me!" the dwarf spat.

"I am not questioning you. I am bluntly saying that you're overreacting."

"Mind your tongue," Thorin warned.

"I will mind my tongue only if you accept the reality of the situation. You stick to your warped perspective, not reality." She paused here and her look softened. "Thranduil was aware of the very extinction that awaited his people if he risked offering you help. He shouldn't be blamed for acting as he did. You have to admit that it was wise thinking on his part—"

"Wise thinking?" the king all but barked. "What about the extinction that awaited us? What about all the people we lost that day because no help came from him? Do not let the naivety of your age fool you. His reason had nothing to do with his peoples' lives; he turned his back to us because he thought us of lesser nature than him."
And that was her own anger's cue to kindle. "Do you honestly hear yourself?" She couldn't believe how much his perception of the past was warped by his blind hatred. Such prejudice couldn't possibly have saving grace. "I may not be able to warrant for his character —in truth, I've never met the man— but have you ever considered what some of the older ones have been through? They fought dragons of strength much lesser than Smaug's and got slaughtered, and I'm being forgiving with the term. Have you ever seen Thranduil fight? And before you go on a rant, I may haven't seen him, but I've been told stories of legendary battles he took part in from people who were there and fought by his side. Do not underestimate him. He is well aware of the disaster the dragons caused ages ago."

"Still, he could have done something—"

"Oh yes," she humoured him, a sneer fluttering in her lips, "he could have marched into the mountain and against the dragon. An elf perhaps may have had luck with the bow and kill the beast, but the desolation was already wrought! All of Dale and half of the Mountain were already dilapidated before the Elves even got there, no? The result would be the same—most of the people would die with one way or another."

*Queen moves towards the knight.*

"Let me put it this way," she continued when he didn't reply. "Would you have helped the Elves had they been in your place? Would you lead your people into the jaws of a fiery fate if you'd fought worse battles with dragons in the past?"

The dwarf cast a disdainful glance at the woman who was standing there expectantly with her hands on her hips, and then at the table, to his comrades. "I would," he said, voice almost inaudible to everyone's ears—including his own.

Arya almost laughed that off. "Oh, please."

To his credit, Thorin was quite agile for his age and size and Arya, indulging herself with the temporary safety Beorn's estate provided, had let her guard a little further down. In no way should that breed complacency. Before she could fully turn her back to them he had clutched her neck in a vice grip, sending her to collide against the wall behind her.

"If memory serves, nobody actually asked of your opinion or presence here," he grunted. "The wizard served you at my doorstep without asking. I can use only a warrior with compliance and tracking skills, not a supporter of the elves who talks with cats."

From the corner of her eyes Arya glanced at Beorn, who kept a watchful eye on the dwarf ever since that little argument started, and nodded at him to not intervene. That wouldn't end well for any of them.

"So let me make a few things clear if you wish to continue with us. One," Thorin fumed, "words and manners like the ones you just spoke and acted are forbidden. You will learn to respect your superiors."

She scoffed. "I seriously hope you don't mean yoursel—!"

"Two," he cut her, pushing her further against the wall and tightening the grip on her neck, "I am the leader, and you will follow and obey my commands. There will be no room for disputes, preaching, or advice, unless I ask for it."
**Knight is out. Bishop free to check the king.**

Words like ‘forbid’ and ‘obey’ had never gone down well with her, who was too independent to be ordered around, unless she reckoned the order or decision to be wise.

Then Thorin let go of her and stomped to the table. "You may be a woman, a Lady, or even a *Princess* of your people, but *we* are not your people! No right you have to meddle in matters you know nothing of," he barked with finality, expecting no retort or objection. He turned his face away from her, sat back in his seat and lifted an apple from his plate.

*Bishop moves.*

The dwarf was about to take a bite of it, but in the next moment it was whooshed out of his hand. Slowly, he turned to his right and looked at the knife that had impaled the apple onto the wall beside him.

*Checkmate.*

**Chapter End Notes**

The little grey ball of fur is more like a British Shorthair, if that helps you create the visual.
To stalk, or not to stalk?

Thorin closed his mouth, studied his once full hand and looked at the skewered fruit on the wall, which half of those present gawped at. Then he turned to her. There was a slight chance that he had just crossed a line. This was information not to be publicly announced. Now he wondered if he would get away from this in one piece. Could he with the excuse that it was a slip of the tongue? Probably not... Who was he kidding? Definitely not.

The two princes and the hobbit, most of all, took in the scene with wide eyes, unsure what to think or how to weigh the situation.

The Ranger stared at the king with a mixed look of anger, hatred, distrust, and many other unidentified feelings that were ready to boom out of her. She’d felt an almost sadistic joy when the knife left her hand, and a subsequent mixture of chagrin and relief that she had targeted the apple rather than his temple. "A word?" she hissed. "In private."

Thorin walked out of the room and into another and she followed with heavy steps behind him, after taking the knife out of where it had been stuck, leaving everyone else to question the oddity of the words exchanged. The apple fell on the floor with a thud, cleaved in half.

The minute they were in the other room Thorin felt a boot colliding with his abdomen from below. He reeled backwards, stunned by the force of the kick, and could feel the mild sting of pain when it sent him crashing into the wall and sliding down to his knees. In the next moment he got the wind knocked out of him, this time because of her shank crushing his chest from one side to the other, right shoulder across down where his left lung was supposed to be, although after this he wasn’t so sure as to the organ's exact whereabouts. Honestly, the irony was almost poetic. The apple was just a warning of what was to come, and so he found himself pinned against a wall much like the fruit before, minus being skewered by the knife. Instead the woman was wielding it only inches away from his throat.

"Choose your next words wisely," she growled.

"The wizard would not deem it wise if you killed me."

He groaned when the pressure on his lungs became evidently more noticeable. "How did you know that?"

Thorin caught a glimpse of the sharpened knife illuminated by the early afternoon sunlight that peered through the window. Clearly, she didn’t seem to have the slightest qualm about killing him and, in truth, she had every right to. "Gandalf told me of your heritage," he admitted reluctantly.

There was a flash of disbelief in her eyes. "I want the truth."

Gently, he tried to push her back. On cue, she pressed her shank further into his chest, possibly cutting off air, but as long as he hadn't turned blue yet... oh, well.

"Speak!"

"That is the truth," he insisted, voice coming out a little strained. "Even if that was a lie, your reaction rather confirms it."

Arya was part livid, part panic-stricken. Mostly the first. She didn't even know why she was panicking in the first place. It felt like she was the one under threat, not him. The walls seemed to be
closing in on her, the house itself was suffocating her, sucking every last breath of air away from her lungs, and the only way she could save herself was to run far, far away and never come back again.

"I know who you are," Thorin said seriously. "I do not know why you're trying to hide it still."

She did not deign to answer, refusing to give him even the hint of satisfaction. Yet felt already beaten the moment she contemplated her actions—a little late for that, really. If she hadn't thrown the knife at him, she could have denied the claim as something absurd. Confound it all.

"Oh..." he breathed out as realisation dawned clear on his face. "Unless you're not as alone as you've led us believe you to be."

Arya seemed to recoil for a brief second, panic striking anew, every word of his a blow in the gut for her. Had Gandalf told him so much, or had he come to that conclusion on his own? "I have led you to believe nothing," she lied. "Someone inquired about my family and I told you the truth—they all perished long ago."

"Then what is it that you're trying so fervently to protect?" he pondered. "For I am obliged to inform you that you just remarkably failed to do so." A growl found exit out of her throat and she looked just one hint away from smashing his sternum. "You are not the last of your line."

"Yes, I am," she said harshly in a last attempt to win a fight she was already defeated at. It sounded so feeble, she didn't even convince herself. How was she expected to convince him, quite shrewd or informed as he had proved to be? How could she prolong or delay the inevitable?

He snorted with derision. "If you were the last of your line, your people would treasure you like Smaug treasures the gold in Erebor," he argued. "Not in a thousand years you would have become a Ranger. You'd never be allowed to venture out of the safety of the most secure place in existence fitting for the heir of Númenor, which, from what I gather, must be Rivendell. And they would see you married to someone, so you'd bear a son to carry on your line."

The conviction with which he spoke made her teeth gnash with anger.

Thorin was a king—or at least he was going to be officially proclaimed one when and if the Mountain was reclaimed. He was not going to tolerate offenses by a woman unable to control her temper. He despised her for being the child of a bloody elf, and the ever-existing ironic tone of her voice made him want to demean her further. "You see," he said, unfortunately starting to tap into his reserves of arrogance, "I am far more observant than you give me credit for."

The blade felt cool against his neck. "Pray," she hissed, "what is that supposed to mean?"

"What I'm saying is," and he tried to make the words sting as much as possible, "I can read you like an open book."

Her eyes resembled molten metal while being forged. Such powerful fire was blazing behind them and threatened to burn him alive, but inwardly she felt weak. Everything she was striving to hide all these years surfaced now in an unfortunate moment.

Fueled by his arrogance and the fact that she seemed completely lost at the moment, he decided to take it a step further. In hindsight, it would only serve to humble him, if anything. "I've met others like you before," he said haughtily. "People who think and act like they are above everyone and know everything, only because they descend from a strong bloodline-"

"Please tell me you include yourself into that list!"
"Silence," he commanded with a raised hand. The rude motion had her eyes practically burn holes on his face. "I told you before, I'm saying it again; I care not if you descend from great kings, I won't be preached, or have my opinion and authority disputed in front of my company by a ragged Ranger," the poison continued dripping, "especially a foolish young girl such as yourself!"

So this is what it was about, authority and egotism. She scoffed. Then removed her leg from his chest and put the knife back in its sheath, looking at him as though he wasn't worthy of having his life taken by it. He had slumped forward slightly after the weight lifted off his chest, hands on his knees, taking his first proper breath in what felt like hours.

"I stopped being a girl when your incompetence to take a head after taking an arm cost the lives of some people," she said coldly, towering over him like a giant and watching his eyes narrow in confusion.

Alright, this may or may not have been a step too far, even by her standards. The death of her family was not Thorin's fault; at least not directly. But right now it didn't make a big difference. Not when the rest of his words had such a deep impact on her and the potential of him knowing could be fatal for both her cousin and her. He didn't trust her, she knew it. So why should she trust him to keep such knowledge secret?

The dwarf processed the information slowly. Under other circumstances he'd be affronted, but now was left staring at her in utter bewilderment. "How is that relevant–?"

"The scumbag that took your grandfather's head off happened to murder my family. Also, it is my uncle's son I am so desperately trying to protect. He is the heir, not I. My, my..." she sneered, looking verging to that of a lunatic's. "How was the mighty Dwarf King not aware of this? I thought he could read me like an open book!"

He seemed quite upset. Good.

"Why, how about I enlighten you on some other matters to see if you're correct about your insightful observations?" Arya continued with mocking civility. "You accuse me of meddling in matters I know nothing about. If you asked me about history, though, I'd probably give you a whole speech. Elves? Men? Dwarves even? I know a lot about them; historical facts, political strategies, what their vested interests have been, what decision would probably be the most appropriate to be made for the greater good. True, I've never actually been in a position where I've looked at a whole nation and given orders as you have. But I have looked at thirty Rangers and given orders to them back home, where I was second in command after my Chieftain."

Her ire had finally burst. It was brewing in silence, until it rose to a crescendo of palpable sarcasm. Her words and all what they expressed belonged to the rage, the hurt and the memory of the person she had once been and the person she had become.

"Now, if you asked me about war, you'd probably expect me to start babbling about tactics and moves and stories of battles I've been told, no? But you didn't ask if I've ever been in one."

She paused and he was looking at her expectantly.

"For your information I have," her fervent tone confirmed his suspicion. "In the end of it I'd held a friend's head in my lap and watched him gasp his last breath, looking at me for salvation." Her eyes momentarily watered as she recalled the memory, but quickly shook it off in favour of a glare. "Did you also know there are times I regret surviving and believe I did not act righteously by not suffering the torture and dying back then? Moments that I think I did not love my family enough? Because if I did, I would have the decency to kill myself long ago and follow them to death. Did you know there
are moments I doubt I'd ever dare to love anyone, because of the pain their loss could bring to me?"

He was well aware of the pain someone's loss could cause—there were multiple examples throughout his life. And she had lost a considerable number of people dear to her, and in a rather short amount of time that was her age compared to his. A strange feeling started to form within him out of nowhere. It ranged between pity and a tiny bit of shame.

"You look at me and see a foolish girl who thinks herself to be above everyone and everything, because you want to see that," she spat out, her rage bubbling forcefully under her chest, before a sour expression marred her face. "When I look at my reflection, I see nothing. I feel so empty that if you throw a knife at me, I don't think it will find anything to stab."

At that moment Thorin felt obliged to say something, but didn't know what. For a weird reason that was never cleared in his mind, he went to take hold of her arm, but she forcefully pulled it back from him and swatted his away.

Stripped of her composure completely, Arya savoured his shame. She lived for his discomfort, for the opportunity to share her suffering with the arrogant man that stood regretful in front of her. "No one could possibly understand these thoughts and the depth of their roots. I don't even understand them and they reside inside my head. And you..." She let another mocking laugh that quickly turned into a scowl as her teeth clenched. "Did you know anything of what I just told you? No. Yet you presume to know everything about me because you learned something about my past and whose descendant I am."

"Ary–"

"I am not finished!" she shouted and his mouth fell shut. "I know not how you got the impression that I think myself to know everything and be above everyone. My forefathers were Kings and Princes, not I. And as you have pointed out countless times, to which I wholeheartedly and proudly agree, for it is the absolute truth, I merely am a ragged Ranger. But I hold slightly better knowledge of these lands, their paths and dangers than you, and all I was trying to do was help you overcome them."

It felt like a sheer, tangible force emanated from her form, able to destroy whatever dared to step within range.

"Rangers seek neither glory nor thanks, so if you'll excuse me." She gave a mocking bow and exited the room.

All the dwarves were on tenterhooks as they sat round the table in silence, waiting for the two to return. First stormed out Arya, passing by the table like a hurricane and fuming her brains out without looking at anyone but Gandalf, who had returned but a while ago.

"This was not your tale to tell," she growled quietly and disappeared to a dark corner.

"Where are you going?" someone inquired when she fastened the belt with her weapons.

"My presence is clearly not required," she shrugged. "In fact, it never did, therefore I'm leaving."

Gandalf quickly followed behind her. "My dear–"

"I can send someone else in my place if they need it," she cut him. "I can send the fastest one, he'd be here in two weeks' time at the very least. Although I'm fairly certain that their dear king," she glowered from the corner of her eye at Thorin, who had just appeared behind them, "does not deal
well with sensible people, and another one like me will do him no good."

"Wha–?" Bilbo asked wide-eyed.

"What's the matter?" Dori peered curiously.

Fili shot his uncle a look, sighing, "What did you tell her?" He was perfectly aware of Thorin's admirable ability to get under one's skin without so much as trying. And as far as he was concerned, Arya wasn't very famous for her patience—although she'd managed to put up with Kili in some of his worst moments so far, and that entailed quite the amount of patience. Still, it was like putting an egg in boiling water and expected it not to boil.

"Why does she want to leave?" Kili demanded after him, jumping on his feet and swatting the wooden table in the process. The twist in his stomach was surprising even to himself the moment he heard she was about to leave. There, he admitted it, he didn't want her to leave. Maybe because he wanted her to stay, maybe because he was afraid of her travelling all alone. Again, he was missing the fact that she was living and surviving by herself for ten years before they met her, yet he couldn't shoo the annoying feeling of concern.

None of those who asked were bestowed with an answer.

Meanwhile, Gandalf was leading the woman away from the several prying ears and eyes. "I asked particularly of you to accompany them," he said lowly, "and not any other for a reason."

"Which is?"

"Anyone else would deem other matters more important than this quest."

"I, too, had other matters," Arya growled, "more important to attend!"

"Yes, you did," the wizard conceded calmly. "But he does not need you constantly there, ready to give your life to save him should danger arose. You share the same blood. If something happens to either of you, it is incumbent upon the other to carry on the line."

"That is exactly my point!" she hissed. "There would be less chance for anything to happen to either of us, if we were together and not hundreds of leagues apart!"

"You still owe me a favour, though."

"I am aware," she said with gritted teeth. "Though as far as I recall, we did not set an exact date regarding the return of said favour. Surely I can return it on any other occasion that will hopefully involve people with common sense."

Gandalf remained stoic until she ceased speaking. "My dear girl, do not accuse Thorin of not being sensible when you fail to be as well. Think," he advised. "You are one of the remarkably few that have travelled to the East and are familiar with the dangers of these lands. The few others who have done so are either too old for such a quest, or too dead."

She ever so slightly loosened the grip on the weapons, fixing him with an incredulous look. "Where I come from, that is called coercion."

"'Twas the only way to make you accept without starting a riot," the wizard continued calmly. "I assure you, had someone else more suitable than you been available, I would have asked them to help. I'd never put in jeopardy you and your cousin's lives by bringing you apart. Your fathers would
have my head for it if they were alive, and rightly so." He let a sigh and placed his hands on her shoulders. "You know who you are. Thorin will respect that and your advice, perhaps even your opinion."

She scoffed.

"He will," Gandalf insisted. "If not now, then in the future. But he will. And you, my friend, need simply be patient with him."

As if he was listening at the door, the dwarf king sprang up behind them with an unreadable expression on his face.

"Thorin Oakenshield, I thought I'd warned you about this."

"I haven't forgotten," said Thorin curtly. The wizard's strict tone did nothing but enhance the sensation of being scolded like a naughty child. "And I assure you, it did not happen on purpose."

The Ranger, who until now was blatantly ignoring him, snapped her head towards him. "Purpose or not--"

"There, now," Gandalf stepped in, "one argument is enough. I believe Thorin realises how serious this is and is sensible enough to keep his word." The dwarf nodded. "Hopefully he's also sensible enough to stop dwelling on the past."

The king crossed his arms defensively in front of him. "I would gladly take your counsel on many things," he told Gandalf, "but do not tell me that the past does not matter."

Arya let a weary sigh. The dwarf was incorrigible; she had thought this before, such prejudice could have no saving grace. "Are you willing to let me be your guide, or not?" she asked coldly.

Thorin nodded.

"Then I am obliged to clear a few things up as well. One," she mimicked his words from earlier, raising her hand in front of him and counting with her fingers, "don't you dare touch me again. Two," her voice sounded more menacing as she went on, "don't you dare touch me again. You have no idea who I am, what I've lived through, or what I have inside my mind, and I'm not planning to tell you my whole life story. Your threats sound empty in my ears," she grunted. "So do your orders, unless they belong to the category of wisely made decisions for the greater good. All I need is for you to stop snubbing my opinion on everything and listen to the advice I have to offer you. Savvy?"

He never got the time to answer, since he found himself pinned against the wall once more with her menacing form towering over him. Her eyes were simmering with distrust, fingers twitching toward her knife, though cutting his throat now wasn't likely to accomplish anything except soothing her nerves. Maybe inciting a war, too.

"And if you even consider revealing this information to anyone," she hissed, "I swear, I'll cut you into pieces and feed them to the dragon myself." She then let go of his shoulder and stormed out of the room, leaving the two alone.

Gandalf saw the dwarf's burning gaze seeking to lock with his. "And that's as courteous as she gets," he smiled, "when it comes to that matter."

Thorin suddenly recalled the first time they met. Her bearing and proud manner gave a strong impression. Also, he hated to admit it, but he had felt surprised by the scar on her arm she had showed them earlier. Some of his best, most skilled and oldest warriors possessed such scars that told
stories of brutal fights and she, a female of the race of Men, had acquired this—or rather missed a piece of her arm—at an age of no more than twenty. He now realised that he had originally accepted her in the company not only because of Gandalf's insistence about her skills and knowledge and the help she could offer, but just as much because there was more to her than what the eye could see at first. She was exiled royalty, much like he was, and she may or may not have triggered his curiosity.

A brash Arya entered the room where the rest of the company still whispered and gossiped about the possible cause of the fight and everything stopped at once.

Fili's head jerked up as soon as she entered his field of vision. "Are you really leaving?"

His brother had been standing right next to him, oblivious to the frustrating anger that swarmed behind his eyes, and clenched his fist so hard, it actually pained him.

"No," she said simply and dropped the weapons down, with little care for the noise they made.

"Arya—" Fili began.

"Not now," she drawled and circled him to move away.

Unable to keep further control of himself, Kili grabbed her arm and pulled her towards him, causing her to almost stumble on her own feet. "What on earth is going on?" he demanded, unable to let his curiosity unsatisfied for longer. "What was that?"

Arya felt a lump stuck in her throat with her arm held captive in his hand. There was a considerable amount of force in his grip and it made her feel like she was going to yield under the intensity of his gaze. Yield to do what? That, she didn't know. But she wasn't nearly as harsh as with Thorin when she pulled her arm away from his. "Nothing," she soughed. "Just a small misunderstanding."

The bear-man watched closely as she forced herself away from the young dwarf with nervous movements and feet led her before him.

"May I come to the patrol with you? I want to shoot something," she growled under her breath, her eyes briefly flickering over the spot Thorin stood.

Crossing his massive arms over his equally massive chest, Beorn raised an eyebrow. In the one time she had visited his home before, they'd had a spectacular argument on the matter of patrol, although back then there was a third participant as well. He made a mental note to inquire after him later, when she wouldn't be in the mood for killing someone. "Certainly not," he refused, eliciting a huff from her. "You shall limit to abuse the trees in my yard and no further."

The fact that she did not protest this time, though, had him wonder. Something sinister must have taken place in that room between her and the dwarf king, for that he was certain.

Arya had no plans to lash out on a poor, innocent tree trunk when there were orcs strolling about outside the estate. So she decided to seek the peace of the trees, where no company would disturb the silence she needed to get her bearings back.

As soon as she was out in the vast yard, she climbed on a tree and perched herself on a thick branch, leaning on the trunk. Emerged as she was in thought, she didn't realise that someone had followed her outside.

"Apart from Fili and Kili's mother, I also had a younger brother."
Thorin's voice startled her slightly as he approached, but she made no move to face him.

He crossed his hands behind his back, looking as solemn and regal as ever. "He fell in the battle of Azanulbizar," he supplied quietly, "along with my grandfather and many others of my kin and friends."

"I am sorry for your loss." She could add some emotion to this, but she wasn't in the mood to even attempt to appear civil. So the way it came out was curt and cold and would probably make Thorin think she didn't mean it. And to be honest, she didn't give a damn what the dwarf would think. There, she had offered her condolences and could now return to brooding.

"I have been blaming myself for his death since then. I could put the blame on our father and grandfather for letting him participate in the battle at such a young age, but no..." he sighed. "I always blamed me for not being there, next to him, to protect and save him. My sister, Balin and Dwalin have been telling me that what I do is wrong and, honestly, I'm trying to believe them. But I believe them only for a second and, before you know it, the guilt begins to hunt me again."

Her face cocked to the side so she could look at him. She made a questioning motion with her hand, "Is there a reason you're sharing this with me?"

No, in fact, there wasn't. Thorin couldn't exactly figure out the reason he was sharing this with her. Maybe it was one of those rare moments that he felt he'd do justice by letting her know something about him, since she had revealed something about herself to him. Sad thing is, he had provoked her to elaborate on such personal matters, whereas she'd done nothing to trigger him into telling her. For once, he admitted being at fault.

"If you cannot answer the question, please leave me alone. Do not expect any comment on what you just told me, for I won't make any."

The next few moments of utter silence stretched stubbornly.

"You despise me, don't you?"

Arya snorted. "If I gave you any thought, I probably would."

Thorin nodded thoughtfully. "You had better come inside before the dark falls," he said blankly as he made to leave. "The skin-changer advised not to venture out of the house during the night."

"Don't try to feign concern for my welfare, for you are remarkably failing to do so," she mimicked his earlier words with another snort, then her voice became gruff again. "I had no intention of staying out of the house in the dark, so save your breath."

Thorin refused to say anything further and slowly retreated to the house. Despite having given him a piece of her mind, it felt as though he still knew next to nothing about her. There was much more in that head of hers than the eye could see or guess. Even after all this, he still couldn't bring himself to trust her—it simply wasn't in his nature. Her mother might have been one of the Rivendell's Elves, and he had to admit they were a tad better than those of the Woodland Realm, but they were Elves all the same. The Ranger had elven blood inside her so, no, he could not trust her. And he doubted that that'd get to change any time soon.

She counted every step of his, steady and firm, until the door closed. For quite the time there was pure, much wanted and needed silence and time to reflect on the events of the day and the words exchanged. She dearly hoped Thorin would not open his mouth to anyone about this; Gandalf had also given his assurance. She wouldn't hesitate even a second to cut the dwarf's tongue off, if he did.
And the rest of his body parts would follow suit.

The next few dozens of thoughts that crossed her mind involved her cousin and their family—or what was left of it, anyway—and she didn't realise how many hours had passed. Yet the blissful moment came when her mind reckoned it wise to shut down, close her eyes and think of nothing; maybe fall asleep up there, away from everything and everyone; all alone, just like she used to be until a few months ago. She could only hear the birds chirping in the neighbouring trees now and the occasional whistle the air made through the leaves.

Ah, the sweet sound of solitude. "How much I've missed you," she whispered wistfully to herself.

Just then steps on twigs were heard from beneath and a voice cried her name. Impeccable timing as usual. "Why do I even open my bloody mouth?" she thought with a sigh.

"Arya, where are you?" Fili's deep voice echoed for once more.

"Nesting above your head," she replied sullenly after moments of wavering between answering at all or not.

"And might I ask what you're doing up there?"

Trying to soothe her murderous instincts, courtesy of his dearest uncle. Although that wouldn't be a courteous thing to say out loud. "Why, admiring the view, of course," she replied dryly. "Is there a particular reason you're looking for me?"

The dwarf looked up to the tree branches above his head and saw her lurk there like a shadow. "It's getting rather late to be outside," he noted. "The sun will set in a while. Shall I wait for you to come down?"

"No."

A frown made his forehead crease. "You can't stay alone here," he protested. "Beorn told us--"

"If you don't expect a negative answer, why do you even bother to ask the question?"

"I was just being polite," he said and offered a toothy grin that brightened his face considerably. "Also, Kili's got so restless that I've half a mind to muzzle him so he'll stop badgering me to come and take you inside."

Arya arched an eyebrow. "It'd never occur to me that he was capable of such a sentiment for the likes of me."

The dwarf simply gave her a dry look.

"What exactly is he worried about?" she snapped under the intense gaze. "That a goat will bite me? Or that the orcs' arrows will find their target up here?"

"Thank you for giving me another two reasons to tell him so he can start worrying further," the blond muttered slyly. He was certain that even if a goat bit her, Kili would knacker the poor creature and have it for supper the same day.

"Well, convey to him that his concern is misplaced. Let any danger come," she twirled the knife that was previously sheathed in her boot, eventually embedding it on the branch. "They would be my guest."
A shadow of concern flitted across Fili's face. He concluded that something serious must have happened; it was no mere fight, that one between her and Thorin. The woman was literally lurking for a chance to kill someone in order to vent her anger. Yet this wouldn't do much to tamp Kili's concern at all if he told him. His brother might as well rush out of the house to drag her inside himself, which fact's natural result would be another epic squabble between the two.

"Aren't you even a little touched by how worried he is about you?" his mouth suddenly blurted out before he could control his words. Unfortunately, thoughts were bloody faster.

"Why?" she questioned. "Is worrying such a rare occurrence for him?"

"Do you really want me to answer this question?" Fili shot back and wiggled his head impatiently. Despite his belief that she probably was a perceptive one when it came to reading people, sometimes it felt like he was talking to a wall.

"Honestly," her voice held a considerable amount of irritation, "do you think I've survived the last ten years because I had noble princes such as yourselves to keep me from harm every time highwaymen or orcs happened to be on my way, or a wayward hand found its way near my backside?"

His face twitched at the second half of the sentence. "Anyhow, how long shall I wait for you to come down?"

"Hours." She didn't want to fill her mind with the evil notions the dwarf was implying. There was a whole bunch of them in there already and they definitely did not need company.

A small sigh found its way out of his lips and, defeated as he was, took the way back to the house, bracing himself for Kili's new round of pestering. Oh, dear.

The Ranger abandoned her position upon the tree an hour later, just before the sun set and Beorn got out for the patrol and gestured her to go inside. She didn't want to sleep with the rest of the company, though, partly because she wished to avoid questions and partly because of the need to stay alone. Mostly the second. So she decided to occupy the makeshift bed in the barn—the small bench in front of the large window.

The moon still wasn't directly on the opposite of the window, so no light was cast upon the bench, and she felt like a shadow lurking in the dark. After an hour or so of wiggling to find a position where the scars on her back wouldn't make her curse inwardly and outwardly, she closed her eyes and tried to coerce herself to doze off.

Just about when the first signs of a troubled sleep had appeared, her ears caught a sound and her eyes snapped open. Stretching her neck slightly to check where the sound came from, she found herself halfway off the wooden board, practically on air, and almost fell off the bench.

Kili was standing under the door case of the next room, raptly unaware of her presence there. His figure illuminated by a lone candle that burned upon a small table, he wore only his tunic and trousers, which hung disturbingly loose around his waist, and was holding something—a bar of soap she imagined, considering there was a large barrel designed as a bathtub in that room. She watched as he slowly took the tunic off and the toned muscles across his torso tensed and subsequently relaxed from the movement. Her conscience was already chastising her for even viewing such a private act. She felt like the female counterpart of a lecher, for goodness' sake, yet still wasn't able to muster the fortitude to turn her eyes away from him.
No, she was not a lecher. She was not stalking him. She was definitely *not* stalking him.

Alright, maybe she was.

But, no, she refused to believe that this was stalking. In a broader sense, she was just watching him from afar.

Kili placed the soap on the small table beside the candle, entwined his hands and stretched them out in front of him. The contours of his taut biceps were visible even under such poor lighting; not that the light made any difference, of course. On the other hand... maybe it did. He then let a wide yawn and stretched his arms toward the roof.

The already hanging loose trousers dropped. And Arya *did* fall off the bench.
"Are you ready?"

"No."

Kili frowned slightly. "Do you not trust me?"

"Honestly? Not so much."

"That's insulting, to say the least. Arya," he sighed, "haven't we already discussed it at length?"

She hesitated. "Are you certain about this?"

"Yes, I am," he said determinedly. "Now, stop moaning."

"But I am still not certain that you're certain. And, no, I won't stop moaning until I'm certain."

"Will you cease with the repetition?"

"Kili, have you even the faintest idea how to do this?"

"How hard can it be?" he cried dramatically. "Now, would you just sit quietly for a moment? I can't do it when you're wobbling around!"

Her protests died down then and she simply remained silent, dreading the worst.

Kili felt her already stiff muscles tensing even more. In response, his hand crept up to her shoulder and gave a light reassuring squeeze. "I'll be gentle, I promise."

"Alright, but--" Just then he made the move, and a groan was suppressed at the back of her throat. "Bloody hell!" she cursed. "Since when do you call this gentle?"

A few hours ago

Fili returned to the house with his head ducked, arms crossed behind his back and, overall, looking defeated.

As soon as Kili spotted him moving, he nearly crashed onto him from the fury of running towards him. "Finall--" he went to exclaim, but then noticed the negative nod. "Where is she? Did you let her leave?" The fact that he had actually seized his shoulders and shook him violently up and down eluded him at the moment.

The blond swatted Kili's hands away. "You lost that last drop of common sense you had, didn't you? How could she possibly leave without her weapons?" he asked rhetorically, gesturing towards the corner of the room where said weapons lay, and then rolled his eyes dramatically. "Bloody hell, Kili. Use your head."

"Why did you not bring her inside then?"

"Safe to say, she won't be in the mood to see anyone for a while. Not even you."

Kili narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Why me in particular?"
"Oh, I don't know," Fili waved off, "I await the moment it will occur to you with baited breath." The younger harrumphed. "Why don't you admit that you want her–?"

"I most certainly do not!"

If the smug grin was anything to go by, Fili looked like he'd just hit a vein of gold. "Oh brother," he sighed, drawing out the interjection for effect, "haven't you learned that only the guilty get defensive?" Before the wall got decorated with Kili's brains he chuckled lightly, and the imminent explosion was postponed. "I merely meant that you want her to stay around."

Perhaps the danger wasn't entirely avoided, after all. Kili's head was still as red as a ripe tomato. "Oh. Well, that--" he swallowed tightly and rubbed his temple nervously, "that... that might be true."

"You don't say!" the blond exclaimed wryly.

Kili let his head slump forward into his hand in frustration.

"Promise me that, henceforth, you shall behave and not leap at the opportunity to start an argument at a moment's notice--"

"She started them--"

"And you got on with them," Fili objected. "Stop whinging and do something to make amends."

"Any ideas?"

Fili rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then grinned. "Nothing your inner prude would be in favour of."

The roguish twinkle in his brother's eyes made Kili recoil. It only marked something sinister going around his brother's head, that twinkle.

"Oi, ye brats!" Gloin exclaimed as he passed right next to the two princes, and they froze. "Save the secretive chit-chat for later and get with it," the red-headed dwarf continued without waiting for an answer, "supper's ready."

"Think about what we said," Fili advised as he lightly clutched his brother's neck, act that was followed by a grimace of disgust when, retreating his hand, he felt and smelled the remnants of perspiration due to the morning training. "If you're to have any success, you might also want to consider washing yourself first. You stink--"

"Shut up." Kili pushed him aside, fairly irked, though a second later took a light sniff of his armpit. Well... it wasn't the best of fragrances, so to speak, but he had survived worse days.

Fili shook his head in frustration and followed in tow as they headed to the table. His brother was silent for the remaining of the day, munching quietly and pondering about the little chat they had, with little regard for the words exchanged around him.

As soon as dinner was over and Bombur had devoured the last pieces of food left from all the plates, most of the dwarves returned to their spots in front of the big hearth to smoke their pipes and go to sleep. Only Kili went to ask Beorn, before he left for his patrol, if there was any place where he could bathe.

The bear man simply pointed towards his barn without further explanation and was off to who
knows where, only to return moments later to drop something in the dwarf's hands and disappear in the dark of the night.

Kili regarded the bar with suspicion, then examined it carefully, and decided it wasn't threatening. He knew it was soap, of course, but it had a very weird smell. After minutes of inner debate he concluded it was made of wax and honey—no wonder, with all these bees in the house. In swift moves, and when most of the company had dozed off, he opened the door that connected the house with the barn and shut it behind him as he walked in, taking his clothes off on the way.

It was pitch black outside and, subsequently, inside, so he had to blindly search around for a source of light. After the first eight times he tripped, he was a step away from calling it quits, and let the bloody bath be damned. But he'd never hear the end of it. Ergo, mindful of his nudity, he forwent coat, jerkin and underwear, put only his tunic and trousers on, and ventured back into the house in search of a candle. It'd be better than nothing; he wouldn't, for example, want to accidentally step on that mysterious cat, Arya's friend and admirer, Mr. Button. Or maybe he wanted, he wasn't certain as yet; he didn't exactly have a tendency for liking such charming creatures.

Successful in his quest for a candle, he returned to the barn. The light illuminated only part of the room and the sight made him halt in his tracks.

The comfortable tub back in their house in Ered Luin, where there was actual plumbing, was missed terribly. Even the cold running water of a stream would be preferable. Beorn's so-called bathtub was flattering itself by calling itself anything akin to a bathtub. It was just a barrel full of water where he would just sit in and stew in his own filth.

Wisely, Kili reprimanded himself that this was no time for luxuries of any kind.

With a long-suffering sigh he took the tunic off, unable to relate to his brother's obsession with baths. Dwarves didn't make a habit of bathing so oft within a few days' time. Although his mother would ardently disagree, for she and Fili always had a knack for hygiene, as opposed to Thorin and himself, who could go a few days longer without a proper cleaning. He smiled at the reminiscence of his mother. He hadn't actually thought a lot about her the last few days and was now regretting it. He wondered what she'd be doing right now, how her day would go by without them at home. In peace and quiet, a voice answered in his head making him laugh to himself. Then he yawned and lazily stretched his arms upwards.

The motion caused his unlaced trousers to drop on the floor. In the next heartbeat, a thud sounded a few feet away, startling him. He looked around wildly, searching for what caused it and– There was Arya, sprawled on the floor, face down, scrambling to get back to her feet. Their gazes met and that's when he realised that he was totally, humiliatingly exposed.

"Erm... I wasn't--" She coughed awkwardly. "I did not know you'd be here."

He couldn't bring himself to utter a word. He couldn't bring himself to blink. And worst of all, he couldn't bring himself to even move at all to gather his bloody trousers from the ground and put them back on. He was just standing there frozen in horror, in all his naked glory, certain that even a field of roses wouldn't be a match for his conspicuous blush.

The look on her face could only be described as mild curiosity. He didn't know what to make of it.

"Well, I suppose now one may consider us even."
Kili vaguely registered his jaw dropping a little. Of all the things he expected to hear... He or his brother usually made that kind of comments, he wasn't used to be on the receiving end of them.

She turned around, easily falling into her previous position on the bench. "Feel free to take your bath, do not stop on my account," she said nonchalantly and shifted to her side, turning her back to him. "You do not have something I haven't seen before."

"Y-" The amount of thoughts that went about his head, one chasing after the other with dizzying speed, had an almost nauseating effect on him. "You have?"

"I have been living in the Rangers' camp for the past ten years."

Kili swallowed tightly, feeling his stomach tighten as though reacting to rotten food. 'Strange' didn't even begin to describe it, but he couldn't for the life of him pinpoint why the thought of her having seen a man's bare body left such a sour taste in his mouth.

"My mother was a healer," she added quickly, unable to get her head around the sudden urge to explain herself to him, of all people, "I know one or two things about healthcare. It was only natural to offer aid to whomever had been injured, even if the injury was in a private body part."

He exhaled a breath he was holding, relaxing his clenched fists just slightly.

"And do not get any ideas that I'll have to marry you to restore your honour."

His shoulders were shaking with silent laughter at the deadpan delivery before he even realised it. Although he didn't really mind her being in the next room while he'd bathe himself, he still couldn't control the constantly increasing temperature of his body, or the fact that his blush had spread at full length.

As soon as the bath was over and Kili climbed out of the barrel, he dried himself with something that remotely resembled a towel and put his socks and clothes to soak in the foaming water, keeping only his trousers to wear to keep a semblance of propriety. He and Arya had seen enough of each other, as it was, there's no need for more.

After a good wash, he smelled like honey and the clothes like cleanliness. The latter also needed to dry off.

With clothes in hand that awaited to be dried in front of the hearth, he managed only three or four steps on his way there—not even out of the barn. Something made him halt under the wooden partition that gave the barrel some privacy, and that was a pair of eyes staring at the previously empty space he was now standing in. An idea was starting to form.

Arya noticed someone's form standing where she'd been staring at for the past few minutes. Or maybe hours? She didn't know and, to be honest, didn't care. Lo and behold, it was Kili, because who else would have the nerve to lean on the partition with a handful of dripping clothes so smugly? Without thinking it through, her gaze traced the hard lines of his chest and then slowly moved down his abdomen, until it landed on the soft line of dark hair below his navel that ran down to the laces of his trousers. He was surprisingly hairy from the neck down, considering that he did not sport a full beard. She had seen men's bare chests before, but strangely found this particular sight quite appealing as opposed to the others.

Kili watched with amusement how her head cocked slightly to the side as she looked down the length of his body, brow creasing critically as though she made an observation of interest. With no reason or rhyme, he suddenly felt boastful. Very few women had stared at him so intensely in all his
years, mainly during training when he happened to take his tunic off, only to make snide little comments about his physique. He didn't know why or how this felt different.

"Enjoying the view?" he arched an eyebrow suggestively.

The flaming cheeks completely rebutted her, but the effort to gather all the affront she could muster in one glare was there. "You're disgusting."

The prince laughed quietly. The sound made her stomach tighten in the most unexpected of ways. That must have been the lamest attempt to lie he'd ever seen. He feigned a seductive look —not that he needed to put a lot of effort in that, as the bothersome voice in her head noted— half closing his eyes and, surprising even himself, decided to be very, very bold. "I love it when you talk dirty to me."

The woman let a long-suffering sigh. "You really are an idiot," with that she turned her back to him again, not failing to be the target of another round of quiet laughter.

Kili kept watching her for some time. The place was not too cold, but he thought he saw her shiver. For a descendant of Elves, who were known to be quite resilient to the cold, she seemed relatively sensitive to weather conditions. The time it took for him to go into the house, leave the wet clothes to dry by the fire, grab his own blanket and the spare one he'd given her —or rather Fili had laid down for her— the night before and return, seemed to pass in a blink of an eye. He tossed aside one of the blankets, then leaned down and draped her with the other, catching glimpse of her face. He lingered a while longer to simply stare at her and then plopped down, determined to jump at the chance now that he had it.

His absence had been noted. Arya was focused on tapping her fingers rhythmically on the bench, something that helped keep her mind off things, until footsteps were heard and she suddenly felt him tucking her under something. She cracked an eye open and glanced over her shoulder.

"I do not recall inviting you to sit here with me."

She turned just in time to see him crouch on the ground beside the bench, his face opposite to hers, still undressed from the waist up. *Stars have mercy on her depraved soul*. She really put an effort into not looking directly at his chest, but couldn't since it was right there.

Kili gave a nonchalant shrug, delighting in the fact that she kept gawping at him without knowing. He'd seen folks scrutinising sculptures with less intensity than this. "My gut tells me that you actually do enjoy the view."

Her eyes immediately darted up to his and a grin formed on his face upon catching her again. "Well, if you could just please put your clothes on so that I can concentrate on anything else beside hairs," she grumbled, pointing at his chest, "it would be very much appreciated."

"Sorry to disappoint, but my clothes are drying off by the fire. Although I have no objection throwing the tunic on," he said with a mischievous look, "so long as you don't mind it being soaked and sticking on my skin."

*Good heavens, no.* Her body's reaction at this was rather questionable, and she scrambled to turn away in time before he saw her all flushed.

"Pardon me for being so bold, but... why did you and Thorin fight?"

"You are being too bold today," she scolded, sending a gush of blood to his cheeks. "And I believe it is well established that private conversations, or fights for that matter, ought to remain private."
He looked only mildly embarrassed, but got over it quickly in favour of searching her face to discover any clue regarding the cause of such a rift between her and his uncle. Still, she was as deliberate to reveal something about it as Dwalin was about his tattoos, so Kili found himself not in the position to be persistent. She would probably stuff his mouth with hay to make a point, if he did. Yet it was not in his nature to not pursue a conversation when he sat opposite one and they were alone. Good manners required social skills, which she either lacked —which he doubted— or wasn't willing to use them where she deemed unnecessary. Thus, they were forced to stay silent for quite long before his patience evaporated.

"So... you're Storm. Is Arya your real name or was that a lie?"

"How came you to be so loquacious around me?" she muttered, irritation obvious in her voice.

"Would you rather I turned into the unsociable, laconic mule you believe me to be?" he inquired. "For bickering would certainly add a touch of fun in this dull night."

"Tempting, but I'll pass."

"Thought so," he said with a raised eyebrow.

That was his signature move when he was expecting something, Arya had come to notice. The raised eyebrow that made him seem as though he wouldn't let even a word drop. With a tired sigh she resigned to her fate and his question. "They call me Storm round the lands of Eriador." Clearly, he was expecting more. "Look, female Rangers are in short supply. Aside from our rarity and the fact that people might remember us more easily because we're women, no Ranger will give their real name so lightly. Names hold power, and I am not inclined to give mine away to strangers. Take no offence, but if it was up to me and Gandalf didn't have a hand in it when Thorin and I met, all of you would, to date, know me as Storm."

"No offense taken," he said casually, but felt a mild bitterness over the word 'strangers'. It stung more than it should or was socially acceptable between two people of acquaintance akin to theirs. His eyes fell on his lap then, where his hands rested. He trailed a thumb over some of the scratches that adorned his palms, not knowing with what else to occupy himself as they sat there.

"Kili, it is unwise to be in my company now."

"Who said I was wise?"

Arya scoffed. "Fair enough."

The prolonged silence that followed and the awkwardness that the former engendered were starting to become unbearable.

"You really like solitude, don't you?"

"What was your first clue?" she wondered wryly.

It earned her a chuckle, but she still wasn't in the mood to get this going. "Kili, please—"

If she'd resorted to using the word 'please' when addressing him of all people, the situation was worse than he'd imagined. "Forgive me," he said quickly. "I only wish to take your mind off of what is that troubles you."

"You wish to make me feel better. You are helping me." Her brow crinkled in suspicion.

"Voluntarily," she concluded with a questioning tone and mouth hanging slightly open, to which he
nodded eagerly, as though it was the most natural thing in the world.

He resisted the urge to laugh at the caricature that was her dumbfounded face. "You really have a problem with accepting or asking for help, don't you?" he asked, much to her surprise, and was rewarded with a flash of irritation in her eyes, a sight that almost made him crack again.

"I do, actually. It tends to form commitments and I do not particularly like the idea of being indebted to people."

She wasn't relaxed at all, Kili decided. She was a brooding thunderstorm ready to lash out at the first unfortunate person to offer a cheery comment.

"And may I enquire why I've captured your attention on this dull night?"

"It is such a dull night as you say," he admitted, "and I'm merely in search of interesting objects for observation to pass the time."

"Is that so?" Her smile was odd. "Do you know what is interesting about me?" Before he had the time to answer she finished the sentence herself, "Nothing."

"Oh, I beg to differ. You're quite interesting, fascinating even."

"Fascinating?" she repeated with disbelief. "Me? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"Because I find you fascinating?" Kili snorted. "Seems to me 'tis you who's taken leave of her senses."

She regarded him with a befuddled look for a second, then turned away without answering.

"Do you find me any interesting?"

"How hurt would you be if I said no, I'd rather have a talk with the cat?" Arya replied dryly.

To his credit, the dwarf didn't even consider backing down. Instead he shifted closer, a confident smile playing on his lips. "Do I really annoy you that much? Should I best turn in for the night and leave you here to rot in solitude?"

"How about you stop asking questions for starters, and then do all the rest?"

"By all means," he condescended, his smile giving his eyes an unnervingly clever beam. "Although I still don't understand your desire to sit here all alone and sulk."

She glared at him. "I thought we agreed on no more questions."

"That wasn't a question."

"Why are you doing this?" she demanded angrily.

"Oh, so you can ask questions?"

Her head slumped back on the bench, a sigh of frustration escaping her as her fingers combed through her hair. "You are truly infuriating, you know that?"

"That makes two of us."

"It's a long story, alright?" she finally snapped, trying to elude that turn in the conversation by falsely
making him believe she felt uncomfortable; which was partly true.

Kili flashed an even broader grin, one of the kind that were able to blind someone. She was starting to crack. "The world is not in the immediate need of salvation," he chirped and sat more comfortably, resting his elbows on the bench next to her, "so I'm all ears."

Arya let a weary sigh. Looking past her shoulder, she saw the determined look and it told her that they were going to have this conversation whether she liked it or not. "People tend to converse," she said eventually, pointing out the obvious example in front of her. "They must therefore be avoided."

She slowly took a deep breath and then exhaled, rubbing her hands over her arms to warm herself up under the blanket. The friction made her scars itchy and fairly painful, so she stopped, preferring to just get a tad cold rather than be in pain. He, of course, wasn't even remotely satisfied with the meagre reply.

"They also tend to stare," she deigned to add, "trying to figure out what is it that they see in others, what is their personal conflict—can't say I'm lucky enough to have evaded such scrutiny. Although I don't so much mind that, the staring, even if it gets quite irksome at times. But I can't by any means stand the bloody questions. Nor can I stand people constantly telling me that I look sad and tired. I know I look sad and tired. I am sad and tired."

"You are not sad and tired. You're in pain."

"Who said I'm in pain?" she protested.

"Someone who has nightmares almost every time she falls asleep is in pain." There were times a mere glance at her could confirm this. "So the curious people that surround you are the real and sole cause? Is it not that you simply want to be alone?"

"You– Why do you keep asking questions about me?"

"Curiosity," he smiled. "I told you, you're interesting and I would like to know you better."

The striking tone of honesty made her insides twitch with an unidentified as yet emotion. Cocking her head from side to side, she sighed dramatically. "It is an easier burden for my mind," she admitted under his keen eyes, "because there's less food for thought when people are not around."

"Is it too hard to think?"

"Not at all," she shrugged. "Just unpleasant."

He smiled a little, pleased with at least getting to know some things about her even if they were of the strangest nature, and then his eyes steadily searched hers. He didn't know what prompted him to look so intensely at her and he didn't know what to tell her now that she was looking back. He thought she'd add something, but remained painfully silent.

For a few minutes they were content to just stare at each other, until her gut twinged as the fight with Thorin sprouted like a weed amidst her thoughts again. But she also got another weird feeling, caused by the eyes on her opposite. They were warm and soft, emitting something that could pass for concern. They made her think that the young prince was in fact far more insightful and intelligent than they gave him credit for, and she feared that he might acknowledge the source of her inner flutter.

Kili saw the gradual change in her features as he studied her face under the dim moonlight, her feelings transitioning from pain to melancholy to, surprisingly, wonder. Her eyes, seemingly holding
back countless secrets, allowed him to detect another feeling—an intricate one he could neither decipher nor describe. Still, even though dark and mysterious like the deepest cavern of a mountain, at the same time they were sparkling like the stars in the sky of the clearest night. The moment he saw that sparkle lasted only for a second, but it was enough for him to know.

Arya felt like he was reading her mind for a few seconds; seconds that made her feel vulnerable. As soon as she realised it, she looked away to stop this extremely disturbing sharing of thoughts with no words involved.

He averted his gaze as well, this time towards the window. "I do not know what the fight was about, but I'm sorry if it upset you."

Their eyes met again momentarily, as though they had it arranged. For that dizzying second she wasn't thinking about anything else but only scooting closer to him and stealing some of the warmth his body radiated, despite being swaddled in a blanket and him being half-undressed. As soon as she realised the thoughts her mind conjured up, she gave her head a slight shake and tried to slow her elevated pulse down.

The woman seemed at a loss for words and, for a weird reason, the sight pleased Kili immensely. Whatever pleasure started to fade the moment he noticed her hand upon her chest fiddling idly with something. The familiar silver chain was shimmering under the moonlight that entered through the window on the wall.

Arya opened her palm and revealed it, locking eyes with him again. "Why did you search for it?"

His stomach squirmed in protest. He'd been wondering the exact same thing for days on end after he went to search for it, eventually convincing himself that it was for the single purpose of receiving an apology for the words she had cast upon him. But now... now this reason felt insultingly inadequate.

"I wouldn't wish to be the culprit for the loss of what is left of your family."

She bit the corner of her bottom lip in concentration, unprepared for the inflow of frankness.

"I have something similar, you know," he continued, rifling through his pocket for a bit until he conjured up a small black stone. "My mother gave it to me," his tone had turned wistful. "See these runes? This is my promise that I will come back to her after all this is over."

Out of nowhere she clasped his hand inside hers, feeling the cold stone against her palm. "Thank you," she said in earnest. "Really, thank you."

He laughed under his breath. "I'm sure you would have done the same had I been in your place."

Her gaze strayed toward the wooden roof. "I'd never wish for someone to be in my place."

"We all have lost people dear to us."

He did have some experience in that field. The last image he had of his father popped into mind right then. He rarely spoke about him, as did Fili. They had both accepted his death rather young and looked up to Thorin as a father figure since then, even though their case and Arya's weren't so similar. They hadn't seen their father murdered before them and neither were most of their nights haunted by nightmares that diminished already scarce naps.

Guilt drowned her at the realisation that, of course, he must have lost someone close to him. Everyone, everywhere, had lost someone close to them; she didn't have the privilege of being the only one. And right now she was hastily trying to figure out a way to get her exceptionally large feet
into her even bigger mouth.

"I know," the tone was bitter and it sounded like she was apologising, "but it doesn't make it any easier."

"Unfortunately," he muttered comfortably, "world used to be a bigger place."

"World is still the same," the woman said with a negative shake of her head, gaze still fixed on the roof. "There's just... less in it." She promptly tucked the pendant back under her tunic and forced her eyes shut, resigned to welcome what dreadful dreams awaited her round the corner.

Kili let a small sigh and shifted his gaze from her side, where her hand rested, toward the nearest pack of trees outside the window and the patch of sky they hid. It was completely dark and only the moon cast some light in the large barn. This and the owls chirping somehow calmed him. It felt so peaceful, he could easily fall asleep in an instant.

"I know you're not asleep yet."

"How can I be," she muttered with eyes still closed, "with you, the chatterbox, in the room?"

Alright, this was his chance. He would either take it or lose it. "Arya, I know we got off on the wrong foot, but... do you reckon that, and try not to let your intense vulnerability, or the fact that we have seen each other in a truly poor clothing state become any kind of factors here--"

Full-blown laughter burst out of her like thunder, and for a moment he found himself dazed and unprepared to have been the cause of it.

"So do you reckon it'd be good if we... erm, if we made a new start?" he continued when she quietened. "See each other as friends... maybe?"

Arya arched an eyebrow, "Are you sure? It involves a lot of not wanting to rip my eyes out of my head for a large portion of the day."

"I have never wanted to rip your eyes out of your head--"

"Yes, you did."

"Slander and calumny!" he protested. "Who would ever want to do that?"

That was a long list of people, Arya thought in wry amusement. "Then a new start it is," she declared and raised her hand as though holding an imaginary mug, "Cheers."

Since there were no actual mugs involved, Kili bumped his fist against hers to honour the agreement—a little too happily for someone who hadn't had a single drop of ale. "Why, lady Arya," he said with a devilish grin, "I believe this just might be the beginning of a beautiful friendship."

She then bundled herself up under the blanket, reflecting on the newly established friendship. Part of her acknowledged that he actually made her feel better for as long as he kept her company, but another part advised that it'd be better if he stayed away from her for his own safety and she should keep being alone. She tried to shut down that annoying little voice in her head for the sake of her sanity, absentmindedly groaning at the friction between the bench and her back.

Kili's face wrinkled in concern. "What is it?"

"Nothing," she brushed off as she shifted around to find a better position. "Just my back. I think it's
getting worse instead of getting better."

He didn't laugh along as intended. He was as cheerful as one attending a funeral. "Let me take a look—"

"That would be unnecessary," Arya raised a hand in objection, "thank you."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm fully aware of the condition of my back. The bandage has probably stuck on the skin and needs repositioning," she said calmly. "Nothing I can't do myself."

"Please, allow me," Kili insisted, already having a grip at the hem of her tunic. "You don't have eyes on your back, I can get a better look."

"Use your imagination," Arya growled darkly.

The dwarf arched an eyebrow.

"Alright," she admitted with a sigh, "that sounded better in my head."

"I'm sure it did," he agreed. "Now, let me see. We may have to wake Oin."

After a few more minutes of futile arguing, she finally gave in and let him do the honours. They were stuck just as she'd suspected.

A while later

"There you go," Kili said merrily as he lowered her tunic back to its normal height that covered everything properly. "Good as new."

Arya glared at him from the corner of her eye, still feeling her skin burning. "If you had me bedridden, I'd be kicking your tender till the end of time."

"I only rearranged your bandages," he sighed dramatically, "how could I possibly have you bedridden?" His eyes remained fixed on her as he waited for her to find a relatively comfortable position to lay, and leaned his head on the bench too. "Not to sound forward here but, since neither of us is in the mood for sleep, could you, maybe... teach me more about the stars?"

For all her good eyesight, she did not see that coming. She cast him an examining look as he waited there smilingly, chin resting on his hands. Obliging, she began to show him whatever constellations were visible from the window and telling stories that came with them.

Kili wasn't so much paying attention to the sky as to her, who was vividly waving her hands about as she went on and on about the constellations. He liked that she seemed happy to ramble on about these things and, even if he'd never so far held any special interest in them, he suddenly found himself desiring to know more. He lost count of the time as the night deepened and did not remember at which point he dozed off.
Sometimes you tell the day by the bottle that you drink

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was physically impossible to watch Kili as he repositioned the bandages on her back, though Arya could just as easily imagine his reaction at the legacy of her sojourn as a guest of the Goblin king and his hospitality. It must have been rather unsightly. She could not see him, but could feel his eyes tracing over the scars like silent hands. Then he had asked her to teach him about the stars. Though initially bemused, she delighted in his request, for talking about them was a reminiscent of good moments.

Despite the darkness conquering even the farthest corners of the world, she thought good still existed—in the form of the sky, the sun, the moon, the stars, their light. They would remain eternally pure and beautiful. No evil could ever touch them. Yes, there's still good in the world. Someone only had to look at the right place to find it.

She hadn't realised at which point his head slumped forward and his breathing deepened, instead too focused on the patterns the stars created on the night sky. During all the time she talked, she caught herself flinching with surprise that no one interrupted her even once. Usually her little brother would cut in to moan about the infinite amount of stars that confused him to no end, and her older brother would lament sitting with them in the first place and having to listen to her blabbering on about stars and whatnot. A small sigh escaped her at the thought, but she couldn't fight the smile that rose to her face upon a glimpse at the soundly asleep dwarf that sat right next to the bench and used his folded arms as a pillow.

Dawn came and Kili, still travelling across dreamland, felt something on his chest. It did not take him long to figure out what it was, even if he was still partly asleep. She was not heavy at all, he thought, and he would perjure himself most profoundly if he claimed not to enjoy the light weight atop him a little. Then he wondered how exactly they'd ended up sleeping one on top of the other, for he didn't remember much from the night before except his delight at their agreement of a friendly start. No matter—he was too busy enjoying the feeling of her hair against his palm to pay attention to such minor details. It was so soft and smooth—undoubtedly a trait inherited from her mother; he had noted this in Rivendell, all the Elves' hair was always so sleek, even if they had just got out of a fight. His hand brushed across their length, leading up to a furry tail–

Wait, tail?

Sealed eyelids snapped open in absolute horror and all the light of the morning sun blinded him at once. A pair of icy grey-blue eyes stared down at him menacingly, their owner perched upon his chest with its paws tacked on his blanket—which had mysteriously ended up covering his upper body. On cue, Kili let such a girly scream that, had his brother been there to witness it, he'd never let him live it down.

"Meow."

Kili cast a murderous glare at the animal that remained royally planted upon his chest. It continued to watch him with a scrutinizing look, as if contemplating whether he was worth killing.

"Bloody fur ball," he muttered.

Somewhere between the third and fourth minute of their silent staring contest, it was clear. Kili knew. The cat knew. Even the goats grazing outside knew. The thought hung in the air like a bloody
banner, bending space around it. There were words behind the cat's eyes, words that'd put him in
great trouble if it, Mahal forbid, could talk. It was staring at him as though asking "Were you
expecting someone else in my place?"

An amused voice suddenly broke the intense staring contest and spared him the humiliation. "Has
making friends become your new habit?"

Two heads turned at the direction of the voice, one hairy and the other... well, considerably less hairy
than the first. The cat detached its paws from the dwarf's blanket and almost bounced to get tangled
between the woman's legs, rubbing his face against her boot, still not breaking eye contact with the
prince.

"Friends?" Kili choked out. "How am I supposed to become friends with something that is half
animal and half pure evil?" The grimace he made at the last words made her chuckle, although the
furry form seemed all but pleased with the commentary revolving its person as it restlessly wiggled
around her legs and meowed warningly.

"Well," Arya objected, "I didn't see you complaining all night long that he was sleeping and
stretching and rubbing his face all over you."

"Did you let that thing rub his mug on me?" Kili exclaimed, appalled.

Pushing the blanket aside, she stood up and strolled to the door, mindful of the sleeping dwarf. Little
care she had for possible midnight encounters with anyone who wasn't asleep yet, only to find what
she was looking for a few feet away from the bench she was lying on. Kili's blanket was carelessly
tossed on the hay-covered floor, making her wonder why he didn't use it to cover himself earlier.
Strange things. Without giving it too much thought, she laid part of it down next to the bench and
gently pushed Kili on it, draping him with the other half, so that he'd sleep normally and not seated.
Just as she lied back on the bench and pulled the other blanket up to her shoulders, the deep sound
of a purr emerged on her side, and she did not manage to hold back a chortle at what ensued.

The grey ball of fur planted himself determinedly on Kili, settling a hard-to-miss barrier between the
human and the dwarf. He raised his gaze, ears and eyes always vigilant, to check if the dwarf was
really asleep, and then lowered his head to rest it on his front legs. Arya watched in extreme
amusement how undeniably sweet and also quite ridiculous the sight was as the cat stretched across
the dwarf's torso.

"Be nice!" she chided and then employed a disturbingly sweet look that made his skin crawl,
"Besides, you both seemed so peaceful... it'd be a shame if I spoiled the moment and woke you."
The dwarf refused to grace her with a reply. "For your information," she added, "he rarely gets fond
of someone."

"Really?" Kili inquired sarcastically. "I wonder why..."

"And surprisingly enough, he seems to have taken a liking to you."

"Oh, yes, I can totally feel the love!"

The cat purred loudly, prompting the human to look down at him and lift him up. "Come, now. After
your wild night, you must both be hungry."

The furry ball idly waved its tale from side to side, completely content with his current position in
Arya's hands, and shot a taunting look at the dwarf on its opposite, as if telling him that it would be
the only one so lucky to be firmly attached on her lap.
Being first to the table, she made the honours that morning, giving Beorn's animals room to do whatever it was that animals did in their free time. Kili had disappeared to don his now dried clothes, and headed to the table just in time to catch her placing a small bucket of goat milk in one corner and the cat pouncing to eat with speed a warg would envy.

He offered to lend a helping hand, but was promptly denied. So he took a seat quietly and watched her bustle about Beorn's large kitchen, boiling and stirring and banging utensils while humming tunes under her breath. He took to fiddling with the tassels of the frayed tablecloth to pass the time, eyes following her almost reverently as she prepared something on the griddle.

When she was done preparing enough for everyone, she took a seat beside him, placed a plate before each of them, and expressed a wish that he'd find her cooking skills at least adequate compared to Bombur's. The dwarf tossed his head back, laughing. Just the fact that she'd made an exception and took the time and trouble to make him an omelette instead of hard-boiling the eggs as she'd done for the rest, made him feel spoilt enough as it was. They agreed to keep that a secret.

It was the most lavish breakfast he'd had ever since they left Bag-End. The thyme and small pieces of cheese in the omelette were especially appreciated. Beorn's honey cakes were exquisite, that much was known. Bacon was still missed terribly. But one can't have it all ways; they were fortunate enough to eat at all.

He lost the slice of bread with jam that was meant for him in a bet. Arya's love for milk apparently was the stuff of legends; he didn't know what he was getting into when they made the bet. She downed an entire jug of it —Beorn sized jug— faster than he chugged ale on celebrations. He admitted defeat only after laughing until his ribs hurt at the mustache it left above her upper lip. And Kili was suddenly hit by a strange feeling of domesticity that he ought to find foolish, but couldn't.

Not long later, they were joined by a drowsy Fili who had surprisingly woken rather early. The blond walked into the room with eyes still practically sealed from sleep, seeking to empty his bladder outside and quickly return to his warm blanket to resume his sleep. As soon as his brain registered the picture of two certain people sitting next to each other and discussing quietly, he did a double take. Surely, any random person would react accordingly if faced with that. For a brief moment he wondered if this was a product of his dreams and not something worth to bother his head with. But when the pair looked in his direction and smiled, his need to take a piss was forgotten.

"What–?" he muttered, waving his hands about for a reason only known to him and his mind.

"Good morning," Arya greeted and was soon followed by his brother, who was staring at him askance and justifiably wondered, "How come you're up so early?"

"What–? How are you–?" Fili shook his head, having no recollection of getting drunk the night before, which fact's normal result would be a terrible hangover and hallucinations. "What is happening?"

Kili flashed a bright smile and straightened his back, crossing his hands formally in his front. "We decided to act our age and agreed on a truce," he announced with the appropriate solemnity that beffited his princely status. Until he couldn't keep it any longer and raised his fist victoriously. His brother looked at him as though what he'd said made no sense.

Arya felt a tug in her stomach at the words, but remained silent. She still held the feeling that all this was a mistake and would do good to none of them.

Fili's mental faculties weren't fully functioning still, so he simply walked out of the house to empty his bladder, leaving the pair with similar quizzical looks to stare at his retreating back. Minutes later
he marched inside with a face clearly showing that he was no more sleeping standing up. "Took you bloody long enough!" he exclaimed with the pent-up exasperation of a mother having to drag her brood along in the weekly visit to the market.

Arya forced out a smile, even if her instinct told her that nothing good hid behind that smile of his. Her fears were confirmed when the smile turned into his signature devilish grin the moment he took notice of a minor detail. And just like that, they were doomed. Just shy of being pelted by saliva and regurgitated milk, Fili continued to make all sorts of lewd comments, listing the various activities in which the pair could have possibly engaged to during the night and led to hay getting stuck on her clothes and his brother's hair as a result.

"Have you no decency?" Kili interrupted him wildly, wiping off the milk around his mouth and chin. "You have serious mental problems, you know that?" Arya piped up.

Fili paid them no heed. He was too busy slamming his hand on the table, his head tilted back as he tried to catch a breath from the hysterical laughter. The obnoxious sound naturally roused the rest of the company, who barged into the room ready for a brawl.

"So here you all are still," a merry voice broke in the midst of the dwarves' grumbling and Beorn appeared through the huge door. He seemed to be in extraordinarily good mood for such an early hour and that had them wonder why. "Our little bunny is getting nice and fat again, I see," he laughed.

Bilbo did not seem so pleased with the huge bear-man poking his stomach, but managed to pull off something that could pass for a smile. Only when Thorin walked in and took a seat on the table did the atmosphere become slightly heavier. It wasn't long after that the Ranger gave the subtle excuse of wanting to train the hobbit and moved to leave.

"Wait," Thorin called, causing her step to falter before she turned around with a cold look. "We leave on the morrow, before dawn. We're running out of time, we cannot linger more."

The Ranger offered only a nod and made to walk out of the door, only to stop again in her tracks with her gaze pinned on something near the big gate. Bilbo wondered what made her halt and glanced the direction she was staring at.

Arya swiveled around, feigning an aggravated look, to which Beorn replied with a half-smile. "You changed the decoration and didn't invite me to help?" she gestured towards the yard. "Shame on you. You know what a great taste I have."

Thirteen pairs of eyes searched around in vain, failing to spot any difference.

Only Bilbo, who alternated his gaze between the man and her, figured what this was about. "I do not think she means something inside the estate," he noted and the woman nodded in the affirmative.

"A warg's carcass is nailed to a tree outside the gate," she informed.

"Also a goblin's head is pinned just outside of it," Beorn added, eliciting a huff from the human. "You shall meet the rest of them sooner or later," he comforted her, "fret not."

"You found the pack?" asked Thorin tightly.

"I did," Beorn confirmed. "They won't dare come any closer for a while. At least not until you reach the edge of Mirkwood."
"So you'll help us?" Balin inquired politely, being the most diplomat of them all.

"Do not mistake my hospitality for sympathy." Dead silence fell in the room and anger seemed to kindle within the company. "I don't particularly like dwarves. They are greedy and blind," Beorn continued, his mood suddenly turning gloomy. "Blind to the lives of those they deem lesser than their own." He glared at Thorin from the corner of his eyes, and promptly glanced at the Ranger who stood by the door, silently contemplating the barb at the dwarf. "But orcs and goblins I hate more."

Thorin had been staring him down the entire time. It took some nerve to stare down a seven-foot-something skin-changer, Arya had to give him that.

"I will give you whatever you need," the bear man finally announced. He promised to give them ponies and horses to carry them till the edge of Mirkwood, food that would last for quite a while and had a few private words with the woman, to warn her about the new dangers of the forest.

Thorin observed as she shook her head in thought, struggling to hear even a word that came out of her mouth as she spoke, but caught none. Their fight and her words had roused a strange feeling inside him and he didn't know what to make of it.

"Do you still have the bow I left you?" she asked Beorn quietly.

The man simply nodded and gestured toward a big trunk where he had enclosed gathered weapons from his patrols. He opened it and, after a little search, handed it to her. "I've a few more to spare." He watched as her fingers fidgeted with the string. "Do any of them know how to use one?"

"Thorin can," a voice came from behind them and peered curiously inside the big trunk. "Dwalin, too." Without looking at them Kili grabbed the two bows, passed them to their new owners, then took the third one out —this one he'd keep for himself— and made a brief assessment with the eye of a craftsman well worth his name. "You two," he commanded, "out for practice, now. We've less than a day to get used to these and we ought to make the most of it."

Thorin and Dwalin shared a glance, looking far from surprised. In truth, they looked amused more than anything, as though there was an joke in there that only the two of them knew about. The lad might be young and act on impulse more often than either of them would have liked, but when it came to training or his art, Kili had inherited his mother's bossiness. And the lady Dís's commanding tone and presence was not something to be taken lightly.

"Bilbo, you practice with Fili," the brunet continued and his brother nodded without hesitation. "And you," there was a finger pointing to their female companion, "are training with us." Before anyone could even think about offering any kind of objection, he grabbed a few arrows, took a speechless Arya by the hand and led her outside.

"What are ye staring at?" said Dwalin with a shrug. "The lad's right. If ye have nothing better to do than sit on yer bums, grab a weapon and start training."

The rest of the company followed suit and soon, the only sounds that could be heard outside were those of swords or axes clashing, and arrows being nailed on makeshift targets on tree trunks.

"You can be very imposing if you want," Arya commented quietly.

"I don't understand the tone of surprise," Kili replied dryly. "I am always imposing. You simply fail to notice." He had been stealing glances at her, observing the way in which she shot the arrows one after the other. He could barely hear a sound as she placed them in the bow and pulled the string back. Apparently, she was a decent shot if there wasn't a sprained wrist involved.
"Such modesty!"

"I'm famous for my modesty," the prince said with conviction. "It is directly proportionate to my height."

Arya pinched the bridge of her nose in response, trying very hard not to give him the satisfaction of laughing, or even smiling at the quip.

Thorin found himself glaring at the two from afar, nauseated by any form of banter between them. It did not escape his notice that something had changed the last two days between them. Something was different, and he hated being in the dark. The pair seemed less inclined to start a fight out of a petty argument; they seemed somehow friendlier with each other, somehow... closer. His instinct warned him, though he prayed it was false alarm and his worry was for naught.

The whole day rolled as such and, under Kili, Fili and Dwalin's stern gazes, only very few of the others dared to protest about missing luncheon. The training drew to an end an hour before the sun was about to set, when Thorin ordered them all to go inside, eat something and go to sleep, for they would be starting very early in the morning.

It was around this point of Arya's guiding the company where events took a turn that did not usually feature in old storybooks. As the dwarves, the hobbit and the wizard gathered around the table for supper, what started as idle chatter gradually turned into animated conversation. Even Beorn joined in for a while and offered something as a treat for the last night of their stay. The dwarves were more than happy to accept the yeasty mead and thanked him many times, and with bows of their heads at that. The Ranger, on the other hand, was more than happy to simply occupy a dark corner and let the others talk, and was partly lost in thought when Bilbo asked Gloin about a silver medallion he carried.

"No!" almost every dwarf present protested in a choir of irritated voices.

"Why," Bofur exclaimed in despair, "why did ye have to ask?"

"What did I say?" Bilbo asked innocently.

"Aye, what's wrong with his question?" a vexed Gloin piped up.

"Really?" Nori inquired sarcastically and the rest dissolved into laughter. "Every bloody time we can rest for a while, we are bound to hear about Gerda and Gimli! The past few days that you had your mouth shut were bliss!"

The Ranger cracked a half-smile. However the red-bearded dwarf did not seem offended by Nori's speech. She was certain, though, that had she been the one making that speech the dwarf would have started a riot by now. Gloin was one of those very close to Thorin, who considered her ancestry a crime of nature, to say the least.

"At least I have a wife and a son," Gloin countered in a good manner. "I don't see any of ye having a nice woman to warm yer bed at nights." With that, he had admittedly made some swallow their tongues and some others to cackle.

Bilbo was astonished and his curiosity took the better of him. "None of you?"

"Except for Gloin and Bombur," Balin said fairly, "none of us are actually married."

"How about ye?" asked Bofur, tapping the hobbit lightly on the shoulder. "Ye have any lass waiting
for ye back in the Shire? I don't recall seeing any woman around the house, apart from yer neighbours."

"What--? Me? Oh, no, it's just me," Bilbo rushed to say, smiling contentedly. "In my youth, however, I thought I'd end up marrying Susie Bolger."

"And why did the romance come to nothing?" the Ranger asked from her corner, sounding moderately sad.

"Oh, it was hardly a romance," Bilbo waved off lightheartedly. "Anyhow, long story short, she married my fifth cousin, twice removed on my mother's uncle's side."

Arya's eyebrows shot upwards, almost reaching her hairline. It took her a few seconds to figure this out but, even then, she wasn't sure if she correctly got the relation between Bilbo and the other hobbit. She had also failed to notice how Kili was staring at her all this time, a smile of genuine amusement on his face due to her baffled expression.

"And you, lass?" Balin asked kindly. "Any good lad that awaits you back home?"

Several things happened at the same time. Automatically, the moment these words were uttered, the smile fell from Kili's face and he felt his body going stiff as his mind dug out the memory of her with that man in Rivendell. Fili took notice of this and casually rested his hand on Kili's shoulder, acting as if nothing happened. The blond needed to assure his brother wouldn't act even a bit irrationally now; not when Thorin was sitting next to them and watched them like a hawk.

"Me?" she laughed heartily, as though what they'd just asked her was not to be borne. "Of course not."

"But the man we saw you with in Rivendell--" Fili took the opportunity to ask himself and save his brother's mind from an imminent eruption. "Who was he? You certainly seemed very amiable toward each other."

"Oh... tall, dark-haired man, definitely not an elf?" the hobbit's voice sprouted before she was able to form a word in her lips. He recalled the odd encounter of that night, and then turned to the woman. "Estel his name is, right?"

To Arya's ears, the words sounded like an echo from another world. "You know his name?" she swallowed tightly, her legs suddenly too weak to support the weight of her body.

For a reason that Kili refused to acknowledge, he gritted his teeth, clenched his hands around the huge cup and took an enormous swig of his drink.

"Yes, yes, he told me," Bilbo replied, not tracing the source of flutter that made her hands tremble. "I thought he was your husband at first when I came to see you, and particularly remember myself apologising three times for disturbing at such late hour," he smiled. "One of the very few times I've been so embarrassed in my life, truly. He was a nice lad, though, didn't frighten me that much." Well, that wasn't entirely true, for the man had given him quite the fright, although he'd rather keep that tiny little detail under his hat.

All the blood drained from Arya's face, and she seriously considered the possibility of being in dire need of a chair lest she collapsed on the ground. Her furious gaze fell on Gandalf, who looked equally astonished, and then at Thorin, who seemed rather passive.

"So he's not your husband?" Fili peered thoughtfully, trying to bring the conversation back to track.
Oblivious to himself, Bilbo came to the rescue. "No," he certified the curious prince, "he's her Chieftain."

The blond instantly felt more at ease as his brother became less rigid next to him and the hard expression behind his eyes softened. Arya, on the other hand, decided that someone was playing a very cruel game at her expense. One revelation and one near-revelation of her secrets had transpired in only a two days' time. How much more could someone's nerves handle? Although, now, it was nobody's fault but Estel's; a word or two with him next she saw him was in order. How long would it be till her return, after all... seven, eight months? She had a long bloody memory.

The dwarf king took the information in with a contemplative look. Her pallid complexion was more than enough proof that something had her aflutter, even if she otherwise had no reaction that would indicate something amiss. He briefly wondered if the cause of it was the current topic of discussion, or perhaps it was just a warning that she'd be soon occupying the loo; probably the former. Could it be that the man their burglar met was the cousin she had told him about? It'd only make sense for the heir of their family to be the Chieftain. On another note, the woman was a handful, truth be told. Blessed with patience and strong nerve Thorin wished for the man who, in the name of charity and good will, would take this woman as his wife—if she ever got married or wasn't already betrothed to someone, of course.

Sensing her mild discomfort, Balin wisely decided to intervene, "So you're not betrothed to a man? A bonny lass like yourself surely must have caught someone's eye."

"Valar have mercy on that eye," came Fili's very muted remark, followed by silent laughter.

To his misfortune, it did not fall on deaf ears as intended. Arya glared at him, though there was anything but malice in that look. He bet five silvers she was trying to hold back a smirk.

Arya was simply happy that the conversation had deviated from the previous topic, even if this was the price she had to pay. "A bonny lass would have probably caught someone's eye," she agreed. "A Ranger should not."

"Your father was a Ranger," Fili reasoned with a quizzical look, "and he had a family."

Her look darkened. "And the whole family, except for me, is dead."

The room became quiet again with satisfying rapidity.

"Although," Arya quickly jested, "at the time when my brother and I joined the camp, my father took it upon himself to betroth me to someone, so he'd make me abandon the idea of becoming a Ranger."

Just when Kili thought he had relaxed, he felt his eyes rolling to the back of his head from a surge of anger the likes of which he hadn't experienced again. There was a scowl on his face that risked becoming permanent if this particular discussion went on for long, and he didn't quite understand why the topic had such an effect on him. He obviously needed more of that stiff drink to clear his head, or perhaps to befuddle it even more.

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She had been patrolling near the small stream, waiting for her brother to join her so they'd return to the camp, when she saw the dark cloaked figure of a man trudging quietly across the bank. Now, that's interesting. The natives of the near villages had heard the Rangers would set camp in the forest. But rarely, if never, would any of them dare to venture near it. People always kept a significant distance from them; they were frightened, thinking them dangerous and bearers of grim news. They weren't exactly mistaken, now that she gave it a second thought, regarding the news
part.

So what was this undaunted man seeking after in these parts? Could he be a heedless villager that had ventured in the woods alone, or was he a highwayman that preyed on innocent travellers?

The man was walking silently, careful not to leave any marks on the ground, tired of searching for the camp for the past three days. Minutes later he came across a stream and found the fortunate chance to fill his flask that had been empty for two days. He thought he saw a shadow behind a tree, yet quickly waved it off, laying it to his weariness. It would prove to be the gravest mistake he had ever done. Or was it right? He couldn't decide, even after years of thinking back to it. His swallowing ceased and the water froze in his throat when he felt the cold steel of a blade scraping his neck.

"Your name and your purpose," a low voice whispered into his ear and made the fuzz on the back of his neck stand still.

But he never was so easily frightened by what seemed to be thieves in the midst of the forest. With a strong elbow in the stomach of the intruder, he managed to gain time to pull his sword out. It almost fell from his hand, though, when he faced a woman in the place of the raggedy thief he expected to see. A very fine woman, someone could say, who was holding a sword. She could be no more of twenty years, he was sure. Such a shame, he thought, this woman being a thief.

"I shall give you mine, only if you tell me yours." Yes, he knew how to play that game as well. Yet she remained silent with a tight grip on her sword. He wondered if she knew how to even use it, or if it simply was a piece of the loot she had in possession.

"I asked first."

"And I asked second," he replied calmly. "Where does this conversation lead us?"

Her face was hooded with irritation; a sight that almost made him smile. And it wasn't after long time that she lunged at him. He delighted in her attempt to disarm him, though he couldn't deny that she actually knew how to handle the sword, and quite well for that matter. Still, he was taller and stronger—she hardly stood a chance. It didn't take him long to have her pinned against a tree trunk, her sword tossed a few feet away and his scratching her delicate neck. The rush of the fight had painted her cheeks pink and, surprisingly enough, her skin was rather clean for that of a thief. Well, if that wasn't a sight for sore eyes, then what was? But then she offered a wry look and her gaze strayed downwards. His eyes followed suit and, much to his dismay, he realised that she was aiming a knife to a very sensitive area.

"Ah."

"Funny, isn't it?" she mused. "Men worry so much about their throats that they tend to forget about what's down low."

She studied him closely, wondering how he still kept a straight, calm face, fighting off that of defeat, and then it caught her eye. The star-shaped clasp of his cloak. Oh no. Great. Absolutely bloody great—she had just assaulted one of her kinsmen. Her father would have a field day with this.

The man flashed a cheeky smile. "How about a deal?" he offered. "We both draw our weapons away and each of us takes his path."

She didn't bother with an explanation—for that would definitely come later in the day, before or after the necessary apology—so she gave a simple nod, yet kept her gaze locked with his, waiting
for him to make the first step back.

"It was a pleasure dueling with you, fair lady," he greeted and completely took her by surprise when he took her free hand and kissed it. "Remember, though, thievery is not a nice way of living."

Her eyes went wide and before she had time to react, he had already turned on his heel. Did he seriously think her a thief? What had the world come to? The women of Rohan had been taught how to fight since their youth. Had the women of Eriador no right to learn as well? "Men," she whispered with a dramatic shake of her head as she gathered her sword from the ground and took the path back to the camp, hoping she'd find her brother on the way there. At least with him by her side, it'd be easier to sit through father's castigation and the hundredth repetition of why she had no business becoming a Ranger.

After an hour of wandering Eradan finally found the camp and was thankfully met with a familiar face. His uncle was there, discussing with another man, and waved at him to come closer.

"There you are, son," the older man said with mirth and tapped his back lightly. "I thought you lost your way."

He decided better not to answer, so he simply smiled.

"Lads," his uncle addressed the two young men next to him, "this is my sister's son, Eradan." Then he turned back to his nephew, "This is Aragorn and his cousin, Aranethon; new recruits like yourself."

The three men slightly bowed their heads to each other and soon got into conversation, until another figure suddenly sprouted up out of nowhere.

"Ah," Aranethon smiled, "and this is my sister, Arya."

At the turn of his head, Eradan's eyes widened. He had half a mind to scuttle off, but he was braver than that. Oh boy. He had a gut feeling that he'd never hear the end of this.

"So you are the shieldmaiden," he said with genuine interest.

Arya arched an eyebrow. "My reputation precedes me, I see."

The wry smile that lit up her face prompted the corners of his mouth to curl upwards. Oh, this was going to be funnier than what he'd signed up for.

The other two young men tried to fight back subtle clearings of their throats at the banter, still not entirely convinced that she belonged there. Whoever had so far seen her stroll around the camp couldn't fathom her tenacity to join. Yet she was so bloody stubborn, her father could do nothing but simply give up and consent after all these months of incessant argumentation. It was actually a miracle he'd lasted that long.

"Though to wed and start a family were not my intentions. My father had a hard time accepting that I wanted to follow in his footsteps, or like every other in the family before me. 'Twas a little unfair, don't you reckon," she pondered loudly, "being denied something that ran in the blood for generations, just because I was a female?"

"So ye didn't marry the lad?"
She shook her head 'no'.

"Why?" Bilbo suddenly peered, drawing her curious gaze. "After your family--" He pursed his lips and lowered his head, trying to find the right words to continue. "What I mean is... you could start a family with him."

"After my family perished, he did offer for my hand more than once. He was such a kind soul and one of the few people who've made me laugh so much in my life--"

A sudden gush of blood rushed under his cheeks and Kili felt his whole head turning red. He had been aiming to calm himself by trying to pay attention to his drink rather than the words exchanged. It had been more exhausting than he'd initially imagined and had already required the consumption of prodigious amounts of the golden, sweet-flavoured liquor inside his cup than ever before, in the name of remaining sane.

Fili was quick to notice him rub his left temple viciously. "Are you alright?" he whispered.

"I'm getting dizzy," the other grunted.

"What?" Fili discreetly examined him from the corner of his eye, astonished. "Because of the mead?"

"Because of the conversation," Kili hissed.

His brother let a quiet sigh and just patted his back comfortingly, mindful to conceal his enjoyment at Kili practically admitting to a mild case of jealousy.

"--but the feelings weren't mutual," Arya went on. "He was aware of that, but held a secret hope for awhile that I'd suffer a change of heart. Of course, a little down the road he met--"

Here, Beorn's muffled laugh cut in. "I remember the lad," his deep voice rumbled. He intended to enquire after him the day before, but thought it best not to in the state she had been.

"You've met him?" Ori, who had for most of the time been silent, peered curiously.

"Aye, the last time she'd come for a visit. She was travelling to Rhûn and he was accompanying her. All the time running after her to protect her," the bear man jested, "like a puppy."

Kili promptly changed ten shades of purple—the words had really struck a nerve. "And how come your knight in shining armour didn't come along to protect you this time?"

The lighter air of the room evaporated completely, leaving in its place tension that had exponentially grown to momentous proportions. Arya narrowed her eyes at him in question, wondering how or why would anyone sneer regarding someone he wasn't even acquainted with. "He's dead," she muttered starkly. "He died four years ago."

The blond made a point of slumping his head forward in frustration, thinking how worse the timing of these two could get. Kili saw her gaze avert from him, eyes filled with pain and anger. Still, he couldn't find it within him to feel bad about his manner.

"Now, that is enough storytelling for one night," Gandalf stepped in as he stood from his seat and urged the others to do the same. "You must rest as much as you can tonight, for the journey will be long and difficult from now on."

Practically the entire company rolled their eyes—as if so far they'd been on a carefree pleasure walk. The Ranger was too immersed in her thoughts to pay heed to anything else beside the empty space
After Beorn left for the night patrol, everyone bid goodnight to each other and went to sleep. Arya had taken a spot next to an already horizontal Bilbo and thought him asleep, until he turned to face her and his eyes were wide open.

"Wouldn't you want to start a family sometime in the future?" he muttered as lowly as he could. In the silence of the room, even the whisper seemed too loud all of a sudden.

She snorted, glad that he felt comfortable enough in her company to get straight to the point. It was a little refreshing, so to speak. "I don't even know if I'll be alive in two days from now. I will try, but you never know round which corner death awaits you. Therefore, no, family is not included in my imminent plans for the future."

Bilbo frowned.

"Besides, with my luck, I would probably give birth to a monstrosity with two heads, extra arms--"

"For goodness sake--"

"I'm just saying!" she reasoned and gave him a smile that confused him as to its genuineness. "If anyone's going to have a baby with two heads, three arms and eleven toes, that would be me."

He made a dismissive gesture with his hand, not bothering to hide a half-smile. "Oh, please, just go to sleep."

Arya turned to the side facing away from him and sank in her gloomy thoughts. Was it necessary to discuss that earlier? It had been well stored somewhere in the back of her mind for some years now, and its reminiscence was the exact opposite of pleasant.

It was when she pondered over bad timing that she felt something soft touching her hand. She lifted her head slightly and saw her feline grey friend sneaking next to her and curling up under her arm. He wiggled his tail and purred happily when he felt the human's hand petting him between his ears. The corners of her mouth curled when he reached to put his paw on her hand, and she fell in a very restless sleep some time later, while staring at the grey eyes on her opposite that reminded her of someone else's.
Her dreams consisted of disjointed portions of that night.

Arms hanging limply from that wooden stick, her head ducked downwards. Voices piercing her ears like drums of war and death. Her brother's throat skewered by the abnormally big hook, her father and other brother stabbed repeatedly in the stomach. Sawing off her mother's neck until the blade grated on bone.

Despite the late of the night, Bilbo was still lying awake with his gaze fixed on the wooden roof, fingers fiddling with his ring. He didn't know why, but he liked to stare at it; just stare, nothing else.

A weird sound coming from somewhere near snapped him out of his evening reverie, and he reflexively enclosed the ring in his palm, glancing at either side of him. Bofur was sleeping soundly on his left, mouth hanging ajar—it probably wasn't him. Which led to the person on his right.

The woman was twitching fitfully every now and then, tossing her head from one side to the other, her teeth clenched.

Bilbo considered his options so he wouldn't have to wake her up on his own and, truly, they were very limited. The moment his eyes fell on the sleeping figures of the two princes, her hand clutched his own in a vice grip. The possibility of suffering a mild sprain in his wrist suddenly plummeted to the bottom of his list of priorities.

The ring was trapped between their palms.

A foreign instinct stirred within him and anger blazed in his eyes. It was the first time in his life he used more than necessary force to free himself, pushing and kicking her away with all his might and absurdly little care that he might hurt her.

A shrill yell set the entire house on foot, animals and otherwise, disrupting the peace of the night and the slumber of many. The searing pain originating in her hand started to bloom and spread to the rest of her body like weeds in a field. Rather than continue with that memory trail, her treacherous mind chose instead to supply her with yet another death. She knew that person. The same way she knew this wasn't a real memory, for she had been present at his death and this wasn't it.

He was striving to free himself, calling her name desperately as the orcs held him tied on her opposite. With heart beating frantically under her chest and face twisted in horror, she could feel the resignation gaining ground along with acknowledgement and fear of what was to come; not fear of dying herself, but of someone else dying. His screams had not ceased; he kept yelling at her not to be afraid, that he would save her, that he would save them both. She didn't believe him for a second.

Several members of the company were startled to consciousness ready to take up arms and fight whatever evil had descended upon them, only to remember that they were safely enclosed in Beorn's estate. They looked at each other in bewilderment at the lack of threat that would warrant that kind of a scream, until their gazes landed on the raucous struggle between the hobbit and the Ranger. A veil of restlessness spread among them at the sight of the woman thrashing about so violently. Her head was at a very weird angle with her body and she kept grabbing whatever was within range of her hands, as though trying to hold onto something to escape an imaginary whip.
No one dared to even so much as breathe more loudly than necessary, maybe to spare themselves the knowledge of witnessing this. Among them, Gandalf and Thorin shared a look, while the rest were too busy gawping at the macabre sight with no unanimous call for a course of action.

Fili, who had awakened to falsely thinking there was an earthquake when it was just an arm shaking his shoulder violently, winced uncomfortably. People having nightmares wasn't exactly his area of expertise, or at least not nightmares that seemed that awful. Kili, whom the aforementioned arm belonged to, had been ignoring his brain's command to blink with a vengeance. His eyes were starting to get dry. The sight made him physically sick.

With a deep sigh Thorin grumbled for Dwalin to follow and, along with the two princes who volunteered despite their apprehension, they were the first at her side. Fili managed to snatch Bilbo out of her reach, who stumbled back and bumped against the wall with grunt, his fist clenched protectively around the ring. A sudden coldness enveloped him upon realising that, when the ring was put in jeopardy, he acted like that. He was beside himself with shock. The poor woman was seeing stars know what, and he had only cared for a round golden object. What was wrong with him? He momentarily locked eyes with Gandalf, who examined his face with those eyes that saw through everyone and everything. The hobbit's look turned frightful as his gaze nervously shifted from the wizard back to the Ranger.

The orc was coming her way, wielding a large blade, a twisted smile on his face. Before she could react, the orc skewered her with the blade like a pig and a gasp rose up her throat. The last image she saw as life flew away from her eyes was a dress, instead of the tunic and trousers she should be normally wearing, and also a large bump protruding from her stomach with the orc's blade nailed on it. Blood started running deep crimson and hot down her front.

Four people were struggling to keep her down and did a marvellous job failing.

"In Durin's name," grunted Dwalin at the other three, "are you even trying?"

For someone barely on the edge of consciousness, the speed in which she jerked upright, reflexively striking the object that was touching her, was spectacular. Immediately she recoiled and slithered away from the shadows that surrounded her, trying to catch her breath and her sanity. Hands blindly reached down to feel her stomach and, with a relieved gasp, she found no bump. A whimper left her mouth and she drew her legs to her chest, blinking rapidly to make the tears dry as her head slumped between her knees.

The fact that she had an audience seemed to be eluding her. Only when a subtle clearing of a throat came did her brain begin to register her surroundings. To her absolute mortification, half a dozen pairs of eyes were staring uncomfortably in her direction.

"Hey," a voice muttered softly somewhere next to her ear, and she flinched back at the proximity of anyone being that close. "Hey, hey, it's alright," the voice tried to allay, "it's me." It took a good few seconds to put a name to the voice. "It's me. You're fine. It was just a nightmare, yeah?"

Kili saw her eyes try to harden and hide her emotions, but a slightly quivering lower lip betrayed her. For an unearthly —and beyond inappropriate— reason, he found himself wanting to trace that lip with his thumb. That is, until he remembered that they unfortunately weren't alone. The prospect of Thorin witnessing such a gesture put a real damper on every impulse he had to comfort her in any way or form.

Her voice when she spoke didn't mirror what was happening to the rest of her face. "That was— I am so sorry," she muttered and stood in one swift motion, avoiding Kili's helping hand yet again. "I didn't mean to wake you all. Please go back to sleep, I shan't disturb you more, I promise."
A choir of voices rushed to ensure her not to worry about it, with the exception of the hobbit, who felt so remorseful that he was seriously considering grovelling at her feet to rid himself of the guilt. He watched as most of the dwarves returned to their spots, albeit reluctantly, tucked themselves in and tried to doze off again. Even Gandalf returned to the warmth of his blanket after sending a pointed look to the woman, to which she replied with a weary sigh. Bilbo thought he'd put down roots on the wall. Beside him, only the two princes lingered as she gathered the thin blanket from the ground and draped her shoulders with it.

"Do you think you'll be able to sleep some more?" asked Fili.

"I'd rather not," she muttered with a frown on her way to the door, apparently in a hurry.

"Wait," the younger prince called and grabbed her arm midway there, and even Thorin had the courtesy of turning a blind eye to that. "You'd better not stay alone," Kili said and unconsciously gave a squeeze to her hand.

Her gaze was downcast, fixed on their entwined hands for some time before she pulled hers back. "It's alright," she said thinly. "Nothing I haven't done before."

Before he could reply she had turned on her heel, leaving them behind to stare in uncomfortable silence. She disappeared inside the barn, closing the door behind her, and slumped down on the small bench there so heavily, the wood creaked violently in protest.

For all the turmoil the nightmare had caused her initially, she seemed to get back to her senses like a well-oiled cart. The unease slowly melted away to give its place to self-pity at the thought of being reduced to that state again. In front of a bunch of strangers, more so. This was one of the reasons she avoided getting too close to people; never sought their pity and was too proud to accept it. Was that a fault or a virtue? Often she mused on it, but never came to a conclusion.

At the end of the day, yes, she'd got used to being alone. She liked being alone. At least she had convinced herself that people were better off without her. For once she got to know someone really well and became very close with them, they would always be wrenched away from her in the worst of ways; it had become a law of nature. So she'd had to isolate herself, not only on account of keeping her sanity, but keeping people's lives intact.

Arya didn't exactly kept count of time as she sat there with head slumped forward in her hands and elbows resting on her knees. Only after a few thousands heartbeats did her feet, of their own accord—perhaps after a light urge from her thirsty throat—to get some water. She came to an abrupt stop when the first thing she faced entering the room was Dwalin sitting on a chair, a wet piece of cloth placed over the right side of his face.

"What happened?"

Dwalin removed the makeshift patch, revealing a large bruise underneath his eye. "Your left cross happened."

Her eyes went wide as she put two and two together. "I— I didn't mean to—"

He brushed it off with a wave of his hand and watched as she looked everywhere but to him.

In truth, the Ranger was merely scouring the place and her mind to find anything to compensate for the trouble she'd caused him. Not that she was so much concerned about him—surely he'd suffered far worse than a punch—but having deprived him of his sleep filled her with regret. Mercifully, she was lucky enough to spot the wooden jar where Beorn stored his homemade cookies. Unbeknownst
to her, she'd just hit a vein of gold.

In two swift strides she had crossed the room, with Dwalin's ever watchful eyes—eye, in this case—following every move. She opened the lid and took two out, hoping that the bear-man wouldn't notice. "Do you want a cookie?"

Dwalin froze. Had he heard correctly? Were there cookies in the house that he hadn't found yet? Good heavens, he was getting old. The dwarf had the nose of a bloodhound; in his youth he would have smelled those cookies from a mile away.

"Certainly," he shook his head in appreciation, clearing his throat. "Why not?"

She handed him one and took the other for herself, along with her water flask, and they just sat there, munching silently. The burly dwarf looked askance at the woman as she took only a small bite of the cookie, in contrast to his large ones that allowed him to devour his in seconds, and then put it down on the table. Her hands were resting on her knees, her dark hair like a river of night against the white of her tunic, and she just kept staring at the table as though she'd never seen one.

He was reduced to stunned silence when, at some point, she pushed the leftover of her share towards him. And that was the turning point in his relationship with the Ranger. Who would have thought that the fine line between suspicion and a vague liking was not in fact a line, but a cookie? Perhaps Thorin had been too harsh on her.

As time went by and they sat with each other in silent companionship, he was regarding her with a rare sort of understanding that had no pity in it; she was one of those people that didn't feel it's necessary to yak about codswallop in order to fill uncomfortable silences. Unsurprisingly, he was one of those people as well. He could say he sympathised with her in more ways than that, though. Even if he didn't know her family in person, he knew the pain of loss. He'd seen his own father perish in the battle outside the gates of Moria, remembered clearly how brutally he was slain. He'd be eternally grateful that his brother hadn't been another body in the pile of corpses. It made him wonder whether she had anyone else in the world left, a simple friend if not siblings, or if she were just a lone Ranger in the service of the lands of old Arnor. It was a sad thought in and of itself.

An hour before dawn, around the time Beorn returned from his patrol, the dwarf and the woman took it upon them to rouse the rest of the company. At one point she disappeared from sight; went to look around for her little feline friend to bid him goodbye, smiling sadly upon finding him asleep and purring in a quiet corner, curled up in a ball of soft grey fur. Couldn't bring herself to wake him for the life of her.

Beorn gathered the ponies and horses he'd lend them and ordered his animals to pack food and water supplies for each person separately. He first said his farewells to the dwarves and the wizard, with whom he also had a quite lengthy exchange away from prying ears. Then he squeezed Bilbo's hand and poked his belly, telling him that he was welcome to stay any time and to another round of chess with him, and finally gave the woman another bear-hug that came with a warning whispered in her ear.

"Go now, while you have the light," he urged. "May the wind be at your back, for your hunters are not far behind."

One day's ride separated them from the edge of Mirkwood and they had no intention of prolonging it or delaying even a second more. Some of the dwarves paired off to have fewer ponies at their disposal. While many of those offered to ride with the hobbit, the Ranger insisted to have him ride with her on one of the horses. Needless to say, after the night before, Bilbo was less than inclined to
"You might want to take hold of me," she advised as they rode quietly, one of the last pairs in the long line.

His face was so telling, he could see the first signs of puzzlement on her face. Still, he couldn't stop looking at her as though he was apologising for something. Arya simply gave him an unaware, encouraging smile, mistaking his reluctance for bashfulness about putting his arms around her waist. It only served to make him feel all the more worse about his behaviour. Added to that, Kili had been practically skinning him alive with his eyes ever since he dared sit on that saddle, so that was the definitive factor in his decision to lie about being fine without having a hold on her. And let him fall on his bum if he slipped off the horse. Nothing he didn't deserve.

"So," Arya began casually and looked to him over her shoulder, "what thought you of my Chieftain?"

He was taken by surprise. "We didn't speak a lot, to be honest... Seemed like a nice chap, though."

"You should see him during training. Remember our sessions?" He nodded. "If he doesn't have you leveled on the ground, the training isn't over."

"I cannot fathom he's managed to tire you out."

"Oh," she laughed, "believe me, I might have beaten him a time or two, but it took all my strength, both mental and physical. I literally remember my stomach heaving like a water-mill."

Bilbo cringed. Training with her was exhausting enough as it is. He probably would have died before he could survive a training session with her Chieftain, if there was any truth to her sayings. Thinking about it, he counted his blessings it was her and not that man that guided them.

"I'm sorry for thinking him to be your husband—he seemed very affectionate when you were hurt. I did not wish to embarrass him, really. Will you tell him that when you see him again?"

Arya let an imperceptible sigh of relief. The hobbit didn't seem privy to any further detail about the nature of their kinship. "I assure you he was amused more than anything," she smiled. "And he must have been as affectionate as any captain would be toward a soldier."

That was far from true. The way in which the man held her hand wasn't that of a captain taking care of a soldier. The gesture held more concern in it, indicated a closer bond. Perhaps the way someone would take care of a dear friend. "Old friends, you and he?"

The Ranger tightened the grip on the reins. "Bosom companions, if you will," she said simply. "And it lies within my duties to protect him."

The hobbit absentmindedly shook his head, completely unfamiliar with the customs or the rules that applied amongst her kin.

"Bilbo," she whispered at him over her shoulder, "do me a favour, will you? Promise me that you shan't mention his name again." She paused for a moment, looking thoughtful. "Better, forget you ever met him. And should anyone inquire about him, come to tell me. Please."

"Alright... but why?"

"The other day during training when you said you trusted me, were you telling the truth?"
"Of course," he nodded fervently. "Slightly more than the rest, in fact."

Arya gave a content smile. "Then I need you to just trust me on this, without knowing all the answers you want to know. Can you do that for me?"

Bilbo didn't know what to think of this, but respected her wish. "You have my word," he said evenly, trying to reassure himself on the inside.

The rest of the ride rolled in relative silence, with everyone being in vigilance for any danger creeping up on them. Even after night fell and they set up camp, no one was in the mood for a chat. The enemy was lurking close enough without their voices helping the orcs spot them sooner, so only a small fire was lit to warm their hands before they went to sleep.

Watches had been assigned earlier during the frugal supper, although the Ranger stepped in and announced she'd take care of it. No one bothered to object and they simply watched her disappearing from the camp to go scouting. She had returned just when the company was ready to turn in and took over a spot on a small hill next to the camp to have better vision. There was almost plain land laying ahead at every direction, with the sole exception of the vast amount of trees in the East that was Mirkwood forest, so it'd be easy to spot anything approaching from the surrounding area.

Only an hour had passed since her watch began and she sat there quietly, fingers either fiddling with the feathers of her new arrows, or trying to scratch the scars on her back over the bandages without making it worse. Her grip on the bow and arrow tightened when swift, clipped footsteps marked someone approaching.

Arya greeted the intruder with a nod, thinking it unwise of his part to miss a night's rest. As far as she was concerned, he didn't have any problems sleeping.

"I know you'll reject my offer to keep watch instead of you, so allow me to suggest something else. Would you like some company?"

His persistence was no news to her. Should she refuse, he'd make a point of badgering her into going to sleep until she gave up and complied, so she might as well spare herself the experience. He looked surprised when she gestured him to take a seat.

"Are you cross with me?" he asked after a long moment. "For what I said last night," his eyes darkened, "about... that man." That was uncalled-for, really, and he was attributing his unsavoury attitude exclusively to the amount of mead he had consumed.

"No."

The prince rolled his eyes. "Are you even trying to be convincing? I know you're cross with me."

"Oh, do you? Alright, then why bother to ask in the first place?"

Bloody hell, he hated when she did that; acting all calm and unruffled as if nothing had happened, when she was boiling on the inside. "I'm waiting for an answer," he said impatiently.

"I gave you an answer," said Arya with a weary sigh. "If it doesn't satisfy you, that is your problem and yours alone. So take it and bugger off."

Kili grumbled something under his breath in Khuzdul, then took a deep breath to calm himself. He'd take a fight over this apathetic stance any time of the day. At least she'd be honest then. "Arya—"
"Why is it so bloody hard for you to believe that I'm actually telling the truth?" she snapped.

He scowled. "Then why are you sulking and being so abrupt?"

Arya swung so that she was sitting at his opposite, leveling him with a glare. "I missed the part when we agreed that I would be your jester," she huffed and then tugged at her tunic, grumbling something under her breath.

His jaw dropped a little at the very eloquent swearword she threw at the bandages that obviously troubled her. "You are a lady!"

"I have bad days," she growled.

It was right at that moment when Kili decided that even if it took him a decade to get used to that woman's ways, she was definitely worth the time. Her hands were still fumbling with the bandages when his eyes averted from her face and followed her moving arms. He scooted beside her and swatted them away from her back.

"Stop it," he commanded. "You'll make it worse."

Oddly, she obeyed, although probably because she knew he was right. Thus they remained silent, until he was unable to contain an almighty yawn that made his mouth stretch like a freshly baked bagel.

He was surprised when he heard a chuckle. "What's so funny?"

Her eyes beamed wistfully and the tips of her mouth curled despite herself. "It reminded me of my older brother," she whispered. "He held sleep in very high regard, but he was a sloppy one when it came to it. I can't even begin to recall how many times I woke in the morning with his feet in front of my face and started to tickle him until he fell off the bed. Of course, that was at a time when we were little. You can imagine that trying to tickle a six feet four inches tall man does not go without retaliation."

Kili laughed under his breath. He found that he enjoyed listening to stories from her past, yet it slightly alarmed him that she was deliberately sharing her memories with him. She didn't seem like the type who revealed anything without a little prodding. On the other hand, they had agreed to be friends, so perhaps this was an attempt of hers to communicate.

He could still discern her eyes, even if it was fully dark. They reflected the light the stars and the moon gave off. Without seeing it, he knew there was that spark in them. It was there most of the time, but more noticeable when she was pleased about something. Then again, even when she was quiet and distant and the spark was gone, they still held a most enchanting quality. They were beautiful.

Some errant strands of her hair fell on his shoulder when she turned her head, and he realised just how close they were sitting to each other. It put a stop to everything, coherent and not, in his mind. His thoughts had stilled at her hair, as if tempting him to twirl it around his fingers. He didn't know why, but the thought stirred a strange feeling in his chest and he was glad it was deep into the night, so that the woman next to him could not see his flushed face.

She turned slightly to look at him, wondering about his pensive look. "You're extraordinarily tacit tonight. How is that so?"

"Oh, I am just waiting for you to fall asleep. Dwalin mentioned you stayed awake all night."
"People tell the truth when they say that men are far worse gossipers than women."

He gave a look of exhaustion and ever so slight amusement. "It is not really my wont to gossip; far from it. I simply asked if he'd seen you at all after you woke up," he explained, but then his eyes softened. "Why don't you go to sleep? Even for an hour—"

"Once I went almost five days with barely any rest. Two nights of lacking sleep won't do me any harm."

A sudden urge overwhelmed him as she quietened and he blindly reached for her hand. She surprised even herself when she didn't pull away this time. Her eyes never raised to meet his gaze, but stayed fixed on their entwined hands. Only the night before, she was pondering on how much she liked being alone, and now she was allowing someone to hold her hand as a gesture of comfort? Obviously, she was losing it. It seemed that some of the latest decisions she'd made were not filtered by her mind, but by something else that was only recently set in motion.

Kili discovered his new favourite pastime in tapping her knuckles with his thumb. Unbeknownst to him, it was mutually soothing. "Arya, you really need to get some rest."

Silence. If she said something, it felt like the moment would be ruined and all the comfort his hand provided would be taken away from her. And that was something she absolutely did not wish to happen.

The lack of response didn't deter him. He fell silent and listened to the few left over birds so close to the forest trilling creepily as the darkness lightened a bit and the others kept sleeping.

Morning dawned fair again as a light was starting to form on the sky in the East, painting the tree tops with orange hues and piercing through the morning dew.

Kili's gaze strayed from the rising sun and he observed the unmoving mounts of each member of the company, who snored in the blissful unconsciousness of their slumber. The air was carrying a faint scent, and he took a deep breath to fill his lungs with it; orange blossoms. As his eyes landed beside him he could barely contain the smile forming on his face. For there was a head laying asleep, slowly breathing in and out. He thanked the heavens when her eyes finally gave up and she slipped into a dreamless sleep a while ago.

The light breeze weathered the white fabric of her tunic slightly upwards and his smile quickly vanished as some of the scars on her back became visible. They were starting to scab over. He didn't know why, but felt stressed just at the thought of her getting hurt again.

His eyes strayed back to the sky which had transformed into a pool of bright colors. Whatever the dwarf customs dictated, Kili considered himself an outdoors person. As long as he remembered himself he loved watching the sunrise and the sunset. It reminded him of when he and Fili were young and their father took them to a raised hill on the mountain side before dawn. They would sit there, all three of them, and watch the sunrise together; the sky turning into a canvas of molten yellow, orange, pink and red, Fili and himself chasing the birds that chirped in the peace of the new day's first hours or the hares that searched for food before the sun would rise too high, while father sat on a boulder and laughed as they played and clambered over him. Small blessings.

And then his brain did a terrible thing. The image of Arya bathing was propelled to the forefront of his thoughts, pushing the memory of the sunrise to the side. How he'd connected those two things, he'd never understand.
As though she knew the thought of her was nagging his mind, she spoke, "This will be the last one."

He flinched with surprise and blurted out a chuckle at being startled so easily. "What–?"

"This is going to be the last sunrise we watch."

Kili arched an eyebrow. "Well, aren't you a little ray of sunshine," he commented wryly. "Have you always been so sinister at dawn?"

"You'd be surprised."

He laughed again. "As far as you're concerned, there is no doubt about that."

"Darkness has fallen across these lands," she said drowsily. "The sunlight can be barely seen inside the forest."

He looked down and saw her squinting up to him, eyes trying to adjust to the meagre light. It brought a smile to his face—a little more affectionate than what was acceptable for two people who barely knew each other. But he quickly cleared his throat and she sat upright, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

"I'd better rouse the others," she said and promptly skittered away from him.

By the time the sun had completely rose over the horizon, the place was bustling with dwarves preparing themselves. Kili had unwillingly dragged himself across the camp and plopped down next to his brother with a humph.

Fili was in the middle of stretching arms and legs to let blood circulate again. Peering curiously, he took notice of the dark circles under his brother's eyes. "You look like shite."

"Why, thank you," Kili said with a yawn.

"Didn't sleep enough?"

"Barely."

"Why?"

Yet Kili was far too gone to hear the question. Arya's words had more of an impact than what she intended. Sunrise might just be his favourite time of the day. The implications of being forced to spend the next few weeks in the suffocating darkness of Mirkwood dawned on him just now, and it left a really bad taste in his mouth.

Oh well. There goes something more he'd be deprived of. And there was a list at this point. At least he'd get to watch something else that reminded him of the sunrise and was just as beautiful.

"Kili?" Fili nudged his shoulder, snapping him out of it. Curiosity began to itch his gut at the coy smile on his brother's face. "What's with you?"

"Nothing," the other dismissed with a shrug, but the weird smile did not fade.

Fili briefly wondered if all this time his brother was sleeping with his eyes open but, with no certain signs to support that claim, he just let him be and moved to lift his stuff from the ground. Soon, and after Thorin's impatient nod, he had to practically drag Kili and help him gather his own stuff, for they needed to move on within the hour. Quite a few times he caught Kili stealing glances at a certain someone as she discussed with Gandalf in the distance. A deeply amused laugh bubbled out
of him. He *really* didn't want the specifics, but was certain he'd just found the source of his brother's smile.

Chapter End Notes

Title taken from 'House of the rising sun' by The Animals.
A man's choice and a woman's hair

The ride to Mirkwood was eerily quiet at the best of times. The only pairs that broke through the silence, much to certain people's disapproving side-eye, were the Ranger and the hobbit, along with the two princes and Bofur.

"–wasn't a bad situation?"

"Well," Arya continued, "I sort of ripped his... jewels to shreds a moment later, so I'm not sure if this was a bad situation for me more than him–"

"I'm sorry," Kili interrupted, confused, "his jewels?"

"I have a disturbing feeling," Bofur weighed in, "that she means his crotch area." Arya nodded.

The younger prince pursed his lips. "Well, that's... an interesting way of putting it."

His brother, on the other hand, felt his stomach turn upside down at the mental image that his brain was so fast to create. He looked down at the apple he'd been munching with silent despair. His appetite decreased dramatically. He really didn't need to know that.

Kili, being curious as he was wont to be, wasn't so eager to let the matter drop. "Do they really have... jewels, like us?"

"Of course they do. How do you think they breed?" said Arya and fixed him with a questioning look. Had no one yet taught him where babies came from?

The sound of a choke and a subsequent spit broke the silence as Fili looked disgusted to no end at the thought of orc babies. "I'm eating, for goodness' sake," he muttered angrily, but was ignored.

Now Kili looked more curious, if anything. "They breed like us?"

"They do, actually," Arya said nonchalantly.

"Unless you want the contents of my stomach spread all over you," Fili warned, "change the topic. Now."

After one or two comments that had the blond cringing, they obliged. And as hours passed and midday drew near, they found themselves chatting about the escapades of their youth in Ered Luin.

"–I could hear you downstairs!" Kili cried dramatically. "Basically, everyone in the tavern could hear you–"

"What?!" Fili almost squeaked, his face red in embarrassment. "You were eavesdropping?"

"Eavesdropping?" Kili scoffed. "Fili, the ceiling was ready to crumble all over our heads."

A sly whistle came from Bofur as the dwarf wiggled his eyebrows suggestively. On cue, the rest doubled up with laughter.

"Oh, really?" the blond's eyes twinkled with challenge then. "Then how about I recount how you, dear brother, spent that particular night?"

"How about no?" His reaction was far more profound than what he aimed for, even though his
brother was just teasing him. Arya almost smiled. Fili hid a card that had yet to be played.

"It was in that warm summer evening that my brother decided--" the blond began, undeterred by the blows Kili landed on his arm.

The brunet was trying to save the unsaved. Indeed, Fili recounting ridiculous moments from their younger years was endearing, however Kili didn't want the events of that particular night to come to light. Not because he'd be embarrassed, but simply because there was a woman present. And for a reason that only his subconscious was aware of, he didn't want that particular woman to hear this. The thought of Arya inquiring about his past objects of affection — if someone could possibly call it that — funny as it would be in a twisted kind of way, was more reminiscent of a nightmare.

"—so she thought he'd kiss her—"

"I was well into my cups," Kili quickly reasoned. "I literally couldn't even see beyond my own nose. Had I been sober, I wouldn't even consider doing that."

"Why not?" Arya asked with renewed interest. "You could have simply told her that you liked her—"

"But I didn't like her!" Kili replied at once, a fierce need growing to justify himself. "I was just aiming for the bucket next to her—"

"But he missed it and threw up on her dress!" Fili finished for him, barely able to breathe in between his chuckles.

Consecutive waves of laughter had Bofur practically bounce on his pony, Bilbo was clutching his stomach and Arya was pressing fairly hard a hand over her mouth to prevent a rumbling chortle emerging from the depths of her throat. Despite his embarrassment, Kili found himself deeply amused by her chirpy laughter.

"Heavens, Kili," she managed to breath out, "how drunk were you?"

"On a scale from one to ten..." he said with a mischievous look, "easily a twelve."

The good-natured smile she offered prompted a similar one to form on his face, and as the conversation went on they found themselves occasionally glancing at each other, every time a little bit longer than the previous.

The Dwarf King was moody enough without the two of them subtly staring at each other for what seemed like bloody hours. He was certain that something had changed. Where were the bitter, snide comments, the constant bickering, and the prolonged hours of silence they spent in each other's presence? Now they were smiling and laughing, for goodness' sake. Mercifully, they weren't ogling each other, or else Thorin would hear death knock on his door. He never wanted to be perceived as a grumpy old dwarf, but maybe the time had come for him to take action.

Kili and Arya broke their stealing-glances-when-the-other-isn't-looking eye contact as the company finally reached the infamous forest, where all her good mood evaporated in a blink of an eye.

"The elven gate," Gandalf mumbled to himself and turned to face the others. "Here lies our path through Mirkwood."

"No sign of the orcs," Dwalin noted. "We have luck on our side."

The Ranger barely refrained from snorting in ironic amusement, which would be heard if it weren't
for the wizard's look of reprimand. Much to the dwarves' displeasure, he proceeded to foil their plans of keeping the ponies for themselves and warned them to set them loose to return to Beorn if they valued their lives any.

"This forest feels sick..." muttered Bilbo.

"It is," the woman agreed gloomily.

"As if... a disease lies upon it," he continued. "Is there no way around?"

"Not unless we go two hundred miles north," Gandalf pointed out. "Or twice that distance south."

Bilbo nodded thoughtfully and the dwarves started to unsaddle the ponies. The Ranger took care of the one they rode together so, having no task to busy himself with, he watched as the wizard ventured a few steps into the path alone. Out of the blue, fear discovered rich soil somewhere within him.

Arya's stomach churned and tied into a knot as she stared at the vast amount of trees before her. Six years had passed since the last time she stood at the exact same spot, ready to enter the forest. Foulness and decay were still present, although now enhanced to the maximum—she could feel it in her very bones.

"Not my horse," Gandalf exclaimed before Nori started to unsaddle it. "I need it!"

Fifteen heads snapped at his direction. "You're not leaving us, are you?" Bilbo said in disbelief.

"I would not do this, unless I had to," the wizard almost apologised.

The Ranger frowned at the exchange.

A distant rumble disrupted the relative quietness. The sky was already veiled by an army of clouds, and before long rain began to fall; in small drops at first, only to gradually grow stronger. Gandalf's directions were clear. They'd wait for him in the slopes of the Mountain and would not enter it without him.

"Why in such a haste?" the Ranger asked him in private, concern and worry obvious by the crinkles on her forehead.

No answer came. His expression was urgent, though, and that ought to be enough for her. "Do not let the air of the forest affect you and lead you astray. And no matter what may come, stay on the path!" he advised them all and then leaned closer to the woman. "You are in charge of keeping them safe until we meet again before the Mountain."

No words left her mouth—a single nod was the mark of her promise. Gandalf did not loiter at all for a proper farewell. His figure was on the way of becoming a mere spot in the western horizon.

With a gloomy look the woman gestured the rest to follow. Stepping into the path, they were welcomed by a statue of elvish make that marked its beginning. The leaves covering it seemed to have been pulled aside recently, seeing as they were still budging from an invisible force, even though there was no wind. She had vague recollection of someone's footsteps approaching.

"What's with the sudden departure?" a voice questioned worriedly. "Is there something wrong?"

Arya frowned, "Something's got Gandalf vexed." A morbid shudder pierced her and she began to scan the area around them, her eyes' irises contracting to focus better. "And mark my words, what
bodes ill for the Grey Wizard bodes ill for us all."

Asking a Ranger to offer a comforting word apparently was a lost cause. Bilbo let a stoical sigh—he should have known better.

"Forgive me if I sound rude," her voice sounded again, quiet and imposing, "but do not dare take a step away from the path. Not unless you want either whatever animals and other beings inhabit here to feast on your carcasses or, in case I find you, to die from my hands. And I assure you, neither of them will be a good way to go."

Muffled grunts came from certain people, which were promptly ignored. And thus the great trek through Mirkwood began. Through the forest where everything was rotten, dangerous and deceptive.

The first day they still had some of the sunlight on their side that lightened up the path. When the night came, though, and they set up camp, it abandoned them without remorse. After a lot of grumbling and for the sake of her nerves, Arya gave in and allowed them to light a small fire, considering that they were still in the outskirts of the forest, where it was cleaner of weird animals and akin creatures of a less than savoury nature. Still, she would go to have a quick look around, just in case.

"Aren't you afraid to go all alone?"

Her head swiveled to find Ori quietly seated on his bedroll beside his brothers. "I'm open to any surprises," she said with a half-smile that was all but genuine.

Their unease never receded as they, along with Bilbo, Bifur, Bofur and Oin, watched her creep into the huge trees. The rest were too busy taking out the bedrolls and bustling about the camp to aid with whatever they could.

"Try not to make any noise," she advised before disappearing into the dark.

"Careful, lassie," Oin called behind her back.

Arya nodded over her shoulder, surprised at the sudden concern. But then realisation dawned; they were only concerned about the possibility of getting lost in case she wasn't around anymore to guide them. She silently laughed to herself, taking a firm grip of her bow in one hand and leaving the other free to grab either arrow or dagger, lest danger arose.

"Fili," the king called as soon as everyone had spread their bedrolls and were ready to settle for sleep. "With me, now."

The prince's brow furrowed in question. Thorin looked positively as harmless as a hellhound in search for food at that moment, and for reasons unknown. If that wasn't a bad sign, Fili didn't know what was. I am doomed, he thought with a certainty that was the product of several similar encounters in the past.

"Kili," Thorin barked and the younger's stuff dropped from his hands as if he'd forgotten how to hold things, "you, too."

They watched him go, exchanging glances.

"I would like to make an amendment to the thought I'm certain just crossed your mind."
"Yes?"

"We are both doomed," Kili muttered with conviction, and the brothers hurried to follow him, not wanting to worsen things. They came to a halt at a secluded spot where they found their uncle with his back turned to them and hands crossed behind it. They waited.

Thorin kept pacing up and down with heavy strides for what seemed like a decade before he decided to enlighten them as to the why for their little meeting. He turned to them, sniffed to clear his congested nose, and leveled them with a hard stare. "I've attempted to warn Kili twice so far, but still, I'm being ignored."

The younger immediately went rigid and fixed his uncle with a confused look. What was he to blame for?

"Regarding potential distractions," growled Thorin. 

The young one sighed dramatically. "I told you before, I am not distracted by her and she is not distracted by me. What further reassurance do you need?"

Thorin raised his eyebrows warningly, cocking his head to the side at the nearly belligerent manner.

"I'm telling the truth—"

"Fili, what is your view on this?"

Kili rolled his eyes in exasperation, never one to take kindly to interruptions when speaking. His brother gritted his teeth, jaw set hard. Thorin had them between a rock and a hard place. For all the lessons in diplomacy he had attended, he found himself unable to handle this with the finesse that befitted the situation. And for an issue that he was minimal to none informed about, for that matter. Curse the blasted moment he was dragged into this.

"I don't understand why you consider her a distraction in the first place," said Fili in the end, and Thorin gave him the dirtiest of looks. It was pure you-know-damn-well-why.

"Simply because I might worry about her from time to time," Kili reasoned, "doesn't mean I am distracted. Fili, too."

"Exactly," his brother piped up. "We worry about everyone's welfare. We worry about you. And you— Well, you worry about... basically, everything."

"Your point?" Thorin fumed impatiently.

"It's impossible not to be distracted," the prince explained smoothly. "I am distracted by Kili, Kili is distracted by me, Dori is distracted by his brothers, and so on."

The dwarf king snorted thoughtfully, equal parts pleased and suspicious with the onslaught of common sense coming from his nephews. Although he seemed no less irritated.

"What's going on here?" a voice sounded as Dwalin peered behind a tree with axe in hand.

"Nothing," Thorin said warily, "why?"

"I heard voices," Dwalin replied.

Thorin gestured with his hand that everything was fine and the bold dwarf swiveled to go back to the camp, while he turned to his nephews again.
"You know that I trust you," he started and they looked at him with a gleam of pride in their eyes. "You're not children anymore; you stopped being a long time ago. I consented to you coming along on this quest, expecting nothing more than two warriors devoted to our purpose, two dwarf princes worthy of the line of Durin. So realise the gravity of the situation and don't let sentiment get to you. Both Gandalf and the Ranger have repeatedly made it clear that she's only here to help. Many a time she has proved that she can manage on her own. You two, or any of us, have no business meddling with her safety or worrying about her."

"But she's part of the company."

Thorin almost bared his fangs. "No, she is not."

"She took a warg bite for me."

The king shrugged, "That was her choice."

"Forgive me if I may sound too immature or imbecilic for your tastes--"

"Watch your tongue."

Kili ignored him all the same. His mind was on fire, although he actually made an attempt to sound less presumptuous, "–but Bilbo isn't kin either. However, you've made no mention of your concerns about befriending him."

Thorin flinched. Fili had thankfully mastered quite well the art of delicacy, due to him being first in line for the throne and subsequently groomed for most of his life for that very purpose and all that, but Kili... Well, ever since he was a wee dwarfling, Kili had the habit of being disarmingly straightforward.

A chuckle suddenly left Kili, breaking the uncomfortable silence that had enveloped the trio. "You are unbelievable," he said with emphasis. "Is this about her parentage?"

Fili's eyes snapped at Thorin expectantly. Two minutes of silence passed and the answer was written crystal clear in the latter's eyes. There was no need to voice it aloud. Kili gave another quiet chuckle, shaking his head in disbelief.

Fili let a long-suffering sigh. "You still don't trust her, do you?"

Thorin took a deep breath, frowning. "I understand why you do."

"I don't believe that's what I asked."

"I don't believe you want me to answer what you asked."

Suddenly Kili, who was pacing circles around them all this time, halted in his tracks and covered the space between him and his uncle in three strides. "What exactly are we supposed to do to not let sentiment get to us?" he demanded, oblivious to the arm that kept him in hold. If Fili had his way, the brunet would be sent away to calm down just about now. "Not care if something happens to her? Look past if she dies?"

"I only care for your safety and that you'll never risk your lives for one of them– Or one even closely related to them," Thorin added quickly before they asserted the necessary correction that she was no elf. "It has come to my attention that you've come rather close–"

The lightest of thuds was heard behind a tree, but the two of them were too busy arguing to pay heed
to it. Only Fili thought he caught something, though he quickly brushed it off as the hassle went on.

"...you think that had one of her kin travelled along with us and found themselves in danger along with you," the king asked with a grim look, "she'd choose to save you?"

Tense silence enveloped them again.

"She would try to save us all," Fili deadpanned.

"Oh, I'd have my doubts," Thorin said with a wry smile. "And I don't blame her for this. She may be helping us, yet she does not cease to be different from us. She is not our kin."

The silence that followed was quickly dispensed when he spoke again, resolute to pull at the thread until it snapped.

"What about you?" Both his nephews' heads cocked quizzically in complete harmony. "Kili, if you had to save either your brother or her, who would you save?"

Fili's eyes widened. He had a hunch that the question was directed implicitly only to Kili, not him.

Kili looked at Thorin, appalled. "What kind of question is that?"

To his credit, his uncle seemed as nonchalant as ever. "A question that needs to be answered."

"I'd try to save them both."

Thorin could actually hear the blood pumping through the veins in his temples. It sounded like drums of war. Whatever answer Kili might give, he feared it. For the first time in his life, he found himself doubting his nephew's loyalty. Apparently he was missing the fact that Kili, not only was most loyal to him, the company, and their purpose, but had learned to care for the rest of the world as well. He advocated for helping people when they were in need, no matter their race. Not everyone beyond the dwarven society was a malicious criminal.

"If you could save only one," he persisted, "who would you choose?"

"It is not a matter of choice!" the young one snapped. Fili reflexively tightened his grip on his arm, reining him in. "Of course I'd save my brother!"

As soon as the words left his mouth, several things happened at once. Thorin's set shoulders relaxed, to the point that he looked pleased almost. The shadow on his face disappeared and apparently moved towards his nephew, chasing the light out of his heart.

"I am glad to see your priorities remain intact," the king said with a curt nod. "Now, off you go to your bedrolls."

A cloud seemed to have manifested above their heads upon the princes' return, their moods acrid from whatever business Thorin had called them to attend to. The brothers often commented between themselves about their uncle's uncanny ability to cast a pall over people, whenever and wherever he desired so, although this time they both came to the mutual conclusion that he'd crossed the line.

The rest of the company didn't resign themselves to complete silence or questions as the two brothers returned, though any small talk diminished into whispers. Kili placed himself in a dark spot, pulling something out of his pack to eat, though with appetite levels down to about zero. His taciturn presence was soon forgotten by the others as they dozed off, and even his brother left him to sulk in his solitude, only giving his shoulder a comforting squeeze before he turned in. Only Bilbo seemed a
bit worried, although Fili was quick to reassure him with a convincing look that nothing was awry; well, at least not much.

Thorin had remained back alone, seeking some peace to sort out his rioting mind. Just when a deep breath escaped his mouth, his ears caught a sound behind one of the large trees.

"That was harsh," a familiar gruff voice emerged a moment later.

"I know," the king acknowledged. "Problems of that kind, however, ought to be struck to the roots."

Dwalin entertained his doubts. He may have more experience in combat than most people had of his age, yet his experience in fatherly matters was lacking a little. He knew how much his friend cared for his nephews, but even himself felt that Thorin was playing unfairly this time. "Don't you reckon ye may have gone a wee too far with this?"

"Not at all," Thorin said nonchalantly. "I merely explained them how life is and that the choices everyone makes are in their best interest."

"She's tried to warn us more times than I'd like to admit, tho', and we ignored her."

"You too, old friend?" Thorin inquired, yet good-naturedly and not in an angry manner. Even Dwalin had warmed up to the woman. *What has the world come to?*

"Do not think me traitor," the burly dwarf replied. "I didn't say that I trust her. But she has proved quite helpful this far."

"Perhaps," Thorin said with a deep scowl, his sagged shoulders an obvious sign of tiredness. "I wish it was another Ranger and not her."

"Why?"

"She may be strong, but she still is a woman," Thorin explained. "In a quest like this, a man's mind is worth more than that of a woman's."

"Indeed," a feminine voice commented dryly behind them, "seeing as a functional mind apparently is too rare to find in a man these days."

Each dwarf jumped a foot in surprise. How the bloody hell did she do that? Her footsteps couldn't be even heard, for goodness' sake.

She was moving around the woods so stealthily, Thorin thought, just like the bloody Elves. He had yet to appreciate this and a few of her other aptitudes, which would under other circumstances oblige him to admit that they made her an excellent tracker. "I meant not that women are not worthy or intelligent. Let's just say that war planning and strategies aren't their strongest suit." She obviously misunderstood, because she mustn't have been well informed about how precious the dwarves thought their women to be and how highly they thought of them.

"There are plenty of reasons women abstain from war," Arya muttered sagely. "Some simply do not wish to fight; some aren't trained to; others desire to become healers and save lives instead of taking them. And another reason is that there are women so conniving and wily, they can make your war plans and strategies look like a family excursion to the countryside."

Thorin snorted. "Anyone specific in mind?"
"Fear not," the Ranger laughed darkly. "I do not think so highly of myself and my skills."

The king faked a laugh. "May I point out that ladies are not supposed to possess such bad habits as eavesdropping?"

"I thought I'm supposed to be a ragged Ranger, not a lady. And bad habits?" she asked with an impassive voice. "I was having a look around. It was you who happened to be in my way. You could at least have kept your voices down."

His look darkened, a step away from turning into a glower. He never liked her way of talking and thought she was messing with him. He spoke no better about her, though, so wry manners were partly anticipated. "If you expect me to apologise, you are deeply mistaken."

"Believe me," Arya chuckled, "an apology is the last thing I expect from you. A little more caution is what I want. You could be heard so far from here, it's a miracle something hasn't attacked us yet."

"We should go back," Dwalin suggested. "A long absence is never a good thing." He then turned to her, "Are ye coming?"

"No, I have yet to finish my patrol."

The two dwarves seemed anything but displeased. Dwalin took the way back ahead of the king, leaving him and the Ranger alone in the dark of the night and the tangible tension that enveloped them.

"I honestly don't understand why you think I'm a distraction to anyone here." She saw him tense up. "Is there a sensible argument, or do you simply fear that I shall taint the princes with my filthy blood?"

"This is sensible enough for me," he said and she rolled her eyes. "And I really don't like your manners," he added with a grumble.

"Get used to them," Arya countered with voice perfectly unruffled. "I got used to yours, so it's only fair." True, she may have sounded quite impertinent, but he was asking for it. "And if you don't mind, try to be quiet." Light tension framed her entire figure as she watched him leave and the disrupted patrol came back to mind. She resolved to complete it as soon as possible and was quickly off into the woods, though sulkier than before.

Kili had relieved Bilbo from watch-duty, resigned to his sleeplessness. He was at least glad that the darkness was not so stifling yet as Gandalf had warned, and he could still see what was happening beyond the edges of the camp. A faint sound somewhere close startled him all of a sudden, and he jumped up immediately, ready to rouse the others. If he paid more attention to the noise, he'd figure that it was someone humming a tune in another language.

A hand grasped his arm, the one with a grip on his sword, and Arya's voice hustled to shush him, "It's me."

Only now he realised how many hours she'd been missing. "Where the bloody hell have you been?"

"Took a look around at first," she whispered. "Then I watched you fidgeting like a dove before sending Bilbo to sleep."

He remained silent, as though he'd heard the words but his mind refused to come up with something intelligent to reply.
Arya frowned; not because he didn't respond, but because she felt uncomfortable and didn't know how to approach the matter without sounding offensive. "Kili, this is a shot in the dark, but," she began softly, "if it's true... do not bother yourself with second thoughts."

His face scrunched up in confusion. "What do you mean?" he said, her posture and nervous shifting unsettling him. "What's the matter?"

"I don't mean to be blunt, but... are you and Fili in any way distracted by my presence?"

Kili felt his whole body bursting into flames. "How do you–?"

"I stumbled upon your little discussion while I was scouting," she revealed and then broke a smile. "You weren't exactly quiet."

"You heard everything we said?"

"Yes."

"And you heard what Thorin asked?" She nodded. "So you heard what I replied." It was more a conclusion than a question and he looked down thoughtfully.

"I did."

Kili remained silent, his gaze downcast before he raised it to meet hers. "I am not going to apologise," he admitted, sure of himself, but his look was glum. "It was an honest answer."

Her eyes creased with amusement as she smiled, genuinely appreciating his frankness. "I never asked for an apology," she whispered. "You said what was natural to say. And should that ever happen, I trust you'd do the right thing."

His eyes did not stray from hers. "How do you reckon?"

"I once had brothers as well," she muttered wistfully, her gaze moving upwards. But then she realised they were in Mirkwood, where most of the time the sky wasn't visible. "I am nothing but a stranger to you. Not your kin... not even of your race. So if you were actually thinking about it, stop torturing yourself about whether saving your brother and not me was the honourable thing to say– It was. It is."

"But I don't want anything to happen to you either–"

"I know how to take care of myself," she appeased. "And I doubt it will ever come to that."

"Still, I cannot just stop worrying about you like Thorin so kindly suggested. You are my friend."

"Kili," she sighed and unconsciously rubbed her arms to warm herself up, "let's be honest. You barely know me. I am not your frien–"

"I am being honest. Yes, you are," he said sharply. After that night at Beorn's, it became something like an unspoken truth that his mind and character felt closer to hers than most his friends' back in Ered Luin. And that's not something Kili took lightly.

A storm seemed to break behind his eyes and they turned darker and colder than she had ever seen them before. She didn't like that. It did not suit him. She preferred the usual warmth they emitted that made her feel better. Her expression turned regretful, but she thought it wiser to sort things out before it caused a misunderstanding. "Look–"
"No. You look at me," he demanded.

She couldn't find it in her to meet his gaze. "Kili, please--"

"I said look," he all but growled. His tone brooked no argument. He wanted her to look, and he wanted her to look now.

Arya forced her eyes to meet his, the look he was giving her nearly making her choke on the intensity. What in the blazes? She, who always had a ready answer to whatever he'd thrown at her, had now become submissive to his order? Well, it may have been the simple order of looking at him, but still... the tone was what mattered. Still, even after this shocking realisation, she couldn't bring herself to rebel against this.

Kili firmly clasped her hands inside his and held them more desperately than was acceptable for people with no familial connection. "We agreed to be friends. We are friends. Same applies to you and my brother, if I may say so on his behalf. And if anyone is opposed to that, may he come forth and confront us. End of story."

Arya just sat there, in a stupor, tongue-tied, a hundred thoughts roiling about her head and giving her an oddly nauseating feeling. Kili was almost amused. His next move was planned and calculated, because one could never be careful enough near Arya.

The moment his fingers went to twirl a strand of her hair, she flinched back, startled. "What are you doing?" she asked suspiciously, eyes wide in alert.

"If you'd allow me, I'd like to put a braid in your hair that represents friendship. So whenever you or anyone else have any doubts on the matter, they can take a look at it and shut up," Kili explained, a little put-off by her reaction. He expected her to freeze with embarrassment, swat his hand away even, but not scoot away in fear.

Arya cocked her head from side to side, looking at him askance. "No one touches my hair."

There was a stifled laugh. "No offence, but I have slept with your hair violating every orifice in my head back in Carrock."

The dark was quite intense, yet he could still see the vivid crimson tint on her cheeks. "That happened by accident," she said nervously. "This was deliberate."

"Don't get your knickers in a twist," he appeased casually. "I didn't know your people cared so much about their hair."

"My people, no. My mother's kin, however, is an entirely different matter. My mother was very fond of mine and I had promised her to keep it--" A pause. "To keep it decent," she went on, eliciting a smile. "But, you see, Rangers and personal hygiene do not usually make a good match, so... Forgive me," she suddenly blurted out, "this is a very odd quirk, but I am not very comfortable letting people touch my hair."

"Well, I barely did," Kili raised his hands in a plea of innocence, "so no harm, no foul."

It was a shame, really. It had been too long since he braided someone's hair. His mother had taught him all kinds of techniques and styles, what everything meant, from a young age, but since he had no other head to experiment on apart from his parents, Fili and, occasionally, when he was in a good mood, Thorin's, Kili quickly lost interest. Dwalin usually indulged him when Kili was a lot younger, but half his hair was shaved to accommodate the tattoos so there wasn't a lot to work with. Watching all that hair flowing down Arya's back made his eyes gleam and his hands itch. For the moment he
seemed to have forgotten how shockingly intimate combing one's hair with your own fingers was considered by dwarfen standards, so Arya not letting him now might be for the best, really.

Arya forced a smile, but it came out too rushed and grudging despite her efforts. He didn't seem to mind, thankfully. If he did, he had the good grace not to mention it. Only an hour and a dozen subtle attempts later, she cajoled him into going to sleep and took over his watch.

Many a time during that night her brain replayed his words that he'd slept with her hair on his face. Equal times her gaze wandered from the vast amount of trees and shadows towards him and his sleeping face. And every single time she found herself blushing furiously for no apparent reason, feeling the temperature of her body rising inexplicably, despite the chill.

All this they spoke about some time ago, of them being friends and Thorin's disapproval, was a matter of incredible complexity that needed to be handled with delicacy and discretion, and Kili had, miraculously, in three sentences managed to lessen it into something so simple. Still, it might sound simple to his ears, but to hers there were horns trumpeting warnings that she had taken the wrong path and was slowly and steadily treading to unavoidable doom.
Attack of the moths

After the night of Kili's immeasurable display of persuasion regarding their friendship, as well as her eyes' disturbing habit of constantly straying towards his sleeping form during watch, Arya was scared out of her wits. She tried to shoo the ominous feeling away, but it wouldn't budge from the place it had rooted. So she did what she was good at; ignored it.

In order to achieve this, she put her mind into other tasks that would keep her focused and wouldn't let her traitorous eyes wander. The patrols were prolonged considerably. Every night when they set camp and the others munched something and settled to their bedrolls, she'd go ahead to scout. And upon her return, long after everyone had fallen asleep, she would often keep watch for double the normal time and, occasionally, the whole night.

The plan was effective. For the first four days, that is. Because, as the saying went, the best-laid plans of mice and men oft go awry. Arya's was thwarted by an oblivious Kili who'd taken to staying awake and keeping her company until her watch was over, or insisted on taking over the watch and sent her to sleep. The continuous refusals did not deter him. In the end she could do nothing but welcome his company. Oddly, and despite the boundaries she'd set to herself, she did the exact same thing when it was his turn to keep watch—couldn't sleep either way, so she might as well return the gesture. It was clearly due to her inability to sleep and not at all to an unprecedented need to sit close to the young prince with the very fine eyes and beaming smile. He made her feel slightly better than she usually was, and her mind and judgement had been fooled enough to believe that this wasn't a bad thing.

All their nights would usually be spent indulging in idle chatter. With voices low, barely above a whisper, they often found themselves recounting stories of their childhood much to each other's entertainment.

"—that dwarf, Kari, said some pretty nasty things about me that night," Kili muttered bitterly. "He said that I had no right to be called a dwarf since I don't have even a half-decent beard, that I am no worthy heir of the line of Durin, and that I look like an ugly little girl." Then an impish smile lit up his face and all bitterness vanished. "Here, keep in mind that there was too much ale involved and that, when I've had one too many, the chances I'll hold my temper are minimal. So... I may or may not have stepped on a table, pulled my trousers down and showed him— Well, the... little heir of Durin."

It took both her hands and great self-control to prevent the cackle her mouth was ready to unleash at the mental image of Kili giving quite the show while drunk.

"Which is no little at all!" he added urgently. It got Arya laughing so hard, she almost keeled over. Despite the fact that he unreservedly deserved to become laughingstock, his heart swelled with joy at the sight of her laughing, especially now that he was the cause of it. "Forgive me," he said with slight embarrassment, although he did not truly mean it, "I should not have said that. It was very inappropriate."

She brushed it aside with a wave of her hand, still trying to recover. "Bless you!" she choked when she was able to get a breath out. "I can scarcely remember the last time I laughed so hard!"

Kili chuckled. "Happy to be of service, my lady," he said with a dramatic bow of his head. "Now, what about you?"
"Me?" she scoffed. "The last time I was left unsupervised around alcohol, it did not end well."

"Oh?" he said with interest, a gleam of joy in his eyes.

"You see, when I drink, I have a tendency to talk." She paused, before ardently explaining, "A lot."

Kili barely contained a broad grin at the statement, trying to imagine her lightheaded. He didn't know why, but his instinct told him she'd be quite affectionate when drunk. "Did you say something you shouldn't?"

"Well... you can say that," she said with puckered lips. "Twas the day I told my father that I wished to become a Ranger, like him and his brother. Oh, I still remember his face the moment I uttered the words— You could see the veins in his temples popping out. My sons will follow that path, but my only daughter to become a Ranger?" she mimicked his deep voice and reply. "This is outrage! Completely absurd!"

He barely contained a grin.

"Do you know what he used to say after this?" Arya continued. "That war is easier than daughters."

This time Kili straight out laughed. "Can you blame the man? You must have been a real handful."

The sight made her face warm and her toes curl. Many a time she'd thought that his laughter was a major hazard. She wondered if she would need to sit down, though to her great embarrassment realised she was already seated.

"Why this fervour to be a Ranger, though?"

"My father was, his brother as well, my grandfather before them, and so on. 'Tis not so much a family tradition as a duty for the men to join. Well, I happened to be far from cooperative with my parents’ determination to bear only sons, although they were not disappointed when a daughter came to the world," she said quietly, and then added in a more impish tone, "I slept all the time, you see; very quiet baby, from what people told me. Perhaps this is why sleep doesn't come easily now—I've had my fair share back then and it needs to be balanced out."

Kili smiled again, unable to hold himself back from picturing her as a baby. She surely would have been a sight for sore eyes. Another —honestly unintentional— picture formed in his mind as to how much his own mother would love to have a baby that looked like Arya, with those eyes and pouts she pulled sometimes, giggling and walking around their house back in Ered Luin. He didn't know why, but the thought stirred threads of emotions that he didn't know were available in his emotional range; almost choked on his saliva. For once he felt immensely pleased with the dark that surrounded them that successfully concealed his blush.

"Anyhow, I simply wished for the duty to be passed on to me as well, and not only the men of the family."

He didn't press for more; seemed too absorbed by his thoughts. She glanced at him and sighed quietly, wondering why on earth she had just revealed all this to him, before stretching arms and legs outwards and absentmindedly allowing a yawn to escape.

"That's it," a voice announced sternly. "You're off to sleep."

She scowled. "My watch isn't even nearing its end."

"I won't have any argument on this."
And there he gave *the look* again; the one that incapacitated every resistance she had called up to arms. Although he wouldn't get away with it this time. "I do not feel comfortable to even try to sleep in this forest, so please don't force me into seeing a nightmare. It's awful enough already," she muttered with a sad look.

On top of that she gave him her doe eyes, and Kili almost forgot how to breathe. Right then, he was certain that even Smaug would agree to leave the Mountain and never return if she requested it and gave him that look. What made him suspicious, though, was how long she kept eye contact, for her gaze usually averted from his whenever their looks pushed intensity to limits unknown.

"I am not falling for your manipulative schemes, you sly minx."

Arya hadn't expected it to work in the first place. She chuckled and gave a little shrug, "It was worth a try."

"Please, try to sleep," he said softly, "even for an hour. It'll do you more good than harm."

She huffed, but eventually let her head slump against the tree they were resting on. And he had accused her of manipulation—oh the irony. The man had just managed to send her to sleep within minutes of argument, whereas, under normal circumstances, she would have repeatedly told him to mind his own business. *What kind of sorcery is this?* Did he possess magical powers? He probably did, for the next sentence that exited her mouth would never be uttered out loud, unless she was under a powerful spell. Or utterly pissed—although she had no recollection of consuming any alcohol recently.

"For what it's worth, I think you a handsome man."

This time Kili *did* choke on his saliva. Undoubtedly, had he been drinking something right now the liquid would've been sprayed out of mouth, nose, perhaps even ears. Had he heard well? Had she said—? The words made him oddly self-conscious and he felt his body burst into flames, whereas she'd sounded as casual as ever when she dropped the news. He was ready to ask her to repeat that so as to certify his sanity, but when he turned to face her, her eyes were closed and her head was at a weird angle, facing away from him.

Thus the duty of watch fell on his shoulders, although he could barely force himself to think straight. What had just transpired didn't simply catch him off guard, but almost knocked the breath out of him. What was this weird effect she and her flattering remark had on him? Not to mention the look she'd given him before, no matter that it was fake; he could still remember every detail of her eyes. Large, dark and glowing with that spirit of hers that desperately searched for a slit to get away from the confines of her body. Kili went as far as to think that they were more beautiful than sunrise.

For quite the time he was staring ahead at empty space without registering what was happening around him, until he felt a soft weight against his shoulder that jerked him out of his tormenting thoughts. He looked toward the weight and stiffened when he spotted Arya's head. "*Mahal,*" he breathed deeply and cried inside, *stop testing me.*

He tried to concentrate on something else, *anything* else, but it was nigh impossible when the sleeping woman was literally breathing on his shoulder. Never before he had come so close to someone he was acquainted with for less than four months, and he was completely at a loss now that this 'rule' was crumbling to pieces. His every sense was attuned to her, and all he wanted to do was run away and forget about her and how she had started to make him feel.

All of a sudden she wiggled nervously and Kili stopped breathing completely, but then her breathing again became regular and he sighed in relief. A calm fell on him as he relaxed into his seat against
the tree, realising that he'd much rather have her head on his shoulder than run away. Indeed, scuttling off was not even an option since they were in a place he'd never been in before and would probably get lost should he decide to do so.

It was only out of pure luck that Thorin never witnessed any of these late-night conversations of the pair, or even worse—or rather thankfully for him and his nerves—the moments where one of them would fall asleep on the other's shoulder. Surely Kili would not leave his worry and sudden affection for the woman behind so easily, although Thorin wished to believe the lad would come around his mind in the end. The last he was aiming for was to hurt his nephews—for if he hurt the one, he would automatically hurt the other; he was certain they both knew how he doted on them. He only wished to see them safe, happy and focused. And they indeed might behave as he liked them to all day long, yet he could not be aware of what occurred in the dark of the night when he was in deep sleep. And he also couldn't be aware of the depth of one of his nephews' need to be close to the woman and discover her character. Not even Kili himself was completely aware of that.

As of lately, Arya had observed how tired Kili grew day by day and lay it to the fact that he was seriously lacking of sleep just to sit with her and keep her company. It gave her a good dose of guilt to last the summer. She could not understand why he was wearing himself out just to keep her company, when he needed all his strength for the journey ahead. The gesture was appreciated, desired even, yet everything had its boundaries.

Therefore, the past few nights, while it was her turn to keep watch and he'd come over and sit with her, she’d chat with him for awhile and then start humming a song her mother usually sang to her to fall asleep. Enthralled by the low voice and the enchantment the elvish words caused, Kili would drift off within minutes, even if he was trying hard not to. Glad that he was finally getting necessary rest, Arya would continue to keep watch in either silence or while humming more tunes under her breath, unusually content with allowing his head to rest on her shoulder.

As they delved further into the forest the days and nights became darker, the air more poisonous, and less animals were found and seen around. The company had been able to prevent certain weird creatures from approaching the camp from land, but were unable to prevent those that came from the air above them.

First time they made appearance was when the dwarves dared to light a fire, despite the Ranger's—who'd been scouting for some time now—clear order not to. Apart from the fact that the days had grown colder and everyone sought some warmth beside that of their blankets, they also wished to cook a few rabbits the princes had miraculously caught when they went for a short hunting round the camp. As soon as the decision was made, the company separated in small teams to carry out each task. Oin, Gloin and Bombur busied themselves with the fire, Bifur, Dori and Nori were laying everyone's bedrolls down before the last light of the day disappeared, Thorin, Balin and Dwalin were sitting in a remote spot and discussed quietly, and the princes along with Bofur, Ori and Bilbo had formed a small circle and were skinning the animals.

The hobbit watched in severe amusement the younger prince gab about the woman and the late-night idle chatters they'd been having since they entered the forest, when she would keep watch and he'd stay awake to keep her company, or the other way around. Had Bilbo known him better he might have considered the lad was stung by something far worse than a hornet, or even Beorn's oversized bees.

"We were talking for quite a while," Kili gushed cheerfully, in a low voice though, for he wished not to be heard outside of the small group. "She said the funniest thing about—" He paused mid-sentenced and frowned upon noticing the others' looks and broad grins. "What?" he asked with
"You like her," Ori mumbled shyly, earning an approving nod from Fili.

The rabbit dropped from the prince's hands to his lap. He gawped at them all startled and flushed. "What?" he blurted out.

"Aye, ye do," Bofur chimed in with a chuckle, not bothering to even look at him. "And quite a lot, if I may say so."

"No, I don't!" Kili protested. "I mean I do—" he quickly corrected, but regretted it in an instant. "What I mean to say is that she's my friend. One is supposed to like their friends, right?" Words and thoughts became a blurry whirlpool in his head. "Oh, shut it!" he snapped in the end, while the others kept laughing.

Fili, who had crack up about halfway through his brother's delirium, and being the devious little minx he was, decided to follow a sideway to the conversation. "Come on," he comfortingly patted his shoulder, "let him be."

Kili let a deep breath he was holding and continued with the task at hand, trying to get his face colour back to normal.

The blond swiftly crept up behind him, a huge grin on his face. "He's a little sensitive right now," he mocked, "because he is in love!"

The other two dwarves started chortling. Bofur, in particular, proceeded to imitate some uncanny smooching sounds. That had Ori blush and duck his head in embarrassment, Fili double up with choking laughter, Kili fume from his ears as his head turned red, while Bilbo was shaking his head in mocking despair.

"Dwarves," thought the hobbit with a sigh.

It had been quite some time since the atmosphere was so light in the camp and everyone felt thankful for those moments. It wouldn't remain light for long, though. The fire was lit and the company formed a small circle around it, waiting rather impatiently for their supper.

A fuming Ranger stomped over to the camp a while later, where the members of the company sat quietly around a large fire. "Which part of 'do not light a fire' did you not catch exactly?"

"How were we going to cook the meat then?" Gloin snapped. "Ye don't expect us to die of starving, eh?"

She took glimpse of the skinned rabbits currently roasting over the fire and cringed. "These animals are not edible."

"What are ye talking about, lassie?" Bombur piped up and almost ogled at the food, wanting nothing more than to gobble some roast meat. "They're just fine."

"The whole forest is sick and rotten!" Arya burst, eyes glimmering with exasperation. "How on earth did you deduce that its wildlife is flourishing?"

"It doesn't look half as bad as you describe it," Fili protested as he meticulously observed his portion.

"Very well. Go on then," she challenged, "I dare you to try it."
The prince took a bite of it. He munched the lean part of it appreciatively at first, happy to eat meat after so long, but suddenly he winced, "I was wrong." No debating further on it, he spat the piece out without remorse and his disgust on full mode. "It tastes like feet!"

Some of the dwarves were not so easily convinced and took bites of their portions, only to sputter it a minute later. The Ranger pulled an 'I told you so' grimace and they grumbled under their breaths about the lack of proper food, quite grateful that they still had Beorn's food packed in bags, even if it was only honey cakes, dried fruits and nuts.

"Will you please put out the fire now?" Arya sighed.

"We could use a little warmth," Thorin spoke out of nowhere. His tone was not objective, though, more like that of stating a fact. "The nights have grown colder."

"Yes, and I sympathise with you," she said in her most polite tone, at the same time pointing at herself, for their clothes were far thicker than the tenuous cloth her tunic was made of. "Yet there is the risk of drawing unwanted attention."

The king hesitated for a moment, but eventually nodded, though somewhat sullenly. "Still, it'd be useful as a watch-fire," he pointed. "We could just let the embers die out."

Arya scoffed quietly, trying to abate the annoyance that had started to bubble inside her. She had no intention of sitting there, idle, and wait till the fire was dead. So she crept under the dark shadow of a big tree, tied her sword back to her belt and took bow and quiver back in hand, while the others were busy settling for sleep.

Bilbo sneaked behind her when he saw her preparing to leave. "But you've only just returned," he said questioningly.

"That I have. And we're as safe as it gets," she replied. "For now, at least. Though I'm not going to be here for what will ensue."

His face scrunched up in confusion. "What do you mean?"

"Should you let the fire die out, I suggest you find yourself something to cover your head and not make noise," she warned him softly. "Pass that to everyone later, if you don't mind." Before he could reply she had disappeared back into the shadows whence she emerged from.

Bilbo contemplated her words with extreme caution, eventually resolving to follow her advice. She had been here before, she knew better. Therefore the hobbit strode to where his stuff was, vigilant to use a considerable part of his blanket to cover his head. Everyone else had also retreated to their bedrolls and only the one on watch was up and about—Dwalin.

Even after the light of the fire had slightly faded, Kili could not find rest. Something was amiss. He didn't know how it had come to this, but he had grown used to the midnight small talks with a certain someone. And now that they hadn't the chance to do so, it didn't sit well with him.

"Hey."

Fili blissfully ignored the first nudge on his shoulder. And he ignored the second. He also ignored the third one. But then came the constant, vicious poke in his ribs. He made a humphing sound and turned around. "Mmm?" he complained with a groan.

"Is she next to you?" Kili muttered.
"Mm-hmm," the blond replied, hardly sure about what he was asked, his eyes and mind unable to function in the verge of drifting off.

"Is she asleep?"

Another muffled groan left Fili's mouth, followed by a quiet snoring.

"Fili!" the other hissed and lightly kicked his foot.

The blond wiggled like an annoyed worm next to him and cursed under his breath. "What?"

"Is she asleep?" the younger asked again.

Fili's eyes opened in tiny slits and for a moment the enticing thought of a stranglehold crossed his mind, though in the next he grabbed the unsuspecting person on his side, pulled it over him, and made it land with a small thud next to his brother. "Ask for yourself and let me sleep for heaven's sake," he grumbled and turned his back to them.

Two pairs of eyes had gone wide and, even if it was deep in the dark and the fire cast only a faint light, Kili was absolutely certain of the opulent reddening on his cheeks.

"Ask me what?" Bilbo inquired, still partly frozen from the surprise and the fright.

"I thought it was Arya, I'm sorry," Kili mumbled in embarrassment. "Did we startle you?"

Bilbo glared at him. "What are you talking about," he said wryly, "my heart almost stopped, for one grabbing and pulling you in the air just when you're about to sleep is the most natural thing that could happen but, other than that, no, you didn't startle me!"

Kili winced at the dripping sarcasm. Apparently, she was rubbing off on the hobbit. "You spend too much time with her, you know that?" he commented and Bilbo gave a wry nod. "Where is she sleeping?"

"She's not even in the camp, Kili."

The dwarf's head snapped to his right side, eyes the size of bulbs. "What?" He tried not to snap. He really did. Yet he was failing. "Where--? Is that woman ever going to get some sleep?"

Bilbo didn't answer. He wasn't sure if the prince was actually asking a question more than soliloquizing. As they were both lost in their thoughts a whiz ripped through the air and pulled them out of contemplation. Both raised their eyes in alert, not exactly realising what was happening, until they saw them.

An army of dark grey and black moths, of disturbingly large size, was rushing towards the camp, flapping their huge wings in the air and causing a terribly annoying buzz. It also seemed that the fire and the noise attracted something else; eyes, hundreds of eyes that hovered over their heads on the trees above. No one could see what creatures those eyes belonged to, though, for they didn't make the company the honour of stepping into the fading light of the fire.

Some of the dwarves let low cries, whipping their hands over their heads to prevent the moths from whirring about their ears. It didn't work, and it got positively worse when the existing army was reinforced by a regiment of nocturnal inhabitants.

"What are these?" someone screamed dramatically. "Bats?"
"These are beasts," cried Dori, "not bats!"

"Put out the fire!" Bilbo yelled, trying to wave them away with his blanket.

Bad day for the members of the company who were graced with thick hair and beards. Really bad day. The foul creatures got tangled in their hair and bushy beards, prompting some of them to flee to every direction to shoo them away and causing their once intricate braids to go loose.

"Somebody put out the blasted fire!" Dwalin shouted from his post as he swung his axe menacingly against the myriads of insects that swarmed against him.

Thorin was crowned the hero of the night when he seized the opportunity. The insects left them in relative piece as soon as he scattered the last embers of the wood away from the fire. Ash wafted in the air and entered his lungs, making him cough, while the camp was plunged into darkness and a choir of grunts roused from the suffering members.

"Alright," panted the king, "is everyone safe? Are they gone?"

They could barely see in front of them, for the dark proved too intense for their eyes. Only Bilbo was able to distinguish the outlines of some forms. Half the company was sprawled on the ground, panting from their struggles to shoo the flying beasts and the hovering eyes away, while the other half were up on their feet, nervously searching around them out of fear that the bugs would attempt a second strike.

"She told us to put out the fire earlier," Bilbo growled quietly. He was seriously starting to miss the rather peaceful nights of the previous week, when they hadn't walked so far into the forest, where the air was lighter, the weather was warmer, and there was no need to light fires that would draw a buzzing band of bugs the size of their hands. "She has been in this forest before. Why can't we take her counsel just for once?" he continued, voice obviously festered with the first signs of anger.

Thorin could not see him, but still scowled. As loath as he was to admit it, he had to have listened to her. It surprised him that it hadn't been her voice to snap about the matter first. "Miss Arya," he called hoarsely and winced again at the taste of her name in his mouth, for it had been two — maybe three — times in total that he had uttered her name since they met. "Where are you?"

"Not here," said Kili as he blindly reached out to find his brother.

"She's gone to take another look around, I think," Bilbo filled in.

The king hummed something under his breath and Dwalin's voice could be heard grumbling something in reply. What drew everyone's attention, though, was Gloin's aching growl.

"Blasted bugs bit me on my sit-upon!" cried the red-headed dwarf and rubbed his rear soothingly. How could they have penetrated the cloth of his trousers was beyond him. He felt a light tingle around the area and fear flushed him. "It's gone numb," he said urgently, "I can't feel my right buttock!"

His brother, the specialised healer of the expedition, rolled his eyes. "When could you ever feel yer buttocks?"

Gloin blurted out something in Khuzdul, though his fear did not subside. "'Tis serious, I tell you! Somebody has to suck out the poison-"

"Well, it's pitch dark," Dwalin cut in, settling himself back to his watch even though he couldn't see a damn thing, "so ye'll have to wait till the morrow."
"Aye," Oin agreed, "there's nothing we can do now, brother. Just don't sit on it."

The red-headed dwarf whimpered and placed himself on his bedroll on his stomach, seeing to cover himself properly this time to avoid similar accidents. All the dwarves followed his example and swaddled themselves with their blankets, falling back to a restless sleep. Only Bilbo remained quite tense and a step away from snapping at everyone for defying the Ranger's advice once more.

Arya returned to the camp just when the sun was about to rise, although she wouldn't wager a silver coin on the exact hour. At least, some small patches of light blue sky that were visible among the trees marked as so. As her feet noiselessly moved across the camp, she ended up meeting with the kind and rather weary face of Mr. Balin, who had the last watch.

"Ah, lassie," he greeted amiably, "you're back." He took in the detail of her face, the exhaustion etched on her brow and the dark circles decorating the skin beneath her eyes. "Did you not get any sleep?"

She shook her head negatively. "Been scouting through the night."

"You shouldn't," he chided. "You ought to get some rest. Had you been here, you would have spared us the ordeal with the—"

"Moths," Arya finished with a smile, "I know. Yet since His Royal Highness will doubtfully ever listen to me, someone had to keep an eye around the camp when your ruckus, gentlemen, could have roused the dead."

The old dwarf gave a good-natured smile. "Do not think poorly of him," he whispered. "He's a good lad. He simply has much and many to worry about."

"I do not think poorly of him. Poorly I think of orcs," she said pointedly, "not him. Thorin merely has some... issues. I do not blame him for that; everyone has issues. But his are the kind that need to be solved." Her dark gaze sunk into that of the old dwarf in front of her and she let a deep, weary sigh. "And the fact that he's standing right behind me will by no means make me take my words back."

Balin stifled a smile as he stared at his friend who stood behind the woman with arms crossed.

"Good morning," the king greeted them both with a curt nod.

"And let us keep it that way," Arya agreed. "Therefore, please refrain from saying anything in reply to my words. We'd better move on." With that, she left the two dwarves alone and headed to rouse the rest of the company, silently laughing to herself upon seeing them bundled up in their blankets to shield themselves from the insects.

"Reminds you of someone?" Balin asked quietly, noticing how his friend's gaze was pinned on the woman who swiftly strolled from bedroll to bedroll.

The king turned to him sharply, raising an eyebrow. "I would hardly say so, old friend."

"Frerin would make an effort to like her," the old dwarf noted, "if he were here."

A shadow sucked every hint of light from Thorin's face and his look turned gloomy. "Yes," he mumbled bitterly, "if he were here." Within seconds he turned around and went to gather his stuff from the ground, while Balin fixed him with a regretful look and sighed.
"Now, brother," Oin began, "let me see that bite of yours."

Gloin pulled his trousers down enough to reveal his rear, and his brother browsed the injury.

"Aye," the healer exclaimed, "the sting is still under the skin. We have to take it out."

After several minutes of trying and Gloin's muffled groans of complain, the sting dutifully remained trapped under the surface of the skin. Oin wiped the first signs of sweat from his forehead and huffed. He couldn't coerce the sting out without a bloody needle. He took a quick glimpse of the people that bustled around him and prepared their things, until his clever eyes landed on someone and an idea started to take shape in his mind.

"Lass!" he called and two heads snapped at him immediately, while his brother wobbled like a chicken ready to be butchered. "Can ye come here and lend a helping hand?"

Arya looked at him askance. What could the dwarf possibly want from her?

The same thought crossed Kili's mind at the same time as he stood next to her and packed his blanket. "What's the matter?" he asked suspiciously and fell into pace with her as she trudged to where the healer was.

"A bug must have bit him last night," Oin gestured towards his lying brother who was grumbling not to call for the woman, "and I can't take the sting out without a needle. Ye have the most slender hands amongst us, so I reckon you could give it a try."

They were just a step behind the two dwarves and, as soon as Kili noticed the area of the injury, he swiveled around and rushed to cover her eyes with his hand, yelling, "No!"

His voice drew the attention of some of the others, who started to gather closer, their interest piqued.

"Are you mental?" Arya barked at him, trying to pull the hands away from her eyes.

"The b–bite," Kili stammered nervously. "The bite is in an area that you wouldn't... voluntarily like to take a look." He felt her brow rising in suspicion.

She huffed impatiently. "Which would be where exactly?"

"Somewhere you do not wish to know and definitely not going to see," the prince insisted.

"For heaven's sake, get your hand away!" On cue, she batted said limb away. "Now, where is it?" she asked the healer with determination. He scooted lightly away, revealing the infamous by now area and her eyebrows rose. "So the arse it is."

"Don't you dare," Gloin growled at her and shrunk back, trying to cover himself.

"Do ye wish to continue feeling your rear, or not?" Oin snapped and that efficiently made his brother shut his mouth. He then beckoned the Ranger to approach, despite his brother's low threats and snarls.

Arya knelt next to him, observing the small sting and the yellow hue the skin had taken around it. "It may hurt a bit," she warned, then pressed her nails to prompt the sting to come out and the dwarf almost wailed like a baby.

Kili forced his eyes shut and shook his head in despair, unable to bear watching. It wasn't that he minded her seeing someone's private parts so much, but rather seeing Gloin's private parts—the red-
headed dwarf wasn't exactly a sight for sore eyes. He simply felt sorry for the sight her eyes had been obliged to see. Standing right beside with arms crossed in front of him, Fili seemed deeply amused by the situation and the reactions of each one of the people present.

"And... done," the Ranger announced, presenting the tiny sting to the witnesses, while the patient thanked Mahal. "You may feel numb for a while, though."

"Thank you, lassie," Oin smiled at her and not so subtly kicked his brother to thank her too. Gloin limited to grumble something through his teeth that remotely resembled a 'thank you' and pulled his trousers up, avoiding any further contact with her.

Arya let an amused sigh and took the way back to where her stuff was laid, while everyone else returned to their morning tasks and preparations.

"Don't say that I didn't warn you," a voice commented as someone's figure caught up with her.

"I have seen you as well," she pointed out. "What's the difference?"

Kili feigned shock, a palm covering his gaping mouth. "How dare you compare my good, strong rear with Gloin's arse?"

That had her purse her lips in order to contain a chortle—it wouldn't be welcomed right now, especially by Thorin. Therefore she limited to a smirk. "In his defense, he does not have the huge parasites you bragged at the trolls to have and unfortunately torment your tubes."

The prince groaned under his breath, unable to come up with an appropriate answer. Damn, she had won this time. "And here I was," he sighed dramatically, "almost certain that you had changed from the little insolent hellion I thought you to be when we met." For some obscure reason, he was glad she hadn't. It would be out of character for her to go from snarky to the epitome of politeness.

"Ah, worry not," she flashed a smile too innocent to be true. "There's still enough of her inside me to give you a nice pinch in your good, strong rear if you need it."

"I daresay you will find it very agreeable," Kili said smugly and watched as she steadied her belt and loaded the rest of her stuff on her back before they started their trek anew.

They were soon joined by Fili and Bilbo.

"At least the bite wasn't serious."

"Heaven forbid," the blond sighed gratefully. "No one would stand listening to his complaints."

Arya laughed under her breath, glancing at the front of the line where Gloin waddled and soothingly rubbed his bottom every now and then. "One small bite for a dwarf, one giant bum for dwarf kind," she said dramatically.

Forgoing all sense of discretion, Fili felt the laugh coming. It was rising up his throat, threatening to boom out, until he was far in over his head to stop. He tossed his head back and cracked up, with no care of becoming a spectacle. Arya couldn't resist joining in. Kili shook his head in mocking disapproval at the both of them, noting what a bad influence Fili and his whimsical comments could be on occasion.

She didn't speak much after that and, in turn, the rest did not pay much attention to her. Whatever leftovers of her light mood slowly cooled off and darkness filled her soul. She bristled like a porcupine who had sensed danger when the whispers began to assault her ears, and she lingered on
her step, looking like she'd seen a ghost. In retrospect, she wished she'd seen a ghost—they would be favourable company when compared to the unwanted reminder of her past.

What kind of new devilry was being woven around her now?
I could have written a more Alice in Wonderland-esque take of the part where they're trippin' balls in Mirkwood, but went with something darker instead. I did write it while listening to Jefferson Airplane's 'White Rabbit', though.

Hours upon hours upon hours had passed since they went down the path after the night with the moth incident. It felt like all these hours summed up to weeks of wandering, when in fact it had only been six days. They always walked in a long line under the gloomy shades of the huge network of trees, usually with the Ranger in lead, careful not to touch much around them. Almost everything, after all, every inch of the dirt or the trees, was covered with mold—the kingdom of fungi, as someone had whimsically commented.

Nearly everyone was bordering on lunacy. They'd quickly grown to absolutely loathe this foul place. Several had grown exceptionally silent, keeping mostly to themselves when they could feel rot and decay lurking at every step. To say that the environment was scarier as they delved further into the forest would be an understatement. Everything was unfathomably dark and, when the scant light of those sunrays that miraculously managed to pierce through the thick green foliage disappeared as night fell, everything turned darker; creepier. The atmosphere itself felt sickening, the air sultry and frowsty and making their heads heavy with dizziness.

"Air," a voice panted desperately, "I need clean air..."

"My head is spinning," Oin complained painfully a moment later. "What's happening?"

The rest weren't any better. As foulness, decrease in food rations, and dehydration set in, they all became subjects to the effects. Loss of reason, anger... Eventually hallucinations.

Bilbo made a point of shaking his head every so often to stay awake, for whenever he let his head slump, he found himself in danger of fainting. Turning to the side, he tripped over his own feet when faced with another Bilbo staring back to him quizzically. Stars have mercy on us. He wiggled his head briskly yet again, thinking that he must be losing his mind. Fainting slowly began to seem like an agreeable alternative.

Fili thought they'd fallen under some sort of spell that cursed them to wander aimlessly in that bloody forest for all eternity. Not as affected as the rest physically, though equally befuddled mentally, he had had his fair share of delusions that were lavishly offered. At one point he could swear he saw his dead father running towards him, but didn't bother to reveal this to anyone, knowing it was false.

Kili wasn't as fortunate. The entire ordeal felt to him like an endless hangover. Actually, no, he'd had one or two hangovers worse than that, but they didn't last nearly as long. Half the time it was bordering on tolerable, and that's because he'd got so numb, anyone could kick him in the shin and he wouldn't feel a thing. The other half was a nightmare. He could feel his bloody pulse in his eyeballs.

Safe to say, Thorin had it worse than everyone. The man was on the precipice of insanity. On top of that, he found himself unable to get any form of rest or even stomach the meagre food they had at
their disposal. Every time he ate, he'd be sick afterwards. The signs of exhaustion, poor nutrition, and
lack of sleep were becoming evident not only on his face, but his character as well. Not ever one to
rein his temper, even himself acknowledged that he'd become especially volatile as of late. And
heavens help any poor bastard that'd accidentally become subject to one of his legendary moods.

Just when he thought it couldn't get any worse, he found himself glancing at the woman who
incidentally happen to walk beside him. And he was suddenly struck by the image of a pair of pointy
ears protruding through the hair.

The Ranger had learned early on to sit through any predicament with dignity. As much as her hands
were itching to punch her way out of the thrice-damned forest, she kept to herself, out of everyone's
way, almost blending in with the environment. The rest were too wrapped up in their own problems
to overstep her boundaries, so, fortunately, an uneventful trek was more than she could've asked for.

Now, if there ever was a perfect example of jinxing something, that would be it.

Said lack of events should not have bred complacency. That's exactly why the oncoming palm of a
strong hand was registered barely after it crashed against her face. The sheer force sent her landing
on the ground with a muffled thud, the harsh collision with her back that was still on the mend fairly
painful.

"Traitor!"

The unanticipated spectacle of a hopping mad Thorin darting against the Ranger with sword in hand
seemed to snap the company out of their lethargy, though few were close enough to attempt to stop
him.

"What are you doing?" Balin yelled in alert.

"You thought you could trick me?" the king screamed at the top of his lungs, elbowing everyone
who dared lay a finger to stop him, "Let go of me!"

The entire company was stunned to eerie silence. The princes ran to Thorin's sides within seconds,
whereas Bilbo was helping the woman stand up.

"Let me kill the traitor!" Thorin raved again. "I'll have your bloody pointy ears cut out at the root!"

In retrospect, Bilbo experienced a moment of chilling clarity when faced with the reddish mark on
her face. Thorin looked like a wolf being held back by mere ropes that would snap with the lightest
of pulls.

Calm as ever, Arya slowly rubbed a hand over her cheek and fixed the king with an examining look,
seemingly uncaring of the outburst and the obscene yells. It took less than a minute to figure it out—
he was hallucinating.

"Are you alright?" a distant voice pulled her out of her thoughts. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," she lied. Her back stung like hell, she could feel fresh, warm blood seeping out of some of
the deeper wounds that hadn't healed yet completely, one side of her face felt as though it was being
roasted over a fire, and she still wouldn't offer anyone the spectacle of seeing her yield to pain. She
motioned the hobbit with her eyes to step away before rising to her feet.

Fili watched in shock as she took steady steps towards them, a determined gleam in her eyes. "What
are you doing?" he screamed, putting a lot more effort to hold Thorin back, who had depleted his
stock of expletives and happily switched to Khuzdul to continue.
All those witnessing the scene waited with baited breath as she approached the dwarf.

Trapped in this illusive version of reality, even Thorin himself seemed to still for a brief moment, caught off guard by her bold physical approach. The cheek of that woman crossed all limits.

"Are you mental?" Kili exclaimed with wide eyes.

She didn't even spare him a look. All her attention and focus was fixed on the king who, at the moment, looked like an old hag giving her the evil eye.

"Get back!" Kili barked this time.

Again, she ignored him.

Fili didn't know what to make of all this, apart from the fact that the woman was obviously losing it. Therefore, any effort to put some sense in someone's mind was directed to his shuddering from anger king. "Uncle, please," he said lowly, "listen to yourself."

The heartfelt plea drew the latter's attention, and he pinned his gaze on the person who spoke. He recognised the face; the regal features, the blond hair, the striking blue eyes.

"This is no elf," Fili continued with steady, reassuring voice.

"This is Arya," Kili chimed in quietly.

Thorin's head snapped at the sound of the second voice and sought out its source. Unkempt, dark hair and warm hazel eyes that now seemed impossibly dark and brimming with barely-concealed panic; he recognised that person as well. And then it finally occurred to him. These were his nephews, trying to put some sense in an old coot's mind. Granted, he didn't trust the woman, but he would never consider killing her had his sanity not abandoned him. Call it a momentary lapse of judgement, if you will.

The grip on his limbs relaxed when they felt him going less stiff, yet they remained within inches' distance—just in case.

Arya's eyes, however, did not soften nor did she retreat. For someone who was, at times, known to lose her temper a little faster than what should be acceptable for a Ranger, the woman had nerves of steel. She raised a hand and pulled her hair back, putting her ears on public display.

Thorin did a double take to have the earlier warped image of her ears reversed to normal. His grip on the hilt of Orcrist quivered slightly before he let the sword drop on the dirt, whispering, "They are not pointy."

"Good for you to acknowledge it," she said evenly and turned her back to them, glancing at the path ahead. "Come on, move," she ordered. "We've lingered here enough."

They needn't be told twice. Only Thorin was left behind as though he'd grown roots, staring at empty space and trying to sort out his thoughts, until his nephews nudged him to move. Only then he began walking again. Fili had picked up Orcrist from the ground and handed it back to him, and he took it without a word. Both lads remained by his side for the rest of the day, always ready to offer assistance if he needed it, though letting him walk a step ahead of them.

Arya didn't pay much thought to the incident. She knew the forest had this effect, even if she didn't trust Thorin not to do that of his own accord. Nonetheless, she was grateful that so far she had been spared the hallucinations some the others suffered, though her own state wasn't any better. Her head
and lungs weren't as much affected as something else was. And she may have been able to breathe more easily, yet it was her mind undergoing the greatest torture; whispers. Whispers in the dark of the night that disrupted whatever semblance of sleep she managed to get every now and then, and whispers in the lesser dark of the day that made her bristle. Since the morning she had first heard them, they hadn't gone away. Instead it felt as though they were looming closer and closer, slowly and steadily driving her to the verge of insanity.

Along with the whispers had also come the eyes, although these everyone could see, not only she. Hundreds of eyes, and in a variety of colours —blue, yellow, grey, white... because why the hell not?— would hover above them during the night, unsettling whomever was on watch and making them all fluttery and missing sleep.

The Ranger, for her part, was rather apathetic towards them, despite them being a new entry in Mirkwood's late-night freakshow since the last time she dropped by for a visit. Oft her gaze would pin on them, initially out of sheer curiosity and later purely out of spite, engaging in a bizarre staring contest of which they'd come out triumphant more times than she cared to admit. Yet seeing as the eyes' owners —whatever they might be— hadn't harmed anyone thus far, they could hover above her head and watch her all night long for all she cared. Stranger things had happened.

The last rays of sun disappeared, plunging the forest once again into darkness and marking the beginning of another long night. The company set camp, rolling their bedrolls next to each other's, and everyone dragged their exhausted bodies to form a circle and unpack something to eat. Not many words were exchanged and most of them longed to simply drift off, even if their heads were aching from the heavy air that made sleep difficult.

The Ranger was leaning on a tree, unconsciously rubbing a hand over her back that still ached from the morning incident as she munched silently on some dried fruits she'd pulled out of her pack. The movement of her mouth was nervous and quick, as though she wanted to be done eating them as soon as humanly possible without choking. She stopped mid-bite when Thorin approached.

"A word, if I may?"

Arya regarded him with a calculating look and an arched eyebrow. He didn't seem like the type to take rejection lightly, so she nodded resignedly and they walked a bit further into the path for privacy. Content enough to lean on a tree trunk again as he began to pace up and down the forest floor thoughtfully with his hands crossed behind his back, she took to counting his steps until he was ready to spit it out. A good five minutes and about three hundred steps later, she started to get impatient.

"Take no offence, but I've more serious things to do than sit here and watch you carve a path on the dirt," she said with tired voice. "Do you actually wish to speak with me, or to simply finish what you started earlier in the day away from any witnesses?"

His head jerked up, his look a cross between mild shock and offense. "What I did and said--"

"Don't."

His arms fell loose on his sides in surprise.

"I do not want your apology."

He peered at her askance, having expected a telling off for his actions and words, not... indifference. "Why?"
"First, I'd like to believe that it was the forest and the influence it has on all of us that caused this," she said and quickly raised a hand to stop him before he could attest to the statement. "Second and main reason is that, when this quest is over, we will fortunately not be seeing each other again." A wry expression graced his features then and he nodded with brazenly heartfelt agreement. "Hence this apology won't even matter in the long run. If it lightens your conscience, please, do so and I shall accept it. But know that I honestly don't care about it."

Needless to say, he had not seen this coming. Suddenly he felt angry at her for not letting him express the feelings that had been galling him all day long; how low he thought of himself for losing his composure and attacking her, or how insulted he was moments ago when she basically hinted that his reaction wasn't exclusively caused by the poisonous forest.

Once more he found her manners quite disrespectful, but then again, he hadn't shown any considerable respect to her either. Therefore this reaction should be, more or less, expected. And he also might not have a soft spot for the Elves or Men, but he definitely wasn't a brute that found pleasure in striking women. Although, to be honest, he had grabbed her from the neck before. And she had later warned him not to touch her again. And– Alright, this was getting complicated and he already had many a problem to deal with; there was no need to add more to the existing ones.

"I do not claim to know what you think of me, or what issues you have that trouble your mind," she said lowly, though not in a disrespectful manner. "Perhaps you've realised the extent of your prejudice. The fact that you held yourself back, even with some help, in the midst of the influence of the forest... well, maybe it's something. I'm not so naive as to think that you have blind trust in me now—I doubt you'll ever trust me. However, I'm optimistic enough to consider this proof that in the deepest, most dusty corner of your subconscious there's a chance of reconsidering some of the views you've held so far."

The dwarf scoffed. "I assure you, it was no proof of that," he grumbled sullenly under his breath and his gaze strayed toward the trees.

He expected a condescending glare or to just leave him there and go for her usual patrol, but certainly not what followed. He was far more startled than he would have liked to admit when she stepped closer and took his hand in hers, all the while pulling a knife out of her boot with the other.

For a moment Thorin's face and reflexes faltered, and he wondered if she was about to kill him and her words simply meant that she'd make it quick and painless. Yet the knife only scraped the tip of his finger. He was left staring at her as if she'd grown a second head. He promptly made to pull his hand back and start yelling, but she clasped his palm tighter in hers and gave a warning glare. She then did the same on her own finger and brought their hands in front of his face as a thin line of blood rolled down from each cut and mixed into a thicker one.

"What do you see?" she asked quietly, motioning toward their hands.

He narrowed his eyes and cocked his head to the side in confusion. "What on earth–?"

"Do you see something different?"

"Are you out of your mind, woman?"

Arya let a deep sigh. "You have blood of Dwarves. I have blood of Men and Elves. Can you spot any difference now? Can you tell which is what?"

Blue eyes buried into the woman's dark ones that shone cold and tired in the darkness, and he shook his head in denial.
"Exactly," she concluded and let his hand drop from hers. "'Tis just blood. In the end it's red and none of us can live without it." With a little twirl she put the knife back into her boot. "We are not as different as you want to believe, Thorin Oakenshield."

"I have about as much in common with you as I do a dung beetle," he said coldly.

Arya scoffed, too exhausted to deal with his less than clandestine insult. "You've already taken risks too high for anyone to take. You need allies. Whatever unpleasant past you have with people that could be of help now, you need to leave it behind for your own good."

"And here I thought you didn't care much about me."

"I am not your friend," she sounded almost amused. "Travelling with you is punishment enough, believe me. I'm just giving you a piece of advice. What you may choose to do with it, is up to you."

She was already two or three steps away from him when his voice made her pace cease.

"I dislike that my nephews are still close to you despite the conversation I had with them." He didn't need to elaborate further. Both of them knew exactly which conversation he referred to.

Oh, the irony. She almost rolled eyes at this, thinking about her nightly chats with Kili, of which Thorin had no idea.

"And since they are apparently not disposed to listen to me, I will hold you accountable for any potential distraction of theirs. So, if you wish to hold yourself clear of any accusations, see to keep your distance from them."

She didn't even blink while he spoke and defiantly put her hands on her hips when he finished. "How you managed to turn the topic from wanting to offer an apology," she noted dryly, "to threatening me to keep my distance from your nephews is simply masterful."

His jaw hardened. "They're not here to become friends with strangers," he growled, "they are here to serve a purpose." He gave her time to neither respond nor object and turned on his heel.

Arya remained, feeling the anger come and go in waves like the ebb and flow at a beach. Although him long gone, in her ears his voice still rang painfully loud. Within moments she was nowhere to be found. She prowled around the forest like a thief in the night, blending in with the shadows the trees cast and forgoing any attempt to ignore the creepy whispers she was hearing every bloody minute of every bloody day of the past week.

To play games with the minds of others was part of her duties. A Ranger ought to keep their wit sharpened in order to survive. But what happened now that her own mind was the pawn of the game... this wasn't to her liking. She had enough problems of her own and Thorin's warnings and threats did nothing to ease off her burdens. Only one person had managed to take her mind off her troubles lately, and mere minutes ago she was ordered to keep her distance from him.

The whispering voices assaulted her head once again and she sighed in frustration.

Never hitherto had she felt more away from the place she called home, even if that was the woodlands and plain fields of Eriador, and not an actual home. Nor had she felt more alone. And what surprised her most was that, for the first time in ten years, she actually didn't like her solitude.

Watches were assigned amongst those in the company since the Ranger wasn't there, and most
members had instantly dozed off, utterly exhausted from the day's long walk.

Bilbo had taken the first, and it was probably in the middle of it when Arya crept up beside him, placing herself against the trunk with the mossy cover he was resting on. He noticed that her cheek was still swollen, humming thoughtfully. "I'd heard that a wolf's claws leave marks."

The woman tossed her head back, chuckling in genuine amusement in what seemed like an eternity.

"Does it hurt still?"

"I can manage."

In truth, the incident could have gone a much worse direction than a slap in the face had she not thought things through, so she could look past it with a little effort. And she might not be a pard as Bilbo had said, but she could be a very quarrelsome sheep should the need arise.

Her eyes roamed about the camp until they came to a halt. Bilbo followed their trail and noticed that she was staring at a particular spot. The two princes were sitting beside the king, resting against him and sleeping, like two sons would do with their father. Fili was sitting with both his legs crossed and his back resting against Thorin, while Kili sat turned forwards like his uncle, with his face buried on the fur of his coat. At some point the king's head dropped sideways, so that his cheek was resting on top of Kili's head.

The sight had her more ill at ease than she cared to admit. Surprisingly, she found herself feeling guilty for growing closer to Kili. All these midnight chats they had, or how he sometimes showed a disturbing amount of concern for her had the dwarf king already on edge. Well, something more than just on edge. The wolf was baring his fangs and preparing for the attack.

She then recalled the words she spoke to him, that after this quest was over they'd never see her again. They would continue to live their lives just like before they met her, though admittedly happier if the Mountain was reclaimed. And as far as she was concerned, only their mother and Thorin were the only direct living relatives of the two brothers. The last thing Arya desired was to cause a rift and estrange mother and uncle from sons and nephews respectively, due to a friendship that Thorin already condemned and that their mother surely would condemn as well; not to mention the fact that it was doomed to last only a few months.

It simply wasn't worth it.

Therefore she consciously saw to put herself in a distance from the others, especially the two princes as per Thorin's order—or indirect threat—and not talk to anyone unless it was necessary. She was aware that her stance might aggravate her newly acquired friends, but in the end it was for their own good.

Eight days later, things had got worse. Food supplies were drastically depleted, the water was nowhere near adequate, and the air had turned thicker and heavier—if that was humanly possible. And worst of all, there were myriads of cobwebs spread around, sticking and sending vibrations to the whole net of them if they were touched. The Ranger made it clear once Bilbo had touched one out of curiosity, they weren't to disturb them again out of fear that they'd soon have visitors.

From the moment they set up camp and time came for the assignment of watches, she would usually announce that she'd take care of it. Hardly anyone cared to question her at this point, except for one, and the same conversation took place almost every night; same as yesterday, same as the day before.

"What, again?" Kili barked angrily. "You need to get some rest—"
"Owl, bug, another owl, rabbit," she grumbled, each time pointing to a different direction.

The company looked around in confusion, their expressions gradually turning to that of awe upon realising that she had listed animals they hadn't spotted hiding there.

"Is that good enough reason for you?"

The prince would then huff and stomp away to unroll his blanket, whereas she'd disappear in the woods without another word—out of sight but definitely not out of mind. Her default mood was adjusted to gloomy and it seemed like a dark, grim shadow haunted her every step the past days. She barely talked to anyone; kept her thoughts and words to herself and only spoke when time came to offer advice. Yet her words, benevolent though they were, came out stern and curt.

Oddly, Thorin had begun to take her counsel without much hesitation or objections, which she imagined was something akin to a reward for obeying his orders. This is what she'd ended up being, the dwarf king's minion. Often she growled at herself in indignation. Numerous times she was unbelievably tempted to throttle him in his sleep, but eventually decided against it, thinking that it wasn't even worth pouring her wrath on him. She was a Ranger, not a grumpy child, and she profusely refused to lower herself to his level.

Kili was no fool to not notice that she had grown distant from them all, and especially him. Doubt and anger had started to fester inside him and cloud his thoughts. Now, the only thing worse than not talking to him was actually talking to him. For the rare times she did, her tone was cold, estranged and grim. She had brought him to a point where he couldn't even decide whether she actually liked his company. Every time their eyes met, hers were transforming in a weird manner, as though they were the very face of contradiction, pale with indifference one moment and incredibly tense with another puzzling emotion at the next; constantly saying one thing and meaning another. It was as though she was both content and sad, and one emotion was simply a mask attempting to hide the other. But for the life of him he could not decipher which was the mask and which wasn't. And it was driving him insane.

There were times he came dangerously close to venting, with half a mind to go after her in one of her scouting excursions, ask her why she behaved to him like this and force her to explain what her bloody problem was.

Yet Kili resolved not to push the matter. He was trying his best to get on with her attitude and often told himself to be patient, trying to fool his own mind into thinking that it was the forest causing her to act thus. He tried, because he could barely stand to sleep those rare nights she miraculously decided to get some rest and not keep watch. Even if she placed herself several yards away from him, he would always wake up in the middle of the night whenever he caught her muttering something, as though his hearing was perfectly attuned to her.

It was one of those rare nights that it happened to be Bilbo's turn to keep watch. However, he wasn't the only one awake in the camp. He could clearly discern sheer uneasiness emanating from the lying form of someone who shifted awkwardly from side to side and sighed every other minute. Apparently they were both spectators of the same play—a woman in the throes of a nightmare, that is. Until Kili had obviously had it, and Bilbo saw him stomp over to her bedroll and crouch next to the wriggling form.

That moment Arya tossed her head and mumbled something, strange words in the language of the Elves that Kili did not understand. She thrust out her hand as if defending herself against some invisible enemy, and he drew back without touching her. He had an ominous feeling about this, about her actions, and a shadow enveloped him and his heart. Still, he moved to take her hand, but
did not dare scoot any closer.

"Shut it," she suddenly croaked, startling him. He dared to scoot closer, clasping her hand more tightly as she spoke again, still in deep sleep, "Stop--"

The sight had his gut ache. Her eyes were shut tightly, teeth grinding, one hand clasping his and the other clenched in a fist and clutching the hem of his coat. It took him no more than two seconds to lie beside and pull her to him. To hell with propriety. He wondered if this was to be from now on, whether he'd only have a right to help her when she was out cold. No, he wasn't particularly inclined to have that happen, but every bloody time he went to talk to her she'd come up with an excuse and slip away like the wind.

"Stop it," she gritted through clenched teeth, voice coming out in an angry breath, "stop--"

He didn't even know what dreams had come to her and he didn't even dare try to make assumptions. "It's alright," he said softly, not knowing what else could soothe her.

Therefore, what he was about to do next would proceed from the impulse of the moment and it was entirely rash. Of course, where she was concerned, all sense of logic and reason in his head usually vanished, so, without a second thought, he leaned down to lay a gentle kiss on her forehead. He could feel the cool moisture on her skin, the salty taste of her sweaty furrowed brow, but it didn't discourage him from keeping his lips pressed on it. And he continued to cradle her in his arms like a babe, and she resumed her troubled sleep and angry commands for something to stop.

The moment Kili lay next to her, the current watchman had turned away to give them some semblance of privacy, pondering on how close they had come. He knew they befriended each other eventually, although Arya's behaviour towards Kili the past week was anything but friendly. In fact, the hobbit felt privileged to say that he'd ended up being the only one with whom she would exchange a few words. Now he reckoned that the prince was far too kind for his own good. To help someone whom he considered a friend, even if that someone was behaving... well, not so courteously as a friend should, was quite the selfless deed.

And then it hit him. All these times Kili gushed about the night chats he'd had with the woman, how Fili, Ori, and Bofur teased him, and what even Bilbo himself had thought. It didn't take a genius to put two and two together. In truth, the way the lad was holding her wasn't that of a friend; rather something far more intimate.

Not that it was his business, but Bilbo couldn't see any better than a grim outcome for this. A storm was coming and he wasn't sure Kili could weather it.
Morning, or rather the less stifling darkness that was considered morning in Mirkwood dawned and found almost everyone in the same spot they had dozed off. Only Bilbo was replaced by Fili, who was now seated upon the large boulder, while the other members were fast asleep.

Fili, being the observant dwarf he was groomed all his life to become, had the tendency to always seeing the bigger picture. He was struggling to find a solution that would satisfy everyone. He was aware of his uncle's obvious displeasure by Arya's presence, although it had diminished considerably those past days as she had barely exchanged a word with anyone. He could sense his brother's increasing irritation with Arya avoiding him and almost everyone else whenever it was humanly possible, as well as Kili's inner battle of how to deal with it, openly confront her about ignoring him, or keep all his feelings and thoughts to himself. And in the midst of all that, he was trying to keep himself focused and sane.

Yes, life was a bloody rainbow.

Until Fili decided that time for thinking it over and over was up, and time for actions had come. No doubt, if Thorin woke right now, the desolation of Smaug would be nothing compared to his uncle's wrath. With heave heart the blond decided to rouse his brother, who had Arya swaddled in his coat, and get him to move. But they were both practically cuddled up inside Kili's coat, so waking one without waking the other would be impossible.

A soft nudge disrupted the false reality of his dreamworld and brought him back to the real one. Kili inhaled deeply and slowly, opened his eyes, and the first thing he faced was the top of a head whose owner was sound asleep, curled up in a ball against him. He would have smiled had it not been for the light stirring of that person, who woke along with him apparently, and a sudden jolt of hers to push herself away with an expression of sheer terror.

"What the–?" she whispered with trepidation. "What are you doing? Are you crazy?"

Raising his hands in a plea of innocence, Kili fixed her with a look hinting that, at the present moment, it wasn't him who was acting like a crazy person. "You were crying in your sleep and I came to calm you, that's all."

Her eyes went wide as they scanned the camp in frenzy, thankfully finding no one else awake yet. "Why?!"

The princes shared a look of perplexity.

"I– I don't know– What was I supposed to do?" Kili snapped in a low voice. "Let you cry for the rest of the night and, note, the night you finally decided to get some sleep?"

Again, her eyes suffered the usual transformation; a sparkle of emotion at one moment, and hooded with coldness in the next. "And how exactly is my crying your problem?" she demanded. "Certain people wouldn't appreciate your concern."

"It is you that I want to appreciate my concern," he growled. "About other people, I do not care."

Surprise flickered on Fili's face. Colour him impressed, if anything. He kept himself busy observing the prints his boots left on the dirt a few feet away, but still remained close enough to hear.

Kili looked devastatingly exposed, looking at her like that, bleary-eyed and angry and hurt. She was
overwhelmed with a baffling need to protect him, to shield him from the world and all its evils—a man fifty years her senior, tough and strong and worldly—and from herself. "Oh, I'm sure Thorin would be so pleased to hear this—"

He covered the distance between them in two strides, his gaze looming and threatening to break her icy one. "Whether Thorin would be pleased to hear this is my problem, not yours. You could be a little grateful that I was trying to help, you know."

Her jaw clenched. "I do not recall asking for your help." She waved her hand impatiently then, muttering, "Could you just kindly bugger off and leave me in peace? It's already a bad morning as it is."

Kili shook his head in defeat. Surely the woman was mental; any other explanation eluded him. How could one of sound mind have these abnormal mood swings? Without a word he turned around and moved on to wake the others. His brother had stayed, coming to stand beside her with an expression that was judgemental, at best. Yet he spoke nothing.

She didn't like the silence. Silence was worse than words, on occasion. "What?" she snapped.

"How hard are you trying to be so odious?"

"Not at all," she said dryly. "It comes naturally."

"Why are you doing this?"

Her hands ceased moving and she briefly glanced towards an empty spot between two trees a few yards away. "Ignorance is bliss," she muttered starkly, "trust me."

Fili scoffed. He always liked things to make sense and, right now, Arya's words made no sense at all. "You know," he said crossly, "for someone who is gifted with better eyesight, of all things, you are so blind."

"Can't you see that he acts like this because he fancies you and you ignore him and he doesn't know how to deal with his feelings?"

"No, he doesn't. That is absurd—"

"Is it?"

"When we were little," Fili began with authority, not caring that he interrupted her, "there was a stray dog that lived out in the woods near our house at the settlement; it would scratch at the doors at all hours of the night. Kili, all of ten winters old, would venture outside, still in his nightshirt, and feed it." He pursed his lips, pausing to weigh her silence. He had her attention. "Thorin disapproved—he thought it a sign of weakness. Given that kindness is a condition rare in our family, I suppose it's unsurprising that it went misdiagnosed."

Arya's gaze fell down to her half-packed things, not bearing to look him in the eye any longer. She could literally feel the drop spilling and poisoning her insides with self-loathing.

"My brother is a good man. He's honest, and kind to a fault. If every man out there were even half as
decent as he is, the world would be a better place," Fili gritted through his teeth. "Being that good a man makes him undeserving of that kind of behaviour from you, or anyone else."

_Tell me something I don't know_, Arya thought with a sigh. "Does he know you're telling me all this?"

"Of course not," Fili said as though it was stupid to ask. "Though, believe it or not, he's quite smart. I'd wager he suspects that we're talking about him."

_You are talking about him_," Arya corrected. "I am just sitting here, feeling uncomfortable."

The prince shook his head in frustration. He was thinking her to be at fault about her behaviour, which had drastically changed for a reason that was clear only to her. Basically, he was trying to convince himself that she was at fault. But when she briefly raised her head and stole a glance at Kili, who was packing his stuff a few feet away, he couldn't. The look on her face, this mixture of feelings such as sadness, guilt, and suppressed longing, each of them battling to dominate, made Fili curious and worried. She looked as though the weight of the world was crushing her shoulders and dragging her in the void along with it.

"Are you alright?" he asked, causing her eyes to stray from Kili and rush to lock with his in alert.

Once again they transformed into pure coldness without allowing any emotions to show. "We should move on," she said, with hollow voice and a gloomy look.

Fili withdrew his hand from her arm and watched as she completed gathering her stuff and the others slowly rose from their sleep.

Soon they were all up and about and ready to continue, with not so merry looks. The breakfast was anything but satisfying—if the remaining crumbs of cakes counted for breakfast. Afterwards they formed the usual line with the Ranger on the top and Bilbo at her side, Thorin and Dwalin right behind them, and everyone else following in tow.

"Everything alright?"

Kili glared at his brother from the corner of his eye. "Couldn't be better," he muttered sarcastically. "Best time of my life."

"Can we take a moment to discuss the reason you look ready to annihilate a village?"

"The reason concerns an environment which is full of poison, bugs with huge eyes that spy on us all night long, the serious lack of food and water—Shall I add more to the list?"

The blond frowned. If Kili was being sarcastic—and not in the good way—even with him, things were very bad. "And why do I have the inkling that, while it may concern these, it mainly has to do with a certain woman?"

A generous wave of heat rose up to Kili's face. "Ha!" he sneered mockingly, but said nothing else.

That was the winning shot. Fili knew that laugh. And it needed something serious to trouble Kili's heart to reach the point of dodging a question with that. "Cut it out," he said sternly. "This isn't working on me. I know you better than you know yourself."

The younger was starting to feel cornered and all his defensiveness was pouring out like a torrent. Normally, he would snap and answer with irony, but as Fili pointed out, it wasn't working on him.
"Look, I won't have my head blown for the sake of that loony. If she's had enough of me, then that makes two of us," he said with conviction and continued to walk with heavy steps and a grim face.

"Then why were you two cuddling like there's no tomorrow?"

"I was trying to help her sleep properly for once," Kili drawled menacingly, his mouth pursed in a firm, thin line. "Is there any harm in this?"

"Of course not," Fili appeased. "Although it is a surprise to me to see you so caring of someone outside of our family. And I am not saying that in an offensive way. On the contrary, it is quite endearing," he smiled and cocked his head at his brother's befuddled expression. "You know, Kili, I never thought I'd have to repeat this to you after you came of age, but you're the greatest fool I ever laid my eyes upon if you still haven't figured it out."

"Care to lend a helping hand in me understanding then?"

"You have feelings for her."

From one moment to another Kili's cheeks were as though someone had painted them scarlet. "No, I don't!" he protested.

"Oi, I've kept my mouth shut all this time, but do you know how many nights I've caught you murmuring a certain name multiple times in your sleep?"

"What?" the younger sputtered, face pulled into a mask of horror. "I... I– So what? It could have been anyone's name! I could have been speaking of our dog–"

"Remind me," Fili cocked an eyebrow at him, "did we ever have a dog named Arya?"

Kili rubbed his throbbing temples punishingly. "Arya is just my friend, nothing more," he sighed. "Or at least she was during the past few weeks."

"Look at yourself—you cannot even utter her name without blushing, for heaven's sake!"

"I am not blushing," he fumed. He was Kili, nephew of Thorin Oakenshield and second in line to the throne. He did not blush.

"Tell this to your cheeks. They look like tomatoes," Fili said seriously. "Why don't you admit that you have feelings for her? Of the serious kind, if I may say so–"

"You couldn't be more wrong," Kili cut him, though he felt troubled in his heart. "I have as many feelings for her as I have for Dwalin."

Fili was at his wit's end. How could it be that two adults were so cowardly to admit or even acknowledge their own feelings? He whimpered and pinched the bridge of his nose, itching to tell his brother to court the woman already, even though there was a slight chance that wouldn't bode well for his tongue.

"Yes, you do have feelings for her," the blond insisted. "And I honestly hope they're not the same as those you have for Dwalin."

"I do not have feelings for her!"

"Then why the tender kiss on her forehead?"

Kili's step faltered. "How do you know about that?"
Fili's face froze into an uncanny expression of genuine shock. "That was a shot in the dark!" he exclaimed. "You sly little bugger, have you actually kis–?"

"Shut up!" Kili rushed to clam his brother's mouth shut. "I might have, yes. She was having a bloody nightmare, alright?" he snapped for no reason at all. "How else was I supposed to calm her when she's tossing around?"

"Excuse me, but caring for her like this does not prove my point? Do you want me to recount every single time you thought she was hurt and fussed over her? Or how about when she was telling us about the man her father wanted to betroth her to? There was loathing and jealousy behind your eyes."

"Simply because I've yelled at her for being reckless and irresponsible does not prove any point," he objected. In truth, his angry tone belied his thoughts and feelings, for he felt a vague relief, as though a heavy burden had been lifted from him now that his brother was talking about his supposed sentiments. However, he was firmly resolved to remain in denial of what a dark corner in his heart knew to be the truth. "As for the incident at Beorn's, it might have been the mead that made me look–"

"Not to mention the unforgettable sight of you," the blond continued, "when we saw her with that man in Rivendell. Had we been anywhere in the Wild and you carried your bow with you right then, I bet my swords you would have shot at him. Look, all I care about is to see you happy." The young one looked up and Fili squeezed his shoulder comfortably. "If you indeed have fallen in love with her, you honestly have my full support on your choice. And I shall also try to save you from uncle's wrath should you ever decide to announce it to him and mum, although I cannot guarantee for the best outcome." He didn't even dare to imagine Thorin's reaction to this. With some effort and the right handling, mother could be more easy to persuade, so they had a shot there.

Kili felt like his stomach was about to turn itself inside out. "Perhaps you know me like the back of your hand, but not this time. This time you're wrong," he said seriously. "I haven't fallen in lo–" he reflexively stopped midsentence and exhaled audibly. "I do not feel as you say I do."

The other sighed dramatically. "Kili, listen to--"

"No, you listen to me. Even if your claims were truthful and my supposed feelings for her actually existed, it would never work. It couldn't even enter the realm of possibilities; Thorin Oakenshield's second heir to care for a female of Men? And one with Elven ancestors? Why don't I simply jump from the top of a mountain to spare myself the gallows?" The words came out bitterly, and he knew that it was the sad truth. "Now, if you want to keep both our heads attached to our bodies, please don't mention this nonsense again."

"As you wish," Fili said resignedly. "Remember, though, should you change your mind, see that it happens soon, for this quest won't last forever."

Kili hadn't looked so far ahead to the future and only now it occurred to him that, once the quest was over, she'd return to Eriador and her life. And in that moment he realised that he didn't want her to leave. Even now that they'd regressed to the good old ignoring stage of their acquaintance, he did not want her to leave.

All these bothersome, painful thoughts were buried deep in his head and the conversation completely died down as the sound of running water reached his ears.

"We found a bridge!" a voice announced in the distance.
The company had come to a halt at the bank of a river with water dark as the color of the sky at
dusk. Numerous and apparently poisoned plants circled it, in weird colours that shone surprisingly
bright under the dim light that pierced through the trees; purple, red and pink even. Sinister, all of
them.

A bridge was the sole means to connect the one bank with the other and, oh surprise, it had
collapsed under the water.

"We could try and swim?" Bofur suggested, although he wasn't all too eager for it; living proof of his
inner conflict, the frown on his face.

"No. Be careful, all of you," Thorin warned. "Do not forget what Gandalf said, a dark magic lies
upon this forest. This must be the enchanted stream Beorn warned us of."

Bilbo looked down at the black water, his gaze transfixed from something in there, even if seemingly
nothing more than moss and lichen lived on the surface.

"Doesn't look very enchanting to me," a clearly unimpressed Bofur muttered.

The hobbit stifled a chuckle at the wry comment. He had long ago averted his gaze from the waters,
albeit with some difficulty, and struggled to discern something through the fog. "There's..." He
squinted to see better. "I think there is a boat on the opposite bank!"

This new information raised their spirits, and everyone turned to the direction he was looking at.

"Is it far?" asked Thorin.

Bilbo rose to the tip of his toes and narrowed his eyes, trying to estimate the distance through the fog.
"Perhaps, ten..." He wavered for a second, then decided, "I don't think it's more than twelve or
thirteen yards."

The Ranger was standing quietly next to the hobbit, gauging the distance herself. "I'd say thirteen
and a half," she said after him.

"And how do you happen to know the precise distance?"

Not bothering to even look at the king, she gestured toward her eyes and tried to hide the brief look
of confusion his question brought to her face. "I can see and measure it, perhaps?"

"You may as well be wrong," Thorin pointed out.

Arya resisted the overwhelming urge to sigh. "I may as well be right," she countered.

"Beorn warned us not to drink from this water, let alone swim in it," Balin said worriedly before an
argument broke. "What are we going to do?"

"We could throw a rope and pull the boat to us," offered Bilbo with a light shrug. "Although it's still
quite far away—"

"And surely must be tied up," Gloin's grumbling voice piped up, "so what's the point of it?"

The sound of a sword being untied along with its sheath from someone's belt rang in everyone's ears
and fourteen pairs of eyes turned to see the woman handing her weapons over to the hobbit.

Bilbo was wincing from the weight. "What are you–?"
"I am employing another means of transportation," she gestured toward the trees, and a few pairs of eyes went wide. Their reaction begged the question of how exactly she intended to pass to the other bank.

"What, you will jump?" Fili scoffed, alternate flashes of exhaustion and ever so slight amusement sparkling behind his eyes as both he and his brother stared at her. "Or fly?"

"Can you do that?" Thorin asked before she could respond.

The hint of disdain and doubt in his voice made her legs itchy to give him a kick to a place where he would remember it for the rest of his life. But of course she held herself back, only mustering a dry look. "I cannot jump so far and definitely cannot fly. Hopefully, I will be able to climb. Though, please," she pressed a hand on her chest dramatically, "resist the urge to shed a tear if death should find me."

For a second it seemed like Thorin's fangs would pop out and bite her, but he limited himself to savagely pinching the bridge of his nose and grumbling something under his breath.

"Take care of these until you meet me at the other bank," Arya instructed Bilbo. The bow she could carry in her hand, although perhaps she shouldn't in this instance, for her hands had better be empty in case she needed to hook herself on a branch. But it would definitely not be of utility to have the sword dangling about her legs. She turned to the dwarves, "I'll see whether the boat is tied up. Then you'll throw the rope and pull it towards you."

Fili could hardly match his brother's levels of worry at the thought of her basically jumping over a potentially poisonous river without someone else there in case she needed help. Showcasing no discomfort or hesitation whatsoever, Kili stepped forth and made to climb on a trunk, even if it would be a rather difficult task for him since he wasn't as lithe or slender as her. "These vines look strong enough," he noted aloud, gesturing her to follow his lead.

Arya wasn't moved by his eagerness. Quite the opposite, it frightened her. Before she had time to even open her mouth, protest and, if the situation demanded it, tie him up to a tree to make her point known, Thorin intervened.

"No, Kili," the king said pointedly. "That is a task for the lighters."

The prince's jaw hardened and his eyes sought hers, only to be met with an equally heated gaze forbidding him to follow her.

Everyone then watched as she deftly climbed on the trees that almost connected with each other the higher their boughs got, and hopped from branch to branch. Two or three slips over mossy surfaces, which she dearly hoped to keep under her hat, might have transpired and could actually prove fatal; they had ended up with her landing painfully on her bum with a tendency to slide downwards, yet she clung on the tree trunk for dear life and managed to crawl over it again. After a few tormenting minutes she finally —and mercifully— reached the very edge of a fallen trunk that hovered just above the water relatively intact, if someone of course excluded the newly formed bruises on her rear. Her feet took a few steps back, then ran and leaped in the air, and eventually landed with a light thud upon the dirt at the other side.

Arya let a small sigh of relief that her plan didn't go terribly wrong, although her face was crinkled from a mild tinge of pain as her hand soothingly rubbed her injured posterior and dusted the musty leaves off her trousers. She then moved over to the boat, mindful to keep a hand close to one of her daggers now that she was deprived of other weapons, and followed the rope to which the boat was tied up to a tree in the shore.
"Throw the rope," she yelled.

The call barely reached their ears and a few were surprised that she had actually made it. In swift movements they took the largest of the ropes they carried, tied a hook in the end of it and were now searching for the most qualified applicant to throw it. Thorin beckoned his older nephew to approach. Fili might not be the strongest, but was strong enough and with very good sight.

Even Arya couldn't clearly see the blond dwarf swinging the rope above his head and launching it towards the boat through the mist that was spread over the shiny surface of the water. The first attempt failed, as did the next one. It was in the third that the hood managed to scrape the inside of the boat and she ran to catch it before it fell in the water. Hooking carefully the edge of the boat in it until the rope was taut, she then untied the other that held it on the shore, yelling at them to pull.

Fili motioned for some to help him. Kili, Bofur, Oin and Bilbo were the first to answer the call, and all of them grabbed the rope.

Seeing his brother's sullen face, the blond thought it was incumbent upon him to lighten the atmosphere a bit. "Alright, now remember, something this big and long is going to be difficult to manoeuvre. Fortunately, we have a lot of experience in that area," he flashed a roguish smirk as he elbowed Kili playfully, "right, brother?"

Bilbo almost choked on his saliva, Bofur cackled under his breath, Oin doubtfully caught the whole sentence, but Kili, who the joke was aimed at, barely cracked a smile.

The first group that arrived consisted of Balin, Bilbo, Fili and Thorin. The moment they descended from the boat, the three dwarves gave a push to it and wiggled the rope as a sign for the others to pull it back, while Bilbo moved to hand the woman her weapons.

Arya was quite curious as to why Kili hadn't come along with his brother, although she could not muster the courage to ask anyone about it.

"Thorin decided who would be in each group," Bilbo said under his breath, seeing her in her own world of thoughts. "Dori, Gloin, Oin, and Kili are coming next." His eyes twinkled when her hands faltered at the sound of the last name and she almost dropped her quiver with the few arrows left in it.

"Why would I care who's coming next?" she mused quietly, sounding more affronted than dismissive if anything.

"No reason at all," the hobbit sighed.

One might reckon that, being unmarried, love was a complete mystery to him. He was by no means blind. His query of the previous night received an answer and, as it turned out, both Arya and Kili had it bad. Even now that she avoided and did not speak to him, the concern for each other could not be concealed. Bilbo chose not to elaborate further on the matter, however, first out of tact and also because he sensed a heavy discomfort framing the woman's face.

She felt her stomach tied into a knot as the boat carried the second group of dwarves towards the bank, and she tried her best not to spare a glance at them as they neared. Her attempt failed spectacularly when the boat rocked slightly as they got out, and she found herself midway between launching forward and dragging everyone as far from the water as possible. Thankfully they all stepped a steady foot on the ground and sent the boat back for the next ones.

The third group arrived a few minutes later, and only Dwalin and Bombur remained to join. The dwarves were silent as the boat approached the bank and the outline of Bombur's chubby figure
could be easily passed for a giant ball.

The woman's flowing movements as she tied the sword back to her belt and took the bow in hand were viciously disrupted by a weird noise that ripped through the air. Her head jerked upwards when a low shuffle came from some rotten bushes in a distance.

Bilbo was startled upon seeing her bow ready to fire an arrow somewhere between the trees, although he stilled when he caught the sound too. "Were those twigs being broken?" he asked suspiciously.

Arya reckoned to owe him a praising comment for his good ear. "That they were," she confirmed. "Trampled, I would say." Her figure then retreated a few steps toward the others who stood closely to the water, motioning Bilbo to stay behind her. "Be on guard," she warned. "There's something there."

Instantly swords and axes were drawn and another two bows were raised, all pointing at the direction hers did. Kili had reflexively taken a step closer to her, worry engulfing his heart and mind about the mysterious noise she heard. No further sound disturbed them, though, and they relaxed a bit, turning their attention to Dwalin, who was scrambling out of the boat with the rope foiled under his arm. A grumbling Bombur stood up after him to step off, causing the boat to rock and send ripples across the black surface, when the sound echoed again, this time far closer to them.

"Watch out!" Gloin screamed, ducking to avoid the —absurdly radiant white for the darkness of Mirkwood— stag that flew over their heads and prepared to take a leap.

Thorin regarded the extremely bizarre animal in a hateful manner, something less than fond of its surreal, sparkling white fur, and his hand reflexively stretched the string of his bow. The Ranger, upon sensing the benign and, oddly, noble air the stag secreted, hesitated to let the arrow fly and kill it, therefore the hand wielding her bow lowered.

The arrow in Thorin's bow flew at full throttle to kill the beast, but missed it. Before the dwarf king had the chance to shoot another one, the stag leapt forward and managed to jump onto the opposite bank.

"You shouldn't have done that," Bilbo noted quietly, an odd sensation making his skin crawl. He voiced the sentiments of the woman as well, who still stood there and gawked at the spot the animal had once been as if she were in a trance. "It's bad luck."

"I don't believe in luck," Thorin spat out with abnormal —even for his own standards— disdain. "We make our own luck."

The dwarves winced when the sound of hooves reached their ears, meaning that the animal had successfully escaped, thus dissolving any dreams of having venison for supper.

"Bombur fell in the water!" Dwalin's cry snapped everyone out of their daze as he was the only one watching what had taken place upon the boat.

The deer had caused Bombur to flail about and the boat to rock from side and to side, and the dwarf's size did not count positively to the event, so he eventually landed with a loud splash into the river. Not delaying much, the others threw the rope with the hook towards him, he caught it and they dragged him out.

"No!" Arya cried and almost propelled herself there in two wide strides, grabbing the two princes from their hoods who were ready to step into the swallow waters of the ford and pull the dwarf out.
She pulled them with all her might, causing both of them to stumble back and then all three of them to bump heavily on the ground.

Three groans left their mouths simultaneously from the force and the subsequent pain of the collision. Fili felt her knee against his lower back, poking his bones vehemently as she tried to pull her leg away. The lucky bastard that happened to be his brother had landed on a rather soft spot for which, as Fili imagined, he would be very satisfied had he and Arya been in speaking terms.

Kili had an entirely different opinion. Perhaps he was lucky to land where he had and not on the ground, but there was something there, something metallic, that crashed against the back of his head. It was that blasted pendant of hers, he realised and then rubbed the spot, already feeling a small bump sprouting up. "What's the bloody matter with you?" he barked as soon as he managed to drag himself away from her and get on his feet.

"You mustn't step into the water," Arya panted urgently and gestured towards the bank, ignoring the stinging pain in her arse that had crashed against the ground anew, "Look!"

Bombur had been washed up to the bank, his hood floating in the water and his huge stomach protruding out of it. His eyes were closed and he had taken a tremendous grip of the rope and the hook, despite all the dwarves' efforts to pull it away.

"Is he taking a bloody nap?" Dwalin snapped with an exasperated look, arm ready to slap Bombur to wake him.

Arya jogged over and grabbed his arm with her hand, observing the sleeping dwarf's relaxed face and smile. He seemed to have fallen into a nice, peaceful dream, having no care in the world about the reality. "The water is causing it," she suspected. "Enchanted, poisoned- Call it what you will, but something tells me he'll be out for awhile."

"Are you serious?!"

Thorin resisted the urge to savagely rub his temples when she nodded, instead opting to calm himself down with the force of his mind. "We need to carry him," he ordered. "Four of us each time, and the rest will share the carriers' packs."

Needless to say, carrying Bombur on shoulders, even if the weight was distributed to four people, was not for the faint of heart. The next day there was practically nothing left to eat or drink, and hunting was out of the question. Only herbs with pale leaves and unpleasant smell, and wild mushrooms that surely were poisonous were growing around. Yet now, most of the trees they met were beeches and the shadow was not as deep as it was a week ago. The air was also a tad less heavy and a light breeze escorted them during the day, marking the beginning of the forest's eastern outskirts.

The velvety darkness had fell upon them once again and the company set camp for the second night after the river incident. Watches were assigned among the company, while the Ranger went for her usual patrol.

Bilbo had offered to take first watch, since he blissfully found out that the moon was casting a few rays of light through a relatively thin net of branches, and wanted to exploit every single moment of it. The last time he remembered to have seen the moon was at Beorn's house. Never so far he had an itch for these things, but now discovered that he dearly missed the light and comfort it offered in these weeks' infinite darkness.
He was sitting at the roots of a giant beech, his back against the trunk, and ruffled his feet among the
dead leaves that formed a mossy, red carpet on the forest ground. A few tree leaves rustled down and
brought him notice that the autumn was coming on.

"A silver for your thoughts."

The low whisper in his ear almost made him jump a foot. Turning, he saw the Ranger with a smile
on her face after a long time. He chuckled lowly.

"Not so wise to keep watch if you're not paying attention, master Baggins."

His heart fluttered at her lighthearted tone—a rare sight if ever there was one. "I was merely thinking
how time goes by. Autumn has arrived, I think," he muttered thoughtfully and gestured towards the
fallen leaves, "and I don't even know what the date is. Could be my birthday for all I know."

She crouched down beside him and crossed her hands on her lap. "When is your birthday?"

"Twenty-second day of September."

"Ah, worry not," she allayed. "We still have nearly a month for it."

He shook his head thoughtfully, making a mental note to keep track of the days from now on and
wondering how she hadn't missed the count of time being in this godforsaken forest for so long.
"When is yours?" he inquired politely.

The Ranger was too busy carving patterns on the dirt with a small knife and then erasing them with
the sole of her boot. The question made her pause, bringing a half-smile to her face. Very few people
knew her date of birth. "Two months and six days after yours," she whispered.

For a moment he was befuddled, expecting to hear a month and a number. As the words sank in, his
shoulders shook with quiet laughter. Heaven forbid she'd ever give a straight answer. "I'd like to ask
you something, if it's not too forward."

"Go ahead."

"Why are you avoiding the others?" He saw her stiffening. "I mean no offence, but this sudden
change of character makes no sense. And you seem to have irked a few people quite a lot," he noted
pointedly.

Her shoulders sagged when her head slumped forward, and she let out a long-suffering sigh.

Arya forcefully pinned the knife on the dirt and twisted it as the last embers of anger had yet to die
down. "It's not that I want to do it," she hissed. "I simply have to. 'Tis the best way without giving
long explanations that could lead to confrontations which I wouldn't like to be part of."

"I don't understand," he narrowed his eyes, cocking an eyebrow. "You mean you were forced to do
it?"

"Well..." A grimace of uncertainty made her wince and then resignedly shake her head. "In a manner
of speaking, yes."

"Still, I cannot understand."

Another deep sigh escaped her. She had nothing against revealing the reason to him, but thought it
wiser not to drag more innocent victims in a conflict made for two. "Perhaps it is best that you don't."

Her manner was rather rueful than offensive. He could almost feel her sadness, despite her smile earlier. Perhaps it wasn't as real as he'd thought. "But this hurts you, doesn't it? I can see it."

"One gets used to it," she shrugged, not daring to look at him out of fear that he'd read the real answer in her eyes.

The cogs in Bilbo’s brain were spinning. She was forced to avoid certain people, fact which hurt her, and yet was still doing it. The thought of Kili crossed his mind at that moment, and he wondered if it'd be wise to tell him and spare the lad the torture she was submitting him to, along with herself. In the end he reckoned it was far from wise; for Kili would go livid, she would, too, and Bilbo would desire to be in the middle of a fight between the two not in a million years.

"So you just consciously hurt yourself."

"'Tis easier that way."

"Perhaps you like it," he mused and rubbed his chin thoughtfully.

Her head twisted towards him. "Pardon me?"

"Perhaps you like the pain."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm saying that you keep hurting yourself on purpose, because it feels good when you stop."

Arya's expression remained neutral despite the fact that her worldview had just received a powerful blow. Chaos erupted in her mind and she was left staring at him in utter bewilderment, while he continued to stare back at her with that everlasting kind look, seemingly privy to something she was too blind to see. She didn't like not knowing. Knowledge was important, even if it brought pain to its holder—as far as she was concerned, at least.

A low voice put an end to her inner frenzy and brought her back to reality.

"What?" she asked at a loss.

"I said why don't you go to sleep?"

"I can't sleep," she wiggled her head nervously, unable to break away from the disturbing thoughts. "I keep hearing the bloody whispers—"

The hobbit tensed. Did she–? Did she hear voices too? No one else had complained about hearing voices so far, but that meant nothing. Perhaps they did and simply chose to either ignore them or not make it known.

"What whispers?" he asked with caution.

"I do not always recognise the voices– Sometimes I think I hear my parents and my brothers. But the sounds are scratchy and creepy," she muttered with a grim look. "The mind is prone to mischief, I suppose. Either that, or the trees are speaking to each other."

His brain dug up a faint memory of some folk claiming there was something in the water that ran through the Old Forest on the borders of Buckland that made the trees come alive, sough, talk even. Bilbo couldn't help but bristle. "I can hear them, too," he admitted. "The creepy voices."
"This is a dark forest," Arya replied gingerly. "Enchanted to inspire fear and evoke evil notions to the travelers' minds. The whispers are the least of those evils, I tell you, although it still is fairly unnerving."

He rubbed his chin in a thoughtful manner before adding dryly, "Also the fact that half of the company carries giant axes doesn't bode well for the trees, I guess."

Arya barked a quiet laugh, appreciating his sense of humour.

Bilbo would gladly give up a good night's sleep to give her mind a moment of peace. Indeed, her smile before was not real, for she seemed utterly weathered and haggard now that she was sharing some of her troubles with him. No more words left her mouth after that, so they remained silent and he patiently waited for the time to pass and his watch to come to an end.

The night was bound to go by exactly as the previous ones; with one on watch, one sunk into a nightmare, and the others sleeping like logs. Only this time, the nightmare would visit another.
He had no memory of this place. No memory of this mountain or the plain fields below it. No memory of the faces surrounding him. He could feel sweat trickling down his back and soaking his underclothes; the armour was obscenely heavy and weighed him down like steel chains. The air was rich with the smell of blood and moist earth. He brushed a hand over his forehead. Dirt and sweat mixed together, trickling down, burning his eyes and blurring his vision.

There was a flash of movement and he briefly caught a glimpse of a familiar face. A look of shock and pain was frozen on it. A few inches below, there was a blade rammed into his chest and the opponent kicked it in to go deeper. Thorin's body gave up and he fell on his knees. And suddenly Kili couldn't see him anymore. An army of them surrounded him in a heartbeat, hiding him from view. They were so many. Like ants swarming a dead bug.

Bile rose up to this throat in waves.

To his left, his brother was tossed on the ground like a rag doll, all battered and bloody, limbs at weird angles with the rest of his body. And he just lay there, motionless. He yelled at him to bloody move until Fili's glassy blue eyes locked with his, unmoving, as if life had forsaken them long ago.

And then everything ceased. There was no battle raging anymore, no cries, no yells; only corpses; thousands of them, trampling him down and suffocating him, viciously sucking the breath out of his lungs.

The dwarf woke with a start. He breathed and breathed and breathed, so greedily, so desperately, one might think someone was choking him not a moment ago. The nightmare seemed to bleed into the concrete reality of consciousness—he could taste the dirt and blood on his tongue. A quick assessment proved that he'd bitten it, quite nastily so. He sat upright with a groan, his body feeling sore for no obvious reason. He rubbed sleep off of his eyes, but his hands came up wet. He ran a hand over his forehead; sweat had stuck his hair on it, as though he'd run ten leagues without a break.

What he hadn't noticed was his brother staring at him with concern. Fili couldn't for the life of him recall the last time Kili had a nightmare. It was a rare occurrence. He waited until Kili got his bearings.

"Everything alright?"

The younger jumped a foot in surprise, almost looking annoyed that Fili just had to be awake in that moment. "Yes," he waved off, "go back to sleep."

The blond scooted closer, reaching out a comforting hand to his shoulder. "'Twas just a bad dream," he patted him lightly, though it did little to soothe him. "Are you sure you're feeling better?"

"I said I'm fine," the other snapped and yanked himself away. "Go back to sleep." With that, he jumped to his feet and sneaked out of the camp to find a solitary spot to calm the hell down. Maybe punch a tree, too.

Oblivious to the princes, the hobbit and the Ranger had witnessed the entire scene from where they
were sitting against the tree trunk and both reached the conclusion that the forest affected them all in
the worst ways. Arya felt the unease creeping in upon seeing Fili's look after Kili's disorderly retreat
as he reluctantly lied back down. Call it intuition, call it common sense, but something told her the
blond wouldn't get any more rest for the night. He and Kili were always like a strong fist; no one
could break it when they were united, and now the forest and the exhaustion were taking their toll on
them.

"Should someone go with him before he gets lost?" Bilbo said worriedly. "He looked upset."

Arya frowned. Had the circumstances been different she would have been halfway there already.
"You should," she urged. "I'll keep watch in your place, don't wor—" The sentence was cut in half
when he glared at her. "No," she deadpanned, "I am not going."

"You're the guide, aren't you?"

The woman groaned audibly. "Guide or not, I am the last person he wishes to see right now, I assure
you."

Bilbo gave her a look of exhaustion and ever so slight amusement. "Trust me, you most likely are
the only person he would like to see right now." The strangeness of that claim hang in the air above
them awkwardly for a few tense moments, but the hint itself went over her head. When her eyes
narrowed in confusion, he rolled his. "Besides, you know his temper," he argued. "If I go, I may get
punched in the face."

"Oh, is that so?" Arya inquired in mocking surprise. "Well, that's chivalrous. Why should I be the
one to go then, if whoever goes to find him will get punched?"

"Because you know how to avoid a punch!" Bilbo hissed impatiently and gave her a light shove to
urge her up to her feet. "Go! Before he gets lost."

She grumbled something inaudible under her breath and all but stomped after the missing dwarf,
hoping he hadn't strayed too far from the camp.

The hobbit, on the other hand, sat comfortably back against the trunk, a smile of utter content
plastered on his face as he mused on the —hopefully— good deed he had done for the day.

Kili was leaning forward on the tree, both arms resting on the trunk but with nothing to grip on and
snap in half to vent his tension, except for the tree itself, which would take some work. He felt like
he was being torn apart by emotions he couldn't put a name to, all of them bubbling up so close to
the surface that he couldn't tell which was what. He couldn't decide if he needed to try and process
them or distract himself by beating his fists raw on the trunk.

Breathe in, breathe out. It became his mantra. He tried to control his breathing, calm down, get his
heartbeat back to normal before his heart gave out, and pursing his lips together to keep himself from
yelling at thin air.

Arya had a terribly bad feeling about this. She halted several feet away when she found him. Slowly,
carefully, like a hunter did when he approached his prey, she came to stand behind him. She had half
a mind to slope off without making her presence known. When she noticed his trembling, whatever
scruples she had flew out of the window. Fully aware that she might not be the best choice for a
comforter, considering that she basically was an emotional brick wall, plus their less-than-pleasant
exchanges the past weeks, she sadly was the only one currently around.

Cognitive dissonance at its best.
Hesitantly she reached over, placing a hand on his shoulder with a gentleness that she didn't know she was capable of.

The sudden touch startled Kili to his very core. He recoiled from it, pulling the knife out of where it was rammed in the trunk to defend himself, and turned to see the mysterious intruder so fast, he almost got whiplash.

"You shall ruin the blade if you keep going like this."

He fixed his eyes, or as much as they could see, on hers. It seemed to be one of those rare moments that she'd shed that everlasting grim, murderous look and wore a stoic one. There was something in her expression, a reminiscent of what had once been that she was still striving to hide. He didn't know whether she was avoiding him deliberately, with or without reason, but at that moment he realised he'd missed the sound of her voice.

"Why is it so damn hard for you to sleep through the night for once?"

"Keep your voice down," she hissed. "Unless you want all the wildlife in this infernal forest to bear down on us." Her voice then dropped several octaves, "It was just a nightmare."

"I know it was just a nightmare, I'm the one who bloody saw it. Now, would you mind?" he made the equivalent gesture of telling her to bugger off and began to pace angrily up and down the forest floor.

"You didn't have to take it out on Fili for worrying about you."

Before the sentence was even finished, Kili had halted so abruptly, one might think he'd hit a wall. His gaze rose to meet hers and he shot her a fierce look under intense eyebrows. Strangely, it felt like she cared about him out of nowhere, shedding the cold attitude for a moment there. And the feeling of being cared about like that had been unknown to him. Unknown, for it was not the same as how his mother, his brother or uncle cared about him. He did not know how or why this felt different. And along with this new strange feeling came something so close to pity, he wanted to flay the skin from his own flesh. He wanted to fight it, to fight her, to growl that he had no need of it, or her.

"Lass, I'm running out of polite ways to send you away."

Arya frowned slightly at the term of address, especially coming from him of all people. Only at that moment did she realise that she'd fallen into the habit of him calling her by her name, and now using such a generic way to address her felt a little outlandish. Against her better judgment, she persisted, "Was it Fili that you saw?"

His teeth gritted violently. "Go to sleep." It might sound like a strict order, one that he had no right to set upon her, but at this point he couldn't care less. "You need to rest."

He knew she did; and the last thing he needed was for someone to mollycoddle him. Nobody should be there to witness this, or think him weak—least of all her.

"Leave. Now."

"Kili—" she started softly.

"I'm not a bloody child!" he snapped again, pinning her out of reflex on the nearest tree trunk.

She went limp for a second before her brain recorded the small thud of her head and back slamming into the rough bark. And a second later, when realisation assaulted her stupefied mind, she felt the
waves of pain coming galore when the recently broken skin scraped against the jagged wood through the fabric of her clothes. Deep down she didn't believe he would manhandle her, hence the diminished reflexes. Bad decision to trust her heart. Mind would work best in these cases.

"I need to be alone for a while," he growled, misjudging the force he was applying. "You, of all people, surely must understand that. You want to be alone all the bloody time." Again he sounded as though he was accusing her.

Her eyes darkened more, if possible, as she had grabbed his wrist and was trying very gently to push it away from her neck, which already felt slightly sore.

"Alright," she choked out, "point taken. Now, do you mind?" she said with a warning nod toward his tensed forearm. "You know I can take it much further than this."

He stopped then, part appalled at the realisation of his mistreating her, part puzzled that she hadn't already made any move to beat him to a pulp, and the true weight of his exhaustion crashed on his aching shoulders. He wouldn't argue with her. Not this night. He didn't have the strength.

His grip loosened completely and his hand fell limp to his side, regretful for his actions after hearing her wheezing with every breath.

She took the gesture as it was, a sign that she had overstepped his boundaries, and decided to leave him to his own devices, feet already urging her back into the darkness of the woods and her everlasting solitude.

"They were dying," a strained voice broke the silence and made her stop dead in her tracks. "Fili and Thorin—"

"I don't want you to tell me what you saw."

His mouth reflexively shut and he suppressed a grunt, suddenly getting angrier, like her words had somehow offended him.

She glanced over her shoulder at his downcast head and clenched fists, not bearing to see him like this. For a moment she prayed the nightmare had come to her instead. She was used to having them, what harm would be one more? Yes, she should have seen it. No right they had to upset him.

Quiet as a mouse she trudged to where he was, coming to a stop right behind him as he kept his eyes stubbornly fixated on the ground as though he'd never seen it before. "From personal experience," she continued lowly, "it was only a nightmare. It doesn't mean it will come true."

For the fourth time that night Kili recoiled. In his anger he thought she had left. To his embarrassment, only then he realised that she had interrupted him only out of respect to his privacy. He's startled by the shock of it all; that all this time he was being bombarded with peculiar attempts of hers to comfort him.

"It felt real."

"I know," she soothed quietly. "But it's not."

"I watched them die. You'd think that'd be as bad as it gets, right?" He scoffed. "It wasn't even the worst part."

"The worst part is that you didn't."
He looked at her then and realised that she pretty much knew how it felt already. "You know, I was beside myself with joy when Thorin decided to allow us to come. Fili less so—he always had reservations; and honestly, there are times I wish I'd heed him. We'd be better off staying where we were—at least my mother would have less to worry about," he said with a mirthless chuckle.

Arya thought about it at length before making up her mind. She was never good with words of any kind of emotional support or intimacy without sounding mildly aggressive, at best. He still had his back turned to her, so she moved slowly to his side and placed her hand on his shoulder.

The touch made Kili flinch, not expecting her to dare come so close after he had basically lashed out at her, and swiftly turned around. He felt her hand moving from his shoulder upwards, and his expression faltered. She was not supposed to touch his face, let alone his beard—or what existed from it, anyway. To let someone, anyone, feel the coarse stubble, or the skin on his face and neck, was... He couldn't even find the words to describe it. Such a gesture was meant to take place only between people who were intimate with each other, whether that meant family relations or the other kind.

Clearly, he was losing it.

He was blinking rapidly, dreading what was to come, but didn't recoil. He could easily stop her; he could have stepped away and not let her do this. But he didn't.

No, no, he wasn't losing it. He had already lost it.

Suddenly, he felt a soft palm brushing over his cheek. It felt nice. On a second thought, perhaps he had died and didn't know how to feel. Then he took a deep breath. Surely he wasn't dead if he was able to breathe? What was that Thorin had been preaching about since he was young? Always control yourself.

Not now. Not this time. This time the touch of a woman's hand froze him—the touch of this woman. The way her slender fingers caressed his cheek had him completely paralysed. The funny part was that he did not fight it at all. Hell, he wasn't even trying. His defenses had tumbled down, he had surrendered, and he'd be damned if he didn't enjoy it. No matter that if Thorin should ever learn about this, he would skin him alive.

For a moment he was lost in her eyes. Even though the darkness was stifling, they were standing close enough for him to see them. They reminded him of endless seas of peace and comfort that put him at ease. And at that moment as she pulled him closer for a hug, he couldn't care less if Thorin learned about this. He wound up his arms around her and buried his face in her shoulder, feeling that the only barriers preventing him from screaming at the top of his lungs to vent his anger were her and the comfort of their embrace. He held on to her for dear life until she made all the evil notions fade away, as though they were lights seen from a very large distance. And all the pleasure and warmth of this slowly drove the nightmare away from his mind.

He didn't realise it until later, but he'd ended up with fistfuls of her hair. She didn't seem to notice, either.

There was a silent agreement to not let go until the fear would subside. But even after that, they didn't. That strange sentiment that made them feel safe and content, they both wanted it to remain. She couldn't find the courage to lie and give him false hope for the course of the quest or their lives themselves, and he appreciated her unspoken frankness.

Unfortunately, it dawned on them that they were practically joined from head to toe for several minutes. Yet this time they were more embarrassed about the motivation to come so close; for it
wasn't that she was cold and he was the gentlemanly prince he was raised to be and offered to keep her warm, rather the fact that it was mutually deliberate.

They pulled away from each other as though an invisible whip forced them apart. Their similarly awkward gazes and shocked expressions were telltale signs of embarrassment.

Could someone die of it? Arya didn't know, but had a feeling she might explore the possibility any second now. "I– I'd better go," she stuttered and turned around in haste, not sparing him a second glance as blood pooled in the tips of her ears, burning them.

Kili was stunned to silence, at a loss for words, unable to do nothing but watch her scuttle off into the darkness. His fingers absentmindedly hovered over his face, and the memory of a soft palm trailing from his shoulder up to his cheek made him shiver. He bit his lip, remembering how it felt. Admittedly, it was... quite nice. "Really?" the voice in his head mocked. "Fooling ourselves again, are we?" No sooner than it stopped, he blushed crimson. Her touch, even small as it had been, had made his stomach coil like a snake. Although why it should affect something that was in such distance from where she touched him, he could not understand.

"Wait! Arya, wait!"

She paused mid-step, not having the heart or the courage to turn and look him in the eye.

He didn't know what made him chase after her. The words just spilled out of his mouth without his brain having sent any signal. His pace fastened to reach her in time, lest she regretted her decision and slipped away from him again.

"What is it?" she whispered, still not facing him.

"I– I..." he struggled to pour the right words out, which translated to being as eloquent as a drunk man. "I touched your hair." Smooth. "You said nobody can touch your hair... But I did– You let me."

This made her turn. Her face was a shade lighter than red and, as a few faint rays of moonlight had sneaked upon them through the tree leaves, they made her eyes shine in the dark. Their uncertainty only made them more appealing.

She lowered her gaze, muttering an almost rueful "That I did." She didn't know what was proper to say. She didn't know what was proper to do. She couldn't bloody figure out how she had weaved herself into this entirely improper situation in the first place; probably had to thank Bilbo for that.

The acknowledgement roused even more questions.

"Why did you come after me?"

"I never meant to," she snapped lowly, feeling cornered. "Bilbo insisted that I should–"

"Don't lie to me," he cut her. "Neither Bilbo nor any single person in this world could force you into doing something you wouldn't want to."

Arya scoffed as one or two names popped into mind. "I wanted to show you... I just–" She sighed. "Look, I was not always like this. The moving shadow with the grim face that scares off people and craves for solitude; for eighteen years I actually didn't like it so much. I didn't always look like death–"

"I never thought you look like death. Well, once or twice maybe."
She tried to pull off a smile. It failed miserably. "My point is, it's easier that way for everyone. I am not a bearer of good luck. So I think that—and not only I, to be honest—it is best for people to stay away from me for their own good."

"Let the others be the judge of what is good for them."

"I would," Arya countered, "but most of them are dead."

Condescending silence painted the air heavier after that and neither of them was eager to add something.

Kili couldn't understand why it was so hard for them to be friends. Fili's words did not dare to cross his thoughts, but there was the annoying voice in his head trying to yell the answer and his mind was consciously trying to muzzle it. From what he had deduced about her so far, she wasn't the type to apologise face to face; rather with actions; implicitly. So, even though her words were befuddling, he considered all of this as a gesture of apology—or a hint for it, anyway. He was not going to ask for an actual one when she clearly could not give it.

The temptation was right in front of him at that moment and he couldn't resist it, so he reached to play with the end of one strand of her hair. "Will you let me braid it?"

There was a flash of worry in her eyes. If anyone saw a braid, let alone one made by Kili, it would definitely incite questions, fact that led only to one result. Impending doom, that is. "No."

He recoiled slightly, as though elbowed in the ribs, scowling at the refusal. "Am I allowed to touch it at least?"

"What is it with you and hair?" Arya groused.

"Look who's talking," Kili dryly shot back. "It'd be only fair, seeing as I allowed you to touch both my hair and my face."

The woman let a long-suffering sigh. "What do you want, Kili?"

She wasn't his kin, she was definitely not his wife or betrothed, and yet he had let her touch him. That, in the dwarven society, was unheard-of; occasionally, an insult. What he could only think of it, though, was how much he wished for a repetition. Instead of a reply, he grabbed her hands in his and brought them up, placing them on either side of his face.

Arya was scared stiff. She felt his hands slowly leading hers to crawl over his skin and trace his features, while he was softly stroking her knuckles. His eyes continued watching her, but shut when her thumbs brushed the skin under them, and he reflexively snuggled up against her soft palms. The sensation was overwhelming.

"You do realise this seems kind of perverted, don't you?" She felt his muscles twitching when a smile formed.

"'Tis nothing of the sort," he replied with thick voice. The tips of her fingers hovered over his lips, causing a frisson of an exciting, tingling sensation to shoot through him. "This simply is two people learning each other."

Just then his hands left hers and moved up towards the sides of her face, only to meet an obstacle halfway through. She'd caught his wrists, glowering at him, assessing his intentions. He wasn't intimidated in the slightest. A few moments later, her tense grip relaxed a little and granted him permission.
Kili’s movements were nowhere near rushed. He almost laughed when, despite the permission, her hands remained there and only moved slightly downwards around the bracers of his forearms. He took his sweet time to explore every inch, first moving to push her hair back and then resuming his ritual as the back of his fingers stroked her temples and traced every little scar that embellished her skin. As they went further down, his fingers brushed over her cheekbones and he noticed that their trail left a soft pink line behind. Putting some more pressure, the pink line turned into a bright red one that felt warmer.

Only when she was red all over did he quit this precious little game and affectionately tapped the tip of her nose; she almost smiled and he laughed under his breath. With newfound confidence one hand slid down to her jaw, so that it was now touching part of her cheek and part of her neck, while the other descended two inches, right beside her mouth. Her entire face was ablaze as his thumb traced the outline of her lips and then tapped the middle and more plump spot, causing them to quiver in response.

"You are not alone," he finally spoke, his tone indicating more of a command rather than a comforting statement.

In all her years so far, Arya had felt unequivocally terrified only a handful of times. This was just added to the list. A breath was caught somewhere between lungs and throat and simply refused to either go up or down. The moment his hands came anywhere close to her mouth, she swallowed tightly. They were not as rough and coarse as she’d expected, but still very firm.

All these walls she’d built to distance herself from everyone, he was taking them down one by one without even trying. To her mortification, every inhibition she had was being flushed down a toilet, but she couldn’t care less when his touch was this intoxicating. At that point her suspicions were confirmed, the man ought to have magical powers; such influence he held upon her had no explanation.

Centuries could have passed as they stood there staring at each other like fools, and they wouldn’t take notice.

Kili was half-certain he had gobbled some hallucinogenic mushroom that day by mistake. That, or he was dead. Well, if the latter, he was pretty damn satisfied with the afterlife. It was glorious; felt like he was flying above the clouds in the sky, under the warmth and light of the morning sun. Curse whatever deceiving, wicked game Mirkwood played on his head.

The climax of it all was that godforsaken breath that finally decided to go out into the world. He felt something hot tickling his thumb as her lips parted slightly. It was such a mundane thing, but still awakened his most inappropriate, uncivilised instincts; he could hear them roaring inside his body like beasts trapped in a cage for far too long, fighting to break the shackles that held them captive. And Mahal forgive his sorry hide, but his imagination was already racing with images of all the things he secretly wanted to do to her if he could.

It nearly made him loom over her and it was more than a guarantee that what he was about to do would directly drive, if not both of them, then surely him to the gallows. He could practically feel her thundering heartbeat against him even through all these layers of clothes. Only moments and two inches separated them from the world falling apart and–

"Ahem."

Chapter End Notes
Muahahaha, did you really think they were going to kiss so soon? Well, you've been bamboozled! To be fair, I had warned you about the slow burn. And yes, I am that evil (ask my friends).

Title taken from 'Wicked game' by Chris Isaak. I suggest you listen to James Vincent McMorrow's cover which is equally brilliant as the original!
"Ahem."

The strained clearing of a throat emerged from somewhere through the trees near them, followed by an audible groan. The sound was as effective as an unexpected dip in the freezing waters of Lhûn in the middle of winter in their predicament.

Reality crashed around the pair like an avalanche on a mountainside. Both jumped back a foot in surprise as they realised from what they had been interrupted. The almost tangible cloud of heat that enshrouded them froze in an instant when two heads peeped out of the darkness. And just like that, their almost intimate moment was lost and forgotten like a grain of dust that was carried off by the wind.

"Why?" a familiar voice groused in frustration as the owner's figure came to sight. "Why the devil did you have to cough? Why?"

"What? My throat was itching!" another known voice tried to reason in vain.

"Couldn't you just hold yourself for one more minute?"

The hobbit rolled his eyes, refusing to dignify him with an answer, and he began to walk towards the pair who had frozen on the spot.

Pushing his annoyance towards Bilbo aside, Fili strutted over to them in all his smug magnificence, not in the least caring of how either of them would react. "We are so sorry to interrupt this incredibly magical, romantic moment of you two lovebirds, but you," a finger pointed towards Kili, "need to get back to the camp yesterday. Thorin's awake."

Veins started to pop in Kili's neck and both his temples. He risked a quick glance at Arya, who was standing petrified on his opposite, and then at Fili in mild panic when the words soaked in. "What?"

"Aye, he feared you might get lost, so he sent us to search for you," Fili said a little too happily than what was appropriate, considering the unexpected outcome of Kili's storming off into the woods. "But the main point is that he's up and about."

The brunet approached them with the lightness of a hellhound that moved for the kill. "If you mention anything to anyone about this, even amongst yourselves, I'll make Thorin in a bad mood look like the first day of spring."

Holding back a laugh with difficulty, Fili inwardly thanked every deity that came to mind for having been blessed with the opportunity to witness this. The sly look never left his face and his grin widened even more, if possible, whereas Bilbo already looked halfway frightened into submission.
"Don't reply," Kili warned through clenched teeth. "Just look frightened and scuttle."

It went without protest and he turned around, expecting to see Arya and proceed to have either one of the most awkward conversations in the history of the known world, or an equally awkward apology that would shatter his pride to pieces. She was nowhere to be found.

Of course.

He had to know that she'd grasp at the chance to flee as if the devil himself was upon her. He surprised himself when relief set in at having avoided the awkward confrontation, but then thought of the upcoming one with Thorin. He didn't know which was worse.

"You–! What were you thinking?" a voice growled worriedly as soon as the trio emerged from the trees. "This forest is like a maze, you could have been lost–"

Kili dodged the incoming slap on the back of his head with a dexterity than marked age-old experience. "Nothing to make a fuss about," he appeased. "I merely went for a stroll to clear my mind."

"Rather fill your mouth with something else," the devil's advocate muttered through his teeth, though loud enough to make his brother's face turn a vivid red. He promptly received an elbow in the ribs.

Thorin remained blissfully oblivious to that small exchange. He placed a strong arm on Kili's shoulder and squeezed gently, though his expression was nothing short of stern. "Do not let this turn into a habit. This forest is dangerous, lad. You don't know what lurks in the shadows."

Sensing a general discomfort and laying it to the fact that Kili might be still under the influence of what had upset him in the first place, Thorin graciously relieved Fili from his watch and send him to sleep, so he could keep an eye on both of them from afar.

Kili went to lie down on his bedroll feeling a headache coming. He was followed by his brother moments later who, as expected, was dying to learn about the former's little tryst.

"What hap–?"

"Not a word."

Fili rolled his eyes. "Seriously? You almost snogged her and you expect me to sit here in silence?"

"Yes. And I did not snog her."

"I know, that's why I said almost," the blond countered. "Don't tell me you wouldn't have done it hadn't Bilbo and I been there."

The other flagrantly turned his back to him.

Fili gave him a shove, "Don't you dare turn your back to me! You are aware of our customs and laws, but she is not. She seemed to like it, but did you explain the meaning–?"

"Bloody hell, mate, can you not take a hint? Now is not the time." Glancing over at him his shoulder, Kili gestured towards his forehead, "I'm up to here with thoughts. One more and you'll see the insides of my head decorating the trees."

At the vexed tone Fili insisted no further. Only minutes seemed to have passed when a voice sounded again and shook him out of his half-asleep state.
"Forgive me for earlier. It was wrong of me to snap at you."

The blond snorted in amusement, gave him a light pat on the shoulder, and the matter was forgotten. Soon, he dozed off, and Kili went back to sweating his feelings.

Hours could have passed as she sat on the big branch of the tree, staring at the darkness beneath her dangling feet, and she wouldn't take notice. She did not care to return to the camp, dreading anything that might take up residence in her head, be it a thought or a nightmare.

*What the bloody hell was that?* An overabundance of misplaced desire? A childish infatuation? A huge mistake?

Probably the third, but the answer did nothing to assuage the onslaught of thoughts that came with it.

Unbeknownst to herself, perhaps she had just sealed her fate. She leaned her back against the trunk, immensely nervous and frightened, as well as blissfully unaware of the first genuine stirrings of the feeling called love. It was love that had made her proud heart tumble down the walls she had built, love that got her to make so many concessions about him, love that had convinced her to give him a chance to become friends, and love that made her body tingle with something as insignificant as a mere touch of a palm on the face. But she would not remain ignorant for long, because the force of this love was bound to make her realise its existence soon.

Never before had that happened to her. She was a bloody Ranger, for crying out loud, second in command after her Chieftain; she ought to set an example of focus, concentration and professionalism, not allow someone to have such influence on her or, even worse, enjoy being influenced by said person. This disturbing deviation from her duties needed to be stopped, she decided; and very soon, for everyone's sake and safety.

Dawn drew nigh and the dwarf king pushed his eyes open to find a few rays of sun casting some light upon their heads. He had fallen asleep. His gaze rapidly scanned the camp, counting every sleeping form that snored quietly and cracked the solidity of the morning dew, until it came to land on the seated person on his opposite. He grumbled something under his breath, inaudible even to himself, his mind still not functioning properly. Thankfully for all of them, he was completely ignorant to last night's shocking events, which would certainly be the cause of his heart's faltering beat.

The woman looked worn and exhausted, dark circles embellishing the skin beneath her eyes, clothes full of dirt and pieces of moss stuck here and there. Despite all this, her eyes still held the usual intense gaze and the twinkle that heralded her pouring rage in case something dangerous sneaked upon them. One hand was resting neatly on her stomach, fingers tapping in a steady rhythm over her tunic, while the other had a tight grip on her bow, ready to fire arrow after arrow without remorse.

And yet, the moment his eyes met hers, her look became less hard and her face features softened. "You fell asleep," she noted quietly.

It'd be somewhere right then that he'd get angry if her tone hadn't been as polite. She seemed to share his weariness. "How long?"

Her face scrunched up in thought as she assessed the time that passed since she had returned and found none awake. "A good three hours more or less."

Thorin snorted gloomily. He should have woken Dori to take the last watch hours ago, but his own
body betrayed him. Weariness had taken its toll on them all, he could feel it in every fibre of his body. Even she looked positively miserable, he reckoned. "Did you keep watch?"

She nodded before her face twisted into a grimace of sheer unease.

He briskly glanced at her, startled enough to straighten his back and take a better look, realising the clue he'd missed. The hand that was resting on her stomach did not sit idly there, but awaited lest there was a growl from the inside. Not knowing what urged him to do so, he reached inside his pocket and pulled out the single last dried fruit he had left.

Arya had averted her eyes from him, scanning the area around and stoically waiting a few more minutes before she'd start to wake the rest up, when a hand suddenly appeared before her face with the fruit laid on it.

"Eat."

With eyes slightly wide in surprise, she raised her head to face Thorin's standing form offering her food. "Keep it for yourself, or someone else who needs it more."

She didn't mind not having to eat for a few days, but the muscles in her abdomen had been starting to cramp and her stomach felt like it was digesting itself. The averse to the forest and seeing the pure decay around were the cause of constant waves of nausea ascending to her mouth. Therefore, food had tumbled nearly to the bottom of her list of wants.

"I can hear the sounds your stomach makes even at this distance."

She sighed in defeat. Hesitantly she reached out a hand and took the fruit. "Thank you," she mumbled in between munching.

Thorin only gave a stiff nod and gestured her to wake the others. She began by prodding the hobbit, who sniffed and wrinkled his nose drowsily and tried to open the still heavy with sleep eyes.

Most of the dwarves she managed to rouse without much trouble. Only when the turn of the brothers came her moves seemed to falter. Fili woke with relative ease, while Kili felt like taut wire. One soft nudge and he had bolted upright as if he was struck by lightning, and more than necessary time of touching was intentionally avoided, as did the eyes.

Thorin scolded everyone that wasn't yet ready, telling them that they needed to move right away if they wished to cover enough of the path before the sun set again. As soon as everyone was prepared, they loaded Bombur on their shoulders again and tried to make patience throughout the day.

Bilbo felt his shoulders aching quite a lot sometime after midday and fidgeted around nervously, trying to get the feeling back in his numb arms. "I mean no offence," he looked over his shoulder to Bofur, panting lightly, "but have you ever considered putting him on a diet?"

The dwarf just rolled eyes at this, recounting the infinite times his brother had promised to stop devouring everything with so much appetite, while the Ranger, who was leading the line and risked a quick glance at them, cracked a faint smile.

"You know, I've been thinking," Ori mused aloud, not addressing anyone in particular. "If all this ends well, I'd really like to write down the whole adventure."

Bofur fixed him with a questioning look. "Ye keep a diary, lad?"
"A diary?" the hobbit snorted. "And what would today's entry be? 'Dear diary, still in the bloody forest. Today I almost swallowed a venomous bug.' His exasperated tone made everyone in hearing range chortle.

The rest of the day carried on like this, with idle chatter in an attempt to take their minds off the dark thoughts the forest caused their subconscious to form, as well as the endless hours of walking without rest.

Observing the silent exchanges between his brother and Arya became Fili's sole interesting pastime for the day. He couldn't help but notice that everything was going from bad to worse. Before, at least, it was only her who tried to avoid Kili. Now, it seemed there was an untold agreement between them to not converse, not even let their eyes meet; seemed they already had, or were struggling very hard to eliminate the previous night's incident from their minds and lives. Fili felt like he'd had enough of it after awhile.

Arya's gaze strayed, for the umpteenth time, towards the hypothetically sleeping mound a few feet away that hadn't stopped shifting from side to side and stretching shoulders and arms. She let a long-suffering sigh and promptly turned her back to him, trying to focus on keeping watch and not on a dwarf prince that was supposed to be asleep.

Speak of the devil... he suddenly jolted upright, stomping his feet angrily and cursing to himself and the skies.

"Come here."

His face snapped towards the source of the voice, not expecting to find her, of all people. "What?" he asked suspiciously. "Why?"

"Kili, I hear whispers in my head, I haven't slept in days, I'm in the verge of starvation, and I am armed," she said gloomily. "Don't pull at the thread more."

His inhibitions died a quick death under the glower she gave him and he crouched down next to her, momentarily feeling remorse for his shoulders' petty woes. She scooted behind him, yanked his coat off and her fingers dug into the muscles of his shoulder blades as she rubbed them forcefully in circles, before they would become numb and achy. It felt as though tiny pins were being pressed into his skin as the feeling slowly returned, and he finally felt able to lie down somewhat more comfortably.

"Thank you," he whispered, very relieved of the ache that threatened to take him over.

She replied only with a curt nod, suddenly regretful for what she did. She had told herself to keep a distance, and had just slipped. A shallow breath escaped her mouth as she lowered her head in frustration.

It was the first time after the night that they chanced sitting together away from prying ears and eyes, although apparently she was anything but eager to broach the subject. Both were acting like nothing had happened. Oddly, now that he found himself so near her again, and after days' contemplation regarding that night's events, Kili's mouth was itching to address the oliphaunt in the room.

He inhaled deeply to give some courage to himself. It hardly worked. "About that night..."

The words startled her and her eyes did not dare meet his, instead focusing on counting the members of the company for the tenth time. "I told you that 'tis wiser for everyone if I kept a distance from them," she said without facing him. "We'd better do that."
His look hardened. "If you did stick to that, you wouldn't come to find and comfort me." He scoffed. "You're a hypocrite, you know. You've made a silent agreement with yourself to want to be alone and pretend not to care about people, but you actually want to be around and care about them when you think that no one is watching."

Arya tried her best to ignore him and went to move away to a more peaceful spot.

Halfway standing up, Kili grabbed her hand. "I am your friend," he said boldly. "Are you my friend?"

Clearly that small, annoying, yet at the same time gravely important muscle called heart seemed to have stopped beating. Why did he have to do this? How could he make her feel lesser than the worst criminal of the world without even trying? She said nothing in response. She didn't know how to respond, even if she wanted to.

Kili let a resigned sigh, at the same time releasing her wrist, and promptly walked back to his bedroll with a sceptical frown. Perhaps he had overthought things regarding her coming to comfort him the other night. He could take from this that anyone who tried to make someone feel better had an ulterior motive, or he could accept that it's just a nice thing to do, and take people as they come.

Thoughts of her chased after him until he fell asleep, and even after that, causing him to wonder whether this was a reasonable excuse for other thoughts and urges that consumed his mind in his half-conscious state. More concerning images suddenly began to flash before his closed eyes. Nights became full of torturous visions of heat and skin–

And there was where he jolted awake for the second time that night, feeling as though he'd just woken from a nightmare. Wiping the beads of sweat across his forehead, he coerced his disturbingly creative subconscious to put a cessation to all kinds of evil notions. This particular territory was a strictly forbidden area that he didn't dare visit even mentally. Obviously Mirkwood was harmful for everyone. Just the possibility of what other images his mind would produce scared him to the bone.

His eyes scanned the camp and met hers. She fixed him with a quizzical look—probably wondering if he just had another nightmare.

The entire ordeal had managed to send a strange longing wave through him, however, and he shook his head in a futile attempt to rid the scene from his mind. Before lowering himself back to the blanket he shot a last glance at the tormentor of his dreams, and his uneasiness slowly ebbed away. He fell back into a restless sleep with numerous breaks, until his brother mercifully woke him once and for all in the morning.

Bombur made them the honour of waking up the following morning, although it was probably for the worst. The dwarf couldn't stop talking and complaining at them for the disruption of his peaceful sleep, due to the dreams full of food and feasts he was seeing. Everyone else was silently wishing for him to stop, or even further to have not waken at all, despite that his weight would be a severe hindrance to them.

"Is there no end to this accursed forest?" Dwalin soliloquized at some point.

"We are in the eastern outskirts," the Ranger said tiredly. "Be patient."

"Be patient?" Gloin erupted and suddenly began pacing up and down the trees. "How can we be patient? We are miserable! We have no food, no water, cannot rest properly for days now- How exactly do you propose to be patient?"
Arya lowered her head in a menacing manner, sending a positively lethal glare at the red-bearded dwarf who was eternally grumbling about every little thing. "I am aware that everyone has to die of something," she growled, "but I don't plan on leaving my bones in Mirkwood just because you, gentlemen, cannot control your bellies."

She would have said one or two words with him had it not been for Dwalin and Oin's arms to pull her back. She was in the exact same situation as everybody else, yet was too restrained to let the feeling of hunger take over her mind.

Gloin, however, went on with his grousing rant. All were too busy watching him, otherwise they would have noticed Bombur fleeing to the woods, away from the company. The chubby dwarf's mind was still brimming with images of abundant feasts, to the point that he thought to be seeing them yards away. Bofur was the first to realise that his brother was missing and let a yelp that made the arguing voices pipe down and fourteen pairs of eyes to search around in alert.

"Quick!" Thorin ordered. "Scatter to find him before we lose him!"

Even Arya did not bring objection to this and immediately hurtled forward to find the straying dwarf, all the while trying to etch the direction to which they were heading in her mind so that they wouldn't lose the path.

They found him half hour later, resignedly perched upon a huge trunk and almost wailing that he didn't manage to come across the feast. He was definitely whining enough, though. As the dwarves were helping him up it was Dori's turn to exclaim that he saw lights in a distance, which drew the attention of the whole company.

"'Twas this!" Bombur cried gleefully. "These are the lights I saw!"

Before Arya could realise what was happening all the dwarves had marched to the source of these lights. "No! Come back!" she screamed. "Come back, damn you!"

Not even one bothered to turn around, let alone listen. Cursing loudly this time, wings grew in her legs and she ran to drag them back, this time not paying much attention to the route. She could see heads wandering around for quite a while, when all of a sudden the lights disappeared and the forest was one again plunged into darkness.

"Why don't you for one blasted time heed my words?" she barked at them. "Well done, now we are lost!"

Fourteen pairs of bulging eyes was the response she got to this.

"What do you mean 'we are lost'?"

"If you remember the direction from which you came here, please, be my guest and point it to me!" she spat out, anger framing her whole form and making her shudder.

"You don't remember the way back?" Gloin demanded angrily.

She took a few stomping steps towards him, ready to behead him anytime now. "Oh, I'm sorry," she growled sarcastically, "I think I lost it somewhere between the ninth and tenth turn you took while trying to find some bloody lights!"

"We are not lost," Thorin stated. "We keep heading east--"

"But which way is east?" Oin panted.
A new round of argument erupted, everyone putting each other at fault for the current situation. Only Bilbo was immersed in thought, Thorin was shaking his head as though a fly was buzzing right in his ear, but the annoying hiss wouldn't go away, and the Ranger had slumped her head against a tree trunk, trying to tune all the voices out and trace their way back.

She forced her eyes shut, letting her ears adjust and fill with the forest sounds. After a few minutes of intense filtering she could hear it; she could hear the increasing and decreasing pattern of hisses approaching, but couldn't pinpoint the exact direction. A shudder pierced her suddenly, starting from the base of her neck and moving down her spine. For a moment she panicked more than she should have allowed herself under normal circumstances.

For the creepy hiss was not caused by the wind. To her horror, it was then that she realised that, not only the trunk she was touching, but all the trees around were covered in webs.

"Thorin--" she warned, on the lookout for intruders of the worst kind.

"I heard it," he whispered back and turned to the others. "Enough, all of you!" he commanded and the commotion waned. "We are being watched."

Gazes flickered around nervously.

"'Tis quiet," someone noted.

"Too quiet," the Ranger added grimly. Her eyes hastily searched around, then glanced upwards to the vines Bilbo had climbed a few minutes ago, but couldn't spot him in pitch dark and thick foliage.

Thicker darkness had fallen across the place and three more times her eyes scanned the area around them, not finding anything. Which was more worrying than finding anything. The evil was lurking in the dark, she could sense it. She closed her eyes again for a brief moment, hoping that this was just a game of her imagination, but could feel the creatures creeping up near.

Unless a miracle happened, they were out of time. In the world's long history, miracles had been few and far between, and they probably weren't so important to be rewarded with one.

They didn't stand a chance against the bloody things with the forty eyes. They crawled around with their huge hairy legs in search of flesh and blood, steadily spreading across the forest and terrorising passers-by and inhabitants. The foulest stench was in the air, the funk of the past few centuries since the forest had started to rot and decay, and the grisly ghouls from cobweb tombs were closing in to seal their doom.

Suddenly her eyes came to rest on the sword in her hand. She turned it slowly, so the flat side faced towards her, and studied the reflection. The horror was looking back at her and she felt paralysed. A breath was caught halfway between lungs and mouth.

When it finally left her mouth, it came out as a gasp that drew the attention of those who stood beside her. They turned to see her face creased into a grimace of horror.

"Sp--!" she made to scream and warn them, but terror took the sound before she made it. The urgent yelp was drowned by a loud clipping sound, and before the second was over she was catapulted backwards by a sticky rope of some kind.

"Lass!"

"Arya!" voices screamed in sync, stretching their hands to reach her and rushed to her aid without any semblance of fear for what they were about to face.
The rest of the company was startled by the sudden yell and frantically turned around to see the Ranger, the princes and Dwalin disappear from sight as with a snap of one's fingers. Dead silence enveloped the forest again.

Dwalin managed to catch a glimpse of the woman as well as the outline of the beast that carried her as he chased after it. In his next step there was a painful punch low on his side and he found himself gravitating towards the ground despite his will. He never made it to the mossy forest floor. The last thing he remembered was being wreathed in cold.

Kili became a proud bearer of two new scratches on his hand and left cheek as he cleared his way of huge pointy branches that spread in every direction on his way to where Arya had disappeared. He kept an eye on his brother who was running a little to his right, but the next time he glanced there, Fili was nowhere to be found either. And for the first time in his life, Kili felt genuine terror seeping in his bones. There was a sharp pain in his neck and next thing he knew, he fell face first on the ground, greasy leaves licking his face.

In her lifetime Arya had had all kinds of grim thoughts about her cause of death. Spiders wasn't one of them. She struggled to find something to intercept her movement, but everything happened too soon and too fast for resistance of any kind. In the general turmoil she didn't realise at which point her sword slipped from her hands and dropped down. The last memory she had was of a bloody painful pinch on the base of her neck and her own sharp cry. Her head slumped limply on the side. The numbness spread to her limbs and, soon, the entire body in seconds.

She struggled to surface back to consciousness to stand and face the spiders and not suffocate inside the cobweb shell they'd shroud her with. She could feel the venom spreading within, it slowly and painfully leading her into darkness. And though she fought to stay alive, her mind began to falter and follow her body into oblivion.

For no mere mortal could resist the evil of Mirkwood.

Chapter End Notes

*maniacal laughter, in deep echo*
The more sunlight he could discern through the leaves and lighter the air became, the more courage Bilbo found to climb faster. The moment he reached the top and his head peeped out of the huge canopy of trees, he took a very deep breath. Finally. Finally, clear air. A light breeze grazed his face, along with the warmth of the morning sun, and the view filled him with joy. He had nearly forgotten the feeling.

A swarm of blue butterflies fluttered their wings past him and he couldn't resist chuckling. The fiery ball in the eastern sky was greeting him with the warmest welcome he could remember since a long time ago.

"I can see a lake and a river!" he exclaimed joyfully and then pushed some of the branches aside as the rest of the view came to sight. "And the Lonely Mountain! We're almost there!"

He received no answer, though.

"Can you hear me?" he called at the darkness of the forest below, hoping to catch a sound of the dwarves or the Ranger. "I know which way to go!"

Again, nothing.

The only sound that reached his ears was the creaks and cracks of some branches in the distance. He froze. The trees began to sway and wobble and he felt his hair bristling. Oh, this was not good. Not good at all. He lowered himself back under the shadows of the trees and away from the sunlight, nervously checking around for any sign of movement. That was, until his feet got stuck in a sticky web and he slipped forward. He lost count of how many branches he bumped into after the fifth one, and only when his hand got stuck to another one, with his whole body hanging like a cocoon from a tree, did he face the invisible enemy.

Spiders. Of all living things, bloody spiders. Why the bloody hell couldn't it be butterflies?

The last he remembered was slumping further down upon a bed of webs and being shrouded into it.

Arya was taking pains to remember when she had found the time to doze off. She had no memory of how the dream had begun, but it was a weird one.

There was the family again, in its entirety of it this time; both deceased and living, eating and drinking together in a large feast. Her parents, her brothers, her aunt and uncle with her cousin, even her grandfather was there with her grandmother. Everyone was laughing, seemingly without a care in the world, happy for an inexplicable reason.

And if that wasn't a bad omen, she didn't know what was.

Bilbo prayed all this was just a bad dream. He was trying to breath, but felt something pressing uncomfortably against his nose and preventing him from doing so. He slowly opened his eyes and the first thing he faced was a huge spider hovering above him, clicking its teeth, while himself was barely able to budge with his body trapped inside the web. Fright enveloped his heart and, not
putting much thought into it, he managed to take his sword in hand, cut the web and stabbed its belly with all the strength he could muster. The surprised spider writhed and made to attack him but he shoved the sword even further, until the creature eventually tottered and fell off the branch they were both on.

The hobbit jerked upright, tearing the web off himself and noticed the other numerous 'cocoons' that hang from the trees, ready to be devoured by the beasts. Not wasting much time, he reached inside his pocket and put the ring in his finger. That was when the hisses and screeching sounds began to ring in his ears and made his eyes go wide. He could hear them. He could actually hear the spiders talk.

"Their hide is tough, but there is good juice inside!"

"Finish it!"

"It's alive and digging!" another said. "Kill it now, let us feast! Feast!"

Bilbo turned just in time to see some of the figures wiggling and barely managed to bend down as a spider crawled above him and towards the others. Panic took him over and he reached to throw a twig a few feet away to take the attention of the creatures away from the company. All of them swallowed the bait and hurtled to the source of the noise, except one. One was ogling the large, apparently juicy form of Bombur that was squirming and swaying up and down like a worm.

"Curses!" the spider sputtered, searching around for the invisible thing that hit it as the hobbit had begun stinging it with his sword. "Where is it?"

"Here," Bilbo grunted and pulled the ring off his finger, revealing himself to the creature.

The moment it went to nail its teeth on him he rammed the sword right between its eyes, arm trembling from slight fear and disgust and the spider painfully crying that it stung. Pulling the sword out, the beast fell of the branch into the darkness below.

Satisfied with himself, Bilbo browsed the sword and smiled. "Sting?" he mused and stared down at the corpse of the beast that laid on the ground with its feet in the air, nodding appreciatively. "That's a good name!"

A muffled voice brought him back to reality and he quickly rushed to cut all the cobweb ropes the rest of the company hanged from. One by one they bumped on the ground —Bilbo was unable to prevent the painful fall— and groaned inside their white cocoons.

"I'm alright!" someone yelled.

"Where's Bilbo?" Dwalin panted out.

The hobbit let a content sigh as he saw them unroll themselves from the webs and taking deep breaths again. "I'm up he–!" he went to yell, but before he finished the sentence a spider sprouted up in front of him and pushed him on his back.

Sting served its master well for once more as it impaled into the spider's belly, though causing it to totter and take Bilbo with it in lower branches, until they both landed on the ground.

"Bilbo!" Bofur and Nori yelled in unison. No reply.

"Come on, move!" Thorin exclaimed as soon as he freed himself.
Only Kili took notice of the motionless figure beside him as he went to stand up and he winced, his gut sending waves of fear through his body. It was her. It had to be her. With almost trembling hands he tore the web off her and flung it to the dirt, his brown hair streaked with lines of the sticky substance that hanged around his face, though little he cared about them. He only cared about how pale she was, to the point that her face had turned practically yellow. Her dark eyes were wide open and looked directly above her, where he was trying to free her from the sticky constraint. He thought she was gawking at him and it almost made him smile.

"I understand that you cannot fathom how devastatingly handsome I am," he murmured with a playful twinkle in his eyes while soothingly rubbing her hand, "but I need you to stop staring and help me untangle you from this web."

No answer.

"Arya?" The smile fell from Kili's face and his stomach constricted in a very painful way upon realising her eyes were not pinned on him, but were simply staring above, glassy and unmoving as though life had forsaken them. "Arya!" he screamed and seized her by the shoulders.

She was as responsive as a raggedy doll.

"What's wrong?" Fili asked worriedly and knelt beside them.

"She's not waking up," Kili panted, trying to move her hands, but they fell limply at her sides.

"The spiders," someone warned before the blond's lips managed to form an answer, "they're coming!"

The dwarves needn't be told twice. They were too busy trying to untangle themselves and mainly their feet from the webs in order to flee, and they didn't pay much attention to the form that was still not moving. Only two of them had remained behind, knelt over the lying figure.

"Fili, Kili!" Thorin yelled.

"She's not waking up!" Kili yelled back at him and then turned to her. "Wake up," He shook her shoulders more violently this time. "Wake up! Damn you, stubborn woman, wake up!"

As Arya kept dwelling in the dreamworld, Kili suddenly sprouted up in it. As if it wasn't odd enough already. From one moment to the next she found herself embraced by him, yelling for her to wake up. She tried to open her mouth and tell him to stop shouting, for he was deafening her with his cries, yet no sound came out. She felt paralysed; only in body though, not in mind.

The feel of it all shifted from mild doubt to genuine dread. Could it get any worse? To have your mind spinning wildly and your body unable to function to even move a toe?

As much as it pained Fili to even dare admit it, he had to. He could hardly believe she was lost like this. She deserved a better, an honourable death, not from a blasted spider's venom. "Come, Kili," he muttered sadly and gave a tug at his sleeve. "There is nothing we can do now."

Yet the brunet was resolved to stay there until she'd blink those dark eyes at him and wake up. Then he'd kill her himself for giving him such a fright.

The only one who had no problem stomaching everything was Thorin, who stood behind them with a nigh annoyed expression, feeling a meltdown coming. So she had perished—tough luck. They were being chased by giant spiders, of all things. That's what they had to focus on, not mourning over her.
"Leave her, Kili," he commanded with an icy look. "There's no time!"

The words fell on deaf ears. The young one continued to sway the motionless body back and forth to bring her back to life in vain. With an impatient roll of his eyes, Thorin lost no time; he motioned Fili to pull his brother away from her, while he hurriedly unfastened her daggers out of their sheaths. He made no move to take her bow, for it was sheltered between her body and the ground and trying to take it would delay them even more.

"We can't leave her body here!" Kili protested as he was unwillingly being dragged away.

"Enough with this," Thorin all but growled, already ahead of them. "Move!"

"We must go!" Fili urged upon catching clipping sounds in the distance, swords already out and awaiting. "Kili, run!" he barked, retreating a few steps. "Now!"

Still trapped in the strange dream, Arya watched as Kili closed her eyes with his hand. It was a welcoming gesture, nearly dry from being stuck unblinking so long. Oddly, she could still see him; thought she had willingly fluttered them back open, but he didn't seem to notice. Sunk in her thoughts as she was, she didn't realise what was happening, until she felt a hand stroking her hair and temple, and warm lips planting a brief kiss on her mouth—a little to one side and not directly on them, to be precise, but the aim was by all means clear.

The gesture felt delightfully affectionate, just like when he had tapped the tip of her nose with his finger days ago, only better. And it may lasted just for a moment, but it was enough for her to feel something... tingly. She went limp, much more than she was already. Her senses felt raw and stricken, her mind out of focus. She thought her heart was pounding hard under her chest, even though in fact the pulse was unnaturally slow, and her breath was trapped dizzyingly in a place between throat and mouth, unable to find an exit. She finally realised what the warmth ache inside her was. And the realisation struck her like a leg cramp in the middle of the night.

Oh, for fuc–

His brother was already running behind the others and Kili was following suit, all the while catching glimpses of either the heads of the company or the hairy legs of the beasts that flipped in the air and bumped on the ground with screeching thuds. He didn't have the time to feel sadness or grief, or to even make his mind tolerate the image of her lying dead back there, though he would later; and in all its magnificence. What he only felt was loathing and an unprecedented desire to carve up whichever eight-legged beast dared to block his way.

"Keep up!" Gloin's voice echoed somewhere in the distance.

"Come on!"

The dwarves were running as if they had grown wings in their legs, until their route was cut short by another spider that hang from a silk thread and rapidly crept closer to the ground. Thorin had stopped dead in his tracks, Orcrist ready to slice the beast in two, but another figure jumped on the spider first, pushing its head on the ground and using it to slide all the way across the greasy ground, until the spot the dwarves stood. The dwarf king grimaced in disdain.

The blond elf rammed a dagger on the spider's head, bringing it dead on the ground, and he jumped off, landing with a soft thud in front of the dwarves. An arrow was already pointed at the first in lead, while several other elves appeared through the trees, with bows in hands and surrounding the
company without hope of getting away.

"Do not think I won't kill you, dwarf," the blond growled threateningly with a wry smirk. "It would be my pleasure."

As the stranglehold in which the dwarves were into grew tighter and tighter and more elves appeared, outnumbering them by far, a cry for help emerged from the woods along with a scratchy hiss.

Fili's head almost detached from his body when he found the company one person short upon a quick count.

Kili might have disappeared, but her family remained there on her opposite, laughing and talking merrily. Then her father suddenly walked towards her with open arms. She was apprehensive at first, but the memory of her much younger self running to his embrace, stumbling in her own footsteps and then guffawing at her little trip, made that primitive survival instinct falter.

"Wake up," he said sternly. "Wake up."

That wan smile fell from her lips as the whole image suddenly distorted and his face began to deform into something unearthly. His eyes weren't the grey ones with the kind gaze that she remembered them to hold, but black and evil. Her breath—or what could be considered a breath in her state—hitched in her throat and she suddenly felt her body trembling.

She was able to move again.

Her eyes opened just in time to see a giant spider launch itself in her direction and she instinctively went to take hold of her sword. It wasn't there. She vaguely remembered it to have dropped somewhere. Her hands then reflexively searched for her daggers, but they weren't in their sheaths either. The spider was right above her now, clipping its huge fangs devilishly four feet away from her face.

Arya looked down. Count her blessings, her legs were still in place; trapped inside the sticky white cocoon but still in place, and as far as she could discern, mercifully intact. With a swift bounce her feet shoved the beast away. In the brief time that gained her, she tore the webs that were stuck around her boots and the sheath there, yanked her knife out and unceremoniously embedded it into the spider's belly, slicing the flesh further up, almost halfway through its head. All manner of slimy innards burst out of the belly, spreading everywhere. Most of it, unfortunately, landed on her.

Bile rose up her throat at the disgust of it all. Contrary to popular belief, her gut wasn't made of iron. With a strained groan she pushed the beast away to avoid getting crashed beneath it and sat upright briskly, letting the nausea take over.

When it ceased she inhaled greedily, wishing for some water. Her body twitched jerkily as the feeling returned to her numb limbs. With a quick look around she saw discarded web sheets, marking that probably the rest were freed. Why, though, was she the only left there? Had no one made the effort of trying to save her before she became a meal for the hairy forty-eyed beasts? Oh, for the love of the everything... So much for team spirit. They didn't trust her, alright, but were they so insensible to save only themselves and let her die? She knew that she was the one who had to offer protection to them and never so far requested any exclamation of gratitude, but lending a bloody helping hand when the one who tries to protect you and you hardly ever listen to their advice needs it, is the elementary courtesy one is beholden to show.
"Dwarves," she mumbled haughtily under her breath and pounced up.

Only a moment later as she checked her body for wounds, she realised that only her bow and knife were left on her. Where on earth were her daggers? Had they dared to take them away?

This was the straw that broke the horse's back.

Cursing loudly, spitting a mix of saliva, dirt and the remaining spider's blood to clean her mouth and savagely kicking every little stone that happened to be in her feet's way, she felt her ire rising to its most flaming peaks. She had one or two words to say with the dearest dwarves once she found them again, which didn't take too long, since their cries echoed like babies' wails in the forest. With a loud angry groan she marched towards the source of the sound, ready to actually take heads off.

Another cry made her stop dead in her tracks, however, and she immediately changed direction, running to save its owner who was calling for help; and for who apparently she held some very disturbing feelings as she realised not minutes ago.

The spider knocked the dwarf flat on the ground, trying to take one leg into its mouth and lug him back to the web nest. Kili was trying to kick it with the other, having lost sword and knife in his way there as he had fought with a dozen others, nailing his hands on the leaves and the dirt on the ground in an effort to pull himself away.

He failed to see the other two spiders that approached behind his back, when suddenly an arrow was notched into the head of the one that was currently pulling him. He turned around to see someone fighting the spiders off with daggers and bow, having already killed two of them, but another one creeping up to him from the opposite direction now.

Alternately glancing between the tall figure and the looming beast, he yelled, "Throw me a dagger, quick!"

"If you think I'm giving you a weapon, dwarf..." the voice spat out scornfully as its owner held the spider back with relative difficulty, "you're mistak–"

A new hiss tore the air behind him right then, covering the strained voice that had just spoken in both volume and tension and almost making it fade in comparison. Yet this did not belong to a spider; it was a metallic whiz, not a clicking. The beast was still going for him, but suddenly its disgusting legs slightly quivered as another figure jumped from above and landed on it, swirling something shiny in one hand.

Kili's heart skipped a beat. Maybe two. Alright, about five. Was that...? "Ar–?" he went to say, but his voice faltered.

Was she real or was he hallucinating again? She must have been real. She seemed real. He prayed to every existent deity and not for her to be real.

He swallowed tightly. "Arya?!" his voice came out in a roar now, the sound hardly forming the name.

Her eyes, simmering with something that made Kili's insides twist nervously, moved to meet his in a heartbeat. She looked all but sane as she lunged at the spider and thrust her knife into its head, carving a hole in it. The beast slumped on the ground dead with the contents of its head flowing out of it and the woman still planted on top of it, looking like a predator ready to leap on its prey as the spider's blood was raining down on her head and shoulders, making the scenery even spookier.
Less than a second later, another blade was pinned at the beast's dead carcass and after that, an arrow flew and would be nailed directly in her heart had not she been quick enough to lean backwards, bending knees, half her body almost levitating in the air.

"No!" Kili bellowed, raising hands to stop the archer from firing a second one. "Don't!"

Using her arm for support the Ranger jerked upright at full throttle, a wild look on her face and eyes throwing daggers at the person on her opposite. The string of her own bow was taut back, fingers waiting to let loose.

"Are you out of your damn mind?!" she barked at the red-haired elf who nearly killed her.

_Yep, definitely her._ Kili fought the urge to laugh like a madman and crush her into an embrace.

"–what world do I look like a spider to you?" the Ranger's strident rant went on.

The elf didn't take even a step back as the woman effortlessly bounced off the beast and approached her with steady pace and bow ready to fire the arrow. For a second the thought of her being a wildling who had, in a very bizarre way, ended up in Mirkwood and miraculously managed to survive crossed her mind, but the moment the dwarf stepped forth and screamed at her not to shoot the woman, it made her wonder.

"Put your bow and knife away," the elf commanded. "Now."

Arya's eyes narrowed at the tone and she stretched the string of the bow further back without offering a reply or obeying, only budging her leg against the dwarf's and ushering him behind her. Right then, Kili positively felt like a damsel in distress. He was the male here, he was supposed to protect her when they were under threat, not the other way around.

As though she could hear his thoughts, she glared at him from the corner of her eye. "You have no weapons. _Do_ as I say."

One eyebrow rose in a gesture of authority that silenced the young man immediately.

Observing the small exchange between the dwarf and the woman, the elf grew impatient. "Drop your weapons _now_," she warned firmly, "or I shan't hesitate to kill you both."

"Go on," the Ranger said with a dark look, a challenging edge creeping into her voice, "I'd really like to see that." Her gaze was pinned on her opponent, though from the corner of her eye she caught movement behind the trees.

Kili was watching the exchange between the two women with baited breath, weighing their odds. He didn't know whether Arya had anything up her sleeve, but they probably had it bad. He couldn't help but be impressed by the elf's prowess. Though seeing Arya fight this time, not only was he impressed, but also gripped by an unequivocal paralytic fear the likes of which he'd rarely experienced before. For a moment he had truly doubted she'd stop before wiping out everything that _breathed_ in close range. This time she _did_ look like death or, more likely, death's beautiful, maniac child who danced above branches and webs and spiders in the way smoke swirled in the air.

The elf seemed all but affected. As Captain of the Guard, she'd learned to deal with mouthy prisoners. The haughty tone and manners, however, stung her vanity a little.

"Have your parents not taught you that you should not talk back, girl?"

Kili could almost hear Arya's body stiffening like one of the iron rods they used to make at the
smithy. She gritted her teeth. "Have yours not told you that it's not wise to piss off and threaten a Ranger?"

Oblivious to it, both women had touched each other's sore spot by mentioning parents. And that only enhanced their initial opposition.

A Ranger? Was this woman a Ranger? Tauriel almost blurted out a laugh. She may not have travelled outside of Mirkwood, to old Arnor and Eriador, or Gondor, where Rangers usually dwelt, but she'd never heard of women within their ranks. In their Guard there were shieldmaidens — herself being a prime example, going so far as to serve as Captain — and that's only because Mirkwood had turned into one of the foulest places in existence and they needed more warriors to guard the borders despite trivialities, like gender.

Without even nodding at them, her soldiers burst through the trees and slowly surrounded the odd pair.

"Erm..." Kili gave a tug at her tunic upon counting the number of the elves surrounding them, "Ar–?"

"I saw them," again she cut him in time before he could speak her name, yet her bow continued to point at the redhead. She only resigned to lower it when her face was wedged between the tips of two arrows, and a dozen others pointed at them from a distance. Eventually she dropped bow and quiver down, followed by her knife.

"Search them, remove any weapons, and bind their hands," the redhead ordered.

"No."

The redhead arched an eyebrow. "What was that?"

Arya seemed relatively unfazed, as far as situations went. "You may search and remove the weapons, but I will not have my hands bound like some common hoodlum. You already outnumber us and we agreed to surrender, there is no need for that."

The Captain simply repeated, "Bind their hands."

"You have no right to do that unless we're found guilty of a crime," the dwarf supplied calmly.

The elf decided to humour him. "You are guilty of trespassing our borders, which is a crime."

"We were lost–!"

"I am merely taking precautions here, but I shall look forward to your conviction," she deadpanned and turned to her soldiers again. "I'll have no more of this. Bind their hands," she commanded and strode over to the dead spider to collect her dagger.

The elves assigned to search their new prisoners had already engaged to the task; the male one searching the dwarf and a female the human so as to avoid any misconceptions after the small fuss Kili made when a male elf had initially approached Arya to search her. Kili felt half-disconcerted until the male was replaced by a female guard, and then half-relieved for reasons he preferred not to contemplate.

The elleth found one or two smaller knives hidden and tucked carefully beneath the woman's clothes, while her comrade took less time to search the dwarf for weapons, for he had seemingly none left. Only when his hands suddenly paused and he shot a suspicious glare at the dwarf was the two
women's attention drawn.

Kili squarely met the glare with one of his own. "That's all me, elf," he said earnestly.

The elf looked positively appalled at the implication and showed it with a scornful snort. The elleth in charge of searching the human had the same reaction, although Arya could swear she was really struggling to hold back laughter.

Arya, in turn, wondered how it'd be possible to smack Kili's head and kick him in the shin without having a dozen elves pull her away before she got within range. The fact that the prince had not stopped staring quite intensely at the redhead kindled an odd sentiment within her. "Stop gawping," she grunted. "No worries, it actually is an elf maid this time."

And there the irony spilled galore.

The prince simply rolled eyes and retreated his gaze from said elf, instead focusing it on the one that currently tied him up. It was a very intricate knot and for the life of him he wouldn't get to free himself unless he had something to cut it. Arya seemed to have no luck with hers either, though she was intent on fiddling with it as soon as the elleth walked away from her. In truth, he was surprised that they had tied her up in the first place—surely, if she told them of her dealings with the Elves of Rivendell, they wouldn't treat her the same way, although he wouldn't even consider questioning her motives as it was. He was even more surprised when, a minute or two later, he saw Arya standing there almost defiantly with one hand free and the other loosely hanging on her side with the rope dangling from it. He rolled his eyes. *Good grief, that woman would be the end of him.*

"Hest..."

Tauriel's gaze followed the direction the soldier was pointing at.

"She untied it, Captain."

Her eyes narrowed as she approached the woman who had the nerve to continue looking her in the eye. In one swift move she had snatched both the woman's hands behind her back, taking over the task and tying them anew.

Despite her best efforts, Arya felt unashamedly amused upon listening to the severe scolding the young elleth was currently receiving from the redhead in elvish while the latter tied her hands into an even more intricate knot. "I will untie it again," she said with a shrug and it was true. Ropes possessed the bad habit of chafing one's skin. "You shouldn't bother—"

"It is not your place to give advice to me. You are being captured."

"I am not giving you advice, I am merely stating the obvious. You won't be able to do this," Arya replied calmly, nodding past her shoulder towards where her hands rested on her back.

Having spent half a lifetime under the cruel tutelage of Elladan and Elrohir in Rivendell resulted in making one truly disturbingly creative in regard to means of gaining freedom. In Arya's case, that painful experience had earned her a rather flexible left thumb, which she could dislocate and put back in place at will, thus making it easier to slip her hand out of bonds. *Bless those little hellions,* she thought with an air of exasperated fondness one usually applied to the old and incredibly surly dog one's comrade had owned from time immemorial. Though being two heads taller, some pounds heavier and a few thousand years older than her, calling them little hellions could be considered an act of war.

"Do not test my patience."
"I suggest, kindly, that you forfeit the attempt–"

Tauriel didn't know how the woman managed to vex her so much, but decided that she had a talent for it. "And I suggest, less kindly, that you keep quiet," she said quietly, only for her to hear, tightening the rope to make a point. Then he circled her, coming to stand before her.

The human stayed as expressive as a statue. With an ever so slight motion her hand slipped free, much to the Captain's surprise. She shook off the now loose rope with the other one, muttering wryly, "Now I'm so happy."

Meanwhile, a little farther away, the dwarves found themselves in the middle of a thorough body search.

Fili was not at all pleased that the elf searching him had found almost all his weapons—those he was hiding in his pockets, in his boots, even the knife he had enshrined under his hood, for crying out loud. Yet he had half a mind to pay much thought to it when his brother's voice was not heard anymore. The older prince was a step away from rushing forward to go and find Kili, not caring a whit about the arrows that would pierce his body in case he made such an attempt.

Thorin was in the same situation; much more worried about Kili's fate than the elf currently taking Orcrist away from him.

"Legolas, hîr nin," the elf called, handing the sword over to the blond.

Legolas, as his name apparently was, scrutinised the blade carefully, twirling it in his hands before he spoke, "Echannen i vegil hen vin Gondolin." He sharply turned his blue eyes back to the dwarf, "Where did you get this?"

"It was given to me," Thorin said quietly.

Legolas pointed the sword at the dwarf, watching as he leaned his head a few necessary inches back from its tip. "Not just a thief," he said with contempt, "but a liar as well."

Thorin had a few words to say to this, but clipped footsteps signaled the arrival of a group of people, in the midst of them walking someone who he did not expect to see. He felt a burden lifting from his heart upon seeing Kili alive and unharmed, although with hands tied up, and his jaw dropped at the sight of the person behind his nephew.

"Kili!" Fili almost squealed in relief as his brother was escorted next to him and squeezed his shoulder in reassurance. "Thank Mahal–"

The brunet gestured him to shut up before it was too late and see who followed after him.

Fili almost lost it when he saw Arya, alive and unharmed, walking behind him. Her hands were not tied like Kili's, but there were two elves clutching both her arms as she went. "You're alive?!" he exclaimed, voicing his uncle's exact thoughts, who was too busy swallowing his tongue.

Arya cast them all a murderous glare, including the redhead elf, to whom it was long overdue. "Of course I'm bloody alive!" she snapped furiously. "I was alive when you left me behind and I was also alive when you took my weapons!"

The dwarves stared questioningly at each other and then at her, wondering about the words exchanged. Almost everyone was certain that she had been following them so far. Thorin thought he had lost his voice from the shock. A part of his mind was devoted in thinking why on earth had the
elves captured her too; she'd been fraternising with the likes of them in all her life. Of course, then, it occurred to him that mayhap they had no idea who she was. As far as appearance was concerned, she was a female of Men who travelled with a company of Dwarves. There were two possible outcomes; either the Elves considered her a thief as well, or the Dwarves’ prisoner.

"We thought you were dead," Kili explained. He couldn't decide if he felt more shame for leaving her behind, or joy that she was alive. "I would never– We would never have left you back there if we knew–"

"What the devil made you think I was dead?"

"You weren't moving," Fili said defensively.

"Oh, and stillness is a sign of death?" she seethed. "Couldn't you check my heartbeat or if I was breathing?"

"But..." Kili mumbled thoughtfully to himself, his voice slowly fading as he recalled the moment he kissed her. He had felt no response, not even a twitch of her lips, let alone her breathing. "I didn't feel your breath when I ki--" his sentence was cut short when he realised a potential mistake. He nervously shook his head when he saw Fili, Thorin and Arya eyeing him questioningly, trying to get rid of the elusive pink hue that crept to his cheeks.

Legolas had grown impatient with the rumpus between the dwarves and the woman, who strangely was not a dwarf. "Silence!" he ordered them with a severe look. The voices quickly quietened, though there was still tangible tension in the air, and he turned to Tauriel. "Gyrth in yngyl bain?"

Tauriel trudged to where he stood, casting an examining glance at the prisoners and then at him. "Ennorner gwanod in yngyl na nyryn," she whispered gingerly. "Engain nar."

"Hir nin," another elf called, this time addressing directly the Prince and not the Captain.

"Man te?" The ellon presented him with a small blade, more a knife than a dagger. Wiping the stains of blood from the flat side, he read the inscription that was carved in Quenya.

\[Et Eärello Endorenna utúlien.\]

\[Sinome maruvan ar Hildinyar tenn' Ambar-metta.\]

Tauriel threw him a suspicious look while he inspected the knife the soldier had handed him, and the moment she was ready to ask what the matter was, he turned away from her.

The Elf Prince let a long-suffering sigh and swiveled around gracefully, but with an edge in his posture, that of man wondering what kind of new trouble he had in his hands out of nowhere. What business did Orcrist, the long lost sword of the Elves of Gondolin, and a knife with Elendil's Oath carved upon it, had in the hands of nobodies?

"Who does this knife belong to?" he asked, raising it in front of him.

All the eyes examined the blade, not recognising it; all except one, to whom it was something akin to an extension of her upper limbs, so to speak, and being deprived of it felt like she was mutilated. Arya had stiffened when the guard who held some of their weapons approached the Elf Prince in haste, fearing that he had noticed the elvish engraving on it despite it being soaked in spider's blood.

All the eyes subsequently fell on the woman who stood there seemingly unruffled, but deep down worried, and stared at the Elf Prince in anticipation of his next move.
Legolas beckoned the two guards holding her by the arms to bring her closer. "Your name," he requested.

"Storm."

The Prince cocked an eyebrow, thinking she was mocking him. "She claimed to be a Ranger earlier when we caught them," Tauriel informed him before he could respond, then adding in a very low voice, "which I doubt so."

Completely lost as to her identity or how that knife had come to her possession, the Prince repeated the question. The woman refused to reply altogether this time.

"Perhaps she'll be more willing to speak when brought before the King," Tauriel warned.

In her mind Arya had sent everything and everyone to the devil and taken the way back home to the North and her duties, away from this quagmire of a quest. The sole reason holding her back from revealing anything and saving her arse was because the dwarves were present and, among them, only Thorin knew who she was.

"Enwenno hain!" the Prince's command echoed in the small clearing and immediately the guards were shoving the prisoners through the woods, taking the path for the Halls.

"Thorin, where's Bilbo?" Bofur managed to mouth before he found himself pushed forward.

The dwarf king nervously glanced around, seeing no sign of their burglar. He wanted to ask the Ranger if she had caught sight of him, but she was already led many feet ahead of him.

Legolas sent Tauriel to lead in the front of the line, while he delayed one or two steps to catch up with the two elves that escorted the woman, keeping Orcrist and the knife in his hands. "Why aren't her hands bound?" he inquired sternly.

"She freed herself every time we attempted to bind her hands, my lord."

"How?" he demanded, a little taken aback if he had to admit. To the shrug of unawareness the soldier gave, he replied with a curt, thoughtful nod. He paid a studying glance to the woman from the top of her head to the tip of her toes, sensing no discomfort whatsoever, apart from her eyes that seemed to herald a hurricane. "Man le?" he whispered curiously.

"Am man theled anírog istog?" the woman asked in reply, causing his ever steady and graceful pace to falter with surprise.

Chapter End Notes

Title and the idea about part of this chapter's plot are taken from an episode of House M.D. with the same name. I'm not sure if Arya's case is medically correct, but for the sake of the plot, you can consider the spider's venom as the cause of paralysis.

ellon = elf-man, elleth = elf-maid
Hest = Captain
hîr nin = my lord
Echannen i vegil hen vin Gondolin. Magannen nan Gelydh. = This is an ancient elvish blade of Gondolin. Forged by my kin.
Gyrth in yngyl bain? = Are the spiders dead?
Ennorner gwanod in yngyl na nyryn. Engain nar. = Yes, but more will come. They are growing bolder.
Man te? = What is it?
Elendil's Oath is translated as such: 'Out of the Great Sea to Middle-earth I am come. In this place will I abide, and my heirs, unto the ending of the world.'
Enwenno hain = Take them
Man le? = Who are you?
Am man theled anfrog istog? = Why do you want to know?
Too much royalty for one room

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As the elves ushered their newly captured prisoners across the path to the Halls, more and more sunrays seemed to pierce through the green canopy of trees above them and lighten the place, causing a greenish hue to veil the atmosphere.

Legolas had remained close to the human, curious about her very existence, not only among the dwarves, but in general. She carried a knife with Elendil's Oath carved upon it, she was familiar with elvish knots, she spoke the language of his people as he discovered minutes ago, and she had claimed to be a Ranger; if this didn't seem like him botching this, he didn't know what it was. All the evidence indicated that she wasn't a thief.

Walking a few steps and four people behind her, Kili observed the small exchange between her and the blond elf, and worry swallowed him. He had seen the elf's mouth move and Arya slightly turn her head toward him as though she had responded, but naturally couldn't make out the words from that far. He really didn't like the fact that, from that moment onward, the blond elf had remained with the guards that escorted her and often shot her examining looks. No, he did not like at all how the elf's eyes roamed about her face with all the curiosity in the world, and he was fuming for the rest of their route.

The Ranger had closed her eyes and walked ahead, blindly following the two guards that had her by the arms and trying to absorb as much sunlight as she could. She might prefer to stroll about during the night, mainly to stay hidden in the shadows, yet a little bit of light every now and then did not harm anyone. It would even help her once slightly creamy skin —when not smudged with blood and dirt of course— discard the disturbingly pale hue it had acquired during their long stay in the shadows of Mirkwood. She had resigned any attempts of getting away by now, seeing as she was unarmed and surrounded by fully armed elven guards. The blond elf seemed suspicious and confused about her presence amongst the dwarves, and that was confirmed the moment he started to keep his pace in sync with hers to walk beside her. From what she'd heard before in the woods, she concluded that he was ranked high amongst the elves. The guard had called him his lord and he'd been given her knife for examination directly, despite the fact that the Captain of the Guard was standing right next to him.

Unfortunately or not, she knew someone would recognise her sooner or later. And the blond elf did not seem too wicked. So when he had loudly wondered who she was in Sindarin, obviously expecting no answer, he was rebutted as she opened her mouth and responded. Her woolgathering was cut short by the sound of running water. The huge gates of the Elvenking's Halls awaited them as their parade crossed the bridge over the Forest River and rapids that ran through the Woodland Realm.

The missing detail that frightened the life out of her was that she had no recollection of seeing Bilbo anywhere. She turned to the back searching for him, but he was nowhere to be seen. Shit. Shit.

Thorin, now, walking behind the Ranger and the blond elf, felt more miserable even than the darkest days and nights they had spent in Mirkwood. So far the road had been full of obstacles and now they had come to face the biggest hindrance—captivity, ergo delay; also, a confrontation with Thranduil was the very last thing in his list of wishes. The elvish words exchanged between the elf and the human barely reached his ears, for the single thought that consumed his mind was the memory of the
last time he had seen the Elvenking. It hadn't been a nice one.

In the meantime, the hobbit was indeed alive and trekked the path behind the long line consisting of a concoction of elves, dwarves and a sole human, worrying and trying to catch up with them. A blond elf and a redhead elf maid were standing beside the two large pillars in front of the gates as the rest of the guards entered the Halls. After all of them were inside, the two followed as well. Bilbo sped up his pace in order to catch the doors open and almost tripped over a tiny stony that lay upon the bridge. He froze like a statue, though, when the blond elf paused a step away from the gates, abruptly turned around and searched the thin air for a sign of the noise. It was the first time in his so far life that Bilbo found the elves' hearing a disadvantage.

"Holo in ennyn," the blond ordered.

The two armed to the teeth guards nodded obediently as the elf walked inside and Bilbo hurtled forward as silently as he could, eventually slipping through the gate just a second before they were shut.

In the lands of the West there was memory of ancient evil things. In Mirkwood the ancient evil things lived on and prospered. Evil was seen and heard there every single day. The Wood Elves feared and distrusted the world outside; spiders and all kinds of creatures of unsavoury nature were trying to creep into the Woodland Realm, but within its borders no shadow lay.

The dwarves and the Ranger were led through the complex network of bridges that were made of infinite tree branches in the cavernous interior of the realm, until they reached the beginning of a long path that led to the throne room. The elves were constantly exchanging subtle glances between themselves, while the dwarves opted to grumble curses and protests far from quietly—Dwalin, in particular, was especially vocal. Apart from having their hands tied up, they were also tied with each other, effectively looking like cattle that were put out to pasture by the shepherd rather than actual dwarves.

As the guards swiftly escorted the company before their King, their Captain consciously chose to remain at the head of the cavalcade, leaving the incredibly annoying human into the Prince's hands, for she wasn't certain how much more she could tolerate the vexing woman. The blond elf motioned the two guards holding the woman to let her and he went to take her arm in their stead, dragging her toward the front of the line.

The Elvenking was seated—not so royally—upon his great throne, dressed in the finest of silk robes, with numerous rings adorning his fingers and a crown upon his silvery-hair head, made of woven branches and flowers. His eyes were idly wandering about his great halls until they landed on the small troop that approached the throne, at which point his interest was piqued.

The prisoners were escorted up to the very last steps before the throne, where king Thranduil sat in all his magnificence and studied them with an examining gaze. Well, that was a delivery he did not expect. His blue eyes first landed upon the dwarf at the forefront and he almost grimaced as he immediately identified him as the once called Prince under the Mountain, grandson of King Thror. Now, he was simply known as Thorin Oakenshield.

For a brief moment her anger ebbed away and Arya seriously fought the impulse to laugh out loud at Thorin's face; his sneer of contempt was simply priceless. Her scanning gaze moved from the dwarf king over to the magnificent, carved from wood throne in the shape of an elk's antlers, when a flitting thought crossed her mind. Oddly enough, it felt as though she'd seen that image before, and quite recently at that. Yet the thought left her mind as soon as it had sneaked in the moment the
Elvenking's eyes fell upon her.

Thranduil's eyes slightly narrowed at the sight of the woman that stood with hands unbound beside his son. He, who had met myriads of people in his very long life, was not familiar with her face, yet the more he looked at her, the more a vague idea was solidifying in his mind that he knew her. Going through all his memories to recall her face would admittedly take a while, therefore he thought it better to greet his guests with a salutation that would befit a king.

"I was not informed that I would have visitors today."

"My lord," Tauriel stepped forward and gave a little bow of her head. "They intruded our borders—"

"Oh please!" a voice muttered in exasperation, though it did not fall on deaf ears.

Several eyes in the room, including the guards' who stood on their right and left, flickered to the woman and stared at her as if she'd sprouted wings. Tauriel pretended not to have heard and went on with her report. Undeterred, the Ranger refused to give them the satisfaction of looking even remotely contrite.

The woman didn't speak further, so the King fixed his attention on a dwarf that seemed to be the personal guard of Thorin Oakenshield, judging by the way he stood by his side.

"So much for the benevolence of Thranduil, Lord of the Elves," said dwarf flouted, then raised his hands to put the bonds in display, "Is this how you treat travellers to your lands?"

It had been a mere five years since the last time travellers had strayed off the path and were found by his guards on patrol; dead, of course, and definitely not in one piece—the spiders had feasted richly in human flesh the night before. Thranduil was thousands of years old and, still, he couldn't figure how difficult it was for those who used the Elf-path to simply stay on it, for otherwise they would either lure death or would be found guilty of trespass. What other warning did anyone need to finally take that in? It was rather mundane, if not tiring, to have to deal with the same problem and risking his guards' lives to save random strangers for the past twenty centuries.

Patience eluded him when it came to the matter anymore. He didn't really care whether he'd sound rude. "Only the ones who annoy me," he said dryly, absolutely exhausted to explain himself for the umpteenth time this Age.

"Is it a crime now, to be lost in the forest," the older, white-bearded dwarf on Thorin's right spoke up then, "to be hungry and thirsty?"

The Elvenking sighed. Perhaps people would never learn. "It is a crime to wander in my realm without leave," he explained curtly. "If you forget, you are using the road my people made. Yet you still managed to rouse the spiders and enter our realm."

"That was not our intention," the woman stepped forth, but was swiftly immobilised by his son who didn't let her proceed further.

"Oh," Thranduil exclaimed, quite interested in her intervention, "then what was your intention?"

Arya struggled to come up with ideas to veer the conversation off that topic. "I will not plead guilty to thievery or intrusion if that is what anyone here implies," she said calmly, "for we are neither of the above. We are travellers—"

Thranduil raised his hand and her voice faded as her mouth stopped moving and producing words. He descended the stairs that led to his throne and strolled up to her to take a closer look. "And who
are you?" he pointed at her. "Their guide perhaps?"

"If I were their guide," the human gritted through clenched teeth, glaring at Thorin from the corner of her eye, "they would be listening to me!"

With an eyebrow raised Thranduil drew closer to her to inspect her more carefully, while the dwarf King began counting the barbs he and the rest of the company were doomed to receive from her from now on. She was right, they had to have listened to her; he had to have listened to her, because apparently neither she nor they were eagerly looking forward to a meeting with the Wood Elves.

Arya tried to tamp her anger down and cleared her throat, turning to the elf. "We are simple travellers," she continued, "who, in search of food and water, were unfortunate enough to stray off the path and stumble upon the spiders. We meant no harm, nor by any means wished to trespass your borders."

The Elvenking took in every detail of the woman's face while his mind raked up memories of old, trying to remember where he had seen her again. He came up with no possible encounter, but the appearance still held a strange sort of familiarity–she was not the kind to be trifled with.

"Yet my question remains," he persisted smoothly. "Who are you?"

Her sudden proximity with the King drew her nerves tauter than harp-strings. It felt as though he was an ethereal vulture ready to dig into her, for lack of a more fitting word.

"She claimed to be a Ranger, my lord," Tauriel intervened, this time avoiding to express her opinion about the validity of that statement.

Thranduil raised an eyebrow. "Did she, now?" he pondered loudly, the corners of his mouth slightly curling upwards. "Why, pardon me if my eyes are mistaken, but I fail to see your sign anywhere, Ranger."

Arya allowed a faint sneer to creep up to her face. She made a move to grab something from the inside of the pocket in her boot and was immediately met with the Captain's two daggers an inch away from her face. Her head cocked to the side. "Oh, yes, this is very lethal," she said with mocking civility, presenting the star-shaped clasp that once held her cloak around her neck. "Does this give sufficient evidence to my claim?"

Thranduil shook his head and, with a light motion of his hand, the redhead stepped away from the woman.

"She speaks our tongue," the blond piped up, not having strayed his gaze off of her.

Two sets of eyes, the King and the Captain's, widened with surprise as they fell upon the woman who stood there expressionless.

"Man i eneth lîn?" the King asked.

"Storm."

The prince's mouth pursed into a line. "I received the same answer when I asked her as well."

"You demanded my name," the Ranger corrected him. "You did not ask nicely."

The blond arched an eyebrow and no further questions were made, until he approached the King. "And these we found on them." He presented him with Orcrist and the knife, explaining who carried
Arya studied the pair of them, discovering a pattern in their faces. All elves had flawless faces naturally and those not familiar with their race used to say they all looked the same, mesmerising and beautiful. But not these two. Their features looked so alike; same hair colour, same eyes and same proud stature as though they were both tall, lithe pines. It didn't take a genius to realise they were kin. And seeing as the blond beside her was addressed as 'lord', he must have probably been the King's son or nephew. Their faces were perfect and cold, bearing the beauty and regality of their ancestors.

Thranduil's eyes twinkled in an odd way as his eyes examined the two blades and then flashed to his guards. "Take them to the cells," he ordered. "Everyone but these two."

The company erupted in a choir of protests and curses, but their voices were pushed aside as though they were complaints of a bunch of children. Thorin shared a worried glance with the rest as they were being led down the stairs in the cells, until his gaze fell on the Ranger who had fixed her eyes on the figures that were pushed to move forward —on that of his younger nephew's more likely—and subsequently on Kili, who was returning her heated look of protectiveness and concern tenfold. The situation being as it was, Thorin wisely chose not to make a fuss over that small exchange.

As soon as silence fell over the throne room once more and the attendants lessened considerably, the Elvenking fixed his attention on the woman. The pieces had started to come together. "You speak our tongue, then," he stated. "Are you an elf?"

Her face scrunched up in slight confusion, yet her eyes emanated fear and worry. She was so concentrated trying to figure out whether he knew who she was or not, she had forgotten to respond.

The knowing smile that suddenly appeared on his face made her blood run cold. "Is it so hard for you to answer such a simple question?"

"Not at all," she said with caution. "I simply fail to see how that's relevant, or whether it makes any difference."

"I'd like to know how to properly address you, my dear," Thranduil continued with that smile. "So what is it? Elves or Men?"

She let a long-suffering sigh, knowing defeat when she saw it. "Men," she said with clipped voice.

Both the prince and the Captain kept watching with interest. "Are you acquainted with her, my lord?" the redhead muttered, fairly surprised.

"Est Arya in Dúnedain," the King snorted at them unimpressively. He then turned to her again, looking her dead in the eye. "Istannen le ammen."

The dwarf king choked with surprise. He was by no means fluent in Sindarin, but the Elf spoke her name sure as Sunday. She didn't seem to know him, though. Arya gave a slight bow of her head as acknowledgement of his correct recognition of her and shuffled impatiently on her feet. He knew who she was, alright. But how? Not knowing the specifics was gnawing at her insides.

Thranduil took a step closer to her, now almost trespassing her own borders. "We may haven't met before, but I know that face," he whispered close to her ear, only for her to hear his words. "All your features except for your eyes trace back to your father's ancestors. I had fought beside Elendil before he fell and he held himself in a way akin to yours, proud and regal. No matter that finery is out of the question now," he finished with a dismissive gesture toward her clothes.

Arya was genuinely divided between wanting to roll her eyes and scoffing. From what anyone with
some sense would have gathered all this time with the company, they'd come to the conclusion that Thorin was at odds with the Elvenking, to say the least. Now that she'd made the latter's acquaintance, it was like the other side of the same coin. Lovely. As if one of them wasn't enough for this world.

Legolas stood quietly a few feet away, arms crossed in front of him almost reverently like the little princel ing he was, looking the woman up and down. He didn't expect her to be royalty, even decadent of that. As soon as his father uttered her name, he'd realised that he, too, knew who she was, even if they hadn't met in person before. The Captain and the rest of the guards in the hall, unable to hear what the King was whispering to her, were naturally oblivious to her identity and her name made no impression on them.

"Now," the King went on in the same quiet, enchanting voice, "will you make me the honour of explaining why one of your line has fallen so low as to travel along with a band of dwarves?"

It didn't take a lot of effort to ignore that casually insulting little jab. She had grown rather used to them from her experience with Thorin. "I was assigned to guide them through the forest, for I have trekked the path before."

"You were assigned by whom?" Thranduil demanded, his look suddenly hardening. "And why did they want to cross the forest?"

"I am not at liberty to let you know—"

Thorin was already imagining ways to ram a branch of the King's crown into his eye. "This is none of your business."

The side glower he received from Arya was indignation in its purest form. She was staring him down with a look that, more or less, screamed 'We were doing just fine.'

"Do you think you can fool me with lame excuses?" Thranduil snapped and his eyes cast their gloomy shadow upon the dwarf, leaving the woman in peace. "Do you think you could have fooled me?" he asked with a disdainful look and scoffed. "It has been a long time since Thorin Oakenshield travelled so far east."

The dwarf didn't even flinch at the sound of his name. He was acquainted with the Elvenking as much as the elf was with him and it wouldn't do any good to anyone if Thorin tried to renounce his identity.

"For what purpose?" Thranduil wondered. "Where does your journey end?" Judging by the earlier exchange, he obviously did not expect someone stepping forth and delivering an explanation, thus he graciously delivered it himself. "Some may imagine that a noble quest is at hand. A quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a dragon." He then took a graceful turn around the room and came to stand disturbingly close to the dwarf. "I myself suspect a more prosaic motive... attempted burglary, or something of that ilk."

Thorin refused to even let his mouth twitch at the scrutiny of the elf and instead fixed him with a hostile glare.

"You found a way in," the elf guessed. "You seek that which would bestow upon you the right to rule... the King's jewel, the Arkenstone. It is precious to you beyond measure," he said with a weird smile that made both the prisoners clearly uncomfortable. "I understand that. There are gems in the mountain that I too desire. White gems bound in a necklace, of pure starlight."
Arya's eyes flickered to the dwarf. His countenance only showed that he was well aware of the gems the elf was referring to. The Ranger's shoulders sagged in resignation. The Elvenking desired these gems, Thorin was obsessed with finding the Arkenstone—two kings in a room arguing over jewels... She'd be damned if that ever ended well.

"I offer you my help," Thranduil said with a gracious, if hardly there, bow of his head. "I will let you go, only if you but return what is mine."

Arya barely held herself back from crying out that he'd have whatever he wished as long as he set them free. Then she remembered that she was not at liberty to make such exclamations. Anxiety ate away at her gut like termites eating into wood. Her gaze alternated between the two kings, wanting to shout at the dwarf to do the obvious and accept such a generous offer and spare them all the trouble.

"A favour for a favour," Thorin pointed out, beginning to pace back and forth.

"You have my word," Thranduil reassured. "One king to another."

And if there was a perfect example of bad decision-making, that'd be it.

Arya barely managed to get a vowel out when Thorin, all dormant rage and fury that finally found a crack to vent, erupted.

"I would not trust you to honour your word should the end of all days be upon us!"

Whatever hope for freedom there was, Arya had just watched it fly out of the proverbial window for good. "Don't—" she warned, but he shoved her aside.

Her eyes shut in agitation as he spun around and the rant continued, "You lack all honour!"

His mind registered movement in his peripheral vision—the Captain moving at full throttle towards him with a hand clenched around the hilt of her dagger. Before he had time to let the image soak in and engender reaction, his view was blocked by handfuls of black hair.

The Ranger had stepped between them with a palm raised chest-high, calling for calm and peace. "And that's as close as you get," she said benignly, calling her diplomacy to arms, even though it was for a lost cause.

"He insulted the King. He ought to learn to show some respect," the Captain sputtered in contempt. "As you should, for that matter."

Every disposition Arya had for making peace was slowly starting to evaporate. Without blinking, she gave the woman a murderous look, "I give my respect to those who've earned it. To everyone else, I'm civil."

"Move, girl."

She didn't budge as much as a quarter inch. The moment stretched out.

Tauriel made to approach further, her voice now coming out in a hiss, "Move, or you will be moved."

The Ranger's face darkened. She raised her chin just barely, in a manner that, to an outsider, it would seem accidental or innocent, but to her opponent it was enough of a challenge.
Tauriel's gaze was fierce. The elves weren't especially warlike by nature, but as it is, there is an exception to every rule. Tauriel had found that killing put no burden that she couldn't handle in her conscience, especially when the prey was as impudent as this girl, or vexating and disrespectful as the dwarf behind her. In one quick stride she covered the space between herself and the woman.

In an equally swift move the Ranger leaned her head back, avoiding the collision with the incoming fist by a hair's breadth.

"Tauriel!" Thranduil's sharp call reverberated in the hall, and the elf gathered herself from the small surge of anger that built up through her veins. "I believe your attention is needed elsewhere."

Tauriel's heated gaze left cooling embers on its path. With a slight bow of her head the Captain turned away from the King, and hadn't she been an elf she would have definitely stomped out of the hall. An ominous feeling overwhelmed her about these prisoners. Nothing good their presence there heralded for the realm, and the situation in the forest was bad enough already. The confrontation with the spiders back in the forest still had her on pins and needles, for she and her guards had been commanded to clean the land long ago. And now she would have to answer to the King. Needless to say, the day had not dawned fair for her.

Meanwhile, Thorin had a blurry recollection of what had just occurred. Was that the Ranger stepping forth in his defense or was his eyesight failing him due to his age? Either way, the anger was by no means absent, briefly reduced to a simmer under his skin, ready to spring up again at the first opportunity.

Arya turned to him with a severe look as soon as the redhead left the hall. "You've said enough."

"Enough?" the dwarf spat out in disbelief, voice hoarse with rage. "Enough? Do you expect me to be courteous to him? After all that he has done?"

She closed her eyes with a dramatic sigh and stepped aside. No, she would not try to shield him again. If he was asking for it, he'd get it.

"I've seen how you treat your so called friends," Thorin turned back to the Elvenking, pain and fury blazing his eyes. "We came to you once, hopeless and seeking for help, but you... You turned your back on us!" he yelled with all his might and the loathing he could muster. "Imrid amrad ursul!"

Arya had no inkling what that meant, but she was pretty sure it wasn't a compliment on the King's slick hair.

In fact, it brought the latter's rage to the brink of bursting. He leaped forward, his face mere inches away from those of the dwarf and the woman's as he grunted, "Do not talk to me of dragon fire!"

His face suddenly began to deform and reminded Arya of the dream she'd had back in the forest with her father. Only this time, what she saw was very real. The left side of the elf's face was burned, his eye blank and sightless and creepy. It was the first time during this interrogation that she actually recoiled from him in fear.

"I know its wrath and ruin!" Thranduil hissed. "I have faced the great serpents of the North! I had warned your grandfather of what his greed would summon but he would not listen. And you are just like him," he said haughtily. "As for you," he pointed at the woman. "I believe your journey with the dwarves has come to an end. They will stay in my prison, so you have no business here, in this forest. You ought to return to your serving duties back to the West. For this, I am willing to send two of my guards with you to protect you throughout the road—"
"You're not doing this out of concern for my protection!" Arya protested wild-eyed. "You want to be certain that I'll stay away from this forest for good and won't help them escape!"

He pressed a hand over his heart courteously, "It saddens me that you think of my gesture that way."

"Suspicion is, unfortunately, a tool of my trade," she argued, but her tone soon became more quiescent. "Do you not reckon it unjust to imprison all of us, simply because this man, here, refused to comply with your wish to give you a piece of jewelry?"

Thorin's eyes flashed towards her with a heated glare, but she brushed it off for his own sake. She already had a rod in a pickle for him.

"Not at all," Thranduil offered easily. He had tolerated enough for one day. "You are free to leave whenever you want, escorted up to Imladris, or you may stay here in the dungeons with the dwarves until you change your mind."

The Ranger gritted her teeth punishingly. Why all kings were such pains in the arse? Having no regrets about it, she raised her arms to her chest's height and crossed her wrists, encouraging them to tie her up.

The Prince's jaw, following Thorin's example, dropped a little in response. Was she well in her mind? Did she willingly prefer to be imprisoned than get away?

The King motioned two guards to take the dwarf and his son to take her away. With a swift spin he turned his back to them and ascended the stairs to plant himself upon the throne again. "Stay here if you will and rot!" he announced indifferently. "I am patient and I can wait for a change of heart."

Both the dwarf and the human grumbled under their breaths, the start of an interesting conversation through their eyes that would continue down in the dungeons in much louder tones. The two guards grabbed Thorin by the arms, hauling him away from the throne room, and the prince with the woman followed suit.

Thorin had once before been in the Elvenking's Halls, back then as a guest and not a prisoner. He was now starting to realise that there wasn't much difference between the two when it came to Thranduil.

"Why are you doing this?" Legolas suddenly asked as he led her through the long bridges and stairs down to the cells. "You are free to leave."

"Free to leave means to leave alone, not with the escort of guards."

"Still, you chose to stay with them."

She kept her eyes fixed on the small tunnel ahead, not even bothering to face him. "I've made a promise to a friend that I would protect them," was the only information she supplied him with.

He continued to peer curiously at her. "Who is this friend you speak of? Is it one of them?"

Her step almost faltered right then as they entered the dungeons and a head snapped towards her direction. Her heart fluttered painfully at the sight of two hazel-green eyes and she forgot to answer the elf's question. Oh, bollocks. It felt so redeeming all this time that this was shoved in the back of her mind. And now... now that she'd be locked up in a cell for stars know how long, there would be plenty of time to think about it again and again and again.
Even if Legolas partly disagreed with the treatment she was subjected to right now, arguing with his father wouldn't bring any results. He'd already made up his mind to pay another visit to the human soon, his curiosity piqued to no end. He was also curious to know who that friend was that she made a promise to.

A sigh left her mouth as the blond elf gently pushed her inside the cell before turning away and leaving all the prisoners glancing at each other impatiently, in anticipation of good news. Thorin, on the other hand, was thrown into his own cell in a manner anything but kind. Their jailers secured his and the Ranger's cell locks and walked away with the ring of jangling keys in hand, taking all hope with them.

As soon as the guards left an anxious Balin scooted closer to the bars. "Did he offer you a deal?"

Thorin's cell was just as small as the others, no more than a few paces to every direction, and now that he fidgeted around, he positively looked like a nervous worm trying to find a way to save itself from the giant boot that was about to step on it and melt it under the sole.

The moment Thorin repeated the answer he gave to Thranduil, Balin closed his eyes and let a weary sigh. "I wish you hadn't done that," he said half-heartedly, and even Dwalin had the decency to appear a little frustrated.

Thorin scowled.

"A deal was our only hope," the old advisor lamented. "I'm sure your grandfather would be proud for your loyalty, but our burglar might have died trying to get us out of there. If it's all for nothing, then he died for nothing."

"I know," Thorin replied miserably.

"Have you ever considered learning how to compromise every now and then?" Fili said icily. "Just a bit?"

"I am not going to cater to his whims only because he thinks he can frighten us into submission by putting us in prison!" Thorin snapped. "Even then, the last time I saw those gems, they were sitting at the top of the vault. Stars know whether they've been crushed to a thousand pieces with all of Smaug's weight sitting on them."

"That might be a problem," Nori agreed with a thoughtful nod.

Fili side-eyed him and then his uncle. "Yes, well, the more immediate problem is that we're fucked."

"Any ideas as to how we might change that state of affairs?" asked Bofur.

"Only one," Thorin muttered looking up, praying to whomever listened for Bilbo to have gotten away alive to come to their aid.

What drew his attention immediately afterwards was a pair of eyes scalding him alive as their owner stood behind the bars of her own cell, arms crossed and looking as benign as a thunderstorm. To say he was surprised that she hadn't seized the opportunity to walk out of there free would be an understatement. Gandalf had asked her to accompany them and she had accepted, but signed no contract in contrast to the rest of the company. Now she was offered a chance to flee and rejected it. That was... unexpected.

"Arya–" he went to say, but a raised index finger curtly stopped him.
"I am this close," she voiced through clenched teeth, gesturing with two of her fingers to emphasise the proximity, "to severing your testicles. So if you'd please shut up to save me from insanity and spare yourself a castration," her tone became wryer as she ranted on, anger hanging from a thread, "it would be really appreciated."

"What's all this about?" Bofur questioned. "What did ye mean before that we left you behind? Weren't ye with us all the time?"

Fili stepped in before she would explode, "We thought she was dead when we were freed from the webs so we left her there," he said quietly. "You had already moved ahead."

It was the first time so far that truthful looks of guilt spread on the dwarves' faces, even on some of those who found her disagreeable. Yet people hardly ever change.

"We were trying to save ourselves," Gloin justified, "how could we notice who was coming along? We even lost one." He had the nous to say the last sentence very low and not mention Bilbo's name.

Her eyes immediately flashed to him and, numbly, she struggled to hold her temper back. "Oh, so this is my fault?" she snapped. "Do remind me, who was originally very inclined to leave the path and search for some bloody lights, and who was running after you like a madman to bring you back?"

Over the past months Kili had got to know all her expressions that forebode a fit of rage. Some of them were enough to frighten even Dwalin into submission, and her current one was of that variety. He was undecided as to whether it'd do anything if he were in there with her to try and keep her calm before the entire Realm heard them, or if he was perfectly content that there were iron bars separating them. The rest of the company would, most likely, unanimously choose the second.

"Gentlemen, I tried to help you. I honestly did. But so far you've been the whiniest, most obstinate bunch I've met in my life. I've travelled halfway across the bloody world to be your guide. Whenever you needed help, I was there to offer it. When the road got difficult, I tried to give a piece of advice. Most of it you defied and we found ourselves in the brick of death every damn time. And what do I get for that? Imprisonment!"

The pounding of palms against the iron bars was unmistakeable.

"Ary–"

"Did I sound like I was finished?" she barked and whoever was that went to speak, shut his mouth. "I never asked for gratitude. My only wish is to be free and not locked up in a bloody dungeon just because your dearest king was unable to hold his tongue and make a bloody deal!"

Kili sighed heavily. Regrettably, he had to give it to her. She was right in nearly every aspect.

"Alas," she continued, sarcastically mimicking Thorin's voice, "what would be the wisest thing to do to save all my comrades and a ragged Ranger from prison? What would be the best course of action to gain time and a helping hand from the elves, seeing as Durin's day will soon be upon us? But, of course, insult the Elvenking and refuse to cooperate by giving him a bloody jewel! Because that will solve everything!"

Her voice positively echoed to the most distant corners of the underground halls. The iron bars shivered and creaked as she struck them again with vengeance.

"I've had it!" she yelled furiously. "I've had it with eternally suspicious, averse to anything that has to do with mental efficiency mules such as yourselves!" These were the final words as she walked
away from them, giving a last kick at the bars and mumbling something like 'bloody dwarves'.

As she retreated to the dark corner of her cell weariness took over and she sank onto the bench like a plank. For a brief moment she did consider the idea of leaving the company there to rot, as the Elvenking so elegantly put it, to return home to her duties. But her conscience wouldn't stop nagging her for the rest of her life if she did that. Neither would the wizard. And she didn't know which of the two was worse.

Chapter End Notes

Holo in ennyn = Close the gate
Man i eneth lin? = What is your name?
Est Arya in Dúnedain = She is Arya of the Dúnedain
Istannen le ammen = You are known here
And the Khuzdul phrase of the chapter: Imrid amrad ursul = Die a death of fire

Happy New Year to everyone!
The unbearable lightness of the Elves

Several days dragged by since the moment they were locked up in Thranduil's dungeons, and each wasted minute scraped painfully against Arya's nerves as it passed. She had been constantly pondering on whether it was prudent to accept the Elvenking's offer and scuttle from Mirkwood and back to her duties as soon as possible, or remain true to her word and stay with the dwarves; even if that meant staying locked up in a cell.

After Fili's unsuccessful attempt to free himself by trying to break the lock with a small knife that he had hidden within his underclothes close to a very sensitive area and the elves had failed to find, almost everyone practically gave up hope that they would get to see the sun again. Even Thorin, who held hope that Bilbo was alive, had grown gloomier than usual from his despair. The elves had heard the noise Fili's knife made as it scratched the insides of the lock and immediately took it away from him, proclaiming threats that all of them would be placed in cells even deeper down the caverns. In the end they were spared the new cells, but due to this incident and after the Captain's severe orders, all the prisoners had the outer layers of their clothes removed and were searched anew for any other carefully hidden weapons. Thus, everyone had now remained in their tunics and trousers. But it was almost halfway through September and an autumn chill was prominent mainly during the night, making them something less than comfortable.

On the bright side of the confining experience, the food the elves offered was adequate enough. At least, for the Ranger; her appetite was quite sated throughout the day. Of course, the dwarves hardly agreed to that. Most of them initially refused to accept the plate of food that was given to them, but when hunger became throbbing, they devoured the whole portion without a word.

Only one of the dwarves had pushed his need for food aside. He had not eaten properly in days, weeks even if he counted in the time they had spent in Mirkwood, and the effects were becoming more and more noticeable. His body had thinned out more. He barely looked like a dwarf now; more like a slender human a few sizes smaller than normal both in height and weight. Their captors fed the company well enough, but Kili seldom ate what was given to him. Sometimes he took only two bites of the bread and did not touch the food at all, sometimes he left the whole of it untouched. And although his stomach was grumbling, he was paying no heed to it, since the only things consuming his mind and body were thoughts, images and feelings; thoughts about the situation the whole company had been thrown into and if there was a possible way for them to escape it, and images that tortured him during his sleep and showed his brother, uncle and his beloved mother in a very bad state. Of course, the moment he woke from his troubled sleep, his brother and his uncle were there in the cells with him, alive and safe. He dearly hoped his mother was well, too. The feelings that nagged his heart naturally involved the previous three persons, although now a fourth one had been added to them.

That person was placed in the cell right opposite of his, next to his brother's. His eyes never strayed from it, all the time trying to discern the outline of her figure that barely came to light. Most of the time she was curled up in a ball, perched upon the small bench andhid herself in the shadows. Kili did not hear her speak to anyone of them or the elves since her furious outburst. Numerous times he had called her name, whispered to her when everyone else was either asleep or pretended to be, yet none of these times had she responded.

He did not know why he made all that effort to get her to talk to him. He did not know whether it was because he had missed the sound of her voice, even if it would be angry, or because he needed to discuss a particular matter with her—which particular matter was marked as highly unmentionable, especially to her. Still, he needed to get it out of his system, for it would soon become unbearable for
his mind and soul. He hated to admit it but, yes, his brother might actually be right about something.

It was still dark above, the sky coloured with a hue of light blue that marked the early hours of morning, and snores came from most of the cells in a quiet choir. Only the Ranger was awake, although with eyelids shut, and tapped her fingers on the wooden bench with a steady rhythm. It hardly did any good to her taut nerves. It felt like a beast was trapped in a cage inside her and didn’t know how to free itself.

"Oh wait," a voice in her head commented dryly, "you actually are trapped."

It was going to be another long day; same as yesterday and the four days before that. Numerous times she was visited by the blond elf, who was trying to coax her into talking, though little success did he have. She learned his name, learned that he was Thranduil's son, and also learned that he was aware of her true identity. No further information was shared, but his visits had increased in frequency. Every time he inquired why she did not accept his father's offer to leave and every time he was rewarded with the same answer as the first time he'd asked. He also showed concern for her sleeping habits, because whenever he happened to be there, she was always awake.

The present day wasn't going to be much different either.

"And how are you today?" the Prince's smooth voice suddenly twittered behind the bars.

Still keeping her eyes closed, she didn't even bother to turn in his direction. "Languidly decomposing, thank you for your concern," she mumbled quietly. Her voice sounded quite hoarse due to its disuse the past days.

The hint of a smile made the tips of his mouth curl upwards. "I believe you could use refreshment," he gestured towards her tattered clothes.

"The King shall not be pleased if I leave the cell without his permission."

"Yes, I am very aware of that," he said calmly, inserting the keys to the lock and opening the door. "Come."

Legolas doubted his father would give much attention and offer the elementary treatment a lady should get, especially when said lady was travelling with a group of dwarves, had blatantly refused his offer to leave them there and instead chose to be locked up in a cell. Still, his father might be the King, but he was the Prince and had some power in his hands as well. The least he could do for her was to have the maids arrange a bath and bring some new clothes for her. He knew that humans were not as resilient as the elves and the autumn chill probably had taken its toll on her, seeing as her current garment was rather thin, covered in blood and practically a tatter.

Reluctantly she stood up and took the arm he offered, debating whether the gesture was out of courtesy or fear that she would sweep off to the dungeons, grab the keys and free the dwarves; hardly a well-thought plan. The elves would catch them in no time.

As they strolled through the bridges and halls, Arya carefully took in every detail of the space around her, trying to memorise the route from the dungeons up to the palace in case it was needed in the future. Later she noticed a small commotion and high activity in a path that led to a hall from, as she figured out, probably the kitchens.

Legolas thought that she was observing the numerous elves bustling about the great hall which was in fact a large clearing, and carried trays of food and jugs of wine. "We are celebrating Mereth-en-Gilith tonight," he explained.
All the elves seemed to her so carefree and joyful now that a large feast was about to take place and they would have the chance to laud their love for the stars, while the company was condemned in the cells. Arya felt envy. Not because she would like to take part in the feast; oddly enough, she'd much rather sleep in Mirkwood with those eyes watching her for the entire night than being locked up in a cell. Again the burning dilemma was raised. She could be free if she accepted the King's offer. And again guilt swallowed her. She would not stay true to her word if she left.

Meanwhile, the prince was pointing upwards to a large opening that allowed excellent view at the sky and the stars during the night, and babbled on about tonight's celebration, "...isn't it wonderful?"

It was the only sentence she actually caught from his little speech as her eyes drifted back to his smiling face and expectant look. "I could not be more ecstatic."

His smile did not fall, although he tried to adopt a serious expression. He had to admit she was quite amusing. "Pardon my word, but you're very sarcastic for a lady."

"So people tell me," she replied wearily, "and sometimes I feel really bad about it. But then everyone has to be good at something, so I have certain standards to maintain." They remained silent for a little while after this, until her eyes darted up to him in suspicion and her mouth betrayed her. "How come you and your father know who I am? My family struggled to keep that knowledge secret."

He didn't even flinch. "Admittedly, little care do we have about matters beyond our borders, for we already have enough troubles within them," he said gingerly. "Yet we still try to keep our relations with the rest of the Elven Kingdoms intact. My father had been informed of your family members' existence shortly after each of their births and he, in turn, has told me. People of your line are considered friends of the Elves. And we, the Elves of the Woodland Realm, ought to offer help to our friends should fate ever bring one of you to this part of the world. Of course, travelling with a band of dwarves did not sit well with my father," he casually pointed out, "ergo the offer he made to you."

Arya shook her head thoughtfully as the information was stored in her head. "Does anyone else beside you and your father know who I am?"

"No." He was instructed by his father that there was no need for someone else to learn such a piece of information. The other guards and Tauriel only knew her name, not the title that the name entailed. "Worry not, my lady," he reassured. "Your secret is safe."

After that they did not speak more and instead opted to walk in silence, until they reached a room where two elf maids had drawn a bath and patiently waited for her arrival. As politely as she could, she repeatedly reassured that their help was completely unnecessary. The two maids remained firmly planted on their feet, though, until the Prince motioned them to leave the woman alone. He followed suit immediately after, announcing that he would return later to escort her back to her cell.

Kili had been awake during the whole exchange between the blond elf and Arya, and was ready to protest when he took her away. His fingers had forcefully grabbed the bars of his cell and he had his heated gaze fixed on them as they ascended the stairs and eventually stepped out of his sight.

"Calm down," the tired voice of his brother whispered and made his head sharply turn towards him. "I doubt he'll do any harm to her."

"Better not for his own sake," the brunet growled under his breath. If she missed even a hair on her head upon her return, Kili was positive he'd demolish the iron bars and shove the elf into the river with the very strong current that ran below the dungeons.
The peace of the first hours of the day now that almost everyone had let weariness wash over them and had fallen asleep, despite the fact that they were in prison, rendered Fili unable to lift himself off the bench he so far occupied. "Alas, why this unease, brother?" his voice came muffled under the forearm that was resting on his face. "I thought you did not care about her as you've repeatedly told me, despite the almost snogging incident back in the forest."

"Shut your mouth!" Kili snapped through clenched teeth. "Thorin might hear-"

"Thorin is asleep," the blond said casually. "Seventy seven years and you are still unable to discern uncle's snoring?" He feigned a disappointed huff.

Kili was on pins and needles since the burning topic was mentioned. "Hey, Fili..." He was answered with a humphing sound. "Perhaps... You may have been right all along."

"Right about what?" his brother mumbled wearily.

"I-" Kili muttered. "I may 'ave... eelin... for 'er."

That was more than enough to cause Fili to fall on the floor from the surprise. He abruptly tilted his head at an angle that was eloquent of casual menace. "What did you just say?" His lips curled in a smile when his brother let a low grumble. "I heard you say something that I'm extremely interested to hear again," he insisted. "Please, do me the honour."

Kili took a deep breath. "I said," he grunted hesitantly, "I may have... stirrings."

"Stirrings?" his brother shot up. "Aye, stirrings."

"You mean to say feelings?"

"No, no, no," Kili rushed to deny, "not feeli–" Then he noticed his brother's dully pursed lips and huffed in resignation. "Alright, feelings, damn you. I have feelings for her, satisfied?" It felt as though a burden was lifted from his shoulders the moment he finally said it.

"Well," the blond exclaimed in a rejoicing tone, his face now at a fully childish beam, "butter my rump and name me a biscuit!"

"Fili!" his brother exploded, a bright red colouring his face, motioning him to keep his voice low, for a snoring seemed to falter due to the loud volume.

"Oh, shut it," the older waved off. "You are relieved that you finally admitted this as much as I am."

"I don't know what is bloody wrong with me... She haunts my thoughts, my dreams even... I can't–" the younger whispered in utter despair. "Remember when I saw her bathe?" he asked urgently, shoving his face in his hands, and the blond nodded in absolute amusement. "I'm still trying to ingest that piece of rabbit I was eating; it went down unchewed—I think I can still feel it bouncing inside my stomach!"

"Truth be told," Fili mused between chortles, "I never thought I'd live to see the day you would admit to love her without a little nudge from me."

The brunet sharply turned his head towards him with a questioning look. It was true that he wanted and needed Arya with a force of passion that was just as difficult to control as it was to deny, but this had nothing to do with love, right? And Kili wasn't ready to lie about being in love, not even to
silence his dearest brother. "Your imagination is worse than that of a young lady's," he noted. "I may have admitted to have feelings for her, but I never mentioned anything about love. How can I be certain that this is not a mere infatuation?"

"This is where I, your incredibly intelligent older brother, come in to put some sense into your fat head, and give name to those feelings you have for her."

Kili knew that dwarves only loved once in their lives. And now hearing that those feelings might have something to do with... that sentiment, left a bad taste in his mouth. He'd rather have the whole thing remain a debatable mystery than getting tricked into jumping from a potentially simple admiration, or even physical attraction, to something as strong as love at a moment's notice.

He looked at his brother in askance. "Are you sure this is what love is like?"

The blond had seen that question coming from miles away. He stroked the little braids of his mustache idly, taking his time to answer. "Oh, brother..." he scoffed, "if only you could see the way you look at her. It's a cross between murderous instincts and giving everyone within a mile's radius sugar intolerance."

Before the door of the room was closed Arya had caught a glimpse of two guards standing on either side of it and heard the unmistakable sound of a key being turned inside the lock. She scoffed. They guarded her like hawks, despite the prince's claims that she was considered a friend.

Not wasting much time, she stripped herself off the clothes, removed the old bandages that covered her now half-mended back and lowered herself into the warm water. It was soothing to say the least, redemptive almost. However not so redemptive as to save her from the blasted contemplation that tagged along. Her hands scrubbed the filth off her body with practiced movements, paying more attention to the onslaught of thoughts than to such a mundane task as cleansing oneself.

She could not explain how it happened, or when. She could not pinpoint the exact moment it started and the further she pondered on it, the more solid the realisation became that she was already in the middle before she knew it had even begun. As if she didn't have enough problems already. Although everyone would rush to say that this hardly was a problem and having such feelings for someone was very sweet. Funny thing is, her very body simultaneously liked and rejected those feelings.

Beren and Lúthien, Tuor and Idril, her parents, and most recently her cousin and Arwen; apparently it run the family. Was there any chance she would get away from it? Of course not.

It wasn't that he did not live up to her expectations or anything of that sort. He could live up to the expectations of any woman across the world—although there was a high chance to drive her crazy at first. He was like a storm; a summer storm, fierce and untamable. And he was kind, loving, and protective.

Her head slumped forward in her hands and she groaned in frustration. She was pathetic. All she wanted to do was to get fully under water and let the water drown all these thoughts; maybe herself, too.

She had absolutely no idea what to do with this newfound insight into her feelings. Naturally, that only spelled doom. It seemed better for everyone to keep her mouth shut —no, no, sealed— about them, unless she wished to get lynched from a mob.

Seated there in the small tub with arms tightly hugging her knees close to her chest, it felt like her thoughts had manifested, twirling around the room. It was unbelievably real, claustrophobic even.
"Be quiet," a voice begged next to her ear, feeling her grip on his hand loosening slightly. "It's me."

The hand was drawn away and she swiftly turned to face the intruder, splashing drops of water around and panting lightly. "Bilbo!" she exclaimed in mild shock, rather unmindful of the state she was in.

The hobbit was standing next to the tub, with his face turned away from her and looking at the wall. A faint blush was spread on his cheeks despite having seen nothing but her neck and upwards, but he still regarded it as a very private moment in which he had invaded. Nonetheless, it was the only opportunity he had found to speak to her, so he did not give much thought to it.

"No teaching the teacher!" she scolded in a low voice, still panting from the fright he gave her. "How did you get in here? I did not see you anywhere when they captured- Bilbo, we thought you were dead!"

"I sneaked in the halls right after you entered." He still had not turned to face her, although certain about the question of 'how' in her eyes. He wasn't so eager to reveal it, so he quickly went on. "I also happened to hear a discussion between the King and that redhead elf. They let you go and you chose to stay?" he looked at her askance. "Why?"

Arya swiveled around and fixed her gaze on the bubbles on the water, carefully rearranging them to cover herself entirely when she realised the reason he avoided to look directly at her. "I promised Gandalf that I would see to you reaching the Mountain safely."

"But you didn't sign the contract," Bilbo mumbled thoughtfully. "Nothing binds you with the company."

She shifted uncomfortably. "I am not saying that what I chose to do is wise. I don't even know if accepting to come along from the beginning was wise. Yet now the mistake is made and I have to face the consequences of my actions, however poor they might be. A promise is a promise."

Bilbo waved his hand impatiently, brushing the topic aside, feeling glad that she was still there with them. Oddly enough, without reason or rhyme, her presence was like a balm to his anxiety. "I think I've found a way to get you out of here," he whispered. "Though I need more time to look into the details."

She was staring expectantly at him, waiting to be told about his plan.

"Now is not the time," he said urgently. "They might suspect something if a bath takes you so long." She sighed and hesitantly nodded in agreement. "I'll come down to the cells when--"

They were promptly interrupted by a small thud on the door and a voice asking whether she was ready. The hobbit nervously scampered away from the tub to give her some privacy, almost admiring how unruffled she sounded when she apologised for taking her sweet time to dress up.

Being hidden behind a curtain as she hastily donned the clothes they'd brought for her, Arya failed to see Bilbo vanishing into thin air the moment the door opened. The two elf maids had reckoned it wiser to barge in and help her dress rather than waiting outside, giving the hobbit the chance he needed to sneak out.
had missed several beats to be considered functional anymore. His mind was reeling with the impact of his brother's words and he was fighting to hang onto any form of coherency, unable to grasp the concept of having feelings for someone akin to those most husbands had for their wives and vice versa. If that was true, this was a fight he was condemned to lose before he'd even begun to fight. The thought alone had him physically ill; it was his brother's deep sigh that brought him in contact with reality again.

"Once you've given your heart, it is given," Fili said with a faint shrug. "You have no second heart to give to another."

At the very first stages of their acquaintance Kili had barely thought her pretty; merely tolerable were his exact words. Several events occurred after that; the trolls, their sword fight, the warg attack where she ran to save him, their short stay in Rivendell... and there began the downfall. He recalled the moment he and Fili spotted her after she was released from the healing houses, conversing with that man in the shadows, hair wobbling over her shoulders, her solemn voice coming out in whispers. Her grim look added an unearthly splash to the scenery; quite unconventional quality of hers to admire, the grim look, but it was amongst those that attracted him—he could not tell why.

Had they not been acquainted with each other the way they had and should he happen to accidentally stumble upon her in the Wild and she looked at him just like in that moment in Rivendell, Kili had to admit he'd be slightly besotted with her, despite her non dwarven nature. But fate had other plans and, when the dices were rolled, another path was chosen for him to meet and befriend her. Yet in this scenario, with every obstacle, the odd feelings grew stronger and stronger.

It took this trail of thoughts involving all these obstacles to make him understand that it was no mere infatuation or physical attraction. Mahal forbid if it was the second—he would never forgive himself for thinking about her that way. He took a few minutes to ponder on it. No. No, he would never even dare to think of compromising her honour, regardless of what images his subconscious created. The sound of her laughter and her just looking at him with those dark eyes and smiling, these were all he wanted, all he needed to be content.

Just like that, he was sold; defeated; wretched even, if he were so miserably in love that he considered a simple smile of hers able to make him incandescently happy. Bloody hell... was he, the cynical touchstone of his entire family, actually a romantic? Oh well. There goes a reputation falling apart.

One thing was for sure, though; Thorin would find a way to decapitate him even if cells and iron bars separated them. His mother would probably have an objection or two —perhaps a dozen— on the matter. But dealing with his mother when and if the time ever came for her to learn this would be a task far easier than dealing with his uncle. He pondered on the various death scenarios that might await him in case he made the feelings he held for Arya known to Thorin. Without doubt or exaggeration, Kili was dead meat.

"So what do I do now?" he asked with trepidation.

Fili shrugged, "You may as well tell her how you feel—"

The younger almost choked on his saliva. "Are you mental?" he blurted out. "She is a force of nature! You don't just go and tell her how you feel!"

"Why?" his brother asked calmly. "What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"She could kill me!"
The blond chuckled under his breath, sensing the maturity of the discussion lower a few levels. "Be a real man and tell her."

After a few more very long, lucrative minutes of pushing Kili came to his right mind and decided to tell her. He was musing on the right time to do so —probably during the night when the company would be asleep and no prying ears would spy on them— when he saw the blond elf descending the stairs and escorting her back to her cell. He barely suppressed the smile his mouth curled up to upon noticing that she was much cleaner than before. She was also wearing new clothes, odd ones, like those the blond and the rest of the elves sported. Had he not known her, he would have definitely mistaken her for one of them.

Arya entered the cell and watched as the Elf Prince locked the door once again, but now felt strangely optimistic. Her hopes were high that Bilbo would succeed into getting them out of here and she wouldn't have to be send back to Eriador, nor break the promise to Gandalf.

She greeted the elf with a light bow of her head and waited impatiently until he walked away from the dungeons. Taking two cautious steps towards the bars, she quietly whistled to notify the others. When most of them drew closer to the bars of their respective cells, she broke the happy news that Bilbo was alive and thriving, and that he was forming a plan to free them.

For the first time after a few days, the dwarves felt hope rekindling inside their hearts and were in unusually high spirits for people that were currently in prison. Although, they saw to not show their good mood when the elves brought the usual plate of food to them and arouse suspicions.

Only the Ranger's good mood was short term. She coerced her eyes not to meet the dwarf's on the opposite cell, but every attempt she made to banish him from her thoughts made him more real, more vital, more necessary to her than ever. The thought that she ought to suppress these feelings for everyone's good crippled her with pain. For she might be one of Men, but as the annoying little voice in her mind proclaimed, her heart had the malicious tendency to follow the Elves' example and hold such feelings for only one in the slightly prolonged life she was blessed with.

Brilliantly.

She pinched the bridge of her nose. She could feel a headache coming and had a sneaking suspicion that she should have confiscated a bottle of wine from those the elves in the great hall carried when she had the chance. It could be a nice way to befuddle her head so as to live through the rest of the day.

Although Tauriel was Captain of the Guard, she never held guard duty in high esteem. It was simply too idle for her vigorous temperament. There was nothing to do down in the cells besides leisurely stroll around, watch the prisoners, and try not to get bored. Most of the time she was able to avoid it, it being a matter of proper scheduling after all, but she wouldn't like her soldiers whispering conspiratorially behind her back. So it was best that she took the occasional shift, even if it always ended up with her nerves getting jittery. This time it was worse, though, for the shift happened to concur with her favourite festivity of the year and she was bound not to be a part of it for a considerable amount of time. Surely, she held the title of the Captain, but all the same she was an elf. And she would prefer to celebrate the love she held for the stars along with the rest of the realm, rather than guarding a bunch of dwarves and a human.

Her feet soundlessly descended the stairs as she checked each and every one of the cells that were occupied, their residents probably having dozed off for the night, and she inwardly prayed for the shift to come to an end so she could be dismissed from her duty. Her eyes fell on the single other awaken person there, who was a dwarf that quietly sat in his cell and lightly tossed something up and
waited till it landed back in his palm.

Myriads of thoughts were swirling around Kili's mind, the most prominent of them being the way in which he would express his feelings to Arya. Trying to dissolve his nervousness, he was fiddling with the rune stone his mother had given him—one of the few things that had remained on him after the elves' thorough second search—and noticed with the corner of his eyes the red-haired elf standing in front of his cell.

For mere seconds and with a very curious gaze, the Captain observed the young dwarf and the small stone he played with. He did not seem as miserable as the rest of his comrades, to be sure. He didn't seem like a proper dwarf either; his beard was barely grown compared to the others' and he was rather thin. Someone could call him quite good looking too, though in the dwarven society she did not know how his uncommon mien would be perceived. She had neither realised that her feet had ceased their pace in front of his cell, nor that he had noticed her standing there.

"Enjoying the view?" he asked with a hint of smugness in his voice, not bothering to face her.

But he was not the only prisoner awake. Lying on the bench, Arya's head almost slumped against the wall and her eyes made an impressive roll when she caught his words. "You could at least be a little more creative," she thought dully, recalling the scene of him telling the exact same thing to her back at Beorn's. "You cannot use the same line on every woman you meet."

Tauriel was startled by the dwarf's smooth voice and quickly wiggled her head to shoo the thoughts that nagged her. "The stone in your hand," she demanded pointedly, "what is it?"

Kili inwardly smiled. Now that was a chance to add some fun in these infinite, monotonous minutes they spent in the dungeons and take his mind off the matter than burned it. "'Tis a talisman. A powerful spell lies upon it," he mumbled darkly. "If any but a dwarf reads the runes on the stone, he will be forever cursed." He suddenly put the stone in front of her face and the elf flinched back, a bit startled.

With wide eyes Tauriel went to move away. Weird exchanges with the prisoners was exactly one of the reasons she avoided guard duty.

"Or not," the dwarf's lighthearted tone made her stop in her tracks and turn to look at him again. "Depending on whether you believe in that kind of thing. It's just a token," he chuckled and she could not hold back from cracking a hesitant smile as he fiddled it in his fingers. "A rune stone. My mother gave it to me, so I'd remember my promise."

The elf was intrigued. "What promise?"

Arya had settled for burning holes in the stony ceiling with the force of her searing gaze as the conversation between Kili and the redhead went on. Just by the tone in his voice, she could guess the expression on his face every moment that passed; most of the time she was certain that he was smiling. And that, she did not like at all.

"That I would come back to her," he replied. "She worries. Thinks I'm reckless."

"Are you?"

He wasn't reckless; not even remotely, compared to certain females who currently resided in the cell on his opposite. "Nah," he brushed off with a beaming, playful smile.

This made the Ranger's stomach flutter and heave, and not in a good way. She pressed her palms over her face and then savagely rubbed her throbbing temples, feeling the headache that tortured her
head since early midday increasing in strength.

Just then, Kili tossed the stone in the air. But it bounced away from the cell and rolled towards the edge of the rock with a tendency to fall into the vast network of waterfalls below. It would, if it wasn't for the elf's foot to step on it and prevent its condemned route. She reached down to take it in her hands, with an almost wistful expression on her face.

The gesture startled the dwarf who immediately jerked upright and grabbed the iron bars of his cell, watching as she examined the stone under the light that was cast from above. She seemed harmless enough and he trusted her not to confiscate it. "Sounds like quite the party you're having up there," he mumbled thoughtfully.

"It is Mereth-en-Gilith," the Captain turned to him with raised eyebrows and a light smile, "the Feast of Starlight. All light is sacred to the Eldar but we, Wood Elves, love best the light of the stars."

What is it with elves and stars? Every time Arya talked about them, she was truly delighted. She had explained to him the meaning they held to her mother's race, but most of the time he was too busy listening just to the sound of her voice or her occasional laughter when her brothers played a part in the story, rather than the actual story. Maybe it had to do with women and stars, he concluded. "I always thought it is a cold light," he mumbled and shrugged, "remote and far away."

"It is memory!" the redhead sounded slightly offended. "Precious and pure..."

She gulped and Kili sensed that something was wrong. Had he touched a sore point?

Tauriel studied the strange dwarf. He did not seem as bad as the old tales described, or her previous encounters with people of his race taught her. Perhaps their appearances and views marked an unbridgeable chasm between their races, but they might not be so different after all. This dwarf for example, he too had a mother who wanted her son's safety, just as every other mother in the world would wish for her child.

"Like your promise," she continued in earnest and handed the stone back to him, who examined her face for a brief second and seemed ready to smile. He didn't, though. "I have walked there sometimes," she whispered with wonder and her eyes strayed upwards, where tiny specks of shimmering white light seemed to idly float through the night air and their reflection made the rippling waters of the stream below shine bright. "Beyond the forest and up into the night. I have seen the world fall away and the white light forever fill the air."

Now, he did smile. "I saw a fire moon once." He considered it only fair to share a story with her since she had just shared one with him. "It rose over the pass near Dunland, huge," he emphasised the word in the way a storyteller would, in order to hook his audience. It definitely seemed to work as the elf's interest was piqued. "Red and gold it was, and filled the sky," he added. "We were escorting some merchants from Ered Luin, they... they were trading in silverware for furs."

That was it. Maybe her headache had no intention of going away, but Arya would fight it tooth and nail. She would lay siege until it relented. With a not at all graceful movement she bounced off the bench and came to stand in front of the door. Her hands clutched the iron bars painfully hard when she saw that the redhead had planted herself on the stairs next to Kili's cell and listened to him, engrossed in his narration.

"We took the Greenway south and kept the mountains to our left," Kili went on with his picturesque description of the Wild, his eyes fixed somewhere away from the elf, on the stony floor, as if he was reliving the memory. "And then it appeared... this huge fire moon, lighting our path—"
"Excuse me?" Arya cut in and the two heads turned at her direction, obviously startled. "Yes, over here. The occupants of these cells, meaning me as well, are trying to sleep and your little chatter does not help at all. We're hearing this," she said with a low grumble and budged the fingers of one hand as if they were moving lips, "when what we all want to hear is this," she then pressed the fingers together as though they were sealed.

The Captain's face heated up in embarrassment. Indeed, it had been the first time that she found her shift in the dungeons not what someone would necessarily call fun, but definitely interesting. This brunet dwarf was not growling and hissing curses in Khuzdul as the others did every time one of the guards approached their cells. This one was more communicative.

Kili blurted out a barely audible chuckle, an unprecedented amount of amusement washing through him as he heard the vibrating strands of irritation enhancing her dry tone. He had missed her wry comments, even if this time it was addressed to both him and the elf. He wondered why Arya had taken a dislike to the redhead, for she seemed decent enough. She even had a conversation with him, her prisoner. That certainly marked her as better than the rest of the guards, who were glaring down at him and the rest of the company with contempt every time they visited the cells.

He took a step back and slumped down on the bench with a small sigh, while Tauriel turned to face the woman. Green eyes and dark eyes met for a few seconds in a silent clash, both cold and unyielding; until the Captain decided that her nightshift down in the dungeons had come to an end and swept out of there rather eagerly, heading to attend the feast.

The Ranger's lethal gaze followed her until she disappeared from her sight and then fell on the opposite cell, where the dwarf prince was perched upon the wooden bench, squatting and with eyes downcast as they stared at the stone inside his palm. "Oi, mate," she called and then gave a shake of her head, pointing towards his pelvis, "please keep the mouse into the house."

Kili was torn between going furious or doubling up with laughter. "What?" he blurted out, pupils dilated almost from one side of the eye to the other.

Her hands were still clasping the bars of her cells like pliers. That much was obvious now that her knuckles had turned white. "What I'm saying is," she growled through clenched teeth, "I highly doubt that trying to woo the Captain will gain you or everyone else freedom. Be patient and wait for Bilb."

"I wasn't trying to woo her!" he protested. "I was just discussing with her!"

"Well, next time perhaps you should limit your remarks to the decoration," she snapped quietly and threw a glare at him.

She then turned around and heavily stomped to the bench of her cell, plopping down on it with a small thud. Her eyes remained pinned on the shadowy form of the dwarf on the opposite cell, though, and she felt something tugging in her heart, as if countless nails constricted it forcefully.

Kili tucked the rune stone back in his pocket and resolved to sit quietly in his cell with his gaze fixed on her. He watched her tap her fingers angrily on the bench, with curt movements that spoke of the depth of her irritation. It seemed quite odd to see her act so moody; he had seen her moody before, truth be told, but now something had changed. Now there was some sort of emotion into her suppressed ire, he could sense it somehow. It felt like there was a dark grey cloud hovering over her head, threatening to pour all its gloom upon her.

He did not like seeing her that way. He took a deep breath and then exhaled, determined to finally reveal the flame that burned his insides. "Arya, there is something you need to know about..." he said
softly and her sad eyes came to land on his, "about me. I doubt there is a way to tell you this, but I have–"

His voice faded when he heard steps, and her eyes darted upwards in alert when the outline of a moving shadow formed on the floor between their cells. Kili cursed everything in close range that someone interrupted him at such a moment and frowned deeply as the tall figure of that someone descended the stairs and came to stand in front of her cell.
"And what was this all about?" Legolas inquired as soon as his friend exited the cells. He had intended to send a guard and relieve her from her shift earlier, for he was aware how much she wanted to attend the feast. But as he stood in the shadows above the cells and watched what had transpired, he felt a small strand of worry tugging at his heart.

Tauriel stopped on the spot. "What do you mean?" she asked in confusion. "You know very well that guard duty is not my favourite pastime."

The prince nodded knowingly, but his look turned gloomy. "The King would not be pleased to hear that the Captain of the Guard has exchanges with one of the prisoners."

She felt a light wave of heat rising up to her cheeks. She could certainly have avoided the current discussion had not she decided to talk to that dwarf. "That was hardly an exchange."

"They are dwarves, Tauriel."

Her inclination for self-defense took over and she turned to him with a stern face. "With a female of Men in their midst," she countered, "who gets far better treatment than what the rules dictate regarding prisoners."

"A bath and warm clothes are the elementary courtesy that should be offered to a woman," Legolas stated, "even if it is our prisoner. And who is certainly not a thief."

Tauriel harrumphed and marched off to attend the feast, while the prince followed minutes later when Nandir arrived to take over the shift.

"The prisoners ought to be asleep and not make noise at such late hour," the tall figure in front of Arya's cell spoke and looked at her and the dwarf on the opposite.

The prince's eyes narrowed at the sight of the elf that interrupted the very important thing he was saying. It was probably one of the extremely limited opportunities he had to tell Arya about his feelings and the bloody guard had barged in right in the moment. Kili suddenly developed distaste for the elves, despite his earlier, quite decent conversation with the redhead Captain.

"Oh," Arya grumbled sarcastically, "does that rule apply to you as well? Because only minutes ago, your Captain was here and seemed very eager to engage in conversation with one of the prisoners."

The elf was caught off-guard. "The Captain can do whatever she deems wise," he said, eyes narrowed in contempt.

The Ranger laughed humourlessly. "Well, that is double standard," she shot back. "How do you expect us to fall asleep, when a comrade of yours babbles on about stars and feasts?"

She had been very upset—not with the sense of worry, but rather that of extreme annoyance—before, when he was talking with the redhead, Kili reckoned. He wondered why she would get irritated by a random small talk. The fact that she might be irritated by the person he was talking to, or the topics that were mentioned failed to pose as good arguments in his mind.
Yet the guard was not to be so easily daunted by a human nobody. "Go to sleep, girl," he ordered.

Kili pursed his lips, trying very hard not to laugh. Oblivious to it, the elf was making severe efforts to push her to her limits.

The guard abruptly turned to face him, leaving the woman momentarily in peace. "Enjoying yourself?" he asked wryly.

The smile barely left the dwarf prince's face as the elf stood there mighty and proud, looking like a teacher that reprimanded his students. "Definitely more than you are," he mumbled in amusement.

The ellon shook his head, then looked upwards, trying to estimate the progress of the night. The stars shone bright in the sky and cast some light through the canopy of trees. The air was relatively clear, spiced with the light scent of the first falling, ruddy leaves of autumn, and the tranquility of the night was disrupted by merry voices and harmonious tunes every now and then. He sighed, for the hour was still early. It would take a long while before his shift would come to an end. And for now, he would have to manage on his own.

Gloomily, he turned to the two awake prisoners. "I want to hear nothing but the sound of running water during my shift," he emphasised. "Then, you are free to annoy the next unfortunate guard who shall replace me."

Arya sighed in frustration, not even knowing why she thought the poor guard to be at fault for her edgy temper, although the thought of apologising to him was gone from her mind as quickly as it entered it. She was in no mood to talk to anyone, let alone apologise. Kili beginning to say something he wanted to tell her was lost somewhere in her thoughts, but she hardly paid any heed to it; reckoned that he could tell it any other time when they would be out of there.

Kili, on the other hand, was not as indifferent as she seemed to be about the fact that he did not manage to tell her what he wanted. The elf's clear orders for them to shut their mouths did not ease his discomfort and only managed to unsettle him further.

But thinking and musing always tires a mind out. Thus, an hour or so later, the dwarf prince was dizzyingly trapped somewhere between sleep and reality. He was wondering how long would it be before Bilbo came up with a plan to free them. His own mind started to make plans about the future, gauging on the various outcomes this quest would have—which might actually be dreams rather than thoughts. Only when the ellon paced by his cell was he drawn out of sleep and his eyes briefly strayed towards the opposite cell. It was pretty weird, but Arya seemed to be actually asleep. She barely budged even an inch, but was facing towards the wall, so Kili could not be entirely sure. He dozed off once more as the guard's steps faded.

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_Darkness swallowed everything. Rain was pouring down as if the plumbing system of the sky was broken down and a howling wind turned any poor soul's unfortunate trek into a dangerous nightmare. An oil lamp or two were the sole sources of light up and down the muddy road, and those weren't much of a use, really, considering they were being swept from one side to the other by the stiff breeze. It was one of those evenings that the dark grey clouds easily gave the false impression of it being the dead of the night; a night cold and windy, the kind that made people anxious to find shelter._

_Undeterred by the foul weather, she soldiered on seeking the desired destination. Rain was not something she disliked, after all. It was the mud her boots were six inches deep in she was not particularly fond of._
The closest inn to settle for the night was a few minutes’ walk down the road, and in her eagerness to take the damnable boots off she found herself standing before the door of the little town's forge, slightly impatient to get on with her business. Entering, she expected the sudden wave of heat to drown her and prepared herself to welcome it. Strangely enough, the room was rather cold. Only a small fire was lit in the large hearth and the embers were already dying down.

She cursed under her breath—it was late. From where she stood right next to a large working table, she caught movement of a shadow in the adjoining room as a figure bustled about rather unhurriedly.

"We are closed," a gruff voice announced.

Her brow furrowed and she whimpered, feeling exhaustion taking over. It had been a very long week and she dearly hoped the smith would be kind enough to make an exception upon counting the coins in the pouch. "I only need you to sharpen a few blades, 'tis all," she said moderately.

The figure that so far was a mystery and did not even grace her with the honour of walking into the room, suddenly stopped moving. She could see it from the shadow on the wall that had stilled on the spot.

With slow steps, courtesy of a man of some—likely—quite advanced years, the owner of the forge entered the room. Her tired gaze examined the shadowed figure and she cringed, assessing how impolite and disrespectful it'd be to ask of him to offer his services considering the lateness of the hour and that of his age.

"What are you doing here?" the gruff voice asked, trembling with anger.

It was accompanied by a light thud when the edge of something wooden clicked on the floor and the man took a step forward with its help—he carried a cane. Her eyes slowly ascended from his feet upwards; hands coarse from hard labour, now wrinkled and wizened, muscle and strength far less than how much they were endowed with in the past. Muffled in a dirty apron up to his neck that was worn over a frayed tunic, he was almost bent double in his endeavour to find shelter from the weight his own shoulders burdened him with, eager to let his cane carry most of it.

Her gaze finally landed on his face. Except for the wrinkles around his eyes, there were full dark circles beneath them, marking a severe lack of sleep that encumbered an already weary body even more. But the hazel brown streaked with green colour of his eyes was so eerily familiar, even if that twinkle in them was lost. All joy, playfulness and warmth they once held was now replaced by sadness, grief, and fury.

It was as if someone had knocked the breath out of her and the cold air of the forge became all sultry and heated again. "Kili?"

The dwarf prince's eyes snapped open at the soft call of his name, jerking him back to reality for good this time. Stretching as he was sprawled on the bench, the meagre two hours of sleep he got weren't even remotely enough to compensate for his weariness. With cautious steps he approached the bars, examining the other cells and their occupants, thinking that his brother was trying to whisper something at him. When his gaze passed by his brother's cell, though, Fili seemed to be napping his troubles away. When his gaze passed by his brother's cell, though, Fili seemed to be napping his troubles away.

Again the panting breath echoed silently in the air and, reflexively, his eyes pinned on the sleeping figure on his opposite.

Was she having a dream with him? For a brief moment he felt the unprecedented urge to make a
giddy little dance of joy, but it was quickly suppressed when the call of his name followed a faint sob. The smile on his face gave up its place to a puzzling frown.

A guard was hurriedly making his way through the crowd, trying to find either the Prince of the King himself, but hadn't too much luck. Another five long minutes passed to find one of them and he approached in haste. "Hîr nin," he called urgently.

Legolas nodded for him to continue, noticing the worried look on his face.

"A small group of orcs was found near the southeastern borders. They were apparently tracking the dwarves we've captured."

The prince stiffened. "Has it been taken care of?"

"Yes, my lord..." The elf hesitated. "The patrol received unexpected warning about the group's whereabouts prior to the invasion."

Legolas's eyebrows shot up. "Warning? From whom?"

"A group of six; they aided the patrol in taking down the orcs." He hesitated again. "They've asked permission to enter the Halls, my lord," he said gingerly. "Two Rivendell Elves and four Rangers."

A deep sigh escaped the prince's throat. He had pretty good inkling as to what was the purpose of the sudden visit. The bothersome feeling that festered his insides all these days had finally manifested. He should have known that they should expect visitors. He did not, however, expect them to show up so soon. With a thoughtful nod he ordered the guard to allow entrance and lead the men directly to the rooms above the cells as discreetly as he could. His father would learn about this in the morrow; there was no need to upset him or the entire realm now.

Tauriel had watched the whole scene from a far corner of the room and swiftly approached him after the guard left. "Is something the matter?"

He simply crossed his arms over his chest, maintaining his subdued composure and shaking his head in a pensive manner. "We have guests from the West."

Creases of sheer perplexity formed on Tauriel's forehead. "The West? Pray," she then huffed in mild exasperation, "are we to receive every Westerling passing through the forest?"

Nandir was passing by the woman's cell when he heard her suffering wheezes.

Arya unconsciously bit down on her fist and she groaned in pain when the skin broke and beads of blood sprouted out. The metallic taste flowed in her mouth and filled her with bitterness as the nightmare went on. It did not continue where it stopped, though. Mere minutes or perhaps even more must have passed in dream time, and the two participants seemed to have entered a flaming argument. Or rather one argued and accused, while the other, dumbfounded, just sat there and listened.

"You dare to appear before me?" the aged Kili spat out resentfully.

A lump was stuck in her throat that she tried to swallow, but failed impressively. "I did not know you worked here," she said, her usually firm voice now reduced to a quivering whisper. "I am sorry--"

"Sorry?" he growled. "A mere apology does not change the past or the fact that, even after all these
years, you still have the nerve to look me in the eye!"

She moved to take a step closer to him, but his raised cane kept her at a reasonable distance. "Please, listen—"

"No!" his voice boomed like the crack of thunder outside. "I heard your excuses all these years ago and I desire not to hear them again."

Her gaze turned downcast and rueful. From the small window on their right, another lightning shone bright in the distance and the loud rumbling that followed seconds later rang in her ears like horns of war. In the fraction of a second that the room was lit up, she managed to take notice of the white strands of hair on his head that once was a lively, warm shade of dark brown.

"You linger here still. Why?" he demanded, strings of burning rage enhancing his already full of disdain voice. "To mock? To admire the state I've ended up to? Or to recite your excuses all over again?"

Her head snapped upwards, looking at him dead in the eye. "They were not excuses," she said firmly, although felt too weak to support it. "I still—"

"But I don't!" he yelled with all the strength his croaky voice could muster. "I never did! And I specifically told you that I do not wish to hear your excuses again."

The grip on his cane tightened and he took a step forward, slowly and with great focus, as if he expected to plummet to the ground any moment now. "Look at me," he scoffed in self-pity. "Old before my time, or rather alive long after the time I should have died... A dwarf smith in a village of Men, a no-one... frowned upon, treated with contempt every single day of the past century and, trust me when I say it has been a very long century."

If she clenched her teeth any harder, she'd be saying goodbye to her dentition sooner than what was expected of one her age.

"You deprived me of a respectable, honourable death, just because of some bloody feelings—"

"Do not belittle them—"

His eyes hardened even more and he seemed angrier. "I do not belittle them. I simply do not reciprocate them—I never did. Did you not have the dignity to accept that?" he said and then laughed haughtily, "But how could you? Always so selfish, caring only for yourself and no one else—"

"Are you calling me selfish for loving you?" she asked with an incredulous look, quite outraged.

"No," he said sharply, "I am calling you selfish for saving me only to not let your precious self get hurt in case I died. If you indeed loved me as much as you say, you would have let me die in that battle and follow my kin to the Halls of Mandos. I would be with them now... all of them, my parents, my uncle, my—" he swallowed with difficulty, "my brother."

"Kili—"

Tears began to well up in his eyes, and he hardly seemed to register her attempts to hear her out. "Yet here I am still," he said with a sad smile that was all but a smile. "Aged and alone."

His legs staggered and he was seconds away from taking the dreaded fall when her arms rushed to steady him to his feet. Much to her chagrin, he swatted them away with the disgust of one risking to
be infected with plague. Then he tottered all the way towards the chair on the corner. Not wishing to slight his pride any further, she kept her distance yet her arms remained vigilant, just in case.

She drew closer to the seated, hunched figure who covered his teary eyes with one trembling hand and crouched in front of him, taking the hand that rested on his lap in both hers and gently squeezing it to make him look at her. "You are not alone," she muttered, recalling him telling her the exact same words in what seemed like an eternity ago somewhere in Mirkwood. "I could stay here and take care of you, until—" she swallowed tightly, "until you won't be here anymore."

He finally raised his head to look at her, pulling his hand out of her grasp with admirable fervour. The moisture in his eyes had dried and was replaced by a furious look. "Get out," he growled, emphasizing each word in a threatening rasp. "And do me one favour after you leave. Do a selfless deed for once in your bloody life and pray that death comes for me soon."

"Is there the slightest chance to let me into her cell, or even talking to you is a lost cause?"

"To allow a prisoner out of their cell, even to get into another, takes an order from the King," the elf informed the disgruntled dwarf. "Since I have no such order, you shall stay where you are." He then resumed his idle pace.

Kili had just crossed the threshold of his patience. With every other request his politeness was waning by the guard's lack of interest towards her. She was twitching and sobbing quietly, he knew that they both could hear it, but to the elf she might as well be sound asleep. Shame, for he thought they'd be kinder to her just because she was one of Men; perhaps he was wrong. But he could not stand hearing her suffer and just sit idly.

"Can't you at least do something to wake her up?" he said indignantly. "She can't handle this!"

The elf huffed in irritation and turned his head to face him in an angle prone to show menace. "I did not know that dwarves were capable of feeling concern for someone outside their race," he noted, trying to sound casually insulting, although his curiosity was triggered.

Kili flashed a brief, wry grimace that—with some effort—could pass for a smile, "There is a first time for everything."

Their otherwise merry discussion was interrupted by clipped footsteps as a graceful figure that simmered under the moonlight almost flowed down the stairs, which made Kili wince again. He saw the guard bow his head and mutter something in elvish as he unlocked Arya's cell door to let the blond elf in, and his eyes narrowed in suspicion. The elf visited her more often than Kili was comfortable with; once he even took her out to let her take a bath and wear new clothes—all these times in either the early hours of the morning, or some time later; never in the middle of the night. Which meant this was a harbinger of trouble.

First he heard a clearing of a throat. His body stiffened as the elf retreated from her bench and she jumped awake in alert with hands balled in fists, ready to punch to death anyone within a ten feet radius. That's my girl, Kili thought proudly. That alone was the invitation of an annoying little voice in his head to pay him a visit to remind him that she wasn't really his girl. Which was a sad thought in and of itself, and which he preferred not to enlarge upon.

With eyes still wide, trying to take in her surroundings and convince herself that it was just a nightmare, Arya stared at the Elf Prince in front of her at a loss for words. Lovely. Another person was just added to the list of those who'd watched her in this state. So this is how her dignity died; with thunderous applause and elves feasting on the floor above.
"Forgive me for disrupting your rest," he said quietly but she waved it off. "You have visitors and, as they repeatedly asked me to tell you, they would not like to wait."

Her face scrunched up in confusion and she wiggled her head to check whether her ears were ringing or she had heard correctly. "Visitors?" she mumbled. "Me? Here? How?"

"It is not my place to elaborate," Legolas said curtly. "Please, follow me." He took her by the arm, rather yanking her along than escorting her out.

The dwarf prince saw him dragging her away from her cell and tried to shove his head through the bars. "Where are you taking her?" he demanded.

Arya's eyes immediately met his. The sudden appearance of the Elf Prince did not give her much time to dwell on her nightmare, but as that she looked at Kili, everything came back.

Literally a step away from flipping out, Kili didn't know what to do. Obviously he couldn't free her from the elf's grip being behind bars himself, and the dejected look on her face did nothing to ease his concern either. She looked positively frightened, for reasons he wasn't privy to. "Where are you taking her?" he repeated, this time harsher.

Legolas turned to face him sharply, gracing him with a look that could only mean 'be silent, you peasant', but otherwise chose not to reply. Arya was silently walking along with him, trying to sync his brisk pace as they ascended the stairs, and often she stole a glance or two —maybe even four— at the dwarf behind.

As soon as they disappeared from his sight, the dwarf's head slumped forwards in frustration, and he was inwardly cursing their luck that the Elves had found them in that bloody forest.

Another occupant of the cells, secretly awake and observing the situation all this time, finally decided to make his presence felt and speak bluntly. "You care for her."

That had both the elf and the dwarf prince's attention drawn. Kili scoffed upon recognising perfectly well the owner of the voice, his head still downcast. "Amadnadad," he acknowledged.

The elf suddenly felt rather uncomfortable and decided to desert his post in these cells and check on the ones round the lower bridges that reached down the cellars. He would return a while later, hopefully when the conversation was over and the dwarves finally fell asleep, as he inwardly prayed.

Kili was surprised to see the guard wandering away and felt slightly grateful that he had probably no inclination to eavesdrop, or so it seemed. Something told him that the elf was not as sly and sneaky as to stray only a few yards and then report everything he'd hear first thing in the morning.

The dwarf king reckoned it quite decent for an elf to give them privacy, but he shared his nephew's concerns about the validity of the guard's will to walk away. His thoughts quickly drifted to Kili again, though. He knew how to discern the affection due to a disposition towards friendship, or towards something more intimate; and potentially dangerous. Much to his chagrin, he had to accept as true —for no mistake could be made anymore— that his nephew's feelings were of the second kind.

"Do not try to deny it, Kili."

The young prince let a weary sigh. "Lack of response usually indicates the exact opposite of denial, uncle," he said gingerly. "And to confirm your statement, yes, I do care for her. A lot, if I may add."

There, he said it. He admitted it to his uncle. It was surprisingly easy after all, when he thought it
would take him a very long time and preparation to achieve it as less destructively as he could.

"Nephew, we did not embark upon this quest so that you'd find a–"

"Your constantly doubting my dedication is getting a little mundane, to be honest. I remember the reason we embarked upon this quest perfectly well, and you still have my full support and mind onto it," he said benignly. "I am very sorry the feelings that came along with it do not align with your strictly designed plan, but I assure you they are completely separate from my loyalty to you."

Kili was almost certain that had his brother been awake, he would applaud him.

Thorin was not convinced at all. He was not oblivious to the flutters of the heart and definitely had more experience than his nephew, having lived in this world and seen things almost a century more than Kili. He was no fool. He, too, had once been young and, back then, perhaps a bit foolish. But that was a story for another time. What mattered now was that, due to his experience, he would not like to see his nephew get hurt in the future.

At least that, he had to credit to the Elves. They, along with his race, loved only once in their lives. Humans could fall in and out of love every other day. And that fact was the precise reason Thorin deemed Arya completely unworthy of Kili's feelings—perhaps along with three or four additional reasons. Knowing who she was, Thorin reckoned that his nephew would probably end up with a broken heart.

"Kili, people usually are not what they look like on the outside," he said quietly, "let alone those of Men." Elves weren't even worth to be mentioned. "So my only advice to you is to be very careful. And remember, you need to stay focused on the quest and not on the matters of heart, however petty or strong they might be."

They fell into pensive silence then, the latter taking the lack of response as an agreement, like his nephew so eloquently put it minutes ago. Kili retreated to the back of his cell, plumping down on the bench without the fortitude to mull over all the troubles that nagged his mind.

It was deep into the night now. Morning would arrive and the sun would cast some light in only a few hours. And little did they both know that their moment of freedom was approaching rapidly.

After a few hours' necessary rest, Bilbo had found himself unable to sleep more and extremely fidgety for such late hour. He was wandering about the Elven Halls, trying to gather all the pieces of the puzzle so he would get the others out, his mind working overtime. Twice or thrice a day, he would manage to smuggle some food out of the kitchens and satisfy his grumbling stomach before he would revise the plan over and over again.

With that feast taking place, there were dozens of barrels of wine sheltered in the cellars that, once emptied, would be sent down the river that led outside of the realm, towards the east, as he had heard the elves discussing among themselves. He had almost congratulated himself at this point from happiness. The only problem that remained was how he would take hold of the cells' keys.

Just as he contemplated this petty drawback of his otherwise impeccable plan, he caught sight of familiar faces. For a mysterious reason regarding this late hour, the Elf Prince was dragging Arya across a long corridor in a place where four guards stood with their backs turned to him. "Sticklebacks!" he thought in agitation. What had happened?

He had absolutely no idea. He was flustered. And being flustered made him risky.

A low puff was heard the moment he slid the ring out of his finger and materialised out of thin air,
taking great care to hide carefully behind a large marbled pillar.

The four guards were guarding her like hawks according to the orders the prince gave, before he disappeared inside a room a little further down. Bilbo thought that he was seriously tempting fate by deciding to take the ring off, but it was the only way for Arya to see him.

And fate allowed a smile at him when the Ranger suddenly turned towards his direction and caught a brief image of him partly hiding behind a pillar and trying to wave at her. She locked eyes with him, trying to discern what he was trying to mouth to her, but when he finally managed to make the question, she had no reply to give him. She shrugged her shoulders as faintly as she could, completely unaware of the reason she was brought there, and the moment she made to take a supposedly idle step forward, the guards had secluded her in a stranglehold.

Bilbo actually felt worry. She was as pale as an empty piece of parchment and, if his eyes were not mistaken, she was trembling like a freshly caught fish. He didn't know what scared her—for she looked rather terrified—but he reckoned it must have been pretty serious and that he had tempted fate enough. He slipped the ring back on his finger and vanished, leaving a stupefied Arya to gawk at the place he had once been standing, unaware that approximately forty seconds later a dozen new questions would flood his mind.

"I believe I have the right to know why I've been yanked off the comfort of my cell's bench in the middle of the night to be brought here," Arya grumbled sullenly, as soon as the Prince approached her and the guards again.

He did not grace her indirect jab with an answer and only beckoned to enter the room, whose door he kept open for her. "Wait here."

He was clearly on edge, she could see it. Something seemed to have upset or vex him. With heavy steps she entered the small room, taking in the environment and the little table with the two chairs that constituted the only furniture in it. She plopped down on one of them, letting her head slump forward into the ever palliating nest of her hands as the disturbing nightmare roiled within her mind.

Only one explanation she could give for it; she was either having visions, or simply going mental.

A light hiss was suddenly heard as the door opened once more and made her eyes shift from the darkness of her hands towards the two figures that stood under the door frame. The one was the Elf Prince, unusually grim and stern-faced, and the other was the last person she expected to see at that moment and in that part of the world.

"I shall give you two some privacy," Legolas announced. "I honestly hope you'll see reason and accept my father's offer. If not, let the guard outside know and I shall escort you back to your cell."

The door was closed and locked, and the totally unexpected person approached the table in swift strides, while the woman was too busy choking in her own saliva.

She jumped on her legs as if someone had pinched her backside. "What the devil are you doing here?!"

The stern, pointed look on her cousin's face remained in place. "I came to take you back home," he said firmly. "You've been away for far too long and there is no need to prolong it."

"Yes, there is--"

"No, there isn't," Aragorn said quietly. There was anger in his voice, though only fueled by concern
and worry. "I've been on your trail for nigh a month. Any thoughts on how I've found you?" The question was rhetorical, obviously. "A group of orcs, of all things, was tracking you--"

The wheels in her mind started to spin with dizzying speed. "Did you come across them?" she breathed out.

"An hour or so ago."

"What? Did they hurt you?" she asked urgently, checking his body for wounds. "Or anyone else? Or were you foolish enough to come here alone?"

He almost tossed her hands away as he clutched her arms with his own. "Between the two of us, you are the foolish one. And worry not, at least I still have an ounce of mind in my head. Of course I did not come alone."

A sigh left her so far pursed lips and she almost smiled from the relief. But quickly her brow furrowed in perplexity. "How did you know where we're heading to?"

He recalled the very educational interrogation of an orc the Rangers had caught somewhere in Dunland two months ago. "Acquiring a few details from an informant," he eventually replied, "coupled with the fact that I am not stupid, and it did not take much to make a deduction."

She inhaled deeply, feeling her stomach churn. "You had no reason to follow me. You should have stayed back, I would return in a few months--"

"Are you certain?" he said furiously, the tone of his voice too high for his usually poised manners. "I think you may overestimate your skills in battle!"

Arya enclosed his hands reassuringly in hers to calm him down. "I do no such thing. I was only asked to guide them to the Mountain; I doubt my services will require taking part in battles that may cost me my life."

Suddenly the dream came back to mind. She had vague recollection of an aged Kili mentioning something about a battle that his kin had fallen, and it gave her a creepy sensation.

"Correct me if I'm wrong, but you were severely injured the last time we met in Rivendell." He was in no position or mood to relent. "In the morning we will depart from these Halls and, if our luck holds, we won't--"

"No," she shook her head, feeling her mind entering a somewhat foggy state. "In the morning you shall depart, and we will ask the Prince to provide you with supplies, and if they can spare, three or four guards to escort you at least till the western edge of the forest."

He almost whimpered. When it came to situations like these, it had become a law of nature; she was the one to lose her temper and he was the one to always stay calm and unruffled. Yet the fact that she seemed not to care a whit about her life—and on more than one occasion—ended up being quite an irksome, tasteless joke.

"If you come across the skin-changer, tell him we are kin. He will offer--"

"What you do is madness. And I am not going to lose you because your judgement is clouded. Come back with me--"

"I can't. Not until they reach the Mountain safe," she countered. "I've made a promise--"
"Circumstances have changed."

"The nature of promises is that they remain immune to changing circumstances."

"You seem to forget to whom you speak," said Aragorn sternly, and his eyes glinted. "Do not make me order you!"

Her hands tightened into fists and she clutched his tunic almost desperately. She could not refuse to obey; she would not. "Do not make me fail to stay true to my word," she pleaded through clenched teeth. "Neither of the last two times that happened ended well."

She had spoken in a softer voice, and grimness clouded her face, and she looked like one who had laboured in sleepless pain for many nights. He mistakenly thought she had made some progress in weathering the dark moments of the past, but they were still there, haunting every step they took forward. "Arya, there was nothing you could do back then. You cannot change the past."

"Sadly, no," she agreed. "So understand this; I owe a favour and I must bring it to fruition."

He let go of her and began pacing up and down thoughtfully, with his arms crossed over his chest. Her eyes did not leave his moving form and observed him huffing and puffing as he stomped from one side of the room to the other.

"Why are you so stubborn?" he hummed, more to himself than her, then added angrily, "You are a real mule, you know that?"

"Yes," she sighed tiredly, "I believe we've established that several times in the past." He raised an eyebrow and she humbly lowered her head in regret. It really wasn't a time she could afford being sarcastic.

At some point he stopped dead in his tracks and pressed a hand over his face. His arguments held no power against her tenacity.

Arya let a small sigh, unable to tell one emotion from the other. She wished she could feel nothing at all just for the sake of her sanity. Thoughtful eyes sized him up as he stood there somewhere between bewildered and upset, trying to assure him that he had no reason to worry.

Several moments of quiet contemplation dragged by, and both of them slumped down on the two chairs in exhaustion, facing each other, quiet and pensive. Unspoken words were exchanged through their glances, each trying to calm the other about their well-being, although neither was satisfied with the other's reassurance.

Arya wondered whether it'd be wise to mention her new troubles to him, for he was the only person close to her. She had no sisters or mother to share this with, but felt a little mortified at the thought of discussing such things with him. She initially had no intention of revealing anything to literally anyone but her own twisted mind and the little voice inside it with which she always had excellent conversations. The absolutely last thing she desired was to make a fuss out of it. Yet a dream showing her that someone's life —Kili's life— hung from a thread of her own making was not something she could keep only to herself.

And at that moment, as they stared at each other to savour every single moment of their meeting, she spoke. "Can I ask you something?" He nodded. "How—" She wavered then, wondering what was the right way to broach the subject. It occurred to her that there was none.

He was waiting patiently, eyes narrowing in suspicion when she hesitated. It filled him with a terrible sense of foreboding.
Arya remained pensive for a few more seconds before the truth was revealed, "How does it feel to be in love with someone?"

Had the circumstances of their meeting been completely different his reply would have been unabashed laughter. But sinister reality crashed around him like a great wave. Oh no.

Chapter End Notes

Hîr nin = My lord
And the Khuzdul word, which I'm not completely sure if it's correct: amadnadad = uncle
(lit. brother of mother)

Title taken from the X-Men storyline of the same name and refers to Arya's dream.
Mission impossible

Bilbo was too busy gathering his hanging jaw, oblivious to the fact that he had let himself slump against the huge pillar and grip onto it to prevent him from collapsing on the ground the moment he spotted a familiar face among those Elves. It was that man he had met in Rivendell, that other Ranger, Arya's Chieftain.

And the main question was, what on earth was he doing here?

It did not take him too long to reach the obvious conclusion. He had apparently come here to take her back with him. He understood they were captain and soldier, alright, but why would any captain travel across half the world to come and take his soldier back? Perhaps they were something more than captain and soldier after all; something more than good friends, despite what Arya had once claimed. Then it occurred to him that he would have to explain her sudden disappearance when the time came to free the dwarves. Wonder that would go.

Bilbo thought it was already over. She was currently in a room with her Chieftain and was probably getting ready to leave. He did not blame her for choosing to do so. He didn't even know why she was leaving. Maybe she was ordered to, maybe she just couldn't stand being imprisoned anymore, or couldn't stand the quest itself anymore. At the end of the day, it was neither her quest nor had she signed the contract. Most of the dwarves hardly found her likable, with the notable exception of three or four, and they had all ended up getting caught by the elves because they had disregarded her advice. In fact, it was admirable that she had abided them and all this for so long.

Yes, she had every right to leave without any accusations falling upon her; which accusations would naturally be inevitable when it came to dwarves. They didn't want her amongst them, yet they would start grumble once she disappeared.

With heart sunk and heavy strides the hobbit took the opposite direction of the large corridor, giving a mental farewell to his female Ranger friend, hoping that he would encounter her sometime in the future, back home—provided that he got alive out of this mess. He reconsidered his priorities now that he wandered about the paths near the kitchens, and thought to take a last look to the cellars to see if everything was in place.

He tiptoed down the cellars through the many stairs that led there, entering a side door in the kitchens, and a muffled racket constantly buzzed in his ears until he was all the way down. He hid behind another wooden pillar this time. The empty barrels were piled up directly above the large hatch by two elves, who were loitering during the course of their task, while another one was taking inventory of the remaining contents of the cellar, with half a mind to supervise the others.

"Galion, you old rogue," one of the two that carried the barrels exclaimed. "We're running out of drink!"

The one named Galion—probably the one in charge for the pantry, Bilbo reckoned—raised a warning eyebrow. "Lethuin, these empty barrels should have been sent to Esgaroth hours ago," he scolded. "The bargeman will be waiting for them."

Just then, another set of footsteps came to hearing range and the three elves turned in alert to look at the person, fearing that it was the Captain with an order from the King. Relieved pants left their mouths when they saw that it was a simple guard.

"Nandir," Galion nodded and graced him with a light smile and a questioning look. The guard shook
his head tiredly.

Before he was able to speak, one of the other elves, whose task with the barrels was now over, emerged from behind with a flagon of wine in hand. "Say what you like about our ill-tempered King," the elf remarked, taking a swig of the red liquid, "but he has excellent taste in wine. Come, Elros, try it!" he urged and made to pass the bottle to his friend.

Galion seemed quite insulted. "This wine comes from the great gardens of Dorwinion," he informed them with the air of a teacher. "Not that you, ignorant lot, are tasteful enough to appreciate in full such a divine liquor."

The other three laughed kindheartedly at the small outburst. Galion always had a special bond with wines and food and could not be considered something less than a specialist in his area of expertise.

"Then drink with us, dear friend, and teach us how to appreciate this fine liquor!" Lethuin laughed, but the butler crossed his arms over his chest. Seeing him hesitant, Lethuin then made to hand the bottle over the guard. "Nandir?"

The elf briefly shook his head, taking a wiggly round object off his belt and flashing it before the others' eyes. "I have the dwarves in my charge."

Lethuin laughed again, already too buoyant for having drunk only two swigs of wine. "They're locked up," he babbled merrily, grabbing the keys off Nandir's hand and hanging them on the wall, "where can they go?"

"You had to ask," Bilbo thought with a wry smile, considering the irony of it all. The keys were completely at his disposal now that the three elves headed towards the table to wash their palates with their King's wine. Only the fourth one, Galion, still hesitated, but eventually followed them, ready to administer some discipline if it was needed.

The hobbit settled in a small corner of the room to observe them and listened to their merry discussion, which included some parts of a dwarf fretting over the human female prisoner, as well as another dwarf noting the first's affectionate feelings for that woman after the prince came to collect her from her cell. Bilbo pursed his lips, his mouth a thin line. Apparently, the elves were quite disposed to gossip. It didn't take him long to figure out which dwarf the elf's words were about.

Poor Kili, he thought. The lad would probably be a tad angry to know that Arya was leaving. Still, he preferred Kili to be angry outside of jail and not while rotting in his cell. So he focused all his attention to the four elves, prayed for his luck to hold and the elves to get drunk soon and grow less vigilant, so he could get hold of the keys.

"How does it feel to be in love with someone?"

Arya dreaded his reaction. To her surprise, it was nothing short of calm. Which was even more disturbing in and of itself.

Aragorn had been rubbing his throbbing temples for what seemed like hours, pondering on the overflow of information he got in just one day. First he had discovered that she was being held prisoner in the Elvenking’s dungeons in Mirkwood, and then this.

"Why?"

She cringed.
"Arya," he demanded suspiciously, raising an eyebrow in warning, "who is it?"

It felt like being caught with one hand in the jar of cookies. "He is..." she cleared her throat, then let a heavy sigh. "Well, I hoped you'd understand. I hope mother and father would understand, too, had they been here."

That set his mind's wheels to work. His eyes narrowed. "Is it an elf?" he inquired, and her lack of answer had him a tad less upset. "It's an elf," he quickly concluded, inwardly praying to be right and for his deeper instincts to be mistaken. "Is it the Elf Prince, Thranduil's son?"

Arya almost blurted out a laugh at the outrageous deduction and raised her hands to stop his worrisome babbling, immediately feeling the need for the chuckle to turn into a whimper. "Of course it's not the Elf Prince," she said as though it was stupid to ask something like that, "I hardly know him."

His shoulders fell. "Then who?"

"He is..." She paused again. "He's different."

"Good grief, it's one of the dwarves, isn't it?"

"How did you–?"

"You just told me that it is not one of the Elves, and your circle of acquaintances as of late is extremely limited. So," he said pointedly, "it must be one of the dwarves... or the hobbit."

This time she did whimper. Her voice came muffled underneath the hands that covered her flushed in embarrassment face, "It is one of the dwarves."

He let himself slump further into the chair, his fingers rhythmically tapping the wooden surface of the table his hand was resting on. "Is this the reason you are not willing to follow me back home?"

Her head jerked upright. She looked positively affronted.

"I thought you knew me better than that. Should you order me to leave with you, I would obey without question or resistance. This is why I ask of you to understand the reason of my wishing to stay with them. I told you what it is, and it is truthful. My feelings have nothing to do with it."

"I will not beg your pardon," he said firmly. "I had to ask. Your life is at stake as long as you are part of this quest, Arya. If you were willing to risk it for your feelings, you would not find me consistent with your decisions."

She nodded at him, part in dismay part in regret, feeling like a taut, barbed wire; any words that would exit his mouth could be taken the wrong way.

"May I enquire which one is the lucky dwarf?"

A wry grimace flitted across her face and she resisted the urge to snort. Whatever and whoever had to do anything with her could not possibly be considered fortunate or even carry an ounce of luck. "I believe you have seen him once back in Rivendell, although I am not sure if you remember him. Dark-haired one, usually wandering about with his blond brother."

A memory was dragged up from the dusty corners of his mind, a warm afternoon of a few months ago in Rivendell, where he had noticed the look a dwarf had given him when he saw him holding Arya's hand. The young lad seemed positively irked at the sight. And now she claimed to be in love.
with that dwarf.

What goes around comes around. He recalled Arya reciting this to him countless times in the past. And apparently it applied everywhere, not only when justice should be served.

"On the matter of race, do not expect me to express any contempt," he said seriously. "Although, as far as I'm aware of, never before has something similar been heard."

Arya promptly covered her heart as if she had been shot. "Aww, that makes me feel so special."

"Limit to use the sarcasm to those who don't know you, not me," his voice was poised and held no anger or offence in it. "Anyhow, are you certain that you are in love with him?"

"How am I supposed to know? I've never had such feelings for anyone– This is why I'm asking you!"

Elbereth save him, she was.

"He is a Dwarf Prince and I'm a Ranger. Obviously it can lead nowhere; my only wish and desire is for him to be alive, safe and happy. The least I care about is if I'm included in his life."

"That sounds dramatic enough," he remarked. "I reckon the situation is quite serious if you have resorted to poetry."

She let a long-suffering sigh. "I do not want this. I wish I'd never met them in the first place..." the weary voice faded, lacing in harmony with the light chirping of birds outside the room that nestled in the huge trees.

She sounded so exhausted –emotionally or physically, he did not know, although he suspected both– and something tugged painfully at his gut seeing her predicament.

Yet her face went blank and she was back to being coy. "I do not wish to bring any pain to him."

Her eyes always betrayed her. The look they held made him sigh compassionately, "How?"

In one flowing motion she jumped up and began pacing the room nervously. And then she recited what dreams had troubled her sleep most recently. At the finish she had ended up leaning against the wall with her forehead resting on her hands and her back turned to him. She knew not why she was trying to hide her face, or from what. The day before it was fine enough, the feelings were bearable... but now, after that nightmare, it was rock bottom, fifty feet of orc faeces and then her. She was suffocating.

"You cannot be certain of this," he said thoughtfully.

Arya whirled around blinking rapidly in anger.

"If this indeed was a vision of what lies ahead, it came to you for a reason."

"Why?" she demanded, voice hoarse and befuddled. "To know that the future is as bleak and painful as the past?"

"Impossible to know," he corrected. "Always in motion is the future. Still, best consider this knowledge power than weakness."

In the present case she'd rather the latter. "What good is this power," she uttered through clenched teeth, "if in the end you cannot protect the ones you love?"
He did not respond. Instead his eyes scrutinized her face and body, noting how gaunt her form had become, how sharp the edges of her face were; not to even mention the dark circles that fully embraced her eyes from beneath. It was something else apart from this — her feelings were merely the last straw — that was eating her alive. He did not know what, but made her waste away steadily, until in the end only a shadow would be left in her place and not something solid.

After a moment of tense silence, the last thread of all the feelings that existed in her chest snapped. Although it would hurt her to possibly let Kili die at some point, she knew that it should be done.

His eyes softened then, and the gesture was followed by a gentle squeeze on her shoulder. "It might have been just a bad dream."

Arya snorted; where had she found the fortitude to laugh, even mockingly, was beyond her.

"If that is the case, then please convey this message from me to him. If he ever hurts you, if he ever causes you any unhappiness of any kind, I will hunt him down to the ends of the world."

Her eyes searched his face for a sign of a smile, thinking that he went on with his efforts to make her feel better, but found none. He was totally serious. "You taught me that revenge solves nothing," she remarked casually.

"I did," he cocked his head agreement. "Of course, sometimes exceptions have to be made."

Her brow furrowed and she adopted the sternest expression her face could call up to arms. "Do not try to act like a big brother to me. Between the two of us, I am still the older one."

"Three months do not count, Arya."

They fell into pensive silence after that. At one point she observed that he was completely stripped off his weapons. Damn. If she could take hold of even a small knife, she could fiddle with the lock of her cell, unannounced, and save Bilbo some trouble of getting them out of there. But there enter the Wood Elves.

"I suppose you do not have any spare knife hidden somewhere?" she inquired vaguely, risking for a last ray of sunshine.

"I underwent a very thorough search before they brought me to you," he grumbled in a low voice, not being too subtle about his slight irritation.

Arya sighed. Even a pin would do. She had tried to use the clasp of her cloak, but it was too big to fit into the cell's lock. After that, she had called it quits. The only way to get hold of the keys would be to strangle the elf guard that ran the occasional shift, take the keys and free herself. Such a lovely plan... if someone took out the infinite hindrances, of course. It would take an extreme amount of physical effort to take down the guard from inside the cell, another elf would certainly hear even the faintest of screams that would come out of his mouth and, last but not least, she shouldn't forget her rotten luck. Even if the plan was impeccable and had no drawbacks, they would somehow still get caught.

Thus, all her hope had fallen to dearest Bilbo. She took great care to not underestimate him—he had managed not to be seen or found inside Thranduil's Halls for whole days. She did not know how he achieved it, but actually felt happy that he was around and quite anxious to find a way to help him.

"What I could only prevent them from removing it," Aragorn said, producing a small leather pouch out of his pocket, "is this. And since I consider returning home without you, even though I cannot believe I'm actually doing it," he added angrily, "I want you to have it."
The pouch passed through an intense scrutiny by her eyes before she took it in her hands. It was almost weightless and her eyes rose to find his staring stoically at her.

"I know your supplies are running low," he said in response to her confused look. "The pendant barely fits two leaves inside."

Her mouth gaped the moment she took in his former statement.

"And, although you hopefully won't have to use it, I think it would be wise to carry it with you," he continued gingerly. "Just in case."

She hardly registered herself nodding as he stepped closer to hug her, marking the time of a farewell.

"Oh," she heard him mumble through her hair, "and please get your knife back. I know not how you're planning to free yourselves, but I would really appreciate it if the blade returned to its rightful owner."

Breaking their embrace, she took a step back and looked at him with a partly hopeful, partly disappointed look. "There is a chance to get free," she whispered, so low that her voice was almost inaudible to her own ears. His interest was piqued. "Bilbo—The hobbit," she quickly added, "has found a way to get us out of here, although I doubt I can get my hands on any of the weapons. They were placed in a separate room and, as I imagine, only the guards have access to it."

His eyebrows suddenly shot upwards and a wicked grin briefly flitted across his perpetually serious, grim face.

It positively scared her. "What?" she asked suspiciously.

His face turned serious once more as he crossed his arms over his chest and his mind began molding the plan. "How many elves did the Prince say stand guard outside?"

Whatever hair existed on her body suddenly stood still and she swallowed tightly. "You don't actually mean...?" she trailed off, fear and fright being a very poor choice of words to describe the feelings that took her over.

Without gracing her with a reply he turned on his heel, heading for the door and tapping lightly on it before she could react. There was brief conversation between him and the lone guard that stood outside, while he discreetly checked up and down the corridor for any witnesses. And before Arya registered what was going on, the guard received a cross to his left cheek. And then one more. And then another one right between his eyes—but always careful not to make or let the guard make any notable noise, if that was even possible.

Professionally speaking, her cousin's right cross was a beauty. Arya used to take it pretty well every time they were training with each other in arm-to-arm combat when they were young. Now, something over a decade had passed, she had yet to beat him, and she seriously doubted this would get to change anytime soon.

The guard fell completely limp in his arms and he quickly dragged him inside the room before anyone saw and ran with wings in his legs to notify the Prince or, even worse, the King.

Arya had lost all ability to communicate with the environment while trying to take in what had exactly transpired in the space of mere seconds.

Aragorn did not feel very pleased with himself and his most recent acts, but they were done in the name of good will. "He's unconscious," he pointed out, glancing at his cousin who stood like an
ornamental plant, waiting to be trimmed and watered to come to life.

That snapped her out of the numb state. "Of course he's unconscious," she exclaimed frantically, tossing her arms about, "you just smacked him in the face!" She actually felt pity for the poor guard, for there were small drops of blood running down his nostril.

"Arya," he said steadily with a hint of warning thrown in, "if you want to do something wrong, do it right. You taught me that."

"And as it seems," she whispered in awe, "I constitute a source of really bad influence on you!"

"Why, it is healthy to act a bit out of character once in a while," he said casually, while taking the unconscious elf's armour off. "It keeps things interesting."

But she was not to be so easily convinced about the success his plan would have. "If the King finds out, he will have us both hung upside down and the dwarves put in even deeper dungeons."

"Then he'd better not find out," he cut her off quickly, throwing the cloak and helmet to her after she shoved the pouch he had given her earlier into the small pocket on her boot and wore the jerkin whose pointy, leaf-like ends reached down her knees. "The others and I are leaving with the first light, hopefully in secret. I reckon you have no more than two or three hours before this elf gains consciousness and runs to report to the Prince. Find the hobbit, do what you have to do, and make it quick."

No, this wasn't right. She was getting extremely dizzy and nervous about all what she had to do in such a minimum amount of time. Bilbo could vanish into thin air from one moment to another, how could she possibly find him inside the vast, cavernous Halls? Panic overwhelmed her about the outcome of all this. She was seriously tempting fate by these antics. On the other hand, she didn't have any other better plan to follow. There was a detail, however, that was overlooked, which she realised the moment she was dressed up and perfectly resembled a proud elven guard of the Woodland Realm.

Save the wobbling hair. And of course the part of her face that was visible through the helmet.

Valar be praised, at least her ears could not be seen. Neither could her chest, although the dark bodice the elves had given her after the bath did everything it could to worsen the situation, at certain angles giving a rather noticeable hint of swelling, despite the jerkin worn over it.

"I cannot pose as a guard," her exasperated voice burst like a sudden rain, "someone will certainly recognise me!" If she came face to face with the Prince, the Captain, perhaps two or three other guards that knew her face, this hardly well-thought plan would blow just like a bubble in the air.

"Avoid close contact with anyone," he ordered. "And do not forget to take the knife. I am certain that neither you nor I would like to leave a family heirloom at the Elvenking's mercy. From what I heard, he's been a tad upset that the dwarf denied his aid and refused to comply with a request of his, therefore your imprisonment."

A dry snort was her immediate response. "Those two actually have more in common than they think."

He came to stand in front of her, handing her the guard's spear and grabbing her shoulders in a tight grip. "Take good care of yourself," he said starkly. "Do not make me come to drag you back twice, for then it will be an order. Am I clear?"

She nodded her head obediently with a frightful look in her eyes, wondering since when they had
switched places in warning each other. He strode over to the door and inwardly prayed no one be there, so Arya could easily slip out unseen and unnoticed. Mere seconds that seemed like hours to her passed before he beckoned her to approach the door.

Arya peered at the large, empty corridor, straightening her back and mustering all her grace and imposing manner to pass for an elf. She couldn't say that it was entirely successful.

"Be subtle and swift," he whispered to her and gave a light squeeze to her hand as they stood side by side in front of the door. She merely nodded her head, squeezing back. "And may the odds be in your favour."

These were their last words before they parted ways in the great elven Halls; one walking to one direction of the corridor, ready to depart in haste and praying that the moment he saw her again would come soon, and the other locking the door of the room with the unconscious elf inside and going in search of a confiscated blade and an invisible hobbit.

Two, maybe two and a half hours had passed since Bilbo settled to spy on the four elves that heartily and without break consumed the kingdom's supplies in wine, along with a few appetisers.

He was starting to doze off when a sudden muffled thud jerked him out of his half-asleep state and he saw the last elf's head slumped upon the wooden table, while the other three were snoring blissfully in their inebriated sleep.

Bilbo thanked his luck that they had finally fallen asleep and he took a few steps closer to them, opting to take the cells' keys off the hook they were so far hanging from. He cursed under his breath when they made a jingling sound as he unhooked them, prompting one of the elves to stir a bit and him to still on the spot. But he was close... so close to perfect his plan that he determinedly shoved the keys securely inside his palm and his feet swept him up the stairs, towards the cells.

The higher he ascended, the more he could see the first rays of sunlight that marked the arrival of a new dawn and a new day—the day of the company's freedom. Just the thought gave him hope; not so much, though, as to stop praying for his plan to evolve smoothly and without trouble.

The hobbit was not the only one who noticed the sunlight that crept through the canopy of trees above. The dwarves had by now rose from their sleep—those who had taken a few hours of sleep at least— and sat in their cells, grumbling quietly about another lost day in the Elvenking's dungeons.

Thorin had actually been able to rest an hour or two since the conversation with his nephew had come to an end. Kili had tried to sleep, but it was with numerous breaks every now and then, so in the end he resolved to just lie down and stare at the stony ceiling of his cell, counting sheep to doze off—or more accurately, counting sheep until the blond elf returned another prisoner to her cell. It had been more than four hours since he had come to take her and Kili was starting to worry for good now.

Some were wondering where the burglar was all these days and what the mysterious plan he was concocting to get them out also was, unable to find an answer.

"I wager the sun is on the rise," Bofur remarked, voice echoing in the empty cavern. "Dawn must have been near."

"We're never going to reach the mountain," Ori pondered wistfully, leaning against the wall, "are we?"
By some divine intervention, Bilbo appeared out of thin air with a half-smile and keys jangling happily in his hand. "Not stuck in here, you're not," he whispered and rushed to unlock each one of them as quickly as he could.

Thirteen bodies clung on the bars of their respective cells, with smiles of happiness and hope plastered on their faces, yelling the hobbit's name and breaking into a fit of claps from the relief.

"Shh!" Bilbo hissed vigilantly. "There are still guards nearby!"

He first unlocked Thorin, who was the only one not to offer a smile, but still stared at the hobbit at a loss for words. He believed that the burglar would manage to find a way to get them out of there, but there were indeed moments that he gave up all hope. And right now he was very glad that the hobbit had met his expectations for a burglar. The dwarf king offered a small nod of gratitude as he looked at Bilbo in earnest before he flew to unlock the other cells.

Fili felt an extreme wave of joy wash over him and, the moment Bilbo freed him, he grabbed the hobbit into a firm embrace and pat his back to congratulate him. With a smile the blond prince nodded over to his uncle, who stared at him with hope etched all over his face and his whole spectrum of emotions renewed. He then ushered the burglar towards his brother's cell, seeing Kili wait by the door to be freed and, weirdly enough, on edge instead of the normally cheerful self he should present.

"Where is Arya? Did you see her?" the brunet asked worriedly when they stopped in front of his cell and the sound of the key scraping against the lock was heard. "We can't leave without her!"

There was a small pause from Bilbo, his hands faltering in their brisk movements to free the dwarf, and realised that two pairs of eyes were pinned on him expectantly. "I saw her," he said gingerly. "I also saw that man from Rivendell, her Chieftain. He arrived here in the middle of the night, so I suppose she must have left with him."

For a moment the world spun wildly around him, and Kili forgot to breathe. She did what?

"What do you mean she must have left?" Fili said with an incredulous glare. "She cannot leave!"

"Actually... she can," Balin said with apprehension. "She did not sign the contract; nothing binds her with the company."

"That doesn't mean she can abandon us at will!" Gloin mumbled resentfully.

Bilbo was a step away from smacking the red-bearded dwarf upside his head. "Oh, now you wish she were here?" he spat out sarcastically. "You should have thought of that sooner, when she was warning us in the forest and we completely defied her!"

"It's a wonder she's put up with some of us for so long," Bofur added thoughtfully, sideways glaring at Gloin and Thorin, earning a very eager nod of agreement from the burglar.

The dwarf king, however, reckoned that they were pushing their luck by just standing in the middle of the dungeons and arguing about the Ranger's whereabouts, when their lives and quest were a step away from the edge of a cliff and the subsequent impending doom and failure. "We have lingered long enough discussing about her," his coarse, stern voice brought the low hubbub to an end. "If she left, there is nothing we can do about it. So move!"

"Come," Fili mumbled absentmindedly to his brother as the others began moving, lost as to what his feelings should be about what transpired. He decided that he would put his mind onto it when they would be free and safe again, away from the elven realm and the chance to be caught and imprisoned.
again. He imagined his uncle would be quite satisfied with that decision.

The brunet failed to see the hobbit leading them somewhere down the stairs, and his steps faltered until he felt his brother pulling him from the sleeve and his uncle behind his back, urging him to make haste.

"Kili, I need your mind here," a strict voice pulled him out of his lethargy, "not on a woman who had better things to do than follow us." Thorin did not actually throw blame on her for leaving. In fact, it raised his hopes high that his nephew would change his mind and opinion of her and concentrate on far more important matters.

The prince's head snapped to the side, but he did not allow his eyes to meet with his uncle's. The last he wanted to see was the I-told-you-so look magnificently plastered across Thorin's face and bragging about how right he was to always be distrustful of her. Kili hated that. He hated that his uncle spoke ill of her when she was no longer present.

She would of course return to her duties, she would of course follow that man and not them. What obligation bound her to them more than her Chieftain, what commitment? There could be a kind of commitment, actually. Hope had festered in his gut and just as quickly died down.

Kili had no reason to, he knew it, but felt betrayed. He held the distinct belief that he knew her, even just a tiny part of her character, to be sure that she would not just leave them there. It was not betrayal that she had caused with her actions, but one his mind had caused by allowing him to believe he knew her. Her actions had only hurt him—deeply, yet only hurt him. He felt betrayed by his own self. It made him furious. And perhaps a bit reckless.

"She's left," he deadpanned, still without turning to face him fully. "No need to discuss it further."

Thorin seemed partly satisfied with his answer. However, he knew Kili like a father knew his son, and he was certain about the lad's inner war of thoughts and feelings, despite the fact that he had indeed managed to almost convince him with his statement of indifference. It would be just a small gesture—a rare one, nonetheless—and, in an attempt to offer some comfort, he reached to compassionately pat his nephew's shoulder.

But Kili was a force of nature right now. He couldn't figure if he had accepted her leaving so soon, but he was sure that what he currently desired most was to get away from this place. He hardly registered his uncle's hand hovering above his shoulder the moment he rushed forward to the front of the line, pulling his brother along with him.

After two or three sets of stairs, Bilbo finally led them where he wanted, almost tiptoeing before he peered behind the stony wall to check if the elves were still asleep. Thankfully, they were and snored quite ungracefully for that matter. "This way," he whispered, gesturing them with his hand to follow him.

Kili, now leading the line of the dwarves, took the first hesitant step, taking in his surroundings. Much to his chagrin, he noted the infinite barrels and bottles around. "I don't believe it," he burst quietly, "we're in their cellars!"

"You're supposed to be leading us out," Bofur piped up in the same desperate tone, "not further in!"

"I know what I'm doing," Bilbo grunted gloomily and started counting them as they descended the stairs. "Come on, this way."

The thirteen dwarves, lost as to what their business in the elves' cellars was, were currently standing
next to some barrels and whispered among themselves, doubting the hobbit's mental efficiency.

"Everyone, climb into the barrels," the hobbit commanded, wiggling his hands to usher them forward, "quickly!"

"Are you mad?" Dwalin blurted out wide-eyed. "They'll find us!"

"No, no, they won't," Bilbo insisted with a brisk nod. "I promise you! Please. Please, you must trust me!"

None of them was too eager to go on with the weird plan and numerous whispers merged in a choir of complains.

"Very well!" the hobbit snapped. "I will lock you in your cells again. You can sit there comfortably and think of a better plan to get out!"

Grudgingly, the voices piped down and after an impatient nod towards the king, Thorin ordered them to do as told. Another commotion began as they tried to shove themselves or shove others who had trouble enter their barrels alone due to the size of their bellies.

"This is either madness," Dwalin grumbled, not at all happy with his predicament, "or brilliance."

"It is remarkable how often those two traits coincide," Bilbo replied dryly and promptly gave the bald dwarf a last push to fit in the barrel.

"What do we do now?" Bofur suddenly asked, his head peeping along with his hat above the edge, prompting twelve other heads to look to him in sync, anxiously waiting for directions.

"Hold your breaths," Bilbo said determinedly and pulled a lever.

"Hold me breath? What do you mean?"

Before Bofur could even finish his sentence, a scream drowned the rest of his words as he felt his barrel detaching from the ground and moving with downward inclination. The floorboard opened and one by one the barrels began to roll towards the edge of the hatch, and then land inside the water below in a midst of loud splashing sounds.

The noise that the barrels and the dwarves made, however, was enough to make the elves stir and start waking from their sleeping state.

Bilbo had hopped next to the opening of the floor, watching as the barrels were dropped in the river, obviously pleased with himself and happy that the plan was successful. Only when the hatch was pulled back up and the opening closed did he realise the petty drawback of his plan and let a wry laugh.

Oh, bloody hell.
Who let the dwarves out?

Half-convinced that there was little chance something would blow her cover, Arya roamed about the Elvenking's Halls in search of the room where they had deposited her and the company's weapons. She took glimpses of rooms' interior whose doors were open, discreetly peered inside others whose doors she opened, but still did not find the right one.

After almost two hours of searching without results, she decided to try her luck and descend to the dungeons. On her way there something drew her attention and made her raise her downcast eyes. It was a sculpture, a woman's effigy that made her stop and stare for a few seconds. It was as though the way in which the statue was made, it made the woman ready to come to life in the eyes of the passers-by; she surely must have been mesmerisingly beautiful. The Ranger had a vague feeling that she had seen it again, somewhere.

And then it clicked. It was the same statue that was placed in the beginning of the elf path at the western entrance of Mirkwood. Arya was surprised that her mind had deemed that detail worthy of remembering. Her eyes slowly moved downwards to the inscription on the base, which read 'Ilmariel, Lady and Queen of the Woodland Realm'.

So this was Thranduil's wife. No wonder the Prince was so handsome with parents like these. Yet few people in the world were aware of the Queen's fate and Arya was not one of them. She remembered Aranethon's attempt to ask their mother and later Elrond, but her mother did not know and the Elf Lord had subtly dodged the question.

But enough with the irrelevant observations, the Ranger decided. She had loitered enough and there was work to be done. She continued her way to the dungeons, checking every room she came across and praying no one was inside.

Half hour and twenty mental curses towards the Elves later, fate finally sided with her for a second. The moment she opened the door and saw all kinds of weapons spreading from one end of the room to the other, she had to fight the urge to squeal in excitement. A chortle left her mouth when her gaze flitted across Fili's numerous knives. The dwarf was practically carrying an armoury underneath his clothes. Not that she was any better. Though she did have the sneaking suspicion that Fili had been hiding a knife in his underwear.

Dark eyes searched around the room for a sign of her own weapons and narrowed when they did not spot them among the rest. Her hands clenched into fists and she sensed that familiar wave of panic coming from a mile away. No, no, no, she could not afford to fail right now. As more torturous moments passed and her weapons were nowhere to be found, the more solid that prospect became.

Just before all hope faded, her eyes moved to browse the separate table in the corner. She recognised Orcrist, and her own weapons lying beside it. The first thing she grabbed was her knife, which went directly into its sheath in her boot. The guard's attire she wore involved no belt and she was thankful it wouldn't take too long to gird her own around her with the two daggers sheathed on it. When the distinctive click of the buckle sounded, a sudden calm fell upon her.

Until fate decided that she'd had enough luck for one day, and voices sounded from afar. Arya hurried out of the room and slipped the door shut precisely when two elves rounded the corner in the corridor. They were too busy discussing between themselves to spare a glance at her, but she still
walked away from them with a spring in her step, all the while cursing for not taking her bow with her. The daggers on her sides could be easily covered by the cloak, aye, but a bow that hardly resembled those of the Wood Elves would perhaps draw unwanted attention. And that, she didn't wish for.

The inner rant did not last long when, on her way to go and search for Bilbo, a scream in elvish stopped her dead in her tracks; someone was calling for the Captain. *Shit.* Instinctively, the first thing that came to mind was that she'd been compromised. Her hand clenched around the large spear, while the other flashed down around the hilt of one of the daggers.

"The dwarves are not in their cells!" another voice cried.

*Wait, what?* The Ranger felt the ground tottering under her legs. *How--? When?!* She growled under her breath. These people had seriously turned leaving her behind into a habit, hadn't they? But if Bilbo helped them escape as he promised, had he also agreed to leaving her behind?

"Where is the keeper of the keys?" the Captain's strict voice snapped her out of her thoughts, and Arya turned to the side to avoid being recognised.

Four guards shrugged their shoulders, unable to give an answer to the question, but a loud, rumbling noise and a few grunts from somewhere below made their eyes flash downwards.

"In the cellars," Tauriel commanded, hurtling down the stairs with the four guards following suit. "Tolo hi!"

Arya decided to have a word with the company when and *if* they all got out of the Woodland Realm alive. Soon, clipped footsteps passed by her as a small troop of guards ran across a passage not far away. Not lingering more, she ran after them to catch their pace, heart pounding as the sound of running water seemed to get closer and closer.

Bilbo could feel nervous laughter bubbling up his throat at the situation he ended up in. When loud voices sounded from above, his feet moved of their own accord.

He stepped forward, turned around, hopped on the boards, swirled around himself; nothing. No bloody exit. He couldn't go up the stairs, the guards were already on their way to the cellars; he couldn't hide in the cellars, the four elves that had been sleeping were still there and would wake up. Wherever he could go, he'd be discovered. He was trapped between a rock and a hard place, and the space was too sultry for him to breathe. Not for a second it crossed his mind to wear the ring and disappear. How could it, being so flustered and upset?

The closer the marching footsteps and voices got, the closer Bilbo was to a panic attack. He backed away from the staircase, face frozen in terror, not paying heed to gravity pulling him backwards. Not until his feet began sliding across the wooden boards and he found himself in a free fall above the running waters.

The Captain and the four guards arrived just in time to see the hatch returning to its original position and sealing the opening. She glanced around in frenzy, searching for any sign of a heavily incapacitated Nandir, the guard who was supposed to be on watch, or his dead body —for it was one of those two states the King would take as an excuse for this situation— but found neither. What she did come across, that drove her mad, was four heads slumped on a table in the adjoining room, their owners fast asleep, equal numbers of glasses, a plate of fruits and cheese, and three or four bottles of
wine. Empty bottles of wine.

Tauriel was furious. She marched to the table and gave a powerful kick to one of the table's legs, rocking the guards out of their inebriated slumber. "Echuio, a úhaelath!" she yelled. "Lyst i saim!"

The elves jerked awake at the sound of the voice and the violent shake of the table, bleary-eyed and hungover.

"Drengin i·mbendryn!" Tauriel raved. "Bado!"

The hobbit found himself gulping generous amounts of water in his efforts to ascend to the surface. During the not at all enjoyable bath he had subjected himself to undergo, he felt a hand trying to pull him upwards and gladly clasped on it. He peered through the water, spitting a few mouthfuls of water directly into Nori's face, and clutched onto the dwarf's barrel for dear life.

"Well done, master Baggins," Thorin exclaimed with —surprisingly— a smile.

The half-drowned hobbit tried to splutter out some words, an effort that failed since another mouthful of water landed on Nori, so he simply waved his hand dismissively.

Not delaying their chance for freedom more, Thorin then turned to face ahead and gestured the others to follow. "Let's go," he urged. "Come on, quickly!"

The dwarves started to paddle with their hands as the stream pulled the barrels along with it towards a rather large hole in the even larger cave that led outside, into the river and the light. And unfortunately to a waterfall as well.

"Hold on!" Thorin warned with a yell the moment he realised what lay ahead.

His voice was partly drowned, as he was for that matter, when the barrels plunged into the rapids. One by one, they came up to the surface again and started floating down the river with the raging current.

"Bilbo!" Bofur screamed and grabbed the hobbit tightly. "Hang on!"

"Help!" Ori yelped as the barrels came face to face with huge chunks of rocks that sprouted here and there inside the river and subsequently bumped into them every now and then.

In an accidental turn of his head, Dwalin caught a glimpse of the blond elf running out of a gateway and another elf behind blowing a horn. As they were rounding a large rock, rapidly approaching an outpost that was built above the river, screams were stuck in their throats. Three heavily armoured elves were standing guard there and a fourth one ran to pull a big lever down. A loud metallic sound rang in their ears, resembling the bells of impending doom as the gate swiftly shut and trapped the barrels.

"No!" almost half the company cried in unison as they watched the sight unfolding before them and themselves getting trapped behind the closed gate.

The barrels bumped into one another and a whistling sound tore through the air as the elf guards pulled their swords out.

Arya didn't exactly know where she was heading to while following the three guards in front of her. As soon as she discerned the Elf Prince rushing out of the Halls with another elf behind him, and
realised that the three guards were heading towards that gate, she strayed from the route. She had neither intention of risking to be recognised, nor force herself into a fight against numerous guards and Legolas. If that was the need, she would fight them, but could certainly not guarantee results as to who would be the winner.

The first gateway she stumbled upon before the one the Prince rushed outside, she used it to run out of the Halls. It wasn't admittedly the wisest choice she had made, since the descent towards the river was sheer rocks with a few spots of dirt sparse here and there, but it was the fastest way down.

When she was finally all the way down, thankfully without any tripping or falling on the rocks, she caught sight of a bunch of barrels swimming down the river and a respective number of heads protruding out of the barrels, soaked to the bone.

"Huh." Her jaw reflexively dropped a few significant inches. "Barrels," she muttered to herself to certify that she wasn't hallucinating more than anything. Well, that was... unexpected. Bilbo had a knack for creativity, she had to give him that. But that didn't in any way reverse the fact that she was left behind. What on earth had happened?

The river suddenly formed something like a corner, the barrels disappeared from her eyesight, and she quickly commanded her feet to run after and catch up with them, being not too far behind.

With heart sinking into vast seas of hopelessness, Bilbo saw the elves ready to fight them off and lead them back to the Halls. Yet an arrow suddenly came out of nowhere and notched itself on one of the elves' back, catching him and the rest off guard, and the hobbit's eyes bulged when a most disgusting face sprouted behind the walls.

"Watch out!" Bofur warned as the wounded elf fell into the river among the barrels, followed by Dwalin's roar, "Orcs!"

Just when Kili thought that things could not get worse, they actually did. First the shut gate, then the elf guards and now orcs? Was fate trying to hint with a not at all enjoyable way that their quest was in vain? Not to mention his other problem, which had been stored in the back of his mind for later thinking and surges of anger. He still couldn't believe that she had left. But life was not a rainbow, so he had to actually put it well into his precious little mind, which very foolishly made dreams and plans for the future, that he would never get to see her again.

It was so simple.

And it wasn't. How could he actually deal with the fact that the woman he had come to love had left him and he would have to live what years were left in his bloody life away from her? He couldn't. He was in serious denial about the matter. The words he had said to Thorin were replayed in his head, that his mind was fully onto the quest and not on a person that they'd never see again, and he was mechanically trying to believe them. It would be wiser to concentrate on the gaining of their freedom for now and later, when their lives would not be in danger, he would have all the time to himself to accept the situation. But he did not want to accept the situation. He did not want to believe it, to admit what was true and what wasn't.

The orc's guttural growl was the one that triggered the rest of his comrades to jump out of the bushes and the trees around, like a flock of ants crawling out of the sand. It felt as they had no end to their number. Some were fighting with the guards on the outpost — the remaining two of them, for the third was unfortunately beheaded — some were plunging in the river and on the dwarves, weighing them deeper into the water, and the majority of them were efficiently fighting off the elf guards that had arrived not moments ago.
One of those was the undercover Ranger, who had got over the issue of her surprise at the orcs’ sudden raid and currently found the elven spear a terribly effective weapon. It was double edged, which rendered it an exquisite means of taking two heads with one movement, and she tried to make the best use of it. In the seconds she found the chance, her eyes flashed towards the company to secure that nobody had been hurt and she slowly tried to move towards the outpost and open the gate that held the barrels back.

The single person in the company that was in hold of a weapon was Bilbo and did whatever he could against the enemy, sometimes passing Sting to the dwarves to use it as well.

"Get under the bridge!" Thorin ordered, trying to pull as many as barrels as he could near him.

Fili was shoving repeated punches to the orc that had landed next to him without remorse, until the creature’s face was smashed against the stony wall of the outpost and his black blood was drained on it. Dwalin, next to him, had no intention to melt their disgusting faces. With one, two elbows at most, the orcs were hitting the bottom of the river dead and possibly with their nose shoved back inside their brain from the force of the hits.

Only Kili was currently devoid of an orc only for himself, and his eyes hastily searched around the place until they landed on the big lever above them. The outpost was also empty, the elf guards either being dead or fighting somewhere near, and no orcs seemed to be up there.

Something occured to him then.

He clenched his teeth and determinedly hauled himself up to get out of his barrel. It would soon prove to be either one of the worst or the best decisions he would ever make in his life.

A pair of eyes was not oblivious to the dwarf's movement, though. What was the fool doing? Was he trying to get himself killed, Arya thought in exasperation and began to incorporate her legs in the blows she gave to the orcs, in order to approach the outpost faster. And despite the fact that she was still fighting with more desperation with every passing second, feeling the sweat trickle down her back, a cold shiver pierced her whole body when Kili jumped to the stairs that led to the outpost.

Calling his name Dwalin threw him a sword and with a swift turn the prince managed to fight off the orc behind him. The creature avoided two other blows, but could do nothing when Kili's forceful kick send it into the water and Dwalin's murderous hands.

Two more orcs darted against him as he ran closer to the lever. He decapitated one of them, while the second was taken care by Fili, who rendered its face a marvellous target for a knife. And Kili was so close to free them... He felt a rush of courage washing over him, he felt invincible. Nothing could stop him now; or so he thought.

Apparently, the dwarf's proximity to the lever triggered the orcs' temporary captain's ire. Bolg growled under his breath, seeing the dwarf only two steps away from giving the rest their freedom, and decided to take action.

No one expected what was about to take place. No one had seen it coming. It took only a second, though in Arya's mind time stretched longer as the scene evolved in slow motion. In a moment of terrible clarity she knew what was going to happen before it would. And there was nothing she could do to stop it. No matter how many knives or the spear itself she hurled towards Bolg, no matter how fast she ran to push Kili out of the arrow’s way.

The worst nightmares that haunted her sleep —and there weren’t plenty of them— flashed before her
eyes with incredible speed and bells drummed inside her head, marking that he would soon be added to those she wasn't able to save. The last she cared about was the most recent nightmare, the one with the aged Kili and the hurtful words he threw at her, and she literally paid it no mind the moment the need was born inside her to save him, however great the cost.

But she'd been too slow. All she could do was suppress a cry, a tinny roar of kindling rage that emerged from the deepest place of her gut. It never succeeded in exiting her mouth and the pressure made her throat ache. The arrow pierced through clothes and flesh and nailed deep into his thigh, and then came the sharp intake of his voice.

Three people called Kili's name at the same time, in a colourful variety of volumes. First was his brother who practically screamed witnessing this, then Arya, who whispered his name in pure agony, and last was Thorin, whose eyes and thoughts snapped from the shut iron gate and drifted to his nephew and the possibility that he had been injured.

At first Kili didn't realise what happened; not until the overwhelming pain and a wild need to scream at the top of his lungs became inevitable. He simply listened, watched, felt and tried to ignore the blistering pain in his thigh where the arrow had penetrated skin and flesh, each drumming beat of his heart sending splinters of fire that roared agonisingly around the wound.

The dwarf abandoned his attempt to hold himself up and slumped forward against the lever, grunts of suffering sneaking out of his clenched teeth. Unable to carry the weight of his body, his legs gave up and he eventually plumped on the ground like a heavy sack of flour.

In the space of two mere seconds Arya felt as though her heart was being shattered over and over again, in thousand pieces, until there was nothing left but aching. No, she could not afford feel lost and dejected right now. Rage was a much safer path and it was the one she would currently set out route for. Someone would have to get through her in order to get to Kili, as long as she was in charge of keeping him and the rest of the company alive. Also, the fact that he was the only person in the world that she had come to care about in a way very different from the one she cared about her family enhanced her lethal instincts at full capacity. And she was not very famous for her ability to fight her natural instincts. Or maybe she didn't want to try and keep them chained anymore.

Another orc was crawling above the wall to leap over Kili who was lying on the ground unable to move, hurt and groaning, and Arya was ready to go for the kill when a voice screamed from afar.

"Dúnadaneth!" Tauriel cried as she ran down the path, bow and arrow at the ready.

It made the Ranger halt on the spot. She craned her neck to the side, catching glimpse of her hair wobbling down her shoulders and cursing to the skies that her cover was blown. Then she sought the one who called her, locking eyes with the redhead elf of all people, who motioned her with a shaking of her head to duck.

The small exchange between the two women happened in a blink of an eye. The Ranger complied and the Captain successfully shot the arrow over the bent human, finding the target and swiftly moving to the next one. Then the Elf prince with more elf guards jumped through the trees and everything became a blur of arrows and severed heads being hurled in the air.

Little did Bolg remember the human, who now glared at him like a dark cloud ready to pour its entire wrath upon him, since the last time their paths crossed. With a sour wrinkle of her nose at the sight of him, Arya bristled like a porcupine and her ears wiggled with hatred. She didn't know when that filthy bastard's time would come. It wouldn't be now, she could tell. But if his death happened to come from her hand, it would be slow and painful in the most savage way imaginable.
She finally allowed her rage free reign of her body as she tightened the grip on the long spear and twirled it menacingly in her hands, quickly covering the distance between her and Kili. Two, maybe three heads flew above hers as the wide blades at the ends of the spear detached them from their owners' shoulders.

Kili saw his whole life flashing before his eyes the moment he fell on the ground. He clutched his leg painfully hard and took notice of an orc coming directly on his way. But it abruptly slumped down the stairs and fell into the water, hit by an arrow. His eyes reflexively snapped to the person who was responsible for this, and he saw that redhead elf stepping forth into the fight and weighing the situation. It wasn't too long before she fired a second arrow and was followed by numerous others elves that appeared out of nowhere, the blond one being with them as well.

Impossible to forget the forceful surges of pain the wound send to every fibre of his body, he wished that he had the chance to thank the redhead elf for saving him and slowly tried to crawl towards the edge of the stony ground.

But another orc rushed from the tree above to kill him and this time, he had neither a weapon, nor the ability to move about and kick or punch it. Just a moment before he was ready to embrace his fate that without doubt involved death, a raging elf guard darted against the disgusting creature. Kili saw the point of a long spear piercing through the creature's mottled breast plate that was made of Mahal knows what, and a squirt of its black blood dampened his tunic as the orc fell dead beside him.

He was ready to choke out a feeble 'thank you' to the person that also saved his life after the Captain, although the elf didn't seem to pay so much attention to him as to turn around and face him.

"Watch out!" Kili cried when an orc sneaked up behind the guard and went to ram a blade onto the elf's back.

The guard ducked out of the way, the orc blade colliding with the spear instead, and knocking it out of hand. For a great long second they just stood there panting and unmoving, working to understand who would make the next move, before the orc grinned wickedly and moved for the guard's neck, whereas the latter avoided the blow just in time, pulling a dagger out of his belt. The orc took hold of the other's arm to shake off the grip on the dagger a little too late. With a little deft twirl the guard had already switched hands, tossing it from one to the other, and slit his opponent's throat just as the orc had his blade raised above their heads to give the final blow.

The sound of flesh being torn apart and blood spurting out mingled with a strangely familiar, coarse growl. The next clue was the black mane of hair waving down the guard's back. Kili almost did a double take at the sight.

"Arya?" he cried, equal parts surprised and in pain at this point.

She turned to him with an arched eyebrow, "I don't understand the tone of surprise."

Someone would probably think him a madman when a throaty chuckle left his mouth in his predicament.

In the moments that followed, seeing that no orc was close to them for the time being, Arya seized the chance to kneel beside him. She was seriously trying both their lucks by standing there, seeing as an arrow could easily hit either of them. She had only the spear in hand again, the dagger having gone back into its sheath, and with her free hand she stroked his face. "Look at me," her tone was stern and brooked no argument, "you'll be fine, yes?"
Kili was in no place to sit through gestures of comfort. "I tho—" he struggled to say, "I thought you left! With that man from Rivend—" his voice was drowned by a groan that he tried to suppress in his throat. He clasped her hand tighter in his.

Ignoring the fact that he miraculously was aware of that and swallowing her grave curiosity to ask him how, she gently squeezed his hand. "Your faith in me is just shocking," she commented dryly. He tried to laugh, but a string of groans came out instead. "Now, we'll get this arrow out of your leg and then I'll help you to the edge—"

"Behind you!" he cut her off and immediately saw her jerk back up like a taut wire.

His eyes reflexively shut in pain as all the comfort her hand offered him disappeared. But he felt a last strand of happiness still lingering intact inside him, now that she was right there, fighting to save him. Somewhere deep in him, there might have been a last hope —the fool's hope— that she hadn't left. Really, he was. He was the greatest bloody fool to exist upon this green earth, and he was fine with it.

Kili took one, two good looks around, then down to himself. With his luck, he was probably going to die in the next hour. So it was a good time as any to blurt it out.

"Arya, I—" a groan left his mouth, "I need to tell you something—"

She didn't even turn to nod or anything. The list of the things that could distract her from a killing spree was extremely small.

Still, when Kili addressed someone, he liked to have their full attention. "Are you even listening to me?" he demanded, all the while making subtle attempts to pull the arrow out of his leg.

The spear was hurling a cropped head yards away and her eyes briefly flashed to him. "I'm a little busy at the moment!"

He gave up his attempts with the arrow, for he simply didn't know how to do it in a way that would not cause him more pain than the already existent. "Do you— You remember that night in— In Carrock?" his voice strained to come out, and it did in haggard pants. "That I wouldn't lend you my coat?"

Arya turned to face him with a wild, questioning look on her face. "Are you serious right now?" she almost squeaked.

"I have an arrow stuck in my leg, damn it!" Kili spat out furiously, the loud volume in his voice enhancing the already vibrating strands of pain that made his body tense. "Just answer the bloody question!"

Her head tilted to the side in exasperation as another orc jumped beside them. She yanked him from the neck, ramming the spear under his jaw, directly into his throat, without remorse. "I remember, yes!" she growled impatiently.

Kili was a step away from the lever, painfully trying to rise to his feet and pull it down. "Dwarves—" he hissed, but his legs could not hold him up for too long.

"No, Kili!" Arya yelled and rushed to him as he almost hung himself from the lever and pulled it down with his weight.

Gravity sent him to the stony ground again and he let another loud groan, this time earning a short glance from the redhead Captain.
Tauriel, seeing that the Ranger was beside the dwarf and tried her best to protect him against the enemy, quickly resumed her fight with the orc in front of her. This momentary straying might have cost her something very valuable like one of her hands, had not she been fast enough. On a completely different note, she had to admit that the cheeky human knew how to wield a weapon.

Kili was struggling to drag himself closer to the edge as the barrels were now free to escape down the river. "Dwarves hardly ever feel cold--"

"What are you on about?" Arya snapped, eyes widened in fury, thinking that he was either going delirious or that she was missing the obvious.

"I know this is definitely not the right place or time to say it--" His breaths came out strained and short. "Without any ulterior motive or hope, only because I could well die soon-- I want you to know that I love you."

And at that moment, hell may have just frozen.

"And not just in a friendly way," Kili went on.

The battle around them seemed to have diminished into something unimportant, time itself felt like it had stopped running.

"Wh– You– What?"

Her vocabulary was suddenly reduced from its knowledgeable origins to the lexicon of a drunken brute. The sole intelligible response she only managed to come up with in her state of total confusion was, "But I don't even have a beard!"

Was there a worse answer in the history of the world as a reply to one declaring his love for another? Probably not. Arya didn't know how to feel about that. Her joy at this knowledge was trampled by fear of the unknown.

And Kili... poor Kili didn't know what to say to this. He didn't expect a confession on her part, but– No, actually he didn't know what to expect. It was Arya, which meant that the possibility for a sensible reply was down to about zero. He merely slid off the outpost and into a barrel below, forgetting that the arrow was still notched in his leg and screaming in pain when his fall prompted it to break in half at the edge of the barrel.

As though the event was erased from her memory, Arya watched as he fell back into the water along with the rest, and then the barrels rolled down the river. She jumped over the walls, landing on the ground of the right bank below, and coerced her feet to carry her as swiftly as they could after the myriads of orcs that ran after the dwarves by land. It was a miracle that she hadn't yet found one in her way to try and kill her. Most of them were already whole yards ahead and she didn't have her bow with her to try and stop even some of them.

It was then that the Elf Prince and the Captain came in handy. They leaped over the wall as well and followed all of them down the river, armed to the teeth and ready to clean their lands from orc filth. Seconds later a whole group of elf guards followed suit and soon, there were elves jumping from tree to tree above the river, shooting arrows at the orcs, orcs in turn were trying to kill the dwarves, and finally the dwarves were being creative and killing every creature that blocked their route with the most imaginative ways possible.

Everyone had lost count of how many different rapids the barrels had met, and most of the company was getting dizzy due to the large amounts of water that had inevitably inserted their lungs during
this small trip. That, combined with the facts that they were trying not to lose each other in the vast network of the river and the streams, trying not to drown themselves or others, and on top of that struggling to fight off the orcs that were hunting them down.

Who mentioned anything about complications and difficulties?

Gloin, Bifur and Nori had managed to snatch three swords out of the orcs' hands as they fell dead in the water, and the blades were circling around the company, to those who were in need to kill someone.

But the arrows could not be avoided. It was out of pure luck that the poisoned arrows were nailed on the barrels and not on them, mainly because the water and the foaming rapids made it difficult to hit the target. Of course, the elves helped quite significantly when they caught the orcs' pace and another round of the heated standoff came round the corner.

For a brief second, the possibility of throwing up inside the river crossed Bilbo's mind, but he quickly dismissed it. He was frightened as he had never been before and was struggling to keep a steady grip on whichever of the barrels was found in his way and not get drowned. He watched in utter astonishment Bombur leaping over the river and on the bank, still stuck inside his barrel, and orcs surrounding him.

Refusing to surrender so easily, the chubby dwarf tossed his arms on either of his sides, a blade in each hand, and took the orcs down with only a few moves. For someone of this weight, Bilbo reckoned, Bombur could be considered extremely dexterous. The barrels disagreed, though. The moment Bombur swirled around and fell into an empty one that flowed directly beneath his feet right then, he was submerged completely under the surface. He ascended a few seconds later, thankfully alive, but nonetheless having swallowed quite the amount of water.

Arya had also caught up with the dwarves and the orcs, only now having forsaken the helmet she previously wore on her head behind, due to a small incident with a creature. The filth had managed to grab the helmet and her neck would follow next, but she managed to swivel around, thus leaving him with only the helmet in his hands, while his head hopped up and away from the rest of his body a moment later. Every sensible person would prefer to lose a helmet, rather than his own head, right?

She could now see that Dwalin and Dori were obviously displeased with Legolas currently balancing on both their heads—at some points only on one of them— to shoot the orcs down. She couldn't even make the time to look around for the red-haired Captain.

The surprise came a while later, when Thorin actually threw a sword to an orc that was ready to kill the Elf Prince. Whether he did it to save the elf or not, it didn't matter. What mattered was that the orc was dead.

An even bigger surprise was the sight on Fili's right, on the bank, where he caught glimpse of a familiar face struggling to take a quite husky orc down. His eyes did a double take to ensure that he was her. She hadn't left after all, had she? He had no time to feel happy, or actually feel anything regarding his realisation, when the creature hurtled forward and crashed his forehead against her face.

Arya felt her head spinning and her eyes rolling backwards. The spear fell from her hands on the ground and she thought it possibly her last moment in this world. The orc was ready to kill her, she could see the blade inches away from her stomach but felt unable to even twitch. She had gone limp.

Kili saw it too. But he was too far to reach her and currently had no weapon on him to throw to the orc that was ready to stab her from the front, or the second that sneakily crept up behind her. "Arya!"
he bellowed with all the strength that had remained in his lungs, agony bursting through him like a
lightning bolt at her imminent fate.

Just then the burglar hauled himself into his brother's barrel, who was far closer to her, and the
blond's eyes gleamed with an eerie twinkle. "Bilbo!" he cried and frantically nodded towards the
bank.

Bilbo saw the figure's body that Fili was pointing at him tottering with a dangerous tendency to fall
into the water and recognised the very known face of his Ranger friend; a face that was now stained
with a small river of blood that ran down from her nostrils and drenched the lower half of her head
with an obnoxious amount of the bright crimson liquid. He resentfully gritted his teeth the second he
noticed the orc behind her with a blade raised above her head, and it did not take him long to consent
to the prince's idea.

Fili paddled with all his might to approach the bank and Bilbo readied himself for what was about to
come. Just a second before the critical moment, the hobbit grabbed the practically unconscious
woman from her ankle and forcefully pulled her towards them. Caught off guard, the two orcs ended
up killing each other in their separate attempts to kill her and she ended up falling into the river.

Before the only thing she could see was water and the last feeling she had was that of her lungs
suffocating from the lack of air and, oh surprise, the overflow of water, Arya caught a glimpse of an
army of orcs running, a blond mustache, and then felt a hand trying to clasp hers. It might succeed, it
might not; she could not tell as the strong current drifted her away.

Chapter End Notes

Tolo hi = Come now
Echuio, a úhæelah! Lyst i saim! = Wake up, you fools! The cells are empty!
Drengi i·nbendryn! Bado! = The prisoners have escaped! Go!
Dúnadaneth = Woman of the West

Ilmariel [ilmä ("starlight") + rí ("crown") + iell ("daughter")] = woman crowned with a
starlit garland. I chose to name Thranduil's wife thus, mainly inspired by the love for the
stars the Mirkwood Elves are supposed to hold, according to Tauriel's claim earlier on.
Not to be confused with Ilmarë, handmaid of Varda.
The aftermath of a bumpy ride

What felt like endless hours passed in a blurry frenzy, changing between fighting orcs and trying to keep themselves on the surface. The current was so strong, it was a miracle they’d survived that raging river and the barrels hadn’t sunk yet.

That is, most of them.

After an abrupt turn of the river Bofur was lost from sight. After that abrupt turn they were also lucky enough to have outrun the orcs -in that aspect the strong current proved quite efficient. Also, neither Fili nor Bilbo had been able to grab Arya's hand when she fell into the river and, unconscious as she was, probably didn't have the needed concentration to try and swim towards the barrels to hook herself on one of them.

Now the barrels containing the company floated lazily in the water, the strong current having drifted away to a smaller branch of the river. Half of them were dizzy enough to even twitch their mouths and utter a word, while some of the rest were silently mourning over their lost companion.

Fili was one of those who suffered the vertigo the constant spinning and twirling inside the water had caused to an unbearable degree. Not to mention the fact that his barrel had to stink of blasted apples. Never so far did the blond dwarf have any problem with the otherwise delicious fruit but, adding the effects of dizziness to the smell, he was half a minute away from throwing up. The only thing that stopped him was the fear that the smell might stay on his clothes.

His brother had half a mind to care about the smell inside his own barrel, when all his thoughts were focused mainly on the second of the two deceased.

"Anything behind us?" Thorin asked from the head of the small line they had formed in the water.

Several heads turned around to check, but spotted no one, much to their relief. "Nothing that I can see," Balin was the one to answer.

"I think we've outrun them!" Gloin's voice sounded from inside the barrel he was stuck.

"Not for long," Thorin warned. "We lost the current-

"Bombur's half drowned!" Dwalin pointed out worriedly as he began to paddle towards the rocky shore ahead, constantly glancing at the rest and counting them.

"My brother!" the chubby dwarf cried mournfully, his cheeks wet; either from water or tears, nobody knew. "He's lost-

Bifur was holding onto Bombur's barrel to pull him to more swallow waters, afraid to let him go out of fear that he'd sink further into the river due to his weight. He, on the other hand, was not crying over his lost cousin; only whispered something under his breath in Khuzdul, along the lines of a prayer.

"Make for the shore," Thorin commanded. "Come on, let's go!"

The rest obeyed silently, using hands or floating branches as paddles to propel themselves quickly to
the rocks, several voices united in a choir of complaining grunts.

"Come on, you big lump!" Dwalin grumbled as he, Bifur, Dori and Nori tried to pull Bombur free off the barrel's limited girth.

"My brother..." Bombur repeated, his voice ranging between heartrending whispers and wailing, oblivious to the people that struggled to help him out of the barrel. "My brother!"

Thorin was already standing atop a large boulder and gazed around vigilantly to check for unwanted followers or something of that sort. The initial trust he had attempted to show at Bilbo's escape plan was seriously starting to wear off. They had already lost Bofur and, if his eyes were not mistaken, he'd managed to catch a glimpse of the Ranger fighting off the orcs on the shore along with the Elves, dressed up as one of them, but had lost sight of her after a while.

She hadn't given them up still; he had to give her that, at least. It felt only fair to allow a tiny bubble of respect to rise up to his chest in her memory, and an even bigger one for the toymaker. Bofur had been an honourable dwarf who had unfortunately passed away before he had the chance to reclaim and see his home again. Although sad about the losses they'd just suffered—even though he didn't count the Ranger's death as a great blow, so to speak—his thoughts quickly drifted off to how the quest would continue from now on.

Fili had never heard anything like the muffled scream and the curse that ripped from his brother's throat as Kili collapsed on the stony ground—the horrific pain the wound caused, all the agony and anger and misery. The blond didn't know all four emotions so well as to flatter himself that there was anything he could do to make Kili feel better, so he only knelt down beside him and clasped his arm tightly.

A rattle of dead silence and helplessness had fallen upon them as Kili's legs reflexively quivered when he dared to press a torn piece of his tunic over the bleeding wound. He barely took notice of his brother three feet away and could barely registered what the others did around him, or even if the whole world was still in place. Guilt swallowed him whole. Not about Arya's death—there was nothing he could do to save her against the force of the water. Guilt he felt for he wasn't as sad about Bofur's death as he was about hers. He knew the toymaker since he remembered himself; recalled all the times as a dwarfling that he visited the market and Bofur would secretly sneak in his hands a little toy that either he or Bifur had made. The eternally wearing that funny hat upon his head dwarf had always been kind to the young prince; never said something offensive about his appearance and was as kind to him as with the rest of the children in Ered Luin. May he rest in peace.

And despite all that, Kili wasn't nearly as sad as he was about the death of a woman whom he'd met only months ago. How horrible a person was he? Although there was a voice in his mind telling him it was natural to feel this way, he couldn't bring himself to believe it.

Fili thought he might be on the verge of witnessing something extraordinary—Kili's eyes were red. Kili was never one prone to crying, or even tearing up; he thought it was a sign of weakness and never wanted to be perceived as weak by anyone. The last time he cried was when their father died, and they were almost children then.

The brunet did not indulge in his grief, however, especially when Thorin was standing a few feet away. He blinked furiously until his eyes were dry enough for that redness to pass for irritation from the water. What did Thorin know about loving a woman anyway to sympathise with the pain Kili felt?

Of course, the young prince had lived a hundred-odd years less than his uncle, so there were aspects of Thorin's life that Kili was not privy to. Parts that no one beside Thorin himself was privy to.
The hobbit had knelt next to the two brothers, watching warily how Kili squeezed the bloodied cloth over his leg and gritted his teeth in anger. Hadn't he been familiar with the prince's temper which was the closest thing to a summer storm, he'd reach out a hand to pat his shoulder comfortably.

"Why didn't you grab her arm?" Kili growled, his already clenched hand turning into a fist. "Why didn't you-" the sentence was cut short by a wave of pain that prickled all the nerves in his body and made his stomach churn.

"We tried," Bilbo defended.

"You should have tried harder!" the brunet hissed under his breath. "You could have saved her-"

"She was our friend, too," snapped Fili, loud enough to attract attention from the rest. His lips were pursed into a thin line and his blue eyes were shining in anger. "I know this is hard for you, but don't you dare accuse us of not trying to save her as much as you would."

Dwalin's head tilted to the side towards Thorin. "What in the name of hell?"

"She didn't leave," the king said gloomily. "She was dressed up as an elf guard and followed us down the river."

Dwalin faltered for a moment before he let the words soak in. "Was?"

Thorin snorted heavily, staring first at his injured nephew and then Fili, who stood guard beside his brother. "She drowned," he muttered with a resigned sigh.

The rest of the dwarves exchanged a few looks of compassion, some more affected than others at the sinister news. Of course, she wasn't their kin, so most of them didn't found the idea of her death hard to deal with. There were those two or three who had inkling of the extent of feelings the younger prince had for her, and of them, Dwalin was the only one to give a brief, comforting pat on Kili's shoulder, ignoring Thorin's severe glare.

The brunet barely registered the gesture. His gaze was downcast, fixed on an empty spot on the ground, oblivious to anything else but pain; and the wound did not make anything to ease it off. He knew his brother was right, this was not his or Bilbo's fault. But Kili was craving to blame someone along with Bofur's. Maybe the blasted river with the damned waters would be a safer solution, he decided.

The hobbit was at a loss, so he glanced over at the blond, who motioned him that it was alright.

"I'll bring Oin to check-

"I'm fine," Kili said blankly, deciding to wear his mask of apathy. A long-suffering sigh of his brother's forced him to double his efforts to appear nonchalant. He would find a better time and place to defuse all his rage later, away from everyone. Then and only then, he would perhaps allow himself to cry.

"And you reprimanded her for being reckless and irresponsible," the blond scolded him.

"It's nothing, I tell you," he insisted. "It's not like I haven't been injured before. And I am still alive and moving as you can see."

Fili narrowed his eyes in doubt, debating on whether to make an attempt to believe him, but a voice cut the trail of his thoughts.
"On your feet," Thorin's commanding tone drew everyone's attention.

"Kili's wounded," his older nephew objected. "His leg needs binding."

"There is an orc pack on our tail," said the king, as if that was explanatory in and of itself.

His tone might be stern, but his face contradicted it. With brow furrowed in worry he glanced at his younger nephew, yet Kili showed no sign of discomfort or pain when he met his gaze; not physical, at least. The emotional pain —possibly the worst kind— was magnificently etched all over his youthful face and made him look thirty years older. And suddenly anger flared inside him, seeing Kili like this. She had managed to hurt the lad after all, damn her.

His eyes hardened again. "We must keep moving," he deadpanned.

Deep down, Fili knew he was right. It didn't necessarily mean that he agreed with him.

"To where?" asked Balin.

"To the Mountain," out of nowhere, Bilbo's panting voice responded. The hobbit took a step away from the two princes and strode upon the rocks, rubbing his hands over his arms to warm himself up from the strong shivers his soaked clothes lavishly gave him. "We're so close."

"A lake lies between us and that mountain," Balin informed. "And we have no way to cross it."

"So we go round," Bilbo offered.

"The orcs will run us down," Dwalin cut in, hatred colouring his already husky, menacing voice, "as sure as daylight. And we have no weapons to defend ourselves."

Thorin shared a glance with him and began pacing thoughtfully. "Bind his leg," he told Fili and then motioned Oin to help as well, "quickly. You have two minutes."

In the meantime, at the south-western ends of the Long Lake where the estuaries of the Forest River led, two dark spots could be discerned from afar; both unmoving as they were washed up on the cobbled shore; one unconscious and one partly unable to move, trying to let things soak in and thanking the heavens for saving his hide.

The latter glanced over the crushed barrel that had collided with a large rock which was entirely submerged in the water and which he failed to notice, then at the practically unconscious woman whose limp body prompted the soft splatter of the water that echoed in the air. He smiled sadly to himself, thinking that she hadn't left as they thought, but instead followed the company and almost drowned on her way to catch up with them. If they reclaimed the mountain from the dragon, she ought to be given at least something from the treasure for the troubles she was constantly getting into because of them, the dwarf reckoned. He made a mental note to remind it to the others later; which fact roused a new round of worrisome thoughts.

He and the Ranger had strayed from the rest at some point, and now he had no idea where the others had ended up, or whether they were still alive. All things considered, they must be safe, if a bit soaked to the bone. His mind drifted to his kin. Bloody hell. They must be dead worried, probably thinking him drowned or killed by those orcs. Mahal save him from Bombur's preaching once they meet again.

After a minute or two, when he finally found the courage and strength to haul himself on his feet and stagger over to her place, it became crystal clear that there was something wrong with her face. Aside
from the fact that there was blood splattered all over her jaw and cheek, there was something else not fitting with her normal appearance.

A gasp let him when her head budged an inch and he realised what was amiss. Her nose—no, more like part of her nose seemed to... deviating to one side, just slightly. Cautiously he drew closer and hesitantly nudged the tip of her arm to wake her.

Lost somewhere in her comatose state, Arya sensed a faint tingling somewhere in her arm and tried to coerce her eyes just a tiny slit open. She felt something granular touching her lips, at times it went dry and at others wet. Water. Well, at least she hoped it was water.

As minutes went by, everything came back; the river, the barrels, the orcs. A few questionable feats were included in the course of her life so far, which in no way were considered frolics, but she had to admit that Bilbo's otherwise ingenious idea to escape Thranduil's Halls in barrels through the river was certainly bordering on madness. Dwalin would wholeheartedly agree with her.

"Thank Mahal!" a much known voice panted out from somewhere close to her the moment she managed to twitch a muscle in her mouth.

Bofur.

"Lassie, if you wanted to lure me away from the others to have some privacy, ye could have just asked."

A quite merry Bofur, for that matter.

"It didn't need to drown us to get me all for yerself," the dwarf babbled on.

What could Arya only say or do in response was to squeeze her eyes shut and growl deep in her throat, feeling a wave of something rise up to her mouth disturbingly fast. If the constantly, overly cheerful dwarf did not already have a head wound, she would have made sure that he did in mere minutes.

But the wave broke out as her eyes inadvertently snapped open and, in contrast to Fili, she couldn't hold herself back from puking. Not food, though; mostly the water she had swallowed during the joyful ride in the river.

The dwarf was tapping her shoulders comfortably until retching her guts up seemed to stop. "How're ye feeling?"

With a husky moan Arya struggled to lift herself up from the ground she was so far glued to. Her face was in the verge of turning white. Whether from the chilly water or the low circulation of blood, she did not know. "Well, I don't think the river is there anymore," she coughed out, "because I drank it."

Bofur held back a chortle. "There, there, now," he soothed and rubbed her shoulders again. "Count yer blessings you're alive."

As soon as she wiped her mouth and splashed some water on her face to clean it, she tried to lift her head more and take a look around. "Where are the others?" her voice came startled as her eyes widened.

He shrugged. "We must have got separated at some point, and we ended up here."

Fear and worry swarm into her chest. More memories started to flood in and her eyes flickered up to
the dwarf with the funny hat who gingerly kept an eye on her. "Kili... He was hit by an arrow, he was injured—"

"I know," Bofur cut in. "I saw it. I heard a few other things, too."

His pointed look made a vast amount of blood rapidly rise to Arya's face and help turning it into its original colour. Bloody hell. "Did you see him?" she asked quickly. "Was he hurt more?"

"Everyone was fine. Last I saw Kili, he was fine too," he said quietly before adding a thoughtful, "Well, as fine as someone hit by an arrow could be." He really didn't want to upset her more.

Putting a lot of effort and with Bofur's help, she managed to drag her carcass over to the dry rocks of the shore that weren't licked by the water. A terrible headache was tormenting her already injured head as she plumped on the ground limply and the dwarf perched himself beside her. He continued to stare at her with a strange look several more minutes than it was socially acceptable for adults.

"What?" she muttered with annoyance.

He gulped quite loudly and pointed a finger to his nose. Slowly she reached a hand up to her own. Just when she felt something amiss, a sharp pain sent prickly twinges to her whole body. So that was the cause of the headache. Damn.

The dwarf fancied himself manly enough not to cower before a battle wound. He had even witnessed the birth of one of his nephews—it still gave him nightmares. In comparison to a battle wound and bloody childbirth, a broken nose ought to be a laughable sight. Despite all this, he found himself closing his eyes every time Arya attempted—in vain—to fix the slight disfigurement her face had sustained, mainly because of the unearthly cracking noises that gave him the goosebumps.

The first two attempts failed.

"Put that bone back or so help me," the dwarf murmured in mild disgust.

It took another two attempts to get the bone in place, naturally accompanied by a string of muffled groans of pain and curses. Being the second of three siblings—the other two being boys—added to her training, meant that she had her nose broken once or twice in the past. Yet back then there was always her mother or Elrond to fix it properly. Talking about centuries of experience and practice in the field compared to her elementary knowledge of medical assistance.

In the end the nose was done, the skin around it was bruised and the lower half of her face was stained with both dry and fresh blood. "A sight for sore eyes, you are," Bofur jested.

Arya didn't seem to appreciate it a lot, as her sole reaction was to try to raise an eyebrow and glare at him, although the bruised nose considerably limited her choices for a variety of facial expressions. "We need to move," she said after a while, eyes scanning the woods in the distance.

"But we don't know where the others are."

"Sitting here will not help us find them," said the Ranger. "There's a whole pack of orcs behind. They will be here in a day's time at most, if we are lucky. And I, along with those who end up close to me, are not usually lucky. Would you like to have another meeting arranged with them?"

The dwarf had absolutely no desire to see their ugly mugs again. He shook his head negatively.

"Then I suggest we move now."
"Aye," he agreed, "but where to?"

Her head tilted towards the lake, specifically the middle of it, where the small town of Esgaroth stood under the sunlight that reflected upon the water. "If the others have survived, pray they're lucky enough to find a way to cross the lake. They surely would make a stop to Esgaroth to get supplies. If they didn't survive..." A pause. A new wave of nausea made her stomach turn. She swallowed the bile that rose with barely noticeable disgust. "Well, let us hope that this won't be the case."

Bofur gave a brief nod and followed suit as she stood up. Arya favoured her ears more than her eyes, for the skin beneath them was slightly swollen and starting to turn purple, and that swell, even light as it was, made her eyesight decrease in strength.

The two of them began to trek along the western shore, gazes constantly flickering either towards the forest or the town, both nervous and hopeful that no other harm had fallen upon the others, or fall upon them. For the bridge that connected the shore with the town was quite far, and the path could turn dangerous at any moment.

The promisingly intense interrogation of the orc they captured preceded his father's severe admonishment about the dwarves' escape from the dungeons. Which actually became even worse when Tauriel informed him that the woman had escaped as well, under the cover of one of the guards. The aforementioned guard appeared minutes later, stripped off his armour, and reported to them what exactly had happened; how that male Ranger punched him and everything went blank from then on.

Hearing this, the King went livid. And he actually had every right to. His strict, angry voice possibly echoed in the entire realm as he soliloquized about the audacity that pair of Rangers had so as to try and fool him, his son's poor decision to allow strangers enter the Halls without notifying him, as well as his guards' incompetence to keep the prisoners in the dungeons, where they belonged. The Prince and the Captain patiently waited side to side till the rant came to an end, acknowledging their mistakes, but also failing to explain how the prisoners escaped.

Yet, after the interrogation was over and came the royal order to literally seal the Woodland Realm from the outside world, Legolas dared to debate that order in order to bring his friend back. Tauriel had hurtled into the forest, after who knows how many orcs, and for what reason? He still mused on it to figure it out. He didn't hesitate even a moment to grab his bow and blade, convince his father of his actions and follow after her to put some sense into her head. There were times he seriously doubted how she'd become Captain of the Guard, when she had the nerve to disobey the King's orders at a moment's notice.

And there she was now, hopping from rock to rock with graceful steps, making her way through dead animals torn into pieces and eviscerated, with orkish arrows notched in their carcasses. She paused just at the edge of the shore, staring in the distance at the town of Esgaroth, which sat in the middle of the tranquil waters of the Long Lake. On purpose, Legolas kicked a little stone with his foot. The almost inaudible sound stimulated the sensitive ears of the red-haired elf.

In a swift move Tauriel turned to the source of the sound, crouched upon the rock with her bow ready to fire an arrow at the intruder who dared to hinder the hunt she was off to. Just as she was ready for the kill, her eyes took in the sight and she glared at the Prince who also had his bow and arrow at the ready.

"Ingannen le Orch," she scolded him, a relieved breath escaping her nonetheless.

"Ci Orch im, dangen le," Legolas said with a pointed look and they both lowered their weapons.
"Tauriel, you cannot hunt thirty orcs on your own."

The redhead had strayed her gaze from him to look back towards the lake, yet sideways glanced at him when he spoke. "But I am not on my own."

"You knew I would come," he sighed, prompting her to crack a light smile. "You know that the King is angry, Tauriel. For six hundred years my father has protected you, favoured you," he walked closer to her. "You defied his orders, you betrayed his trust."

She fixed him with a heated look, showing that she was well aware of how angry the King must have been. She had been present when he directed some of the accusations towards her and the soldiers about the prisoners' escape. "Whatever the King's order is, it was given after I left," she said steadily. "Although I can imagine what it's about."

"Dandolo na nin," he said softly, "e gohenatha."

Tauriel stood there, unblinking. She knew the King would not take kindly to that misstep of hers should she turn back. "Ú-'ohenathon. Cí dadwenithon, ú-'ohenathon im." Either way, she was determined to stand for her beliefs. "The King has never let orc filth roam our lands. Yet he would let this orc pack cross our borders and kill our prisoners."

Legolas was not to have his views change so easily. And the last he wished was for her to get hurt in order to help a bunch of dwarves or, even worse, chase after their hunters. "It is not our fight," he insisted.

"It is our fight," Tauriel countered.

For a minute he contemplated her words, trying to figure if she indeed supported her views, or held any special interest in one of the prisoners. He had watched how her eyes sparkled with worry when the orc they had captured mentioned something about a dwarf's fatal injury. His brow had crinkled in suspicion even at the thought of her having a soft spot where dwarves—or specifically one of them—were concerned.

Eager to not let this disturbing notion enter the realm of possibilities, he decided not to throw such blame on her. She had always been more open-minded than the rest, far more than himself and his father. Of course, she was rather young to comprehend the hostility between the two races and what preserved that kindling fire of hatred and dislike. One might argue that she was rather smart to see past it.

"I know what you think," Tauriel said quietly. "That I am still young. 'Tis true, I am. But I was there when we marched to the Mountain, though a mere guard and not a Captain back then." She recalled the memory as if it was yesterday. All the destruction the dragon wreaked in the space of mere hours, the people running to shelter themselves from the flames... It still gave her the chills. "You remember it too," she said with a raised eyebrow, knowing that he did.

The Elf Prince was put through a severe conflict. Was she trying to make amends for something that she thought to be a mistake of the past? "You are perfectly aware of the reason we did not try to get closer to the Mountain back then."

"I am," Tauriel agreed. "But it did not end then and it will not end here either. With every victory, either of little or big importance, in Mirkwood or anywhere else, evil will grow and fester every corner of the world. And if your father has his way, we will do nothing and simply let darkness descend. Are we not part of this world?" she wondered. "Tell me, mellon, when did we allow evil to become stronger than us?"
Legolas briefly glanced towards the town in the middle of the lake and pursed his lips, without offering an answer.

As Fili had put his mind onto the necessary task of enshrouding his brother's leg tightly with a piece of cloth to stop the bleeding for the time being, the rest rambled around, trying to gather any stuff that had survived inside their pockets before it floated away.

Bifur, Dori and Nori were set to comfort Bombur and put an end to his silent mourning. Oin was taking a look at those injured, although he did not take the chance to approach the most serious of injuries the company had sustained. Kili was giving out death glares to anyone daring to claim that he required immediate medical attention. In turn, he claimed that he was just fine and snapped at them to mind their own business and leave him in peace.

Stubborn lad, the healer thought. He would have to take a look at his injury later, perhaps when the prince would be a tad calmer. He only hoped that it was not something serious, for his medical supplies were running extremely low; most of them had either been confiscated back to the elven Halls, or were lost in the water.

A more carefree compared to the rest dwarf was sitting near the edge of the bank and flipped over his boots, a splash of water rolling out of each and into the river. Ori wiggled it in the air, trying to get as much water as he could out, when a tall figure suddenly shadowed his own hunched form. Panic rose in his gut as the figure moved and he slowly turned to face it.

At the same time the whole company took notice of the intruder, and twelve heads snapped in his direction. Not lingering much, a furious Dwalin sprang forward in Ori's defense, who had frozen in his spot wielding a branch he'd picked up from the ground as a weapon.

An arrow suddenly embedded on the long branch in the dwarf's hands, and the latter dropped it down. The grim-faced man whose form stood looming upon the large rocks had fired it as a warning, while another one tore through the air a second after the first.

Forgetting the pain in his leg, Kili grabbed the first thing he saw that could cause damage and jumped up to his feet. The precise moment his arm came over the shoulder to gain momentum, the tip of the second arrow hit the rock in his hand, deflecting it to stars know where.

"Do it again," the man warned, his voice coarse and dark, "and you're dead."

Chapter End Notes

Ingannen le Orch = I thought you were an orc
Ci Orch im, dangen le = If I were an orc, you would be dead
Dandolo na nin, e gohenatha. = Come back with me, he will forgive you
Ú'-ohenathon. Ci dadwenithon, ú'-ohenathon im = But I will not. If I go back, I will not forgive myself.
mellon = friend

I've realised it just about now... I'm so, so sorry I haven't thanked you for reading this and leaving kudos or comments, so I'm doing it now. Thank you all very much and I hope you enjoyed this chapter as well!
The rocky road to Erebor

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The tall like a pine tree figure of the man remained dutifully planted upon the large rock as he aimed a third arrow at the dwarves. His motions were fluid, swift and, mainly, not hesitant. He would not have a problem to kill them without even flinching. Thorin's eyes narrowed in question as his gaze examined the man and, before he had the chance to speak, his advisor was already on the move.

"Excuse me," being ever the peacemaker, Balin stepped forth with hands raised as proof of his lack of weapons, "but you're from Lake-town, if I'm not mistaken?" The white-bearded dwarf was lucky enough to notice something mere seconds before the man showed up, and he was sharp enough to put two and two together.

The arrow held in the bow was immediately pointed towards the speaking person. The man noticed the dwarf falter in his steps in response, though he resumed his attempt to catch his attention.

"That barge over there," Balin dropped the bait, "it wouldn't be available for hire, by any chance...?"

The man's eyes flickered towards the aforementioned vessel, parked in the small dock behind some bushes, and the bow seemingly lowered a few inches. With examining eyes he regarded the strange group composed of dwarves and another person, who definitely had not the stature of his comrades, and prepared himself for a difficult bargain, if that was the case.

"It depends on who's interested," he said warily, but nobody gave a response. "What renders you so interested?"

"You're too curious for your own good, master bargeman," Balin said lightly.

"So people tell me," this time the man put the bow aside and moved about to load the remaining barrels that were washed up on the rocky shore to the barge, "but I think you would agree that it is only fair to give me some information first." He offered a faint smile, unruffled and knowing, as though he was expecting a blatant lie. "What makes you think I would help you?"

Yet Balin wasn't offered the position of the King's advisor without reason. With a flowing motion of his hand, he gestured towards the man himself. "Those boots have seen better days," he noted, "as has that coat. No doubt you have some hungry mouths to feed," a kind laugh escaped his mouth. "How many bairns?"

The man's eyes shortly flickered to the speaking dwarf as his thoughts drifted back to his home, where the family waited for him. He knew the small talk should end soon, and he would have to achieve a good bargain if he wanted to secure the next month's food supplies. "A boy and two girls."

"And your wife, I imagine," Balin went on, quickly glancing at the others to coerce them to look something livelier than statues and something less than ready to throw punches at someone, "she's a beauty."

That had the bargeman stop in his tracks and the barrel he was holding to sneak out of his grip, tottering a bit to the side, but he was quick enough to catch it and put back in line upon the boat. "Aye," he said solemnly, "she was."

Blast it, thought Balin. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to-"
Not really famous for his inclination to patience, this was starting to grate on Dwalin's nerves. Orcs could appear within moments and they were chatting as if they had all the time in the world, when they might as well knock him unconscious and get on with it. "Oh, come on," he snapped under his breath—at least what he thought to be under his breath—"enough of the niceties."

Of course, it did not go amiss.

"What's your hurry?"

Dwalin looked positively ready to pounce on him. "What's it to you?"

"I would like to know who you are," the man demanded in his grim voice again, his face a mask of seriousness, "and what you are doing in these lands."

"We are simple merchants from the Blue Mountains," Balin responded easily, "journeying to see our kin in the Iron Hills. But we had a small accident in the forest and lost most of our gear-"

"We need food," Thorin chimed in urgently, giving a brief glancing over his nephews, where the older was helping the younger to sit as comfortable as he could on the rock. "We need supplies, weapons... Can you help us?"

When all the barrels were loaded onto the boat, the man turned his head towards the dwarves. "No one enters Lake-town but by leave of the Master." Their faces and shoulders fell. "Whatever business you had with the Elves, I suppose it did not end well, judging by the state of the barrels." There was surety in his voice and it angered some of the dwarves. "I am the bargeman," he pointed towards the evidence, "I am expected to know where these barrels came from. Yet I am a simple bargeman and this is my barge, not a ferry."

Thorin was lively motioning Balin with his head to forge ahead with his attempt to convince him to help them, which the man again did not fail to see. He was on a good way.

"All the town's-" the grim voice spoke again, but abruptly came to a pause. What town's wealth, he wondered. The whole town was a raggedy mess and barely had food to survive. And winter was on its way. "All the Master's wealth comes from trade with the Woodland Realm. He would see you in irons before risking the wrath of King Thranduil," he pointed out as he untied the boat from the small dock, for a more dramatic effect.

"I wager there are ways to enter the town unseen," Balin said pointedly.

"Aye," said the man in a casual manner as he deposited his bow and quiver of arrows down, "but for that... you'd need a smuggler."

Balin followed the man inside the boat with a step too light for a dwarf his age. "For which we will pay double."

Legolas remained silent and pensive for a while longer as Tauriel stared at him intensely. She'd already made up her mind and there was no way he would convince her otherwise. One could call it insight, another could call it instinct; either way, there was something that led her believe her decision was for the best, even if it'd cost her a few significant duties or relationships in the end.

Yet she could not linger anymore. The orcs had already gained much more ground that she would have liked, and they had to depart immediately in order to catch up with them.

Until the moment finally came that the blond prince shook his head in resignation, letting a sigh.
"Since he will punish you anyway," he said with certainty, feeling too young and bold for his own good again, "I might as well share your burden." He tightened the grip on his bow and inwardly wished things were not as serious as they actually were.

Figuring out exactly whom he meant, Tauriel smiled broadly at him. Although this time, it had nothing to do with naughty young elves who disregarded the King's orders for the sake of climbing up the trees of the forest to reach the light of the stars. It was about the Prince and the Captain of the Guard. And even though their purpose to wipe the remaining orcs out was noble, disregarding the King's orders was a crime that warranted severe punishment. They'd think about that when the time came.

Time rolled so slow, it was like someone was holding the sun in place and didn't allow it to move west to set. The trek along the shore of the lake was far from short or easy. The meagre warmth of the sun wasn't nearly enough to dry their clothes, so the dwarf and the Ranger had to soldier on swiftly and shivering—actually, she walked in a swift pace, he was just trying to catch up with her.

To compensate for this, he thought it fitting to give rhythm to their pace and lift the pall that seemed to have been cast above them. He began whistling and humming various tunes under his breath—because that wouldn't get old fast.

While in the merry month of May, from me home I started
Left the girls of the tavern nearly brokenhearted
Saluted father dear, kissed me darling mother
Drank a pint of beer, me grief and tears to smother

Then off to kill the worm, reclaim where I was born
Cut a stout blackthorn to banish ghosts and goblins
In a brand new pair of brogues rattled o'er the bogs
And frightened all the orcs on the rocky road to-

"It's all right not to talk!" Arya burst when she couldn't take it anymore. The piercing chill in the air made her cranky enough to snap with even the smallest provocation, even though the elven clothes sheltered her sufficiently. They were drenched, however, and that, she couldn't help; she had to wait for them to dry.

The ever buoyant dwarf seemed hurt by the sudden declaration and his mouth fell shut.

The woman sighed in genuine regret. "I am sorry," came the apology. "While I honestly admire your cheerful disposition, right now it's humanly impossible for me to sympathise with it." His features relaxed at this and he ceased frowning. "Also, there's a pack of orcs on our tail. Songs aren't the best way to maintain a cover."

Bofur flashed a wide smile. "My gut says the others are safe, and me balls say we're catching up with them."

Arya let a half-hearted chuckle, deep down hoping that both his gut and balls were right. Then her brow furrowed as she looked worriedly towards the town. They were still too far from the bridge. It could not even be seen now that the dusk was near and mist had fallen like a veil over the lake. Glancing at the beads of sweat framing the dwarf's face, she realised they needed to camp soon, or they'd keel over from exhaustion.

Problem was... where? The night was dark and full of terrors; there was no safe place near to keep them sufficiently hidden. They had to hide somewhere not visible to anyone who passed by the
treeline. Not that it'd be of much help, if the orcs caught up.

The worrisome look on her face did not go unnoticed. Bofur resumed his attempts to cheer her up, reaching somewhere that she really did not want to see or know anything about, and conjured up a bottle. "I was saving this for something special," he said with a smile, "but I believe ye've earned your share."

"How on earth...?"

"Just a keepsake from the Elves' cellars," he shrugged innocently. Not only Nori was familiar with the art. "Besides, it could well be used to bribe someone to enter the town unseen."

The Ranger scoffed. "Not my intention to dampen your spirits, but I seriously doubt one bottle of wine is adequate bribe."

The dwarf's smile fell from his face. "Then as far as I'm concerned, there ain't any other way to enter the town."

"I've got two daggers and one exquisitely sharpened knife that argue different," Arya countered with a wry smile, her gaze not retreating from the bridge in the distance as she twirled the two blades in her hands with a flourish. "And there are many ways to enter a town unseen."

Provided that they reached the damned bridge at some point and did not procrastinate somewhere far away, over the usage of a bottle of wine.

It had been late afternoon when the deal was made and Bard ushered, along with the barrels, the dwarves inside the barge. There had been objections and complaints upon learning they’d reach the town before the dawn of the next day, unable to think of standing inside a boat for so many hours. Thus, they decided to take shifts. Half of them would rest, while the others would stay awake and also keep an eye open for the bargeman.

The first group who were assigned the first few hours of sleep was out within minutes. The ride on the Lake's waters was creepily silent, the tranquility interrupted every now and then by the faint splashes the water made against the wooden barge as Bard led it with the help of the tiller in the stern.

Thorin, who was standing at one side of the boat next to Dwalin was awfully grumpy, even more so than usual. He wished they hadn't lost Bofur on the way there and, weird enough as it sounded, wished the Ranger was there as well. Had she been there they would certainly have avoided all this nerve-breaking discussion with the bargeman. She would have found a way to break the man's nerves sooner than he'd managed to break theirs.

His gaze then fell upon his nephews, who were sitting side to side, with their heads resting on each other like when they were dwarflings, and he surprisingly allowed his mouth to crack something that could pass for a smile.

Weird visions and disturbing images plagued Kili's sleep during the ride. He saw that same dream he had in Mirkwood; his brother and uncle perishing, and himself being unable to even budge an inch to save them. After that he saw his father dying. And in the end, during the very early hours of the night, when the darkness was almost tangible and the mist did not allow them to see beyond their own nose, he dreamt of Arya. Or, to be precise, her corpse being violated in the most disgusting ways that could cross someone's imagination by a group of orcs, with king of the castle being Azog.

It was then that he jerked upright, having trouble to breathe normally, his head spinning and boiling.
He clung to the side of the barge, knelt on one leg, for the other—the injured one—was quite painful to bend, and a retching sound disrupted the peace of the night. Whether it was caused by the abominable content of his dreams or the floating of the boat in the waters, he did not know.

His brother stirred beside him, roused from his tense sleep, and rubbed his back soothingly until he was done. Fili's blue eyes studied his own as he silently slumped back into his seat and wiped the cold sweat from his forehead, feeling a slight change of temperature. Blast his luck, he cursed, he must have got fever.

"Are you alright?" Fili whispered.

The brunet gave a simple shake of his head, motioning that it was caused by the back-and-forth rocking of the boat.

Thorin's eyes almost squinted as he had focused his gaze directly on them, trying to discern any words said.

Quickly, Kili pretended to be falling back asleep, not wanting to deal with his uncle's piercing look. He didn't know why he did that; why he refused to be given medical attention when he was obviously in need of it. Perhaps he was too stubborn to even admit that his injury might be serious, when two others were lost. A wound by an arrow was nothing compared to the cold mantle of death.

With these thoughts in mind he managed to doze off again. As the hours passed and even heavier fog veiled them, the viciousness of the dreams decreased. The nightmares with his father shifted into dreams he'd later have no recollection of.

They had decided to make a stop and rest for a few hours a while later, when the dark of the night deepened considerably. Fire was out of the question; they were already being hunted down, they were not very willing to betray their place.

Just when they sat opposite to each other, resting their backs against a few rocks placed along their way, Bofur began to sing again, very low this time. Arya was simply waiting for him to fall asleep so she could pass the rest of the night in silence and gain time to think. She didn't know about what, just wished for a few minutes of quiet contemplation.

But silence was not included in fate's imminent plans.

"Have ye thought of a serious answer to give him when we meet them again?"

That snapped her out of her reverie. "Excuse me?" He repeated the question and she reflexively blushed from the top of the head to the tip of her toes. "A serious answer to give to whom?"

The dwarf rolled his eyes. "Now, don't play coy. I heard everything."

Arya folded her knees in front of her chest and hugged them tightly, letting her head slump over them. "I don't see how that should concern you."

Bofur did not feel insulted; quite the opposite, he was surprised that she even graced him with a reply. "Ye need to talk to someone about it. If ye don't, that head of yours will explode," he chided. "And I happen to be the only one round here, so ye'd better start talking."

"People who give me advice, I reckon they're talking to themselves."

He stretched his arms in front of him, until his fingers cracked. "Let us start with another question
"Bofur, I honestly appreciate your efforts," she said with a raised hand, her head still resting on her folded knees, "but the last thing I want is to have a conversation about love."

"Don't want it, aye, but ye definitely need it!"

Her head suddenly jerked up, only an inch away from hitting back on the big rock, and this time she graced him with a furious look. "Why do I need it?" she snapped. "Oh, I think that he needs it! He definitely needs it since he chose to love me, of all people!" Her companion was ready to say something in reply, but then she spoke again, "There are not many women amongst your people, I am aware of that, but why me?"

"Why not you?" the dwarf asked in confusion.

"I'm a Ranger!" Arya said dramatically. "Most people don't even like me! People avoid us, they're afraid of us..." That was true, for they were isolated where people had become wary of them, and that only perpetuated their reputation as lone Rangers who remorselessly cleared the lands of the North. "Living proof, half of the company didn't even take a moment to think about it before they started complaining what use you'd have of me as your guide."

"Lass, of course we want y-"

"Oh yes," she sneered, "it feels like a giant hug."

Bofur quieted at this. "Dwarves are mostly calculating folk. There are some who are tricky and treacherous and pretty bad lots; some others are not, but are decent enough people like us in the company," he said with no hint of arrogance or conceit, before offering a playful smile, "if, of course, ye don't expect too much."

"Even he didn't like me when we first met!" Arya persisted. "He said that he hated me-

"There is actually a thin line between love and hatred," Bofur mused thoughtfully.

"No, there is not a thin line between love and hatred! There is, in fact, an insuperable, huge wall with armed guards posted every ten feet between love and hatred."

"Now you're exaggerating," he appeased. "Why wouldn't his feelings shift from friendly to something more intimate?" he pondered. "You are good... kind even, although you take pains to disguise it on occasion, as if it is something to be ashamed of—rest assured, you're quite successful at it. You've been to many parts of the world, seen incredible sights... Kili admires that. He's had an affinity for travels and adventures ever since he learned how to walk. You are a warrior, serve a noble purpose, and that thrills him. Much has been said behind his back about his appearance, especially from dwarrowdams back home. As far as I'm aware, whatever you've thrown at him, it was said face to face. Kili never hated ye for that; he appreciated and respected ye for it. Also, putting a knife to a man's throat as soon as you meet him does tend to make an impression."

Arya gave a less than half-hearted chuckle.

"Even before you two were able to hold a conversation like normal people, back when you're ready to pounce on each other with so much as a word, he'd find a way to throw your name into the conversation. Not to mention later, when you agreed to be friends..." He started to laugh then. "Ask Fili or Bilbo if ye don't believe me, we literally couldn't get him to shut his cakehole the moment he started to blabber about ye and whatever you were discussing all night long, or all the funny things you said—"
"Yes, I got the picture," Arya interrupted, fully embarrassed, "thank you."

"You are also quite appealing to him, I reckon," he added with a roguish look, "despite him being a dwarf. Tho' I guess ye must look bonny to the men of your race," he corrected, then added thoughtfully, "I imagine to the Elves as well--"

"Oh, in the name of everything pure in this world," she said dramatically, "please tell me you're not confessing your secret admiration for me right now."

The dwarf tossed his head back, laughing. "Forgive me for spoiling it to you, lass, but I like me women hairy. And make no mistake, ye definitely are not," he gestured towards her hairless jaw and laughed at the stern look on her face. Her features seemed to relax a tiny bit, although something quickly made them crinkle in a painful expression.

"I am not who he thinks I am," she muttered with a dismal smile, a sight so sinister and humourless that it hung like a dark cloud over her.

Bofur stared at the woman for a while, trying to interpret her quaint sayings, but found no obvious explanation to give to them. In the end he simply broke a lighthearted smile to ease the atmosphere and the darkness that seemed to surround her. "Nobody is perfect," he said simply and slumped further into his seat, lowering his hat to cover his eyes. A faint snore came not long after.

Arya was unable to stand still and rest. She stood up and the cold air hit her directly in the face, prompting her already shivering form to almost run to warm herself up.

Love was not something she had looked for in this quest or in her years so far. But now that she had found it, there was not a single chance for it to grow, even if it was actually reciprocated. She felt the urge to pull her hair out of her head at the injustice of it.

She knew Thorin Oakenshield, his pride and his prejudice; he would never be able to accept a nephew who loved a human woman of elvish descent. Logically speaking, his sister would trail the same path. Only Fili was the one that could possibly have no objections to the abominable union this would be condemned as through the others' eyes. And since Bofur listed the company as some of the finest specimens among their race, she refrained from even imagining how the rest would react should they ever learn about this. They'd probably demand Kili's suspension from the royal line, or something more extreme like—heaven forbid—hang him for treason.

Her heart started to beat erratically in her chest. If anything happened to him because of her, or a potential bond they shared, she wouldn't be able to live with it. His mother was going to kill her. Thorin was going to kill her. Arya thought she might as well kill herself to save them all the trouble.

No, this was no rightful way to die, she decided. Although it would hurt her to leave Kili behind when her duties came to an end and the company reached the Mountain safe, she knew that it should be done. It might drive herself to die out of grief, but she had long ago decided to depart this life in the cold lands and hills of Arnor, at the side of her cousin while she protected him. Kili would be led down to a safer path, with his family and perhaps a loving dwarrowdam at the end of it. Not her. Not the walking wreck she was.

As more time passed and they all felt that they were approaching the town, the incessant rocking of the boat was making Kili more nauseous and he felt quite cold. To ice the cake, Bilbo hadn't stopped staring at the wound without forgetting to remind him how disgusting it looked.

"It's nothing," Kili dismissed the persistent hobbit, trying to get him to mind his own business.
without sounding impolite. "It's just a scratch." He risked a glance at his brother on his other side. Fili
was thankfully still asleep.

Bilbo almost smacked him in the head. "No, that is more than just a scratch," he fumed. "That is an
orc wound!"

Kili huffed out a breath and looked down at his sloppily bandaged wound, feeling too weary to
argue further.

"Are you doing this on purpose?" Bilbo wondered.

The prince narrowed eyes in confusion. "Pardon me?"

"I am sorry for your loss and I sympathise with your pain, but it doesn't mean you should be next in
the line to die."

"Bilbo, what on earth are you rambling about?" Kili snapped quietly. "I am not dying! The arrow
came out and now there is nothing more than a small cut there. End of story," he deadpanned.

"Then why won't you let Oin check it," Bilbo demanded, "if it's so small and unimportant as you
say?"

Kili took a deep breath and leaned closer to him, opting to have a smaller hearing range, namely only
Bilbo's ears. "Thorin already thinks I'm not focused on the quest, which is truly a mistake, for I am. If
he gets even the vaguest indication that this is something that could possibly hinder us further apart
from all the obstacles we have faced so far, I am doomed." The hobbit seemed to start cracking and
the prince inwardly congratulated himself for his convincing argument. "We were stripped off all our
weapons and supplies back to the Halls. I doubt Oin has something to help me, even if I was in dire
need of medical aid. We arrive at Lake-town in a few hours, where Oin could get supplies to treat me
if the injury worsens. So could you please not make an issue of this right now? It really is just a
scratch, after all."

The hobbit's smart eyes did not detect a sign of lying in the dwarf's sayings, but he couldn't wholly
agree with him about the seriousness of his condition. Bilbo might not be a healer, but it didn't take a
genius to know that a wound from an arrow should be checked.

"Very well," he eventually conceded. "Though I am sure Arya would have a word or two to say, or
more likely scream, if she were here to see your antics."

Kili scoffed and spoke no further, forfeiting to mention anything about the chill that weirdly made his
body shiver, or the itching the wound was causing him for the past hour. Readjusting his tunic to
cover himself better, he casually placed his right hand upon the wound, although in fact he was
pressing it, and simply nodded to Bilbo a silent thanks. For the next few minutes he watched as the
burglar fidgeted in his seat, his features drawn in a pensive manner.

And indeed, Bilbo was deep in thought, contemplating all that they had encountered in the road so
far. "Goblins, trolls, wargs, spiders- None of that was in the contract. Maybe... maybe I should have
never left Bag End," he mused aloud, clenching and unclenching his hands. "That was my first
mistake." He then jumped upright, crossed his arms over his chest and turned to face the dwarves
who were awake with the look a teacher gave to his students. "We have an old saying in the Shire,
we learn it from birth—you never venture east."

The dramatic soliloquy seemed to draw unwanted audience apart from the dwarves, giving away a
tad more information than intended.
"Shire?" the man's inquiring voice came from the stern of the boat, where he steered the tiller, prompting a few heads to turn. He was focused on the road ahead, but managed a glance at them, inwardly wondering how far was the truth from their sayings. They were not all of them dwarves, and Shire-folk did not fit well in the description of a bunch of dwarves travelling to meet their kin in the Iron Hills. "So tell me, master hobbit... Why did you venture East?"

Bilbo's quick wit made up for his earlier slip of the tongue. He had a reputation of a bloody burglar to maintain, thank you very much. The single thought crossing his mind right then was that only bad lies had too much detail—he needed to come up with something simple and credible.

The corners of his mouth curled upwards.

"My name is Bilbo Baggins," he introduced himself with a polite smile, "and I happen to be a very good cook." Bombur wasn't in the best state of mind to argue that, so Bilbo gladly took up the role. "I would say at your service, but I'd like to know who I'm serving."

The bargeman regarded the little person with interest, wondering how someone that short could have the guts to appear witty opposite to a man twice his size. "I am Bard," he replied in the same polite tone, "the bargeman, the bowman... and as of lately, the ferryman as well."

The hobbit appreciated the play on words and inclined his head at him.

"You might want to step away from the edge, master Baggins," Bard advised with a pointed nod. The light expression abandoned his face as quickly as it appeared at the sinister warning. "What? What do you me-?"

"Watch out!" Gloin shouted as the barge traveled through floating pieces of ice and suddenly took an abrupt turn to avoid enormous stones that peeped out of nowhere.

The rest, including those who were asleep but jumped awake at the sound of Gloin's battle cry, stared in awe. All but Bard, who continued to drive the barge in the water with the precision of a thread put through a needle in the first try, oft passing by the rocky pilings by a hair's breadth and yet completely unruffled.

The ancient city of Esgaroth had remained a misty, shadowy ruin in the three centuries since the great flood. Even attempts to pass through it, much less resettle it, had ended in disaster—to the point that even Lake-town's present inhabitants were too afraid to sail through it, hence the bridge that connected the town with the lake's shores. Barges and boats of several merchants who had dealings with the people of Lake-town made sure to stay a long distance away from the ruins of the old city, due to the belief that demons and other dangers still haunted the region. Bard had always laughed them off.

Yet the dwarves weren't so impressed by his sailing prowess. "What are you trying to do, drown us?"

"I was born and bred on these waters, master dwarf," Bard said nonchalantly. "If I wanted to drown you, I would not do it here."

Thorin scowled at him and his hands reflexively clenched into fists. Now he definitely wished for the pesky Ranger to be there. She and the man would most likely get along well, for they shared a common trait—they were both pains in the arse, after a fashion.

"Oh," Dwalin growled next to him, "I've had enough of this lippy Lakeman. I say we throw him over the side and be done with it."
"Bard," said Bilbo with a tired sigh, feeling the cold pinching his bones. "His name is Bard."

"How do you know?"

"Uh," Bilbo fixed the bald dwarf and the king with a wry look, "I asked him."

"I don't care what he calls himself," Dwalin grumbled. "I don't like him."

"We do not have to like him," Balin countered. "We simply have to pay him. Come on now," he urged the others as he placed what coins he had gathered already in front of him to count them, "turn out your pockets."

A low hubbub began as the dwarves began to pat their pockets for whatever of value was not confiscated from them by the Elves; not all of them, however.

"How do we know he won't betray us?" Dwalin asked huskily.

Thorin shot him a pointed glare. "We don't."

Yet there was a wee problem as Balin pointed out, when they were a few coins short. Gloin was persistently refusing to offer his money, giving as an excuse all the troubles and misery this quest has brought him so far. He was ranting for quite the time until he noticed that no one was actually paying attention to him, but rather to something else in the far distance.

Even Kili, with his wounded leg, had rose on his feet and, clutching both his brother and the hobbit's shoulder for support, stared with amazement at the scenery unfolding before them through the thick layers of fog.

Thirteen eyes were pinned on the East as the first light of dawn crept through the clouds and lighted the Lonely Mountain that stood there, tall and sublime in all its old glory. The only difference was that it was currently housing a sleeping dragon on the inside. It did not need something more to make Gloin yield and give all his money willingly.

Light steps were heard as the bargeman almost ran to them with small hops over the barrels and demanded his payment.

"We will pay you when we get our provisions," Thorin insisted. "Not before."

"If you value your freedom," Bard warned, "you'll do as I say. There are guards ahead."

The dwarves climbed back into the barrels -not without protest and curses, of course- as the barge approached the small station before the gates of the town to make the proper arrangements for a convincing cover.

Kili was forced to kneel inside the barrel and the position did not do much to ease the pain in his leg. Instead, the muscle was further stretched and hurt more. He bit on his clenched fist to suppress a groan, ignoring the metallic taste of blood in his mouth. "Hey, Fili," he called in a whisper, "have you any inkling of what is happening?"

The blond prince was quite displeased with the situation. And curse his luck, he'd chosen the blasted barrel that smelled like apples again, by mistake! A new wave of nausea hit and he started to heave. "We are all inside the barrels again," he grumbled under his breath. "That is the extent of my knowledge."

"What's he doing?" growled Dwalin, unable to get on with the concept called 'patience'. 
"He's talking to someone," muttered Bilbo, seeing as he was the only one with direct view to the bargeman through a hole in his barrel. "He's..." his voice raised a few significant volumes here, "pointing right at us! And now they're shaking hands-"

"That bloody scallywag!" Dwalin cursed. "He's selling us out!"

Heavy footsteps marked the approach of people and just when the dwarves were ready to haul themselves out of the barrels and jump into the lake, rather than get caught, the occupants of the lake seemed to have evacuated the water and instead switched their residence over to the barrels.

The loud slapping sounds of the tons of fish filling up the barrels to the brim were quite successfully covered by the dwarves' grunts and curses as they felt themselves sink further down due to the extra weight.

They didn't stop complaining for long, long after. And they did it so persistently that Bard was forced to kick one of the barrels and order them to keep quiet, for they were approaching the tollgate.

Everyone was forced to comply and there wasn't even the sound of breaths heard when the town came in clear view.

Chapter End Notes

Title inspired from the "Rocky road to Dublin" by the Dubliners. The first two verses of the song are used in the chapter, with some of the words changed to fit into the story.

I honestly love Bard. Don't know why that much, but I really, really do.

Many thanks to all those who read and left kudos, and to Elisemay and Amelia for your comments!
Hidden inside of an elvish barrel, covered to the point of asphyxiation with blasted fish... A warrior who had forged his reputation in the heat of battle, renowned for his valiance in all seven Dwarf Realms, now entering a town like smuggled goods would have. This was pure humiliation. On another note, Dwalin had to hand it to the lippy Lake-man... it was a smart plan, up until the bloody fish got in the way. And he made a point of making his irritation known even after the kick his barrel received from Bard.

Thorin, on the other hand, surprisingly didn't mind the fish so much. He thought that working as a blacksmith in a village of Men and being treated like trash by them was when he hit rock bottom, so anything else was acceptable.

Bard was steadily steering the tiller, bringing the barge closer and closer to the town's tollgate, when a loud voice tore through the peace of the early hours of morning and the flimsy mist seemed to break a bit.


A man then walked out of the small warehouse at the edge of the town beside the tollgate, holding a small oil lamp to the aid of his eyes. "Ah," he said kindly, "it's you, Bard. Anything to declare?"

"Nothing," Bard replied with ease and smiled, temporarily abandoning his place near the tiller and hopping down the dock to present the delivery papers to Percy. "Only that I'm cold and tired and ready for home."

"You and me both," the man sighed tiredly and granted him entrance. "There you are, all in order."

Just as Bard was warily looking around, impatient to get the job done and get the dwarves into the town, their luck started to wear thin.

"Not so fast," a suspicious voice announced behind Percy as a grimy little man appeared out of nowhere, immediately pointing out that the barrels sent from the Woodland Realm should be empty and not full, as well as that Bard was licensed as a bargeman and not a fisherman.

Bombur thought he might piss himself when the fish covering the upper part of his face was removed. The man responsible for this forwent a closer look at the barrel, where he'd spot a goggling eye following him in fright, and instead focused on showcasing the precious little amount of power he thought he held in this place by wiggling a trout in front of the bargeman rather pompously.

Bard gritted his teeth punishingly. He was a man known to be cool-headed even under pressure, with nerves of steel. There were only a few things counted in the fingers of one hand that could get his knickers in a twist, so to speak. As much as Alfrid fancied himself one of the latter, he had yet to achieve ruffling the bargeman's feathers. The Master's counselor —well, 'counselor' was a bit of a stretch, for whoever heard of a counselor emptying his master's chamber pot every day— was one of those people that if one met first thing in the morning, they knew the rest of the day would roll just as badly. And Bard's day had already started not as promising as he would have liked.

"That's none of your business," he said darkly.
"It's the Master's business," Alfrid countered with a smug look on his face that unfortunately allowed his eternally stained, yellow teeth to shine, "which makes it my business."

"Come on, Alfrid," Bard huffed, "have a heart. People need to eat."

"These fish are illegal," the other declared and beckoned half a dozen guards to empty the barrels into the lake.

As much as he wouldn't like to admit, it was one of the few times the bargeman allowed himself to panic. With good reason—the punishment for smuggling was death. "Folk in this town are struggling," he insisted. "Food is scarce."


"Not your problem—You work for the Master!" Bard protested. "You're supposed to help people, not add to their misery!"

Two of the barrels were already being leaned over the side, and the dwarves in them felt a disturbance in their balance. The ground suddenly felt too far from the bottom and fish started to fall out by the dozens.

Bard had long ago stopped caring about himself. He could pinpoint the exact moment that happened when his wife died and he was left alone to raise three children. If he wanted not to blow the cover, he had to think. Fast. "And when the people hear the Master is dumping fish back in the lake," he said, "when the rioting starts... will it be your problem then?"

That man and his eternal radical beliefs. If Alfrid could replace the fish in the barrels with Bard himself, he would have done it ages ago and be done with him. But he was smart enough to acknowledge a solid threat that could at any moment become full-blown reality. Finally, admitting temporary defeat, he motioned the guards to stop.

The breath that was stuck somewhere between trroat and lungs moved, and Bard exhaled deeply. Honestly, deep down he'd rather have a riot start than let the Master and his wicked minions keep defalcating the town's wealth at the expense of the people.

"Ever the people's champion, eh, Bard?" Alfrid mocked with a sneer, obviously displeased. "Protector of the common folk..." His snake-like features were pulled into a warning glare, "You might have their favour now, but know that opinions can change even with the smallest of sparks."

Bard let a long-suffering sigh. For the past ten years or so he was abiding the same threats and warnings. That little speech had ended up so used and unaltered, he had acquired the habit of mock-mouthing the words and shaking his head as Alfrid continued his preaching.

The moment he hopped back into the barge after Percy's order for the gate to be raised, the counselor spoke again in the most malicious tone he could muster, "The Master has his eye on you. And remember that we know where you live."

An eye-roll was all Bard responded with, not even bothering to look in his direction as he led the barge ahead. "'Tis a small town, Alfrid," he said scathingly. "Everyone knows where everyone lives."

After maneuvering his way through the numerous canals, either big or small, that connected every part of the town with the rest, Bard docked the barge in the most remote part of the market.

"That was close," he muttered as he left the tiller and footsteps echoed across the boat. "You're lucky
"Cease your babbling and release us from this irksome confinement!" a voice protested. Most bet that it was Dwalin.

One by one the barrels were tipped over and the dwarves finally breathed in the fresh air again. Several denied the bargeman's aid and simply flung themselves out of the barrels, scattering fish around the boat and extricating clothes and skin alike from the myriads of fish scales that were stuck on them.

"Get your hands off me," an irate Dwalin growled at him before his head even popped out of the barrel, while a seething Bifur rose from the pile of fish with one forked on the axe in his head.

The rest of the dwarves followed suit, some being pulled out by those who were already free and others struggling in vain to clean their clothes off the slime and fish scales.

"You didn't see them. They were never here," Bard whispered to a man that waited for him on the dock surprised and put a silver coin in his palm. Before he ushered the dwarves along, he turned to the man again with a thoughtful look, "The fish you can have for nothing."

By then the whole company was set to move with the sole exception of Bilbo, who was once again cursing his decision to leave Bag End and his beloved armchair back and take part in this madness, and Fili who was fussing over his brother.

"What is this place?" asked the hobbit in wonder.

Several memories flooded Thorin's mind; others were bad, others not so bad, and a few were simply awful. "This, master Baggins," he grunted, "is the world of Men."

He didn't seem very pleased and no one blamed him for it. Leaving aside the mild discomfort that the wet clothes, chilly air and the tall folk bustling about caused, the dwarves aligned in two small groups in front of the tall man who ordered to follow him, his eyes constantly flickering around at every corner to take note of anything or anyone ill-disposed.

Kili's leg had started to wobble like a mere twig in the wind but, when two pairs of eyes fell upon him, he straightened up like a bowstring returning to place. Thorin spared him a look or two, starting to suspect something was wrong, and Fili kept an awfully close eye to him as the bargeman led the company through the infinite maze of docks and back alleys of the town.

Suddenly a boy rounded a corner like the wind, his steps urgent and his features pulled into a nervous mask. "Da!" he exclaimed. "Our house, it's being watched!"

Their stop was rather abrupt considering their quick pace, so the bargeman was panting lightly when he searched around for prying eyes. He didn't know what exactly he was looking for, more spies perhaps, or even Alfrid himself, swaddled in a ragged cloak and pretending to be a beggar—that foul, loathsome, evil little rat had already made his arrangements.

He took a deep breath as his mind began to mould a plan. Valar help him, if the dwarves were nagging about the fish in the barrels, he wished not to know what they'd do when they'd hear what his plan involved.

The remaining hours of the night had passed in relative silence, with the dwarf snoozing and snoring every so often, and the Ranger more or less opening a pit in the ground as she trudged up and down the rocks with eyes and ears all over and her hands slowly caressing the hilts of her daggers. Oh,
how she wished to have a bow with her.

When the first light of the new dawn lightened the sky's deep blue colour turning it into a paler hue, she decided it was time for them to move on. The bridge would be visible during midday, but the road ahead was still long enough to warrant another night out in the Wild, with no cover whatsoever.

Bofur woke with a battle cry when he felt his whole body juddering as though the earth was splitting in two, only to discover that the world was as he'd left it and a hand was shaking his shoulder with the force of a bloody earthquake. His eyes narrowed in slits and he discerned the outline of the Ranger's gloomy figure, sighing in disappointment; he thought everything had been a dream. *Eh, what can ye do,* he mused. One can't have it all ways. Bless his luck, at least he was stuck with her and not on his tod.

"Oi, sleeping beauty," she greeted. "About time. We must move on."

"And top o' the mornin' to yerself," he replied in a wry tone, taking in her grim face. Brushing his comment aside, she motioned him to get up, take a piss or whatever else he needed so they would get going.

Another long walk commenced as they followed the path along the shore, as monotonous as that of the day before. Arya would speak but a few sentences and glance around every other minute as he followed behind her with an evidently lighter mood, humming tunes under his breath. She made no move to order him to stop this time, though, for he had taken great care to be quiet enough to not attract unwanted attention.

At noontime, Bofur could already feel his legs aching terribly. He didn't mind walking so much, but it was the swift pace—almost running—that exhausted him. "Are we there yet?" he panted out.

"No," was her sole answer.

And the silent trek continued.

What ensued after Bard's explanation of the new plan so that the dwarves could enter his house could only be described by the word 'riot'. Even his son, Bain, noted that the size of the dwarves' mouths was completely disproportionate to their forms. Their grumbles and protests ended up sounding like a buzzing to the ear, until they were forced to comply and one by one disappeared into the frozen water beneath the wooden houses.

Bain followed his father around as if nothing was afoot, both casual as ever, leaving the Master's spies signaling each other after every step on their way to their house.

The bargeman was divided between getting angry or laughing at those antics. Did those people really call themselves spies? Some were ridiculously noticeable and unabashed. And yet there were others who were as sneaky and stealthy as the people who had hired them.

Swiftly they ascended the stairs up to the door and after his son walked inside, Bard decided to make a mockery of it all, whistling down at the two fishermen and throwing them an orange as a reward for all the trouble they went through. "You can tell the Master I'm done for the day," he said cheerfully before closing the door behind him.

A small rush of warmth emitted by the small hearth hit him on the face full-force, and before he could even speak, think or even feel, a body crashed against him.

"Da, where have you been?!" chirped one voice, followed by another. "We were worried!"
The two girls knocked the breath out of his lungs, genuinely pleased to see him after two days of absence. He kissed the top of their heads with a smile, but the thought of thirteen dwarves hovered somewhere in the back of his head and made him frown. "Bain," he said quietly, discreetly glancing out of the window to check if the two fishermen were still watching, "get them in."

The boy flew down the stairs and took a ginger look around before knocking thrice on the wall. A partly bald, tattooed head slowly rose through the toilet at the signal's hearing. Just when he thought he'd been already degraded enough for a lifetime, this happened. Dwalin had to admit, that was a new low, even for him. The boy moved closer to help him out, only to have his hand slapped aside.

"If you speak of this to anyone," Dwalin growled under his breath, and the cover of the toilet seat lifted as he hoisted himself up from the frozen water and anything else that was down there and fortunately or not did not float, "I'll rip your arms off."

The dwarf was glowering at him the entire time he was extricating himself from the toilet's confinement, and Bain was all too happy to direct him immediately towards the stairs. Next in line was another small person, who he doubted to be a dwarf and looked far too flabbergasted to have actually consented to this. This one Bain helped out, for he seemed pretty stunned to communicate with the environment just yet. Most of them denied aid, but there were two — much younger than the rest obviously — who gladly accepted it. Especially the dark-haired one, who seemed to have difficulty in using all his strength.

"Are you alright?"

The prince turned to the boy with surprise. "I'm... fine. Just a small injury, thank you."

Above the staircase Sigrid, the eldest, was left staring at the numerous people that seemed to appear literally out of thin air, her gaze alternating between them and her father. "Da..." she said gingerly, "why are there dwarves climbing out of our toiler?"

Her sister Tilda, on the other hand, the youngest of Bard's brood, had no reservations whatsoever about a bunch of dwarves climbing up the stairs. She had always been curious and this was the first time in her life she was seeing dwarves from up close. "Will they bring us luck?" she said with an eyebrow raised in pure fascination.

Each dwarf had taken a seat around the house, wrapped under numerous layers of blankets and close enough to the fire to have their clothes dry off, while Bard's children handed out new garments and mugs of hot tea to them. The former were not fitted for their size, but they would do the job of keeping them warm just fine.

Bombur and his cousin were sitting quietly in a corner, Bifur having finally persuaded him into uttering a word or so. They had put in a distance from the rest, and didn't mind it. Loosing Bofur was another blow to their family, but they'd recover from it as they did all the times before. They had to.

Bilbo had already two blankets wrapped around his shoulders and chose to sit very close to the fire, for he felt a cold taking him under its wing. He had already started to sneeze regularly and a light sniffle was torturing his red nose. Nice timing to get sick on his birthday. He hadn't revealed this piece of information to anyone, though, for little would it matter. Arya was the only one to know, he thought wistfully; he'd told her when they were still in Mirkwood and, in turn, she revealed her own birthday. It was in two months and six days from now, but she would not be able to celebrate it. And then it occurred to him. Did anyone else beside them know that she was dead? What would they say
to Gandalf when they met him again, or what would he then say to her Chieftain? Bloody hell–

A hand, smaller even than his own which was already small enough, pulled him out of his worrisome thoughts, and he saw the little girl handing him a pair of dry clothes. "Thank you," he whispered with a nod of his head and his gaze immediately fell to her next receiver, who tried to suppress a pained groan as he sat on a chair, eyes flicking down to the crudely bound wound on his leg.

The younger prince was deemed fitted by fate to be offered the new, dry clothes by Bard's youngest daughter, a little funny thing called Tilda, according to her sayings. She pointed out her brother's revelation that one of the dwarves was injured and her sharp eye did not take long to spot him.

"I am Kili, at your service." He forced something that could pass for a smile on his face, not able to mask all the pain that rested there, and her eyes squinted a bit at the corners. "I would bow to you, little lady, but I don't think my leg will comply with my wish."

She murmured something under her breath, as though she weighed his words, and decided that he seemed decent enough for her taste. "Kili," she said hesitantly, tasting the strange name in her mouth, and the dwarf locked eyes with her, "I can bring you something to drink that will make you feel better."

Without waiting for an answer, off she was and returned a few minutes later holding a steaming cup of a kind of herbal tea, which name he did not remember. She stood there in front of him, waiting for him to drink it to the last drop.

Kili had to admit it helped him slightly, for his stomach had been empty for three days, but in the end did nothing to ease off the pain. He didn't want to embitter her, though, so he mustered the most convincing smile he could and handed her the cup back. There was another smile and off she popped again to the aid of the rest.

A heavy sigh left his mouth and was lost in the air like dust in the wind. He wondered how it would be if they hadn't lost Bofur and Arya, if they were here with them as well. Tilda would probably be thoroughly amused by the toymaker, his stories and his crafts, Kili reckoned. And if Arya was there too, he wouldn't feel bad at all. Her presence alone would be a natural balm to his pain and he would by all means abide her raging rant about his stupidity and recklessness.

Loud voices snapped him out of his reverie and his eyes quickly sought out the source. How did the conversation come to this and how did it escalate so quickly?

The boy, Bain, was defending Lord Girion of Dale and his attempt to kill the dragon back then rather fervently, while his father stood beside him with a look full of suspicion and something that resembled guilt. To the boy's claim that Girion had actually managed to loosen a scale from Smaug's armour, Dwalin scoffed and brushed it off as nothing more than a fairytale. Agreeing with his friend, Thorin decided he had enough of fairytales and ghost-stories, and demanded the weapons they had been promised.

Somewhere in the middle of their argument Bard left, only to walk in a while later with the promised weapons in hand and put an end to it as the dwarves quieted down and gathered around the table. Even Kili did, despite the painful pinches round the wound. The precious quiet was doomed to be short-termed when, after the exchange of a few looks, insults and accusations of deceit and robbery started to fly across the table with the rate of raindrops during a storm.

"You won't– Listen to me!" Bard said loudly. "You won't find better outside the city armoury. All iron-forged weapons are held there under lock and key."
Thorin shared a knowing look with Dwalin, which to the trained eye —like Balin's— had but one meaning.

"Thorin," said Balin, causing Bard to do a double take at the sound of the name, "we all have made do with less. We'd better take those and go now if possible."

Bard thought he knew that name; it felt familiar to his tongue. All his thoughts were cast aside when the dwarf suggested departing right away. "Absolutely not," he deadpanned. "There are spies watching every house, dock and wharf in this town. You must wait till nightfall. I'll have a boat arranged to take you across the lake."

The dwarves slumped back in their seats in a choir of disappointed grumbles, resigning themselves to prolong their stay for a few more hours.

Bard walked out of the house to make his arrangements for the aforementioned boat, eager to get rid of them as soon as possible. The name with which the white-bearded dwarf addressed the other kept poking his mind, but he couldn't for the life of him remember where he'd last heard or seen it. He continued to prowl about the remote alleys of the market that was slowly emptying after the sun started to dive in the west, searching for the merchant he was looking for.

Not long after, the deal was made and Bard had already explained what the smuggler's cargo would consist of.

"So they leave tonight?"

"Aye," Bard whispered. The exchange was quick and discreet as he handed him a few coins. "Heading north byway of the lake, visit their kin in the Iron Hills."

The smuggler was ready to leave, but something made him linger in his steps. "The Iron Hills, you say?" Bard nodded in suspicion. "Funny route to take north... Would have thought they travel byway of the Eastern Road."

Forfeiting both the smuggler and the deal, the bargeman found himself sprinting to the opposite direction, back to his house, to confront the dwarves.

Their presence in the town was not obscure knowledge anymore, as some people had managed to catch a glimpse of them and tongues began to roll.

_Esgaroth is gloomy, Esgaroth is bleak,_
_myo underwear got frozen, standing here all week._
_Since the Desolation, our lives have been so grey,_
_thank goodness for the gossip that gets us through the day._

Whichever corner Bard rounded, he'd catch something that had to do with the Lonely Mountain and gold. The pieces were slowly coming together.

_Have you heard there's a rumour here in Esgaroth?_  
_Have you heard what they're saying on the streets?_  
_Although King Thror did not survive, his heir they say is still alive,_  
_The Lord of Silver Fountains, but please do not repeat._

From mouth to mouth the word was quickly spread, and soon everyone was dreaming of better times and a prosperous future.

_It's a rumour, a legend, a mystery._
"something whispered in an alleyway or through a crack. It's a rumour that speaks of the prophecy—"

"The prophecy..." Bard gasped as he remembered exactly where he had seen the name 'Thorin' before. And the puzzle was finally completed.

Meanwhile in the house, Sigrid was making dinner, Bain was handing her the ingredients she needed, and Tilda had was too busy keeping her eyes fixed upon a certain dark-haired dwarf to help at all.

Kili had stumbled back towards a small bench tottering like a broomstick in strong wind, although he steadied himself by sitting down again just in time. He tried to seal any difficulty he had in walking or standing away from anyone's eyes, glancing around every so often to check if anyone had witnessed his lack of balance.

"I heard the grumpy dwarf saying that you'll leave tonight," Tilda noted as she approached, pointing towards his uncle and Dwalin, who were discussing stealthily in a dark corner of the house.

He chuckled at the attributed epithet, even though he wasn't sure which of the two she meant. It fitted both Thorin and Dwalin well enough.

"You are not well."

Kili forced a smile and reached out to gently pat her shoulder. Adding the little girl into the list of people in front of whom he had to appear well and able would exhaust him further than he was already. However shrewd she might be, he wished not to burden her with worry over a stranger who barged into her house out of the toilet. "No need to fret, little lady," he said lightly. "Your tea made me feel much better."

"You're still pale and shivering."

Kili had to give it to her; she might be a funny little thing, but had the eyes of a hawk. "It's just my face," he said, mustering one of his most charming laughs, "and it is rather cold outside."

She studied him with an intense gaze a few seconds longer than he was comfortable with, and then decided to leave him in peace.

The prince sighed in relief for having survived the young one's thorough examination and his mind inadvertently travelled to a dark-haired Ranger. She would have found a great supporter in the little one's face regarding her claims of his recklessness has she been here. His silent contemplation expanded further when he pondered on how Arya's attitude towards children would be. His subconscious bore disturbing images of her teaching a little bundle of joy —boy or girl, it didn't matter— how to fight with wooden daggers or a sword, and him taking over the place of the archery teacher and—

Heavens, this had to stop. He couldn't keep daydreaming about what would happen had she still been alive and all went miraculously well so they'd ultimately end up a happy couple with a bunch of charming, dark-haired troubles around them. Never so far he had so much as a thought about creating a family. Bloody hell, he was seventy-seven years old and she was dead. Musing on family and children with her was bordering on insanity.

The image had nonetheless caused an onslaught of emotions. Once again he held himself back, remembering that he was still in the presence of others. He didn't know when he'd finally break, but it was not going to be a nice sight.
"We are leaving," announced Thorin, startling everyone to their feet.

"So soon?" Tilda squeaked. "It's not even dark yet outside!"

None of the others paid heed to the little one that tried to question their sudden hurry to depart against her father's advice.

Only Kili managed a crooked smile at her. "Farewell, little lady. Thank you for all the help."

Fili made to go to him and help him up, but Bilbo got there first, so he limited to follow closely behind. After his brother and the burglar, he was the only one to offer his thanks to Bard's children, who stood in line watching them go, not really knowing what to do.

Down at the dock the blond found Kili waiting for him, an arm casually resting on Bilbo's shoulders, though Fili could tell he was leaning his weight on the hobbit, given how his right leg was barely touching the ground. Bilbo, for his part, refrained from making even the tiniest grimace.

"They are good people," Kili noted, glancing at the house over his shoulder as they walked away.

"Indeed," Bilbo agreed. "Quite helpful, although some should be really ashamed for not even thanking them," his tone was purposefully raised a few volumes as he glared at certain people ahead of him who intentionally ignored him.

"I thanked them on everyone's behalf," said Fili, his voice covered by Thorin barking an order for everyone to hurry. The prince let a sigh, quite displeased with his uncle's lack of manners, despite that they had to leave if the plan was to run smoothly. Thorin had informed him of the short stop they were going to make at the town's armoury before departing for the Mountain, so he resolved to get this over with and, after his brother's curt dismissal, chose to ignore how the last light of the setting sun made Kili look even paler.

"Say, remember back in the mountains," Bofur pondered loudly some time after they decided to stop and take refuge for the night, "right 'fore the goblins, when I'd said the lad likes ye?"

A dramatic whimper was ready to boom out of her in all its might. "What is it with those moods of yours every night? I don't want to talk about it. Savvy?"

"Make no mistake," Bofur explained as he took a small swig of the wine he carried, not really caring that he hadn't eaten in two days and would probably get pissed at half a bottle, "merely feels lonely when ye're stuck with a person who refuses to utter a word for a whole day."

Her head was slumped down in her hands as he spoke, until she suddenly raised it and let a loud sigh. "Aye, master dwarf, your words have etched themselves in my memory. Why?"

"Nothing," Bofur said casually. "Only... I was right."

"Yes, you were," she agreed with another sigh. "Yet discussing this matter in public, even in the middle of nowhere, not only makes me uncomfortable, but also puts him in danger. So can we please put an end to it?"

The dwarf raised the bottle of wine before his eyes, watching her figure through the half empty part of the glass for awhile, and then narrowed his eyes in question. He lost her at the part about endangering Kili and didn't know what to make of it. Perhaps the wine was already affecting him in the best ways. Without giving too much thought to it, he cracked a sympathetic smile and hiccuped. "He'll be alright... Fili's with him and Oin's an expert in his field." Another hiccup. "Do not lose
Arya looked at him dead in the eye. "I will not," she whispered, "but you might lose an arm or, even worse, a head if you continue to speak."

The dwarf guffawed, raising his one free hand to show that he had no intention of parting with his dear head. "You may kill me yet, but I think you'd feel sad about it," he said and took another swig of wine from his bottle.

Everything went according to plan. Complications had naturally arose, ensued, but were eventually overcome. They even had been lucky enough to find a way to enter the practically sealed armoury without being noticed.

That was, until Kili tripped over his own feet and all hell broke loose. He took such a tumble down the stairs that the weapons he was carrying scattered around and crashed against the floor and other weapons, the latter of which, in turn, produced whirring sounds of equal volume, making the noise resonate in the peace of the night like drums of war.

Chapter End Notes

Seems I have a knack for musicals or something of that sort. I don't how my mind managed to dig this up from the forgotten chest of my youth, but the song the people of Lake-town sing at one point is taken from Anastasia (the 1997 animated film), and the lyrics are slightly changed to fit the content.

Thanks for the comments, guys!
A game of shadows

The last thing Bilbo clearly remembered before the thundering commotion was him, Nori and Thorin passing all kinds of weapons to Kili's arms. The young prince, struggling to keep himself up straight and clearly suffering from lack of prudence, had insisted almost violently to be among the ones who would smuggle the real weapons out of the armoury.

Thorin initially brought no objections to this, while Bilbo fixed Kili with a look signifying that he was trying too much to not show something. It was starting to get to the hobbit's nerves and he was a step away from yelling at the lad to put some sense in his mind. Just when he was about to speak, Thorin got there first.

The king regarded his nephew with a suspicious look, seeing that he was almost hobbling across the room as he gathered the weapons from the rest. "Are you alright?" he asked with concern.

"I can manage," Kili breathed out and looked at his uncle as if Thorin had mortally insulted him. Immediately, he straightened himself up, feeling almost exhausted by this attempt to mask the pain in his leg that was steadily becoming more prominent. "Let's just get out of here."

Bilbo barely held himself back from snorting at this and limited to only roll his eyes. The warning glare Kili was ready to give him was cut short when the lad did the grave mistake of putting his wounded leg forth as he headed for the stairs.

"Bloody hell," the hobbit cursed through his teeth when the prince tottered and the weapons seemed rather inclined to slide off his hands and scatter around, half on the floor and half over other weapons.

All eyes fell on Kili, who grunted from the pain as his leg stretched forcefully under him. He made an attempt to stand up, but couldn't.

Panic. It rose within everyone's gut unanimously and at the same time.

The town guards were alerted to their presence in under a second; their hoarse voices seemed to get closer and closer and, when Thorin noted five swords pointing at him and the others out of nowhere, as well as a knife scraping Kili's neck, he wondered if it had been wise to take his nephews on this quest. Being princes of the line of Durin already put them at stake, and they might as well serve as an extra target for enemies.

Unlike his uncle, Fili wondered if he and Thorin would pay too high a price to see this quest fulfilled as the guards immobilised them outside the armoury and some others escorted the rest of the company out; among those being his half-limping brother. The blond was a step away from smacking the back of his head for being such a pigheaded mule, but instead limited to support him as the guards ordered them to move, despite the mask the younger put on whenever one of the others turned to look at them, trying not to appear weak.

Kili seemed to grow weaker with every passing hour, despite the views he supported so fervently, and as the events turned out, Fili would much more prefer to have stayed back at Bard's home, accept whatever weapons he had to give to them and disappear from the town once and for all than live through this. At least if they had stayed there, they wouldn't be dragged across the town's streets like criminals, under pointing fingers and prying eyes of pretty much the entire population of the town.
They eventually came to a stop in the town square and Braga, the Head of the town's Guard, called out for the Master who furiously stormed out of house enquiring about this late disturbance of his - dull, apart from eating and swigging brandy - day.

The company was consequently accused for robbery, enemies of the state and, last but not least, mercenaries by that ridiculous, slimy little man that served as the Master's advisor or so, which naturally roused a rampage among the dwarves.

"Hold your tongue!" a furious Dwalin stepped forth, ready to spit that greasy worm on his feet. "This is Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror!"

Thorin slowly approached his friend. "We are the dwarves of Erebor," he announced solemnly. "We have come to reclaim our homeland."

That roused a tinny choir of murmurs from the crowd. Some of the town's people were still suspicious about the dwarves' unsavoury nature, while most seemed rather cheerful once Thorin earnestly promised to send wealth and riches flowing from the Halls of Erebor.

On the dark side of the moon, there was also Bard; who was a different matter altogether as he made his way through the crowd, his eyes gleaming of fear and foreshadowing warnings. "Death!" he exclaimed. "That is what you'll bring upon us! If you waken that beast," his voice became lower and grim again, "it will destroy us all."

Thorin pinned his steelly glare upon the tall man, almost daring him to contradict him. But then his eyes roamed about the crowd, who seemed to by beyond excited about his return. And what would a mere man's word be against that of a whole town's? "You can listen to this naysayer," he said slowly, "but I promise you that if we succeed, all will share in the wealth of the Mountain. There will be enough gold to rebuild Esgaroth in its old glory!"

"Why should we take you at your word, eh?" Alfrid asked suspiciously. "We know nothing about you. Who here can vouch for your character?"

Whispers spread within the crowd when no one replied, until a little man's hand was raised as he stepped forth.

"Me," said Bilbo. "I'll vouch for him. I have travelled far with these dwarves through great danger, and if Thorin Oakenshield gives his word, then he shall keep it."

Said dwarf might as well be touched by the declaration, if ever so slightly. He gave a grateful nod to the burglar and Bilbo nodded back with determination, while the crowd erupted in praising cries.

"Listen to me!" Bard snapped furiously. "Have you forgotten what happened to Dale? Have you forgotten all those who died in the firestorm?" He was hitting a sensitive spot, he knew that many of the people were descended from Dale as he was, but he would use every way in existence to put some sense into their minds. "The blind ambition of a Mountain King, so blinded by greed, he could not see beyond his own desire!"

Mentioning Thror's gold sickness and the destruction that came with it prompted almost an attack, but it was prevented when a hand was raised and the guards held the dwarves away from Bard.

With eyes shining and sparkling by flowing rivers of gold that were molded in his imagination, the pompous Master of Lake-town decided to open his mouth and act for his self. "We must not be quick to lay blame," he said with his most successful, advising voice, while Alfrid eagerly nodded his head beside him. "Let us not forget that it was Girion, Lord of Dale," he continued, now pointing an
accusing finger towards Bard, "your ancestor, who failed to kill the beast!"

There, the company exchanged looks of surprise with each other. They were aware of Dale's history and its rulers' names up until the day the dragon came. Girion was the last Lord which, as the Master pointed out, made Bard and his family heirs to a ghost city that no longer existed.

Thorin stared at Bard with his jaw slightly dropped. This explained a lot; for example, Bard and his son's fervid reaction back to their house when a discussion about Dale and its Lord took place. But the dwarf king was too lost and emerged in his thoughts to realise the resemblances he and Bard shared, instead only focusing on the fact that the man was trying to hinder him and his quest.

His nephews fortunately had minds clear enough to note those resemblances and had one or two words to say as the Master's advisor gave a small speech about Bard's ancestor's failure to kill Smaug, profoundly trying to emphasise it with every possible insulting tone in existence.

"This is madness!" Kili mumbled under his breath, all the while glowering at the greasy man. Even with one leg malfunctioning, the prince was certain that he could take that worm down in under a minute.

"This is politics," Fili replied grimly. He had been present at many councils to know when someone was playing dirty. And both the Master and his servant hardly passed for supporters of fair play, or governance in this case.

And his suspicions were confirmed the moment the Master and his obsequious advisor extended a disturbingly generous welcome, ushering the crowd to follow their lead. Something told Fili that this amiable attitude would be extremely short-termed.

His gaze then fell to the slightly drooping shoulders of Bard as he shook his head in disappointment and turned to walk away with look downcast and heavy steps. Fili wasn't sure how the sight managed to get the better of him. He ought to be happy, for they would be given proper food, supplies and accommodation; even a small feast would be held later in their honour in the town's hall, but the man's sad façade had the not at all desirable effect of wiping out every positive disposition of Fili's.

His brother shared the same sinister feeling; though he had one or two more reasons to be indifferent towards the town's warm reception. Kili felt unease and pain churning his stomach, and even the merriest celebration in the world was not enough to make them go away.

The company had been escorted to the town's inn, finally bathed and cast the smell of fish off them and prepared for the small feast, which would attend only selected people of the town apart from the Master and some of the guards.

The great hall of Esgaroth was partly alive with music and laughter. Men and women drank and danced, while the dwarves occupied a large table and just drank. The glasses were often raised in memory of the dead and, even though the sweet red liquor had a numbing effect on their weariness, the moods did not cease to be acrid. And truth be told, their spirits were low compared to the first merry gathering in Bag End, or even the flaccid dinner at Rivendell. But perhaps that was due to the fact that those were better times where no one was hurt; or dead.

The tables were piled high with mountains of bread, meats and fruits; lines of lambs roasted slowly on spits and the wine flowed freely. For a town that its Master claimed to be poor, this was quite the feast, Fili reckoned. But apparently all these luxuries were only at the Master's disposal and hardly the common folk's.
His glance then fell to Kili. His brother seemed all but festive tonight. He was maintaining his mask, but Fili could tell that it was clearly taking a toll on his strength, though Kili would have everyone believe none of that. He was observing all the courtesies, but there was a tightness in him that Fili had seldom seen before. He said little, looking out over the hall with hooded eyes, as if he'd rather be somewhere else far, far away than here.

The brunet was in his fourth glass of wine in a vain attempt to drink and forget, although he knew that oblivion would be extremely short-termed. His gaze idly travelled from Alfrid, the Master's unctuous servant or whatever he was to him, to the Master himself, making him wonder how the people of this town abided this ruling. If he were honest, he'd fancy himself proclaimed the town's saviour if both the Master and Alfrid happened to be found dead in a dark alley in the morrow. People like these deserved to be hunted down, people who did not care about none but themselves; they may as well deserve death if their exploitation of the common folk was something that barely scratched the surface of their real actions and goals.

As the night dwindled down Bombur and Bifur chose to retire because they were not in the mood to even laugh, while the rest already felt ready to fall asleep right then and there. Kili had half a mind to bribe someone to sneak him out of the hall unseen, until he remembered that he had no gold left. So he continued to suffer in silence, for this was more torture than a feast.

That is, until the blond had had it with this profound charade of display of kindness and welcoming behaviour, and simply announced that he and his brother would take their leave and return to the inn to rest. No sooner than they entered the room, Kili had already sunk down into the chair in the corner, pulled out of his clothes the bottle of wine he had pilfered from one of the large tables, and swallowed a gulp. Fili watched him closely from under the covers of his bed, debating on whether it was prudent for him, and mainly his health, to drink. The brunet's gaze was fixed somewhere out of the window, his look that of asking not to be disturbed, therefore Fili remained silent.

A wistful look flitted across his face as he stared at the night sky, recalling each and every time Arya babbled on about stars and how much delight he took in listening to her. Only in those moments, or when he was telling her stories of his youth did she actually seem genuinely pleased and happy. It was such a rare sight; and it had unfortunately or not become precious to him. As days and weeks came by, more often than not he'd caught himself enjoying observing her. He wanted to learn and memorise her looks, her expressions, moods, movements—everything.

Perhaps those desires might sound crazy to others. The fact that he, a Dwarf Prince, had developed those desires and feelings for a female Ranger would definitely sound nonsensical to the conservative dwarven society. Would that he could make them vanish. Yet what he felt was like an ache; a very much ardent longing for someone he was mostly certain he could never have, whether she was alive or not.

Save the physical pain in his leg, he doubted he had the ability to feel anymore. For it was that ache, that yearning, tangible sadness that tore him apart from the inside and emptied his soul from feelings. Neither she nor Bofur deserved to die; at least not now, not so soon. So, why? Why did bad things happen to good people?

He was overwhelmed with a powerful surge of anger. He hadn't realised he was clutching his wounded leg and squeezing it so hard that a few drops of fresh blood stained the already dirty bandage. Nor that he'd finally allowed himself to cry. It wasn't the bawling he thought that would spring out of him, though. It was the kind that was as silent as his breathing and the hot tears felt as though they were carving prickly lines down his face.

Fili woke in the middle of the night and saw him leaning against the window, lost somewhere in a
bad dream. The bottle of wine, now empty, was lying on the floor next to where his hand was hanging loose. There were dark circles under his eyes, his cheeks were wet and his face paler than he ever remembered. Even asleep, his features betrayed a living being so forlorn of all hope that made Fili pray to Mahal to take even some of his pain away. As any brother would, he carried him over to the other bed and stayed by his side until dawn arrived and the small room was illuminated by the first rays of the rising sun.

Kili stirred as soon as the light hit his sealed eyes.

"This will be the last one."

"What-?"

"This is going to be the last sunrise we watch."

The irony wasn't lost on him. Yes, watching the sunrise could be as mundane and unimportant as the morning visit to the loo to one, but to him it meant more. It meant that he had lived to see a new dawn, a new day, a new sunrise. Arya would not get to watch another sunrise again. And this made him sadder.

But this was the point until which he would allow himself to mope around, and did not desire to stretch it further. Crying had helped to relieve some of the tension that accumulated inside his gut and he knew this would remain a quite sore spot for him, yet there was a quest lying ahead that needed to be successful. And there was his king –his uncle- whom he did not wish to disappoint.

Upon seeing that he was awake and lost somewhere in his thoughts, the blond gave him a light pat on his hand. "Ready?"

The brunet did not answer. Instead he turned away and, with pace slow enough to cause him the least amount of pain, walked to the small wash basin on a table in the corner to throw some water on his face. It was when he pulled his boots on that he felt a gentle squeeze on his shoulder.

"I'm with you till the end of the line," a voice cut through the palpable, almost creepy tranquility of the small, cold room.

Come the later hours of morning, the people of Lake-town gathered to bid their farewells to the company as they were ready to depart and proudly made their way through the crowd, dressed up in rather large and unfitting armour the guards had provided them with. One by one they boarded the boat along with the supplies and the weapons, until the line came to a cessation when Thorin blocked Kili's way with his heavy armoured arm.

"Not you," he commanded. "We must travel at speed and you will slow us down."

"What are you talking about? I'm coming with you."

"No."

At that moment Kili's smile died a quick death. "I am going to be there when that door is opened," he insisted, "when we first look upon the Halls of our Fathers, Thorin-"

"Kili, stay here," the king advised and gently patted his head. "Rest. Join us when you're healed."

The brunet staggered a few steps backwards, debating on whether this was a tasteless joke. It was the last thread of hope in his chest; a thread that prevented him from breaking down, and that thread had
just snapped. And at that moment, he couldn't have felt more useless or a greater disappointment to his own blood. Beads of cold sweat began to form on his forehead and every single one of them rolled down his temples. He started to feel icky.

Fili, an audience of this quiet exchange, was left there staring speechless. Thorin's persistence to go on with this quest didn't make nearly as much impression on him as did his priorities. If he'd set Kili's quick mend as an excuse, rather than basically call him a liability, Kili would be less inclined to follow and likely comply with the order. But it was just a matter of perception and Thorin apparently had problem to figure out which way would be wiser and would have less hurtful effect. Fili shook his head in frustration. Almost eight decades treading this world, give or take two years, and their uncle still didn't know a thing about them.

"I'll stay with the lad," Oin offered immediately, only to be stopped by Gloin's hand and stunned look. The healer was not to be convinced otherwise, though. "My duty lies with the wounded," he declared and determinedly stepped out of the boat.

Gloin almost fumed from his ears, yet Thorin did not make any move to stop Oin, for he knew it would be like trying to argue with a wall. He prepared himself only when Fili weaved his way through the rest of the company to come and stand before him.

"Uncle," he said defensively, "we grew up on tales of the Mountain, tales you told us- You cannot take that away from him!"

"Fili," his brother called from where he was, trying to push himself away from Oin, who had finally decided to disregard any of his warnings and examine him, "don't."

The blond ignored both words and glare all the same, making a grimace that magnificently signaled for Kili to shut up. He then furiously turned back to their uncle. "I will carry him if I must!"

"One day you will be king and you will understand," said Thorin gravely. "I cannot risk the fate of this quest for the sake of one dwarf," his tone was hard and unyielding, "not even my own kin."

At that moment Fili did not recognise him. This wasn't their uncle. This wasn't the dwarf who helped their mother raise them, not their father figure since their real father died.

Fili was groomed to be a king all his life, aye, but it would need something more than kingship to separate him from his brother. Had the time and situation been different, he was sure that Thorin would do the same if it were Frerin instead of Kili. Thus, he had no regrets whatsoever when he stepped out of the boat.

"Fili, don't be a fool," Thorin warned, hauling him from the arm to pull him back. "You belong with the company."

"I belong with my brother," the blond said in earnest and flounced to Kili's side.

Thorin let a frustrated huff, which would definitely be rather audible had not the quartet started playing a farewell tune to see the company off. The Master had climbed on a small platform and was now waving his hand, while the crowd cheered and clapped their hands as the boat began to float in the canal.

Bilbo gave a faint nod at the dwarves that remained behind, pulling the extremely large for his head hat out of his eyes' way. The crestfallen look on younger prince's face as he stared at the boat that drifted further away made whatever spirits the hobbit had completely vanish.

"You're a bloody idiot," Kili groaned. "You should have gone with the-"
Fili refrained from smacking the back of his brother's head. He had endangered Kili's health far too long now. He only hoped he had time to rectify that mistake. "Till the end of the line, remember?" he said pointedly and gave him a pat on the back.

All the blood suddenly drained from the younger's face as he was ready to reply, and he slumped forward.

"Kili?" the blond asked in agony, thankfully managing to catch him before he could collapse on the ground. "Oin, do something!"

"I don't-" Oin exclaimed as he frantically searched his pockets for the supplies he had packed with him. All in all, they were practically nonexistent. "I have nothing to- We need to find the town's healer," he said and looked up, pleading the people around to help them.

Yet all men and women had turned their backs and retrieved to their homes' warmth.

"Please, wait!" cried Fili behind the guards who escorted the Master. "Please, we need your help! My brother is sick-"

"Sick?" the Master shrilled in disgust. "Is it infectious? Get back!" he shooed them away with a rude wave of his hand. "Alfrid, don't let them come any closer!"

"Please," Oin piped up in despair, "we need medicine-"

"Do I look like an apothecary?" Alfrid replied with disdain. "Haven't we given you enough? The Master's a busy man, he hasn't got time to worry about sick dwarves. Begone, you lot. Clear off!"

The blond prince was disgusted beyond measure. There was a sole moment that he deigned to let go of Kili, if only to punch one of the guards that violently shoved them away. Without a second thought the Master had retreated back to his halls, shutting the door and forgetting all about the help he had promised to give them the day before. Apparently the aid from him had drawn to a close. Any more of it would come only with the share of the Mountain's treasure. And Thorin had showed no qualms to leave Kili behind, in the hands of these vultures, all alone. Fili almost laughed at the outrage of the situation.

Oin had thankfully found a root of a plant somewhere in his pockets and put it under Kili's nose. It must have been quite smelly, Fili reckoned, for his brother snapped out of his semi-unconscious state with a grimace of disgust.

"Oin, we need to go," the prince advised, while Kili gave a groan of pain beside him. "The bastard wouldn't offer help unless we presented him with a chest full of gold in advance."

"And where do you suggest we head to?" asked the older dwarf. "We have no money- I cannot treat him here in the street! We don't know anyone-"

"Well..." Fili trailed off, eyes beaming with various sentiments and thoughts as he supported more of Kili's weight, "that is not entirely true."

"Bard?" Oin immediately figured. "Lad, we didn't exactly make the best impression on hi-"

"If you have a better idea, please, be my guest."

Oin let a resigned sigh and tried to haul Kili to his feet as gently as he could, yet even that prompted a strained whimper from him. On their way to Bard's, what constantly nagged Fili's mind was their mother and her warnings.
Someone could claim that it was a nice day that had set this very morning. A dark-haired female Ranger would certainly argue different. She really did not like the fact that they were taking so much time to reach Esgaroth. And if things went well for the others, she didn't trust Thorin not to leave the town as soon as they gathered the necessary supplies. The only problem was that she had no bloody idea what the others did or where they were; but, since there was no dragon hovering over the horizon, she supposed they hadn't entered the Mountain yet. Even better, they hadn't left Esgaroth yet; although she didn't hold her hopes high.

It had been another of those mornings, silent and sinister, and both her and the dwarf's impatience to finally join the others grew bigger and bigger. Obvious example, Bofur's constant shuffling up and down the rock, which obviously caused interference with her trying to hearken to the ground beneath her ear.

"Can you hear anything?" the dwarf asked in agony.

The Ranger let a weary huff. "That wasn't funny the first eight times you asked it either."

Bofur rolled his eyes impatiently. "Can you-?"

"I will, if you stop talking and shuffling your feet."

A few more minutes of wanted utter silence passed before her whole body jumped upright and she braced herself for Bofur's imminent panic attack. Hers was already making her bristle.

"What's happening?" Bofur demanded, seeing that she gave no response as soon as she got up. "Are they close?"

Arya fixed him with blank look, failing to give a convincing smile. "Basically, run," was the sole words she said to him before darting forward.

"What?" he exclaimed, his hand pressing down on his hat so as not to have it fly back from the wind. "Where are they?"

"Less than two hours behind us," she warned, already a few strides forward. "And the bridge is less than a few hours ahead-"

"What if they catch up?"

"Some will live, some will die," she called over her shoulder.

"And which category do we fall under?" he squeaked wide-eyed. "They outnumber us by quite far!"

Arya lowered her pace and walked back to where he was standing. "They are already rude enough to follow us without an invitation, ergo for some of them a possible encounter will be a bright educational lesson about manners," she mumbled dryly. "However, until that happens, fly! Run as if the devil himself is upon us!"

Before he had time to even grimace at the words the dwarf felt like all life was fleeing out of his body. His feet almost grew wings upon realising that she had grabbed his hand and pulled him along with her.

An urgent knock found its way on the wooden door and the moment it opened, the owner saw three awaiting faces marred with panic and he winced. "No," he said angrily. "I'm done with dwarves, go
"No, no!" Fili and Oin yelled in unison and scrambled to hold the door before Bard could bolt it down.

The blond felt his heart sink. Kili was barely able to walk anymore and Fili was the one practically dragging him along. "Please!" he begged. "No one will help us! Kili's sick." He glanced at his brother and then back at Bard.

Bard still hesitated.

In the fairly painful state he was, Kili caught a glimpse of brown hair and a round face as Tilda sprang behind the tall figure of her father. Her eyes narrowed when she noticed the three familiar dwarves standing—or more accurately the two of them standing and trying to support the third—but quickly widened as she realised that the third was the polite one that had been injured. He fought really hard to pull off a smile for her.

"Kili-" she began to say and walk closer to him, but her father's hand held her back.

"Sigrid,-" Bard called and his other daughter appeared behind the young one, "take her inside."

"But-" Tilda went to object, although Sigrid was quick enough to pull her into the house. She tried to settle her back to the table when one of the dwarves' voices bellowed again and drew her attention to the door.

"Please!" Fili couldn't care less anymore if he sounded like a beggar. Pride or not, his brother needed help. "Please, he's very sick. I think he may d- Please... help us!"

Bard took a deep breath, taking a closer look at Kili this time. The dwarf was paler than ash, trembling, and could barely stand on his own feet. "Fine," he sighed resignedly, "Bain, fetch some water," he said and the boy immediately grabbed a pot. "Sigrid, Tilda, empty the bed," he then turned back to the dwarves, "you can lay him there."

Such was Fili's relief that he was a step away from hugging the man. "Thank you," he said gratefully. "Valar bless you and your family-"

"If we are still alive after king Thorin wakes the beast, I would gladly accept that blessing," Bard quipped under his breath as he helped the dwarves carry Kili and place him on the bed.

Sigrid and Bain were waiting side by side for the water to boil, while Tilda was standing beside the bed with some long strands of clean cloth in her hands, watching how the two dwarves and her father deposited Kili down. Her father's almost inaudible words, though, were not inaudible to her ears.

"Da, Kili is injured!" she scolded and four heads turned at her direction. "It's not his fault that the grumpy dwarf wants to wake the dragon!"

"Tilda!" Sigrid almost yelped in embarrassment. That sister of hers really did not know how to hold her tongue.

Again, the adjective which the little girl had chosen to describe Thorin did not fail to lighten the atmosphere a bit.

Bard fixed her with a scolding look, although deep inside felt a tad amused, and then swiveled to face the injured dwarf in earnest. He was better than that; than let someone die out of his door, either
that was a Man or Dwarf. He wouldn't follow the Master's shameful example. "Forgive me, master Kili," he apologised. "I meant no offence to you or your king."

"Please," Kili dismissed easily. "You have given me a bed to lay. At least if I die," he half-joked, "I am going to die comfortable."

His words did not seem to have the effect he hoped they would. The family cringed, Oin likely didn't listen seeing as his trumpet was not near his ear, while two bright fires shone in his brother's blue eyes as he wildly turned to him.

The older prince noticed the thick sheen of sweat on his brow, as well as how paler his face looked, despite the smile he was trying to pull off. Suddenly it occurred to him that Kili's tasteless joke might as well come true. "Kili?" he fumed.

"Mmm?"

"Shut up."

The younger tried to laugh again, but this time it wasn't without a toll. A sharp pain swallowed the sound, followed by an agonising scream. Fili almost lost it there.

Without further ado, Oin stripped the old bandage off his leg, only to give a frustrated shake of his head at the sight. "And why didn't ye let us see the wound earlier, if ye please?" he reprimanded. "There is still a shard of the arrow inside, laddie, and the wound has been infected!"

Fili wanted to tear down his eye sockets with his bare hands. He didn't know if that was even humanly possible, but he was moments away from attempting it. "You are-"

"What, reckless?" Kili chimed in, although in the next moment wished he'd said nothing.

"You've been going about for three days with a serious wound from a bloody poisoned arrow in your leg," Fili snapped, not caring if the whole town heard him anymore, "and you refuse to let Oin even see it?"

All those present, apart from Oin, wondered in a union how these smaller in stature people could reach such volumes in their voices.

"You know why I did-"

"If you don't like 'reckless'," Fili barked, "I could maybe use 'out of your bloody mind'!"

"Now," Oin interrupted, pulling the blond away from his brother, "this is no time for arguments. We must focus on healing him, not yelling at him."

Bard nodded and strode across the room to their little storage to see what herbs and supplies they had that could help. As soon as steam began to rise from the boiling pot, Sigrid grabbed it and approached the bed, with Bain following in tow.

Oin was preparing to pull the shard out of the wound. "This will hurt," he warned and then turned to the others around him. "I need ye to hold him down."

Bain put pressure on the other leg, Fili was already there, so Kili simply tightened his grip on his hand when he felt the healer's hand touching the wound. He couldn't help to choke an ear-shattering cry when he felt something that was embedded in the muscle slicing through marred skin and finally coming out of it. It might have felt slightly better, but it lasted only for a second. A new prickly wave
of pain washed over his body when hot water touched the injured area, followed by a damnably stronger one once the healer juiced a few drops of a lemon onto the wet cloth to sterilise the wound.

Bard appeared beside them to pass a washed root to Oin, who broke it in two smaller pieces trying to feed the one to Kili. "Chew on this, it'll numb the pain somewhat."

Kili eagerly grabbed the root and shoved it into his mouth, only to cringe at the taste. "What?" he coughed, "... you tryin' to do?" he then spat the piece out. "Kill me faster?"

"It's not the time to have a preference over flavours, laddie!" Oin yelled and passed the other half of the root to him.

Before Kili would take another chance to destroy whatever supplies they possessed by spitting them out, Fili grabbed the smelly root and all but shoved it into Kili's mouth, clapping a hand over to ensure that he would chew on it. Kili made a face at him and frantically tossed his arms about, motioning that he was choking. Fili took his hand away and the brunet took in a sharp breath, unfortunately enhancing the existing flavour in his palate.

Even after he swallowed it, he couldn't help the grimace of utter disgust, feeling himself mere minutes away from retching. "Bloody hell," he coughed out, "this is what evil must taste like."

Sigrid and Bain tried to offer convincing smiles. Only Tilda stood there still, with those examining eyes of her narrowed in mild fear. She didn't want the dwarf to die. Kili was fairly amiable compared to some others, and a good-looking one at that.

Fili smiled back at the children. At least, even in this state, Kili's spirits were up; disturbingly so, for that matter. There was a flitting moment where he wondered how Arya would react had she been there. No doubt, she could have possibly broken a plate or two. Whether against a wall or Kili's head, he couldn't decide.

"We need something to bring down his fever!" Oin said urgently as he pressed a hot compress over the wound.

"I have nightshade," Bard spread the herbs he had dug up from their stores on the table, "I have feverfew-"

"Aye, bring them both!" Oin exclaimed and beckoned him to hurry.

Bard scrambled next to the bed, threw the leaves into the boiling pot and watched as the dwarf healer soaked a new cloth taken from Tilda's hands to press it over Kili's brow.

Large white clouds loomed above the Long Lake, concealing the moon's reflection on the water entirely. A brisk breeze weathered whoever dared to cross the bridge that connected the shore with the stranded town, and prompted boisterous waves to form on the surface of the previously calm waters. The night was velvety black; unnervingly peaceful and quiet, speckled with the first snowflakes of the forthcoming winter which would fail to cover the ground, for a rain was bound to melt them.

All things considered, someone could say it was quite a spooky scenery.

Bofur, at least, supported that view wholeheartedly. In his prayers he was thanking Mahal for making it to the bridge at last, yet just when he was ready to make a cheerful comment, angry howls and grunts and, most importantly, a few dozen arrows convinced him not to.
"They must have caught our scent!" Arya had panted out beside him, coercing her feet to go faster.

"Ye think?" Bofur grumbled sarcastically, though mindful not to let the wind blow his hat off his head.

And now they couldn't feel their feet from all the intense running. Their limbs were numb, they were exhausted and ready to collapse, and luck apparently chose not to be on their side.

There were one or two thoughts nagging Arya's head as they sprinted across the bridge. First of all, the orcs had caught their scent and probably mistook it for that of the entire company, for that she was almost certain. Secondly, there were two outcomes of this. Either the rest of the company was still in Lake-town and a rather glorious hunt was about to take place, or they had already departed for the Mountain and she and Bofur were luring an orc pack to a populated area. Arya awaited the fireworks any moment now to commemorate the brilliance of that idea.

"I can't..." Bofur breathed out, ushering a cough after it, "...nymore, stop-"

Arya transcended every known level of panic when she noticed he'd fallen a few steps behind. Only two hundred yards or so separated them from the town, they couldn't give up now.

"Run, Bofur," she said in between pants, lingering to take only one deep breath before darting forward again, "run!"

She seized him by the hand and gave him a push to run ahead, feeling the wooden boards of the bridge suddenly starting to tremble and creak from a violent stampede a few hundred yards back. Horror wrinkled her already flustered face; even at that distance, their arrows were perfectly able to cover the distance in under a few seconds. Their hearts leaped up to their mouths as the brutal stampede drew closer, and every strand of hope started to snap painfully fast.

In the fraction of the second that she dared to twist her neck, what could Arya only discern in the midst of the tinny snarls a few dozen yards behind was a bow being raised. Damn you, you filthy little gobshites. They were so close... so close to an opportunity of finding the rest again that it would be a terrible shame to waste it. They were also very close to the town and alert the guards about the orc pack on their trail.

The thought of looking back hardly crossed the dwarf's mind, although he was fairly frightened when he heard a husky growl right next to his ear. In the space of two seconds, only a few strides away from the town's entrance, he found himself blinking and seeing nothing but pitch-black instead of running across that blasted bridge.

Darkness engulfed him, along with the sensation of his lungs being compressed, and he thought death was trying to choke him under his dark cloak.

However... something seemed to be off.

Could there possibly be water involved? For there were bubbles escaping his nose and mouth and something, or rather someone pulling him in unknown direction. He didn't want to follow whomever that was, he only wanted to breathe air and not water if possible. After a forceful attempt to get away the person struggled to hold him there with them. That was it, he decided. That was death and he was just about to embrace it.

Arya had mustered all her strength to pull him up to the surface with her, but he weighed them both down. Why on earth did the dwarves have to be so heavy? She wasn't Beorn, for goodness' sake, to be able to load a whole tree trunk on her back and carry it around with ease. And on top of all, Bofur
must have swallowed a bunch of water and was in the verge of drowning.

When they miraculously made it to the surface, he wasn't breathing and had gone limp. Panic overwhelmed her again. No, he could not afford dying right now. No sky or houses could be seen above them, only wooden boards standing a few inches away from their heads -probably ended up floating under a dock or something of that sort.

She continued to drag him along with her, with little care if either of them bumped their head on the boards above, until she could see the sky again and found a safe place to dock -pun intended. Bofur ended up sprawled next to a few sacks of potatoes -an unsuspecting inhabitant might as well mistake him for one- while Arya was trying to catch her breath beside him.

The dwarf still made no attempt to even breathe, let alone move. Arya rushed to his side and rhythmically started to press her fists over his chest, until a small fountain of water sprang out of his mouth. He violently coughed out the rest of it and then took a greedy, sharp breath, feeling that he had just returned from another world. With a relieved sigh she slumped back onto the ground, glad that he was still alive.

Bofur frantically glanced around until his respiratory system began to function normally again. "What- What happened?" he stammered. "I- I remember us running and then... then nothing- Only darkness and water..."

The Ranger fixed him with a rueful look and quickly turned away.

His blood froze and this was definitely not caused by the icy water. The fact that she did not meet his eyes was ill-boding in itself.

"They fired arrows," she revealed. "I pushed you into the water and jumped in after you to make them think they hit us. I am sorry, it was the first thing that came to mind so we could get out of this... well, relatively unharmed."

Bofur processed the words one by one and, at the end of it, something else dawned on him. "I feel... I feel violated," he breathed out, then turned to her with a suspicious look. "Ye didn't kiss me to wake up, did ye?" She shot him a glare. "I don't think Kili would appreciate-"

"No one violated your personal space, Bofur," she reassured him. "If you, of course, exclude the arrow that blew a hole in your hat."

Two eyes almost popped out of their sockets as his hands wildly reached to grab said hat. He held it in his hands so dearly that the moment he faced the hole proceeded to unleash a string of curses, claiming that he would shove the arrow in places that Arya really didn't want to think about.

"What are ye still doing here?" he suddenly burst as soon as the rant was over. "Off ye go to rip them into pieces!"

"I can't leave you alo-!"

"I have no weapons to fight!" the dwarf objected. "I'll be of no more use than a burden. Go find the others!" With that he gave her a push to move ahead, although she lingered a while to secure that he'd be alright alone. "I'll find a weapon if I can and follow ye!"

Only when he practically shoved her to move did she comply. She gingerly stepped out of the shadows, lurking around the corner of a house, and scanned the nearest docks. Her hands clenched around the hilts of the daggers and she mentally cursed not having bow and arrow with her as her gaze strayed from the docks and the small alleys, moving upwards, where two dozen hunched
figures jumped quietly from one rooftop to another, towards the north-western edge of the city.

A gloomy look made the Ranger's face even darker than the lack of light already made it. They must have found the company, she thought, or else they would have spread around the entire town and wouldn't have everyone head to the same direction.

But she could, too, play the game of shadows.

Fili had refused to abandon his brother's side for the past two hours. Despite how many compresses of hot water he or Sigrid pressed on Kili's brow, the fever did not abate; neither did his painful groans. Sweat had drenched his hair and whole body due to the fever -even the pillow under his head was soaked- and, no matter how many times Oin cleaned the oozing pus that gushed out of the wound, the skin around it maintained the unearthly purplish-black hue that made everyone's skin crawl.

Sigrid had retreated beside the bench in the kitchen and watched them from a distance, not really comfortable to be further involved. The dwarf healer had used whatever herbs and salves they had on hand, but none of them seemed to bring the desired results and the supplies were running dangerously low. Her father had left a few minutes prior to go in search of any other herbs someone in town might be willing to offer.

An itchy gut feeling had the blond on pins and needles. Had more of Kili's leg been exposed, Fili was almost certain they'd find similarly darkened veins going at every direction; meaning that the poison was spreading. Hence-

No. That was not an option.

And he fervently refused to believe that there was nothing he could do to save his brother. He would gladly give up all the gold in Erebor and every potential to become the glorious king everyone was grooming him to be, if it helped his brother got out of this alive. He savagely rubbed his throbbing temples, feeling something ready to burst out of him that there was no way to control or hold back. His head swiveled again to his brother, who was gritting his teeth and had grabbed the blanket with his fists so hard that the knuckles were ready to rip through the skin and pop out.

Yet Fili should better start to contemplate the unthinkable since Oin admitted that he had never encountered this kind of poison before, with a consoling pat on his shoulder. As if that would take all the pain away.

Surges of anger had always been a rare occurence for Fili. But when they happened, it was wiser for everyone to take their distance.

His hands clenched into fists and he shrugged Oin's gesture off as he walked away from the bed. For the first time in quite a while, he felt all hope abandoning him. His gaze strayed somewhere out of the small window that looked north-east, toward the Mountain. It was late dusk; the deep of the night was still far away.

Heavy dark clouds were brewing not too far in the horizon and were slowly covering the sky like a grey veil. An invisible, nippy wind blew from the north and led the cloudy billows closer and closer to the town. Everything was suddenly illuminated by a bright lightning, followed by a loud rumbling sound not long after. So sharp it was and cracked through the air, the wooden floor and walls of the house screeched creepily in response.

A storm was coming.
Joining a band of dwarves and going on a quest had its ups and downs. More downs than ups, if anything, going by the callouses on Bilbo's feet. Whoever heard of a hobbit with callouses on their feet, and the grandchild of Old Took at that? That was outrage; a scandal.

Bilbo was pondering precisely on these thoughts as they trailed along the deserted, barren, and seemingly endless land till they reached the top of a large hill. Just when he thought they'd take a few minutes to catch their breaths, he saw the cliff below and sighed with frustration, for it meant only one thing: more walking—and climbing. Just as he took a moment to catch a breath, his gaze fixed on something peeping through the clouds that looked like walls. It was the remnants of a small city; one that surely must have been glorious in the days of yore, before the dragon descended.

At least, Bilbo could imagine it as such; green trees, houses rising high to two, maybe three floors, streets and alleys vibrant from life and lots of people strolling around with kind smiles on their faces. And what was only left from that joyful picture now was an abandoned place, full of rubble and wooden debris, here and there covered with frozen snow. Even under the light of the midday sun, the scenery seemed dark and gloomy, and there was an ever so slight sense of doom wafting through the chilling breeze.

"What is this place?" he wondered, more to himself than the others, not having realised that every single one of the dwarves had come to stand along with him near the edge of the large rock.

"It was once the city of Dale," Balin said with a sad sigh. "Now it is but a ruin..."

The dwarves shared the look as they reminisced about how active and boisterous the city once was.

"The desolation of Smaug," the white-bearded dwarf then said heatedly and everyone felt their guts twinge come the realisation of their proximity to the beast.

Only Thorin was quite impatient and too drowned in his own thoughts to keep up with the discussion, and he nervously glanced around for a way that would lead them down the hill and closer to the Mountain. "We have no time to spare. We must find the hidden door before the day after tomorrow. Come," he urged as soon as he noticed a less uneven path hidden among the numerous sharp boulders, "this way."

"Wait," Bilbo lingered with a questioning look, feeling something amiss. "Is this the overlook?" The dwarf did not answer and the hobbit sensed he was right. "Gandalf said to meet him here. On no account we were—"
Thorin took a slightly threatening step closer, hissing impatiently, "Do you see him here? We have no time to wait upon the wizard, we're on our own." His look hardened further. "Move, quickly."

And there the first bells of worry started to ring warnings in Bilbo's head. The strange gleam in Thorin's eyes seemed all but good. Something had changed, a shadow shrouding the dwarf king's soul and forbidding the light and reason to shine through. Also the fact that Gandalf had yet to reach the meeting point didn't do much to ease the tension either. It later occurred to him that there was a dragon laying ahead and he would have to enter the Mountain unseen to find who knows what.

Half the day they had spent on the road, hopping and sometimes tripping over small rocks that lay beneath their feet. Everyone was exhausted but they were so very close. Only the short distance till the Mountain made their souls and spirits endure the arduous trek, but hope was steadily worn out as the realisation of the proximity to the dragon inside dawned upon their faces.

Wherever he turned his head, Bilbo would see either dwarves trying to catch their breaths, others wincing from a slight fear that overwhelmed them, a grumbling Thorin nervously scanning their surroundings to orientate according to the map, or finally vast landscapes with huge rock formations that resembled dwarf warriors. Bilbo had never seen something of that size in his life before. His mind could not process how those people, given their short stature were able to have built this.

They avoided passing close to the practically demolished main gate at any cost, out of fear that the dragon might catch their scent or, even worse, decide to go out for a walk. Thorin was leading them directly to the north-western spurs of the Mountain since the map pointed that the door was at this side.

Every now and then a faintest vibration shook the ground, but most of the company brushed this fact aside, thinking that it was just their imagination. Only Thorin, Balin, Dwalin and Gloin shared looks of worry among them and a shadow enveloped their hearts even at the thought that the dragon was apparently alive. When Bilbo dared to inquire about it and Balin informed him that it must probably have been the dragon sleeping and snoring, the hobbit felt his legs weaken. If Smaug could shake the earth beneath their feet with one of his snores, Bilbo didn't want to imagine what would happen if he came back from the dream world.

Only after Thorin wisely decided that by splitting up in small groups they would have greater chance in finding the door, fate smiled at them. The scouting parties has scattered about, with eyes wide open to find something, anything.

Yet all had grown rather fidgety that they had yet no luck as the sun started to sink lower in the horizon. And Durin's day was drawing dangerously near.

Bilbo barely held himself from squeaking like a mouse when his eyes took in the sight before them and he did a double take to ensure that he was not hallucinating. Right in front of him, where one of the two giant statues stood formidable and —surprisingly enough— intact from Smaug's violent attack all these years ago, there were steps carved in the stone. Their intricate design could easily be mistaken for a simple artistic detail if someone did not pay attention from a short distance.

"Up here!" the hobbit yelled excitedly.

Despite the distance they might be in, the dwarves' heads snapped at his direction and ten pairs of eyes saw the hobbit waving his hands about and pointing somewhere. When they all followed his directions and came to stand beside him, they too saw the steps that led to an upper part of the mountainside and hopeful smiles split their faces.

"You have keen eyes, master Baggins," Thorin praised with a broad smile and lightly tapped the
burglar's shoulder.

Something more than pleased with himself, Bilbo received several congratulatory pats on his back. Yet his smile gradually disappeared when another thought came to mind. They had to climb the stairs to reach the place it led to. Hence, more walking.

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*Stars have mercy on his sorry hide.* It was all what Kili could think as the pain came and went, increasing in severity, and he groaned for the millionth time.

So this is how it'd end. With cruel irony.

He wouldn't even get to glance at the Halls nearly everyone in the company longed to see again; the Halls which they'd got into this whole mess for in the first place.

Kili had been determined to ignore the growing pain in his leg and look as though nothing had happened, but Thorin had made him stay behind to recover anyway. From there on, everything went down the pan. They literally had to drag him all over Lake-town in a call for aid that no one responded to, and eventually rely on the bargeman's goodwill. Had it not been for his brother and Oin's pleadings, Bard would doubtfully accept him in his home. But apparently his pitiful state was enough to move a string in the man's heart. And although Bard apologised and reassured that it was his duty to offer help to whomever needed it, deep inside Kili could not bring himself to trust his words.

He still felt unwelcome; felt that he had disappointed his uncle, his mother, his father, his brother, himself even. A pathetic creature, a burden, this was all he was now.

Almost every inch of his body ached. The injury wasn't getting and wasn't going to get any better. Not only he could feel it—it was like being tossed into a furnace—but he could also see it in the eyes of those who stood around and nursed him. Even his brother, who had been adamant to not leave his side even for a moment, had now withdrawn to a far corner of the room and stared out of the window, probably waiting for the inevitable.

Another burning wave of pain shot through him then and made him almost yelp, his entire aching body doubling up from the force of it. Groaning, he turned over onto his side and winced when darkness swarmed at the edges of his vision, the room started to sway and an acrid taste filled his mouth. He hardly noticed the few drops of blood that stained the pillow as he coughed, the route from his lungs up to his throat easily rivalling a flaming road that led to the devil's doorstep with no intermediary stops.

"Kili?" he heard his brother's worried voice call from the other side of the room, where he stood until now that he rushed back to the bedside. "Oin, he's coughing blood!"

The brunet tried to avoid his brother's eyes as he caught a glimpse of him walking away from the window that looked east, towards the Mountain, and now held his shoulder. He felt angry and terribly ashamed of himself; he had robbed his brother the chance to prove himself worthy of being Thorin's heir; worthy of being the future King.

With furrowed brow the dwarf healer wiped the blood around the prince's mouth and shot the blond a worried look, ever so slightly shaking his head.

"Go away, Fili. Both you and Oin," Kili croaked, his throat straining from the effort. "Run away. Far, far away. Join the others at the Mountain. There is nothing but death here—"

"We are willing to risk it," Fili said dryly. "Now, stop. You never were one for drama."
Under other circumstances Kili would laugh, but even that simple action seemed too painful and energy-consuming at the moment. He heard the bed's boards creak and felt the mattress move as Fili sat down beside him.

"How are you feeling?" the blond inquired as he took a cold compress off Tilda's hands and pressed it over Kili's forehead. That blasted fever would just not go down.

"Just bury me already," Kili groaned. "And see to serve salted pork and malt beer in my funeral, please." Mahal, salted pork. His stomach churned just at the thought of it.

But the blond did not appreciate this sinister turn of his brother's humour. "Kili, shut up," he commanded. "There's no salted pork and beer lying around. You do have roots and plants at your disposal, so make do with those."

Kili's eyes went wide as he recalled the taste of the root Oin had given him earlier. To say that it was disgusting would be an understatement—orc flesh surely tasted better than that. He shook his head furiously in denial, prompting the world to fall off its axis again and darkness drag him out of reality.

Eerie silence.

The stars were veiled and a chilly breeze made most of its residents seek the warmth of their homes' hearths. Hardly anyone walked outside at this late hour, save a bargeman who was in search of supplies that could help the injured dwarf in his house, another dwarf who had almost drowned and was now recovering from the shock sprawled on a dock somewhere in a dark alley, a bunch of bloodthirsty orcs and, last but not least, a dark hooded figure who was chasing the latter around.

It wasn't long ago that the Ranger caught glimpse of the deformed figure jumping high above her head from where she was hidden under a house's staircase. For once she was glad for their acutely acute sense of smell; it would take a hell of a lot less time to find out where the dwarves were. She was prowling alone under the balconies of the large wooden houses, stalking shadows through the light layer of fog in the air with the hope that she'd catch a familiar face.

No orc was near, at least from what she could see. They favoured the rooftops over the bridges and alleys and Arya counted her blessings for the small advantage. She dived behind a few barrels, then slid quietly behind a thick pillar under one of the houses the orcs had ended up gathering around. They sat there waiting. To her dismay, their numbers seemed to have dwindled, which only meant they had scattered to the docks as well. Arya cursed. There was a staircase directly in front of her leading to the door, but she'd risked have her cover blown if she moved. She gritted her teeth in annoyance, mind spinning to concoct a plan as her eyes followed the shadows on the roofs. They circled and crawled all over the house like ants in the sand.

Suddenly the aforementioned door opened and out stepped a young girl. Arya nearly lost it right then and there, holding her mouth from screaming at the girl to get the hell out of there just barely. The Ranger looked around wildly. There was a quite dramatic double take when she spotted the lid sealing the barrel behind her.

Innocently, Sigrid mistook the creaking sound outside for her father returning—he'd already been gone long enough. Tearing her gaze off the dwarf that lay on the bed and writhed in pain, she walked out, expecting to see her father and squinting in confusion when she spotted no one.

"Father? Is that you?"

No answer came and, deciding that she had probably misheard, she was ready to go back inside.
Then a noise like feet stepping on the boards came from directly behind her. Before she could even make a complete head turn, she was screaming at the nightmare standing literally inches away from her face. The creature went for her neck, but his hand froze mid-air. A sharp blade and the sound it made as it cleaved through skin and bone in one strike as if it were green wood, detaching the creature's head from its shoulders, made Sigrid's scream drown in her throat. Blood splattered on her face and she let out a terrified gasp when the head rolled off of the body, falling literally onto her feet and rolling away towards the edge.

A dark form appeared behind it and, before the head could fall into the water below, a boot kept it in place. Arms deposited the rest of the body silently down so it wouldn't collapse and Sigrid felt sick in the stomach. Although the intruder basically saved her life, she couldn't help recoiling in fear. And then the figure grabbed her arm and pulled her closer, dropping the hood back.

Everything happened in the span of a breath. And it was a damn long breath. The first arrow hit the wall right where Sigrid was standing not a moment ago and the next one was wedged right onto the barrel lid the unknown figure used as a shield for them both. In all this mess, she barely registered it was a woman.

Arya could feel the girl's arm shaking like a leaf in the wind, but there was no time for this. "Hide, quickly!" was all she managed to breath out before shoving the dumbfounded girl through the door, as another orc jumped off the roof and landed on the balcony only a few feet away.

Two wide strides and he was already charging at her. She ducked, avoiding the blow, and hit him right in the face with the barrel lid, throwing him off balance. The sound of the nose breaking was unmistakable. He charged again with renewed fury. Her block did save her face from the punch, but the barrel lid was hurled away from her hand, ending up in the waters below with a splash. Having left his right side unguarded, Arya shoved one dagger in his middle, slashing across it, then took it out and cut his throat. Just to make sure. A fountain of black blood spurted out of it, staining her face and neck. She spat it out.

And then hell broke loose. They started jumping in from every direction to besiege the house. Arya didn't know where to head first. She was no god—couldn't be at two places at once. The decision was taken in the spur of the moment. She stepped on the railing and jumped up, hauling herself up onto the roof. The door could hold a little longer if the others inside had the prudence to barricade it.

Once on the roof, there was a moment she reevaluated her choice upon taking count of how many of them were there. Before she could even contemplate on it, one was coming her way. She took the second dagger out and dived left to ram one of the daggers in his back before he could stop and turn, kicking the body to the side. It rolled down into the lake, while more swarmed towards her.

It was one of those times that the fragility of life became full blown reality. On this night she did fear for hers. That momentary distraction was enough for one to creep up behind her and attack, ready to drive an axe through her skull. She caught the movement from the corner of her eye and leaned to the side just in time to see the axe whizzing past her bruised nose and retreating for a second blow. Arrows flew over her head, missing barely, and she swiveled to face him hoping she wouldn't lose her footing on the steep rooftop.

Well, that was close.

Her eyes took in her opponent. The bastard was easily twice her size and ready to attack, harder than the first time. Her defense proved meagre compared to the force of his hit and only resulted in having one of the daggers fall from her hand down on the roof tiles. No matter how agile she was, this one would be difficult to get away from. She stepped on the ridge board and went to trip him up before it'd get truly dangerous, but it did get dangerous. Between tangled limbs and arrows whizzing past
them, he ended up squeezing her neck with his arm and knocking all the breath out of her. The nails of her free hand dug into his forearm so viciously, it almost took some skin off, but it made no difference.

Time suddenly seemed to stretch. She had vague recollection of the dagger in her other hand, yet despite mustering all her power, the limb was immobilised several inches away from her body by a foul-looking, muscly arm, leaving her front completely unguarded. She spotted another on the opposite rooftop with a bow and arrow, aiming directly at her.

Her captor forced her hand up as though it weighed no more than straw, in what he thought to be a final mockery to escort her to death. "Wave goodbye, you little cu–"

"Finish that sentence... and I will open my pocket," she growled through clenched teeth, trying to resist the pull of her hand. "And you really don't want me to open my pocket."

"Fuck you!"

She let out a hiss as he pulled her head further to him, bending the neck backwards to a painful degree. "Those are your last words, 'fuck you'?" she rasped. "Come on, you can do better!"

The grip he had on her neck tightened and her lungs ached from the lack of air. In the numbing haze she was sinking into, the dagger fell from her hand on the rooftop just like the other and she heard a sniff directly behind her ear.

"...oot-golgi kurv–"

His voice had been rich and guttural and his tongue was like the crack and boom of rolling thunder.

*This musn't register on an emotional level.* Too bad it did. Arya gritted her teeth almost punishingly. With a wild snarl she snatched her hand out of his grip and pulled his away from her neck just enough to bite off his thumb and make him loosen the grip. The orc growled when he felt teeth sinking into the skin viciously, noticing the back of her head going for his face a little too late.

Several things happened at once. The momentum of the headbutt made him totter backwards, dragging the woman along and, by some tragic mistake, saving her from the arrow his comrade was aiming her with. Had he been only half a second late the arrow would be now exiting the back of her skull and not whizzing past her head as they took a spectacular tumble backwards that resulted in a hole on the roof.

Right after Sigrid had stepped out thinking Bard had finally returned, the creaking sounds became noticeable by all. Sets of concerned eyes looked up and Fili was ready to follow the girl and bring her back inside.

Before he even moved Sigrid tumbled into the house, yelling about something and wildly trying to keep the door shut. She held her own until a large sword jammed the door, almost cutting her arm in half, and made her stumble back. Bain and Tilda jumped to their feet, startled to danger, and the dwarves' eyes went wide.

The door opened and an orc hurtled inside, wielding a blade inches away from Sigrid's terrified face, while Bain pushed Tilda behind his back until they hit the wall.

The orc shoved Sigrid and she ended up sprawled over the chairs, eventually landing under the table with her siblings rushing to her side. Before the attacker could even reach them Fili had darted forward like an angry predator and pinned the orc on the wall, repeatedly punching his ugly face
until his nose was crooked to one side. Oin was fighting his own with another one a few feet away, using his bare hands as weapons, as well as mugs and pots and plates, which proved more efficient than he would have imagined.

It wouldn't be exaggeration to say that almost everyone was certain they would not come alive out of this.

And then the most unexpected thing happened.

Kili had lost count of time. Slowly and steadily, his mind had sunk into incoherence, only taking short breaks back into reality. His fever induced, delusional state was interrupted by a series of strange noises—yells and growls mingling together and creating a deafening noise. Monstrous faces seemed to barge into the house one after the other and he saw Bard's children throw plates at them and hide under the table. Blasted orcs, he cursed. His breathing swallow as he tried to lift himself off the bed and be of some use to the others, the effort only resulted in him wiggle a bit, groan louder from the pain and feel even more disoriented.

His head slumped back into the pillow. A second later, he could hear wood break, then something heavy fell on the floor with a dull thud. There were some quite creative curses and a few painful gasps, which were followed by more cursing.

The dwarves apart from Kili, who was barely holding onto the edges of consciousness, gawped at the cloaked figure sprawled atop the orc that first spat out blood and then half a finger, of all things. Fili could vaguely feel his left side go numb. Oin was too stunned to think or feel anything. The children only doubled their efforts to remain hidden under the table and had shoved themselves further under it, wishing for the floor to swallow them right then and there.

Immediately following the freefall, Arya felt herself touching the wooden ground. Well... touching the wooden ground was putting it nicely. In truth, part of her body landed on the orc and the rest of it on the ground, and the stinging pain in her bum was there to prove it.

She sat up quickly, taking in her surroundings only for a moment before the orc's enormous frame locked around her. His hand reached backwards, and Bain shouted for Arya to look out just as the assailant reached for something that had fallen on the ground along with them. He managed to take it, the blade catching the firey light from the candles in the room as he swung it upwards and made to impale it on the side of her head, but she wrestled herself out of the way. Sadly —or not so much—for his amputated hand, she gripped it and squeezed the fingers together so hard, Bain swore he heard the bones break over the orc's growl of pain. The dagger fell on the ground again, not so far for any of the two to reach but not close either. Quick as a whip, Arya snatched the knife from the pocket of her boot and stabbed into the creature's gut, twisting and curling until all sorts of entrails poured out in rivers.

Fili couldn't tear his gaze away, jaw hanging ajar as he watched his once-deceased friend shove the dead orc on the ground, spitting out the bile from her mouth and shaking most of the blood off of her knife. For a great long minute they just stood there in silence, the two of them working to understand just what it was that happened.

Until the moment passed and she jolted upright like a lightning bolt, kicking the corpse to the side. "Take the daggers!" she commanded.

Despite being reduced to stunned silence, the growls and roars of numerous others that barged into the house through the hole in the roof or the open door snapped the two dwarves out of it. They gathered the daggers from the floor, putting them in immediate use, while the Ranger grabbed something that hung from the wall and twirled the knife in her hand. Kili's groaning voice caught her
ear at one point, and she briefly turned to see him sprawled upon a bed in the corner of the room, drenched in sweat and writhing in pain. His skin was the colour of ash and his lips were purple, whereas a huge stain of blood adorned the pillow next to his mouth.

Shit. Shit.

She was too late. The onslaught of guilt and fear was enough to make any sane being give up, but the adrenaline kept her going. And to top it all, there was that filthy gobshite lunging at the table with the children behind it. In retrospect, it was pretty much at that moment where any said being would lose it.

The orc never got to the young ones; or the table, for that matter. Halfway there, he collided face-first with the back side of a pan that materialised out of thin air and was forced to a halt mid-stride, staggering backwards with surprise and a rightfully earned disfigured nose—even more so than usual.

More blows followed that first one. Each came with a vengeance so enviable, it was a wonder how the bottom of the pan hadn't taken the shape of the orc's face yet.

Fili and Oin, being closer to Kili, had taken as many as they could in an attempt to drive them away from him, but were mercilessly outnumbered.

Moments later Arya caught glimpse of a blond blur somewhere beside her. She turned and saw the Elf Prince, Thranduil's son, of all people, materialising almost as fast as the pan did earlier, in a blink of an eye, starting to take down orcs like flies. Certainly the bow and arrows helped him many, in contrast to her meagre armoury consisting of one knife and a resilient pan, but it was no time for luxuries.

He had chosen to take them by surprise by way of the roof, whereas his companion favoured the door.

Every other noise faded in comparison with Kili's cry the moment one of the orcs snatched his leg. It caused several people to lose their concentration and turn to him. Arya went on a rampage. She watched in slow motion all over again, too far to reach him in time, yet the fates were kinder this time. Tauriel leapt to rescue, throwing her dagger at the creature and pinning it on the wall behind, away from Kili.

The latter had been struggling to free his leg from the grip, thrashing about until the orc released him, but he still ended up tumbling onto the floor. In his trance he thought he caught glimpse of that redhead elf, the Captain of the Elvenking's Guard, standing two feet away, though his eyesight wasn't trustworthy anymore. What on earth would the elf doing in Lake-town?

The table in the middle of the house had been toppled and Bain jumped up to defend his sisters as a bunch of hideous faces and a respective number of swords swarmed in. He lifted the long bench and with all his force threw it against the orc that was coming right at them, only for a dwarf to block his way and push him behind his back along with Sigrid and Tilda.

"Get down!" Fili yelled and set himself as shield between the three children and the enemy, making the best use of Arya's dagger, even though he was not used to this kind of weapons—it was terribly light in his hand.

Shortly before the orc she was trying to hold back with one arm would be taken care, for she had her eyes set upon another one in her front, Tauriel saw a hand roughly shove a knife into the orc's side and a body crash against it. A breath hitched in her throat when the young dwarf she'd had a
conversation with in the dungeons collapsed on the floor along with the filth of a creature and cried out in pain, a violent spasm racking his already battered body.

It was during her struggle with one of them that Arya recognised the agonising scream. Without taking the eyes away from the orc and watching as he moved to grab a handful of hair of one of the two girls who were struggling to crawl as far as possible, she felt her gut physically twinging at the sound of Kili's yelp. The pan in her hand collided viciously with the orc's face, sending him reeling backwards against the wall. Then she tossed it away and clutched his neck, impaling the knife in his chest until the point scraped the wooden wall. Her body started to tremble from the surge of anger that washed over her and she hadn't realised the guttural growl that hurt her ears had come from her own throat. Only when the knife was pulled out of the creature and he crumpled on the floor, body twitching in the throes of death, did she swivel around to face three pairs of wide eyes staring at her in genuine horror. Surely, she must have been a sight from afar. \textit{Oh well.}

And suddenly, as though someone had cast a spell of silence over the room, no voice could be heard except from pants or wheezing breaths. The house had ended up a pile of debris; there was a hole in the roof, the door was broken, and most of the furniture was tipped over if not crumbled into pieces. Not to mention the orcs' corpses that were scattered around the place.

Bain hauled himself up from the toppled table and tried to let the situation soak in, warily staring at the people around the room and trying to avoid glances with the crazy woman next to him. "You killed them all..."he breathed out in disbelief, his voice almost drowning in his throat.

"There are others," Legolas said solemnly and dashed outside as swiftly as he'd appeared in the first place, his desire to wipe the orc filth burning like flame. "Tauriel, come."

Kili was sprawled on his back upon the floor, breaths coming out in ragged pants and mouthfuls of blood pouring out of his mouth with every painful exhalation. Fili was the first to his side.

The brunet was walking the line between unconsciousness and reality. He was positive that he was hallucinating seeing as the redhead and also the blond elf were dwelling in this warped version of reality. He caught the blond calling the other to go. "T-- Tauriel?"

The words were too low, but enough to be heard by those standing close. The Captain wavered. Never before had someone uttered her name in such a manner, as though he was aware what awaited him, and extended his arm to grab her boot. She would have suggested to carry him back to the Halls and have a healer take care of him, but it was simply too far and Thranduil would have none of it; most likely, the dwarf would be locked up in a cell again.

"Tauriel," Legolas repeated more insistently, giving the side-eye and a nudge to his friend. They were here solely for the orcs. No business they had with the dwarves anymore.

Her face did a bad job masking her hesitation. Tauriel exchanged glances with her friend and, after a look of genuine guilt at the injured dwarf and the other two around him, as well as locking eyes with the Ranger for a brief moment, she complied and followed him.

Unfortunately Arya had been a witness to the entire scene. To her chagrin, she acknowledged a clear sign of interest in the elf's eyes towards the dwarf that lay wounded on the floor, and a lump stuck in her throat. She hit the very pinnacle of self-pity the moment Kili called the redhead's name and tried to stretch out a hand towards her, yet the woman left to follow the Elf prince and Kili slumped back unresponsive, eyes rolling backwards.

"We're losing him!" Oin's urgent voice snapped her out of it and made her bones melt.
Steady fingers fumbled with something in the pocket of her boot and pulled out a small pouch. She inwardly thanked her cousin's prudence to provide her with efficient supplies, even though she'd hoped the need wouldn't arise. "I need boiling water," she ordered as the sealed pouch was opened, revealing the dry leaves of a weed that were sheltered inside, "quickly!"

The dwarves were shocked to stunned silence yet again.

Arya clapped her hands together, yelling, "Are you deaf?"

The irony wasn't lost on either of those present, seeing as Oin had been standing before her with his pressed trumpet placed in his ear, yet they elected to dismiss it in favour of more pressing things.

Fili shook his head in disbelief. "Aren't you dead?"

"What?" she said in confusion. "What are you talking about?" Fili received a smack on the arm as proof. "See? Perfectly solid. Now, bring me the damn water!"

They obeyed immediately.

Arya knelt beside Kili and wiped the sweat off his brow, as well as the blood around his mouth with her hand, her heart practically pounding under her chest when he did not make an attempt to speak or even look at her. He was only groaning and pushing his eyes tightly shut, wriggling around like a worm, with hardly any consciousness of the environment. Now was certainly not the time for thoughts like these, but it surprised her how much she'd missed him the days they were apart. And it pained her to even think that there was a chance she'd miss him even more lest he died.

Her eyes stung with unshed tears, but she shook it off and clutched him tighter. "Focus on my voice," she commanded, her tone much more desperate than the stern one she initially aimed for. "Stay awake and I promise, I'll let you braid my hair, damn you."

She kept her lips pressed upon his sweaty brow and began humming an almost inaudible prayer under her breath. If only one prayer and the promise would be enough to save him. He was still for a second or two before he frantically tossed and turned in her arms again, and she made an effort to tear her gaze from him.

It was then that she caught from the corner of her eye the two children sunk in a corner, tightly hugging each other, while the third one —the older probably— had rose to her feet and bustled about the kitchen along with Fili. She did not fail to notice the expression on the girl's face which was as blank as an empty piece of parchment, clearly still in shock, and made a mental note to do something for her and her siblings later.

"We must move him," Arya exclaimed, eyes urgently staring at the dwarf healer at her side and face almost distorted from worry, while trying not to let her hope and composure abandon her heart. "I need to see the wound."

Fili approached in a hurry, at some point registering an absentminded nod from Sigrid that she'd take care of the water, but he wasn't sure. Bain seemed to recover a bit faster than his little sister as he pulled her up to her feet and sat her on a chair, before he and Fili brought the toppled table to its original position and along with Oin and the Ranger carried Kili and laid him upon it.

With every scream or cry there was a pool of blood coming out from the wound and also his mouth. Arya quickly turned him on his side so that he wouldn't choke, and began wiping the blood away from his mouth to let him breathe again. As soon as his breathing came in ragged swallow pants and not pure spits and puddles of blood, she turned him on his back and threw all the bandages away
from the festering wound, feeling the hairs on her neck bristle as she faced the puncture and the black rancid flesh around it, as well as the oozing pus that gushed out of it like a fountain. Her mind spun feverishly regarding what on bloody earth was the arrow that poisoned him—heavens above, the barb had torn the muscle from the bone. Her gaze swiftly travelled back to his face, where his skin had taken a sickly hue of ash to the point that blood vessels became rather noticeable, and his eyes seemed to lose the battle with life, rapidly turning glassy as their warm hazel colour had given up its place to a sinister black. It wouldn't be an exaggeration to say that he looked like a ghost.

Her eyes searched for Fili and she gave him a scolding glare for no apparent reason—though, probably because the one who should receive it was dying right now. "Your mother is right," she spat out angrily, "he is reckless!"

The last thought that crossed Fili's mind right then was to produce a coherent answer. There was so much happening in an extremely limited amount of time, therefore what only existed in his head was a huge blur and the thought of how Kili would be saved.

Sigrid did not linger further in the kitchen as soon as the first bubbles made their appearance on the surface of the water and covered the distance till the table in three wide strides. She deposited the small pot down and immediately saw the woman crush a few leaves of a weed with her fingers and then throw them into the hot water.

"What are you doing?" Oin dared to ask, setting aside all his confusion about the Ranger's comeback from the other world and focusing on the task at hand. "What is this?"

Arya met his gaze, seeing his brow furrowed and etched with worry as he kept Kili's head slightly lifted from the table to prevent him from choking. "Athelas," she said blankly. He only narrowed his eyes in confusion. "Kingsfoil people around old Arnor and Gondor call it."

At this, Oin's face scrunched up in even more confusion. "Kingsfoil? But it does not–"

"It is known to be powerful in the hands of the roya–" She stopped mid-sentence, covering her lapse with a small cough, surprised that her mental faculties hadn't abandoned her entirely in this hour of need. "Elves have other uses for it. My mother said so."

Oin was aware of said herb, but rumour had it that it was only used for its nice fragrance; nothing about healing virtues or something of that sort. And indeed, as the weed was soaked into the hot water, it gave off a refreshing scent that filled the room and cleared and calmed the minds of those present. The scent also varied regarding individuals who smelled it. It did much good to the three children as well, the dwarf healer noted, for the previously drawn from their faces blood began to circulate again.

Four people rushed to hold the dwarf down on the table the moment the Ranger pressed a handful of the newly formed paste from the crushed leaves directly upon the wound in his leg. She grabbed his thigh to keep it still and not let the greenish salve slip away from the wound, gesture that made his whole body twitch with violent spasms.

The numerous arms struggling to keep him pinned on the table were lost to Kili and, not being coherent enough to realise that, he left the floodgates of pain open. In between the furious thrashing and growls of pure agony, he took hold of something that was near his hand —and seemed to cause him even more pain— so he could swat it away.

Fili'd breath was caught in his lungs. A sense of hopelessness enveloped him as his brother continued to convulse as though someone was sawing off his leg, face covered in a thick layer of sweat mixed with blood.
He saw Arya's moves falter and her arm twinge the moment his brother crashed her palm in a death grip, although she was brushing it off like it was nothing. The echo of the pain intensified through the grip. He let her feel all of it. *Elbereth save him.* Her head wiggled furiously to remain focused; she couldn't allow herself to make a mistake. Considering the situation, it could prove fatal.

Sigrid and Bain had taken hold of the writhing dwarf as well, while Tilda stood somewhere beside them and watched the scene unfolding with trepidation. The woman's eyes were closed as she tried to focus on something that Tilda couldn't for the life of her figure out. No words she spoke, so the girl could only tell that she must be in pain, judging by the wince that made her forehead wrinkle and the way her hand spasmed inside Kili's.

Fili was at a loss. He had absolutely no idea what Arya was doing or what this salve she pressed onto the wound was, but he really disliked how it made Kili flail and thrash about the table, as though ten swords pierced his flesh all at once.

Kili, for his part, simply waited for darkness to envelop him. All his senses were attuned to the feeling of pain and the world had turned into a flaming, dark blur that he was ready to welcome with an open embrace if it meant putting an end to this torture. His very bones and veins were sizzling, as though someone had skinned him alive and put him over a fire to be cooked.

Goodbye world.

*Inside the darkness there was something tingling one of his senses and drawing it away from the overwhelming feeling of pain. Before he could find what that was, his eyes were blinded by a sudden surge of light that filled the place he was in and triumphed over the darkness. He found that he was completely limp, for he couldn't even twitch a muscle.*

And in this boundless space filled with light, another form appeared above him, whose face did not belong to any of the people he had met before. He idly turned his head to take a better look at it, even though the light did its best to hinder his efforts. The equally luminous as the light frame of the strange figure was there and they did not make a move to budge or even blink.

Who was that, Kili struggled to think, for he had absolutely no memory of that face. And he was fairly known for his good memory. No, he decided in the end, he had definitely not seen that person ever before.

As his mind fell in a whirlpool of dizzying thoughts, which he was trying really hard to sort out, he took in the detail of the unknown person's form; long, black hair that cascaded over her shoulders, a small curvy nose above full lips and... a pair of pointy ears that poked out of the hair.

This was an elf, Kili thought decidedly. Who in Mahal's name was she, though? What was she doing in his state of death? Even if this truly was the Halls of Mandos, it was known that the dwarves were separated from the rest of the souls there. So how could that elf be there with him? And if this was some kind of a dream, how could he see her in it, if he'd never encountered her in real life?

*Questions, questions and even more questions. Damn all the questions. Why even death had to be perplexing and wearing? Why couldn't he just close his bloody eyes and see nothing?*

They weren't so eager to cooperate with the mental command and close. The next thing that hit him was the pair of striking grey eyes on his opposite, upon the unknown elf's face. He tried to open his mouth and ask who she was and all the blasted questions that tortured his poor mind all this time, yet his voice made no sound. She made no move to speak to him either. She merely stood there, facing him, motionless, somber, with those sparkling, soulful grey eyes staring directly into his own,
as though she could read his mind. They were like bubbling clouds that were ready to unleash a storm upon the world.

He didn't know why, but the sight pained him. He couldn't help but continue staring at her in the hope that she'd say something, anything, to ease his torturing notions.

But she didn't.

On the bright side, even if those notions did not ease off, the pain did. It gradually subsided, so that he felt almost numb after a while.

He thought hours had passed while staring at her and an absurdly odd idea was planted in the depths of his mind that he somehow knew the intensity of that gaze before, even if he didn't recognise the eyes that held it. He tried to give a name to it, to conjure a memory, a name, anything, but came up blank.

Suddenly the unknown elf moved, holding out a slender hand toward him, as if beckoning him to heed her.

He was not as startled as he would've been under other circumstances. Without rhyme or reason, he sensed he could trust her.

"Remember your promise," she whispered.

Kili heard the words as if she had spoken them inside his head. He promptly stretched out a hand to catch hers. She made no move to withdraw. The moment he was about to touch her, however, she disappeared; popped into thin air as though she was a bubble, not a solid form, a mere product of his imagination and nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Kili. The song I could totally associate with his predicament is 'Comfortably numb' by Pink Floyd (having it play at full blast while writing that last part certainly helped). Also, before someone takes a dig at me, let me tell you that the healing involved no magic at all on Arya's part. Just plain old athelas and the knowledge of how to use it.

As for the orcish curse: Oot-golgi kurv = half-breed whore. I highly doubt it's correct, but after hours of research it was the best I could find.

Can't wait to hear your thoughts!
Dead men tell no tales

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the kudos, people!
Sasaya, thank you for the comment! No worries, I won't abandon this, there's just a lot going on this past year and I've fallen really behind in my updating schedule. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Fili watched as Arya kept pressing the soaked herb over the wound, eyes closed and brow furrowed in concentration, her hand clutched by his brother's in a death grip that may or may not hurt her, until Kili ceased tossing and turning and got a bit calmer.

Arya's eyes suddenly opened and she noted the several concerned faces, pretty much certain that she, too, shared the look. Whatever she could do, it was done. And despite the fact that Kili had stopped writhing, he had yet to open his eyes. The grip he had on her also relaxed and as soon as his hand slumped on the table, her own reached to check his pulse and heartbeat.

"Is that it?" Fili asked worriedly after a few torturing moments of silence, fear rekindled in his eyes and heart. Kili's other arm was still tangled with his own to keep him still, even if it wasn't necessary anymore. "Is he going to be alright now?"

His heart was still beating, Arya could feel the pulse, although it was not as strong as she would have liked. "I hope so," she whispered.

Anger flashed in the blond's eyes. "What do you mean you hope so?"

She leaned over his face to wipe the blood pouring out of his mouth. It wasn't so much as before, but it was blood nonetheless. Her head remained downcast when Fili spoke and she only lifted her gaze towards him, making her expression look much more menacing than it should be normally. "I mean I hope so."

"Your mother was an elf, for goodness' sake!" he snapped. "Surely, you know how to--"

"Do I look like a bloody elf to you?" Arya shot back defensively. "I am not Elrond, Fili, I have no magical powers. I did all that was in my power to do, so pray it will be enough to save him!"

All of a sudden more blood came out of Kili's mouth, though he remained unconscious and his eyes shut. At the sight of his chest's heaving, though, sign that he was at least able to breathe deeper than before, Fili seemed to be appeased, yet the fear that Kili wouldn't wake was instilled in him and bound to his very bones.

Oin tapped the Ranger's back softly as he leaned to examine the prince himself, certifying that he was alive. "What did you do?"

With a watered cloth in hand Arya started to clean his face from the blood and pressed her palm over his cheek for a few moments. Her thumb softly brushed the skin under his eye and it reflexively reminded her of that fateful night in Mirkwood that something really dangerous had almost happened; until Oin's voice jerked her out of her thoughts and the memory dissolved into reality. She
tore her gaze from Kili's unconscious form.

"I did not do," she said quietly, realising that her affectionate gesture had unfortunately been witnessed by too great an audience. "The herb did."

Her hand retreated from Kili's face, as did she. She took some salve from the pot and spread it over the existing amount of the wound, until a light whisper, barely audible to the ear, drew her attention and made her head jerk up. The little girl had come to stand a few inches away from the dwarf that lay on the table and eyed the sight with slight trepidation.

Arya almost cursed herself for having forgotten the children. It was of no matter that she couldn't cast off worry and tension, the effort to make her face look softer had to be made. Oin readily took over her post when she withdrew from Kili's side.

Fili hadn't moved even an inch away and watched as Arya circled the table and came to stand in front of the little girl beside him.

Tilda barely registered the form of the tall woman. Her eyes were pinned on Kili's unconscious form. "Why doesn't he wake up?" she whispered.

"He better will," Fili warned, "or I'll kick him in the arse."

No one was really in the mood to laugh and if someone did, it was lost to everyone's ears.

"Are you alright?" Arya asked the little girl as she meticulously examined her small form.

Tilda absentmindedly shook her head, not realising that she was cradling her favourite doll rather tightly. Her gaze moved from the dwarf to the woman who was now knelt in front of her, and whose dark eyes seemed to pierce her own. "I am," she said quietly and then pointed to her left. "Sigrid is the one who's hurt."

Four heads belonging to Bain, Arya, Oin and Fili turned towards the girl to check the validity of her sister's words. And indeed, there was a freshly formed bruise on her left cheekbone along with a small cut, probably the result of being thrown onto a bunch of chairs and the floor.

Arya stood up and strode over to her, observing the boy's futile attempts to examine his sister's cheek when he took notice of the cut.

"Let me see—"

"Bain, I can hardly feel it!"

"I take it that you must be Sigrid," a feminine voice noted politely. "May I take a look?" she then asked and the boy reluctantly moved out of the way, while a scowl spread on the girl's face.

Arya refrained from touching the cut or the girl's face in general, reckoning that she was probably used to being the one who fussed over her siblings, not the other way around.

"You weren't cut by a blade, were you?"

Sigrid merely shook her head in denial and watched as the woman strolled back to the table, took another cloth from the pile, soaked the edge in the salve and came to her again.

"Put this over it," she instructed.

Huffing out an annoyed breath, Sigrid resolved to do as requested. She was really not used to being
mollycoddled, especially by strangers, although this was hardly the case. The woman was just offering a helping hand—really quite far from mollycoddling her— yet after their mother's death, she had taken a proneness to being the one to worry about others. It honestly felt strange being the one fussed over.

Her face twitched when the cloth came in contact with the cut, and she dearly hoped neither of her siblings saw that. If the woman had seen it, she had at least the good grace not to mention it and Sigrid felt grateful for that.

"The bruise will take a few days to fade—"

The sentence was cut in half when hurried footsteps were heard outside and a man rushed into the house, wielding his bow. Quite startled from the noise, Fili pulled Tilda towards him, while Arya shoved Sigrid and Bain behind her, grabbing the knife in her hand again.

"Da!" the youngest shrilled and Fili could do nothing but let her run to her father.

It took a few moments for the Ranger to realise that the man was no threat and she lowered the knife, watching as the other two leapt to the place their father stood with wide eyes. The latter almost tossed the bow and arrow aside as his children darted to him. It was strangely endearing how all three of them seemed to fit in a single embrace, thought Arya.

Bard squeezed them until he made sure that each and every one of them was indeed real and alive, flaming anger burning in his eyes as he glanced at the other people in the house. There was also a glimpse of confusion at the sight of the woman. "What happened?" he asked frantically. "Are you alright? Are you hurt? How—?"

It was the first time after awhile that Fili decided to leave his brother's side, coming to stand before the man in an almost reverent manner; certainly rueful, though. "I apologise for all this," he motioned towards the wreckage. "I really do. We will—" He was deprived of the opportunity to finish and instead found himself being pushed backwards until he felt the edge of the table against his middle.

"I let you into my house, I offer you help—" Suddenly the dwarf found his feet barely touching the floor as a furious Bard hoisted him up by the collar with both hands. "I go away for an hour and it's a bloodbath in here!"

He had seen them trample over the docks and the roofs on their way to the bridge, and thanked whatever luck followed him for carrying his bow and arrows with him. Half of the panicky neighbours were also out of their houses instead of sheltering themselves inside, and he had yelled for them to hide. He'd managed to kill two or three orcs, but two dozens of them were still alive and running. Where was the bloody Town Guard when they were needed?

"Did you forget to give me some information, master dwarf?" he demanded.

"Fath—" the boy went to speak.

"Bain, stay out of this," said Bard and the boy let a resigned sigh. "My children were here!" he burst, shaking the dwarf up and down. "If they—"

"Your children are unharmed as you can see for yourself," a feminine voice interrupted his angry rant and gently attempted to pry him away from the dwarf.

"Who the bloody hell are you?" snapped the man, his rage no less appeased after her reassurance.

"I'm a Ranger," Arya replied calmly and the young ones' jaws dropped slightly in surprise, as did
their father's. "And I think I speak for all of us when I say that we'd rather give our lives than allow any harm to find three children."

The Bowman was still fuming from his ears, though the woman's words and the blond dwarf's sincere nod were starting to take effect. "A Ranger?" he looked at her askance. "In these parts of the world? How come?"

"Now, that is a long story," said the aforementioned person with a weary wave of her hand. And some stories were best left for later or—in this case—for much, much later.

"Da, they're telling the truth," Bain's hesitant voice came from behind. "They saved us."

"I apologise for all the troubles our presence has brought to you and your family," Fili dared to continue. "We shall depart immediately if that is your wish." He swallowed tightly, dreading the man's answer. They were in dire need of accommodation until Kili's leg was mended, but they had no money to pay.

Bard straightened his shoulders and fixed him with a solemn glare. "I never requested that you leave the house, master dwarf. I gave my word that I would help you. But it'd be wise on your part to give me a warning or two about the orcs on your tail," he said starkly. "I am not overly prone to risking my family's lives."

Fili lowered his head in shame. He had been so preoccupied with Kili's condition, the thought of the attack went flying out of his mind. Though he could take comfort at the fact that Arya felt equally guilty. If she had come earlier, they would have had time to warn them and greater chance to save Kili.

"You have my sincerest apologies and my gratitude," Fili said in earnest, not actually knowing what else to say. "And you have my word that we shall pay you for all the damage we caused to your house."

Bard gave a simple nod, though his expression remained severe and grim. "I found nothing that'd be of use to—"

"This lady did something to save Kili," a voice rushed to inform him, sounding still sad and concerned, "but he's not awakened yet. And she took care of Sigrid's injury as we—"

"Tilda, it's just a scratch," Sigrid insisted with a tired sigh.

Fili couldn't help not to recall the last time he'd heard that. It was in the barge during the ride to Lake-town and it had been Kili. And Kili was currently in a state that no one knew whether or not he'd survive. Thus the blond couldn't stop himself from worrying about Sigrid's injury. He briefly locked eyes with Arya, but her discreet nod reassured him that the girl was just fine.

"It's not nearly as bad as when Bain took a tumble at the dock last year—" Sigrid went on with her speech of defense, but was cut off by her father, who approached to examine the cut on her cheek.

When he did not found an injury of great concern, he gave her a sad smile.

The admittedly sweet family moment was brutally interrupted by a grinding sound and a low curse, and they swiveled around to see the woman push the bed beside the stairs back to its place and lightly tapping the pillow to prepare it to welcome a head.

Somewhere around that moment it occurred to Arya that the occupants of the house owned the bed as well. She glanced over her shoulder, noticing the four heads staring in her direction. "Do you
mind if we move him to the bed?” she asked gingerly. ”We must keep him warm.”

A table hardly posed as a comfortable place to lay until he woke up, and it might take a while until that happened. Her heartbeat increased suddenly. She barely registered the man’s affirmative nod and only saw him when he approached to help them lift Kili off the table.

Oin, Fili and Bard carried him carefully to the bed under Arya’s severe order to be careful not to budge his leg, and she stepped aside to let them deposit him down. As soon as he was on the bed, she spread another handful of the green paste over the wound again and this time secured it with a bandage. Kili was still motionless, shoved between thick blankets, yet his breathing had improved and no more blood was pooling inside his mouth.

The children had decided to be of some help and began to dig out of the wreckage any of the furniture that had survived, trying to stay as far from the orcs’ corpses as possible.

It did not go unnoticed.

Arya dissolved some of the paste in another smaller pot filled with water, then went to grab a clean cloth from a small pile that had miraculously remained intact after the commotion in the house and dipped it inside. ”Master Oin,” she handed him the cloth and then gestured toward Kili’s forehead, ”use it as a compress.”

The dwarf healer had by now got used to her presence, almost forgetting that they thought her dead so far. He simply nodded and took his place in Kili’s side.

”Fili, care to lend a hand?”

The blond’s face snapped towards her with a look of utter surprise and disbelief. It was only now that he allowed the fact that she was standing there to soak in. He wasn’t sure whether to accept or decline. He needed time to let the whirlpool of thoughts in his mind settle down.

”Please,” Arya insisted.

Her tone eventually broke him. With swift movements they dragged the carcasses out of the house and had been gathering them in a pile when her voice sounded, ”I did whatever I could, believe me. And I shall do it again if needed, as many times as necessary, until he wakes up.”

The words almost came out slurred and whispering, her eyes shone grim and watery, and the clouds in the sky seemed to reflect her mood. She was ready to burst as was the storm that brewed near.

”I wish I had come earlier–”

Not wasting much time and before he found himself in an extremely uncomfortable place, Fili took her hand in his and gave a light squeeze. ”I am just glad you’re here and alive,” he said quietly. ”We thought you died back in the river–”

”A creaking door hangs longest, they say.” Her spirits seemed to lift a bit when he smiled, brief though as it was. Then she remembered– ”Bofur was with me,” she said frantically. ”I left him somewhere in the market, he wanted to catch a breath, although I think he will rather catch a cold with soaked clothes in this weather–”

”Soaked clothes?”

Arya let a weary sigh, ”As I said, ’tis a long story. We must fetch Bofur here.” Then she glanced over the corpses about their feet and gave a little too forceful kick. ”What are we going to do with
these?"

Fili shrugged his shoulders. "Throw them into the water?"

Her face scrunched up in absolute disgust. "It will get polluted!"

"Arya, we first entered this house through a toilet that leads directly into the lake," Fili said blankly. "I seriously doubt the orcs will be the ones to pollute the water."

And as if he knew that he'd been part of their conversation, Bofur suddenly rounded the corner of the house next to Bard's and saw two people throwing corpses into the water. Orc corpses specifically. Now, that seemed promising.

The hurried stampede that came from the stairs made the prince and the Ranger adopt defensive stances, until they spotted a panting Bofur struggling to ascend the stairs without tripping in his steps. Carrying his hat in hand, he almost collapsed upon reaching the top.

"Bofur!"

The Ranger stood there like a statue, failing to see how the dwarf had found the house without any help. "How did you–?"

"The pack," he breathed out, clutching his wildly beating heart, "they gathered at the gate and crossed the bridge to re–" he took a sharp breath then, "to go back to the shore... and the two elves are hunting them, and– Mahal, I can't breathe–"

Fili's blood ran cold. They obviously hadn't found what they sought here. "They weren't after us," he concluded solemnly. "They're heading to the Mountain."

"Wha– The others left you behind?" Arya asked in surprise, realising that indeed the rest of the company had yet to appear. "How–?"

The prince merely shook his head. They had to find a way to notify Thorin and the rest before the orc pack reached the Mountain. On the bright side, it would take them quite some time to go round the lake. But his first and foremost priority was Kili, and he needed to focus on him.

When the last corpse was in the water and Bofur had finally managed to breathe normally, they went back into the house. Bofur saw Kili on the bed, either asleep or unconscious, a tall man standing on a table trying to seal a hole in the roof, and three children cleaning up the mess on the floor.

Oin almost lost it when Bofur walked in, panting and dripping water. "Slap me thrice and hand me to me mama!" the dwarf healer exclaimed in disbelief. "You're alive?"

"Apparently, it's the night of the living dead," the Ranger whimsically commented under her breath.

With myriads of thoughts and troubles nagging his mind, Fili followed her as she occupied a spot next to the bed, while Oin abandoned his post to embrace and welcome his so far thought dead comrade back.

They had sat there on the bedside afterwards, Fili placing a compress over Kili's forehead and Arya pressing another one over the wound. She had carefully taken his hand in hers, brushing each knuckle with her thumb. The blond wondered if that would be surprising enough for his brother to gain consciousness. Much to his disappointment, it wasn't; Kili still was as motionless and lively as a statue; only breathed in and out.
"Remember your promise."

The phrase positively drove Kili to the verge of insanity. How—? What—?

Only to three people he had confided that secret of his; his brother, Tauriel, who had happened to see the rune stone in the cells, and lastly, the person that made his heart and soul feel as though they’d been given wings —aside the fact that he wanted to throttle her every so often— and then she died and shattered those wings in thousand pieces.

He was so desperate for answers. What was this? How was it possible for that elf woman to appear and disappear at will out of nowhere? And, mainly, how in Durin’s name could she be aware of the promise to his mother? This elf had intrigued him to no end and she wouldn’t let his mind in peace unless she revealed something; unless he was given answers. He had not seen her face before, aye, but at the same time it felt as though he had. There was something familiar there, in her face, it radiated warmth that made him feel... safe, perhaps?

But the elf just stood there silent and unmoving, without giving an explanation.

His hand reached out to hers, but she burst into thin air like a bubble of soap. "No! Come back!" he called out desperately. "How—? How did you know?" he shouted again. "Please, come back!"

Yet she was gone and there was nothing to be done, no matter how much he thrashed about. The almost blinding light in the room suddenly disappeared and the world fell in a vortex again. His eyes reflexively closed, unable to bear the breakneck swirling of his surroundings.

A long time later, or maybe no time at all, he decided not to cower anymore and face what it was that tortured him so. He opened his eyes, ready to be either blinded by light again or get dizzy by the swirling, but none of the two happened.

On the contrary, what he saw was a light blue sky, only speckled with a few white clouds here and there. It must have been early spring or so, for everything around was blooming and the tree leaves were a lively shade of green. Some of their colourful blossoms were detached from the branches and hovered in the air before idly plopping on the ground. Amongst the high boughs of the trees, birds of all species chirped merrily and a bright glistening painted part of the sky, illuminating the tops of the trees in an iridescent glow.

It was a rather welcoming surprise to open his eyes and face this scenery instead of the world falling in a vortex. He slowly moved his gaze about, realising that he was sprawled upon soft grass in the shadow beneath a great oak tree, while the musical sound of running water rang in his ears.

Therefore he had a sense of eyesight, hearing and touch, and the grass against which he lay must have existed too. The early morning dew sparkled in the grass and drifted through the air in hypnotising swirls, the tiny droplets being swept off by a light flowery breeze that brushed his face.

All in all, it was one fine springtime morning, Kili had to admit.

So far he thought to be alone in that idyll, but something seemed to be amiss. Naturally. How could anything go right for him, even in death? There was a light pull he felt somewhere in his face, his jaw specifically. His eyes strained to look downwards and he almost froze at the sight.

Bloody hell, was that— Was that beard?

Well, not beard as in Gloin, or Balin, or even Dwalin's relatively short beard, but the length of his stubble had certainly shot up. Although this did not startle him remotely as much as the fact that the pull he felt at his newly grown stubble was caused by a small hand. And said hand’s extension led to
a small arm, whose extension in turn led to a small body and a head, the latter of which was identical to his own. Kili's manly pride was barely enough to prevent him from squealing like a girl.

That was him. That must be him, he thought in confusion, as he watched this child version of himself leap up onto a rock, brandishing a broken branch as a sword. But that couldn't be right. If it was right, that was Kili himself, and he had never worn his hair so short.

What kind of new devilry was this?

As time passed, however, the more he got the feeling that there was no imminent danger in this. This small version of himself was circling around and practically clambering over him, blissfully unaware of the onslaught of thoughts in the bigger Kili's head. The little one was laughing delightedly and vying for the other's attention to watch by tugging at his beard.

It felt disturbing, to say the least, although he wouldn't go as far as calling it creepy.

After some time, and when the little one paused to take a breath and easily snuggled up to his chest, Kili had no time to care that little boots had left dusty footprints all over his fine, clean apparel. He was too busy holding his breath, his eyes wide and hands raised beside his head in a silent gesture of genuine surrender.

It still didn't feel creepy. It had directly crossed over to terrifying.

Before he had the chance to rid himself of his fear, he saw the small version of himself raise his head from where it was resting on his chest and open his smiling mouth to speak. Kili was hoping for any clue that would at least give an ounce of sense to what exactly was happening and what the meaning of all this was, but the scenery rapidly shifted back into the infinite, empty room.

He was alone and blinded by the damn light again. And what had just transpired was gone from him like the tail end of a dream upon waking.

"About time," a voice commented pointedly.

Bard had managed to employ a makeshift cover for the hole in the rooftop, especially now that the storm had broken and the rain was raging outside. Thankfully none of the doors had been demolished during the assault. For the past hour or so, he was struggling to cope with the facts; that four dwarves were now staying at his house, a female Ranger was there too and oddly seemed to have been travelling with them, despite being a female of Men. And he thought he'd seen everything.

He wondered what she was doing with them, what her purpose was, yet his mind was too clouded and tired to even attempt to come up with a sensible explanation. Therefore he resolved to follow Arya —that was her name, from what he'd heard— and Fili's advice, and settle his children to sleep and take a break from the living nightmare they'd been through today. So they ended up occupying the large bed in the bower that easily fit three people and left the bed in the kitchen and several blankets in the storage room downstairs at their guests' disposal.

Currently, he was sitting on a chair in the corner of the room and observed the three sleeping faces lined up upon the bed, covered up to their noses with the large quilt and slowly breathing in and out. No rest he'd find on this night, not after what had happened. His eyes roamed about the room and fell upon the bow and the quiver of arrows that vigilantly awaited by his side, ready to be of use, despite the Ranger's consoling attempts to reassure him that no one would dare harm any of them as long as she was in the next room.

Her exact words were that she would rain her wrath upon the intruder so hard, it'd make Smaug
envious. Bard was of a more solemn disposition to pay heed to such a ludicrous statement but, when Tilda, Sigrid and Bain recounted in the peace and privacy of the room the face-off between them and the orcs, he decided to take the woman's words a bit more seriously, even if part of him wondered whether or not she was of sound mind.

A troubled sleep claimed him in the wee small hours of the day, with the sound of the rain rhythmically tapping the wooden boards of the house and lulling everyone to sleep. Yet every time even the faintest stir came from the bed, he'd jump up in alert.

In the part of the house where the guests dwelled, in the small storage room next to the toilet specifically, echoed loud snores that caused a disturbance in the peace of the rainy night and at some points covered even the rumbling sound of the lightning bolts. Oin and Bofur were the sources of these rather unsettling noises, for they were older than the rest, had serious lack of a moment of peace and were faced with too many threats for just one day. And they were dwarves. That alone perhaps was enough to justify the fact that the house's walls nearly creaked from their snoring.

In the room above, dutifully seated beside the bed, were the blond prince and the Ranger, patiently waiting for the brunet to come to. A new round of Arya pressing a few of the soaked leaves of the herb over the wound came and passed, yet there was no writhing or twitching this time.

Kili's breathing was steady, his chest slowly rising and falling, and Fili hoped and wished that this was a favourable sign. He observed the way in which Arya tended to his brother so diligently, two troubling fires of disquiet and affection sizzling behind her eyes and shining under the dim light of the candles. She didn't seem in the mood for a chat, explain how she and Bofur had survived, discuss why the rest had left them in Lake-town, or even concoct a plan about their future actions. Her movements were mechanical as she changed the compresses every few minutes and took great caution to keep Kili warm with a blanket or two. Yet they were far from mechanical when her hand slowly stroked his hair.

For the short time it lasted and despite his brother's unconsciousness, Fili could not but feel as though he was invading a rather personal moment that belonged to her and Kili alone. He'd half a mind to withdraw and give them some privacy, but was surprised to see Arya walk away and don her cloak.

"I'll take a look around," she said almost inaudibly, pulling the hood up and fastening her daggers into their sheaths. "Just in case."

She did not expect a reply or protest, Fili realised. He merely nodded before she stepped out of the house and shut the door behind her without noise.

Kili nearly jumped out of his skin. With a sharp twist of his head that actually made him wonder how he did not get whiplash, he faced the person who spoke and almost forgot how to breathe. "Wh–?" he stammered with eyes approximately threatening to take over half his face. "Adâd?"

The older dwarf stood there, piercing blue eyes looking directly into his own, and suddenly flashed a wide smile that made his blond beard wiggle from the movement of the muscles. This was how Fili would look like in a few decades, Kili reckoned. The figure took a step closer and extended a hand towards him. Kili initially responded with some hesitation, not really certain about what the hell was going on, but eventually stretched out a hand. At least, this time everything felt solid—nothing like the unknown elf who seemed to be nothing more than air, or even the smaller version of himself who might have felt more real, yet in the end dissolved into nothing as well.

"Adâd," he repeated in disbelief. "Is it really you?"
"My boy," the other exclaimed, rather unaffected by the brunet's skepticism. "My brave, reckless boy."

Without any warning he pulled him closer for a hug, and Kili felt faint from the onslaught of feelings. It had been too long since the last time his father had embraced him. Funny thing is, this one felt equally real and warm and safe as those decades ago. And he couldn't help himself. "But you are dead!"

His father blurted out a chuckle and gave him a small pat on the back. "How smart of you to notice."

"But since you are dead..." Kili asked in genuine confusion, "does that mean I am dead too?"

"Nah," his father replied, then arched a scolding eyebrow. "You came pretty close, though."

"So... I will live?"

"Aye," his father said simply. "Hard to imagine how your mother would deal with one of you dying. Speaking of whom, and pass this to Fili as well, please try not to get her dead from worrying with these antics of yours."

"Father, it's not like I opted for the arrow to hit me. Someone had to pull the lever down, or else-"

"I meant not the arrow, Kili, and you know it."

At this, the brunet lowered his head.

"No room for embarrassment here, son," his father smiled. "Tis just you and me."

"Thorin all but declared me an invalid," he said in defense. "I disappointed him—again. Fili didn't follow to stay behind with me, whereas he should have gone... He is the crown prince after all, he's- He will be my king one day."

"He will always be your brother first. You'd do the same if the tables were turned," his father pointed out. "And Thorin is not disappointed in either of you. He might have done the mistake of seeing you as his heirs first and then his nephews, but do not blame him for it—he's a lot in his mind and to worry for. Perhaps he didn't want to have to worry more about your injury getting worse, what with both you and Fili's lives already at risk."

Uncomfortable silence enveloped them and Kili nervously shifted his weight from one foot to the other, until his eyes started to scan the seemingly infinite space of the room, as though he was searching for something.

It did not pass unnoticed. "I get that you are confused about something?"

Kili had no idea how to address the matter. Not so much because it was fairly difficult to explain it with actual words in order for someone not to think him completely bonkers, but more because this new scenery, despite seeming and feeling solid, could well disappear just as easily as the other two.

"I saw someone before," he decided to say after thorough thinking. "An elf and- And me... but smaller- What was that? Who we-?"

"Funny what tricks our eyes play on us sometimes," his father mused, idly stroking his golden moustache and prompting the small braids to wiggle a bit, "is it not?"
Kili's shoulders hang and he scowled. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"You always were a curious dwarf, Kili, but some things are better left to the imagination," he patted his shoulder, "literally."

"I miss you," the prince said after a few moments of silence. "And Fili and mum, they miss you as well."

A light smile illuminated his face as he spoke, "I miss you too, lad."

"I haven't forgotten the time we had together before you d-" Kili felt the need to reassure him, swallowing tightly, "before you died. I might be young, but I still remember."

A hand ruffled the brunet's ever unkempt hair. "You may find it hard to forget the dead, my boy. Either it being good or bad, you will carry their memory with you," he said with a deep voice that made Kili nostalgic. "It's the price of living."

There was an abrupt disturbance in their surroundings. Even if there was nothing but light around, Kili could see it; could sense it. He could feel the ground shuddering under his feet. He looked around gingerly and his gaze turned to his father's form as realisation dawned on him. "Is it time for me to go back?"

"I'm afraid it is," his father nodded. "Fili's waiting for you. And there's a braid you ought to give, after all," he added then, a sparkle beaming in his blue eyes as the smile on his face became wider.

Although the striking resemblance Fili had with their father distracted him for a second, Kili's face scrunched up in utter confusion the moment he let the words soak in. Braid? What braid? "What d-?" he went to ask, but a raised hand made his voice drown in his throat.

"Time is running, Kili."

They looked for a long moment into each other's faces.

"Tell me only this," the young one pleaded. "Is all this real? Is it a state between life and death, or has it been happening inside my head?"

His father laughed delightedly, and his voice sounded loud and strong in Kili's ears even though the bright light was descending again, obscuring his figure. "Of course it is happening inside your head, my boy, but why in Mahal's name should that mean that it is not real?"

Kili felt himself lying on some surface again—although fairly more comfortable and softer than where he lay on so far. The smell of blood prickled his nostrils, although it had now mingled with various other scents. He could also feel something wet pressed upon his forehead and a light breeze cooling the places were his face was drenched with the water. But he did not feel cold elsewhere, for he was pretty sure that he was covered with something.

He could still feel pain, clearly. Every inch of him ached, and the place where the arrow had hit him felt like the bruise of a war hammer. He did not stir —could not actually— but knew that the sense of a hand around his own was real. He had expected to hear cheers of triumph and jubilation at his nigh resurrection, but instead silence, tranquility and a solicitous murmur in Khuzdul every now and then filled the air.

His eyes, red and weary, struggled to open in tiny slits. In contrast to the place he was thus far, there was barely any light here. He dared to venture an eye completely open. There was a golden head
resting beside his hand and its owner was obviously awake, though facing away from him and murmuring to himself.

"Please... tell me th--" he croaked, his throat too dry and tongue tasting of blood, "that you at least found the salted pork." The hand around his own seemed to freeze for a very long moment before there was a sound akin to one trying to stifle a chuckle.

"Even at death's doorstep you think about food," Fili commented wryly, unable to prevent a broad grin from reaching his face as he looked at him. "How princely."

Kili was momentarily startled by the resemblance. Bloody hell, his brother really did look like their father; disturbingly much. A wistful look flitted across his face and he smiled after him, feeling Fili's hand squeeze his own tighter. "Aye... but death's plan to acquire my soul did not proceed smoothly," he tried to swallow, unable to drive away the taste of blood, "therefore I am happily resurrected and have returned to you."

Fili shook his head, feigning frustration. "Your flair for the dramatic has worsened."

There were a few more minutes of small talk between the two brothers, aside from their heartwarming embrace, with Kili enquiring about the welfare of Bard and his family and what else had happened after he passed out. Fili was in the middle of one of the numerous answers he had to give, when the doorknob suddenly turned and a hooded figure stepped into the house.

Kili almost yelped and went to move in defense, but an acute twinge reminded him of his injury. He was surprised that Fili was too busy trying to keep him still to get startled by the intruder. The figure dropped the hood and hurried to his side, and Kili almost forgot that he could breathe again.

"Don't move!" she said lowly. "Kili, please, stop moving!"

But the brunet was not to be fooled. He was trying to crawl as far away as possible, taking gradual glimpses of her and his brother. After a few torturing moments of hesitation, he gave up his efforts and let a sad sigh. "I'm still unconscious, aren't I?" he pondered loudly. "I must be, you cannot be here-- It cannot be her."

"Kili, you are fully conscious and she's here," Fili reassured him. "She is not dead. Neither is Bofur. In fact, he's sleeping next to Oin downstairs and what you hear is their snoring."

"But she died," Kili protested with something that was a cross between a chuckle and a scream. "She died, Fili. I saw her drowning in the river-- I-- She's dead!"

The blond had little care as he pushed Arya aside to make him stop moving. "Kili, look at me," he coaxed. "Trust me, I could not believe it at first, but she's here. She is real."

Kili was still far from believing what was thrown to him. Perhaps this was just a trick to stay asleep as he believed he was and never wake up again. An idea began to form in his mind regarding the validity of this reality where Arya was still alive. He fixed his eyes on her figure. She was still dressed in the elvish clothes he'd last seen her in, her hair was a tangled mess, spots of dried blood marked most of her skin across her face and her nose was terribly bruised and swollen. His heartbeat increased upon seeing her face again, damaged though as it was.

If this was one more of these mind games, he would have none of it. "How can you be alive?" he breathed out in sheer disbelief.

Arya sighed and scooted to sit beside him, a worn look on her face.
A hand was stretched out in the direction of her face, and she made no move to withdraw. The moment he was about to touch her cheek, his plan was set in motion. Instead of her cheek, his hand rapidly dropped and touched something several inches below. It might be highly inappropriate on his part but if this was a dream, if her form was a product of his imagination, then she would not be opposed to this.

What brought him into his senses and finally made him believe that this was indeed real, were his brother’s reflexive scandalised chuckle and the pain in his forearm after Arya’s hand collided with it.

"Do this again and you'll need to find yourself someone who knows how to remove a boot from the colon," she growled under her breath, having a tight grip on the sinful hand.

Kili tossed his head back and started to laugh.

"Is he in shock?"

"I'm fine," Kili blurted out in a remarkably merry manner for someone who had been on the verge of dying just hours ago, "and just received proof that I am conscious." Never one to shy away from the truth, he went on, "Sorry, love, but it wouldn't be your real self had you not reacted accordingly."

Remember Fili’s discomfort regarding private moments? Right now, he felt that, times a million. With a short glance over Arya, he saw that she was flushed beyond control. The sight, though uncomfortable, made the blond smile nonetheless. Kili had always been a smooth talker. Even in the minutes after which he gained his senses, he still attempted to turn on his charms, although with this woman there had been no guarantee of success. But it seemed to work just fine and Fili did not begrudge him for it. He had seen Arya after thinking her dead and secretly mourning her for quite some time, so it was natural to be ever so slightly buoyant.

Her hand slowly relaxed the defensive grip she had on his, yet she made no move to walk away from the bed or talk to him. She didn't know what to do; everything was a tumbling mess both in her mind and heart. It had been slightly easier to cope with all these feelings when he was still unconscious.

Fili noticed her look—anger mixed with embarrassment, relief, and confusion, all molded into one.

A broad grin lit Kili's face as he eagerly swallowed every precious moment in their company. For the first time in quite a while, he actually felt happy; felt like the world was a better place. Which was anything but, but cut the man some slack. He'd practically been back from the dead, he was allowed a few minutes of peace and elation—they all were.

Two hands were in his shoulders and were trying to push him back to the bed, but he would have none of it. Any warnings seemed to come out of his ears as soon as they entered them. He had pulled her in an absurdly tight embrace, as though his life was depending on it, and had no intention of letting go anytime soon.

"Erm..." Fili nervously rubbed the back of his neck, trying to look anywhere but at them, "would you like me to leave the room, or...?"

"Don't you dare move!" Arya glowered at him, her voice muffled in Kili's shoulder. "And you heed my words," she gave a smack on Kili's arm. "The wound hasn't closed yet! You are still bleeding—"

"That's quite alright," the brunet brushed off and pressed a kiss somewhere in her hair as he shoved his face in it. "It's not like I am dying."

The jest was clearly not appreciated.
"Kili," his brother's benign voice warned, "do us a favour and lie still, please."

With quite the amount of hesitation and after a few long seconds, he did as they bade him and slumped back into the pillow. He flashed one of his charming smiles that could light up the entire town, although Arya's arched eyebrow and murderous glare succeeded in crumbling his too carefree look. "Fine," he exclaimed, "I'm just beyond happy to see you--"

"You can also be happy to see me by lying still to let your leg heal properly, so my work and the fact that I used almost half of my supplies in athelas won't be for naught."

Yet he was not in a state to process even half of what she said. If it weren't for the wound in his leg, he would probably be dancing around naked now. Though he imagined that neither Fili nor Arya would appreciate that, much less Bard and his family, so he conformed to the warnings. "My ears shall remain eternally open to your admonition."

"That was enough noise in the middle of the night," she noted ruefully. "Come the morrow and there will be time for everything. Now, you'd better get some rest," she advised, giving a pointed nod to each of them. "Both of you."

She made to get up, but a stretched arm and a voice stopped her midway. "Don't go. Stay here."

She slowly turned around and met his pleading gaze. Sweet mother of all that was good and pure, not that look. Kili had pulled the most convincing doe eyes he could muster, and it took all of her willpower to deny him. That sly little bugger had found her button and was totally using it against her.

Fili was already splayed on the bench beside the table, arms folded under his head and a blanket over him, witnessing the entire scene and betting against himself on who would get to win. Eight decades of experience had taught him that Kili could yield rocks with that look, if breaking Thorin twice was any proof to go by.

"No, Kili," she managed to utter after minutes of self-contemplation. "You need to be comfortable and also, it is not appropriate."

The dwarf raised a scathing eyebrow. "Do I look like I care about propriety right now?"

Arya whimpered loudly and resigned trying to fight it back. She vigorously rubbed her throbbing temples since the bruised bridge of her nose should better be left alone, and took a hesitant step towards the bed.

All the joy that everyone was alive seemed to fade away, and the realisation of the numerous matters that needed to be resolved clouded their minds. And despite their beaming eyes, solemnity and gloom quickly shadowed their faces.

"You do know that a little talk is in order, right?" Kili whispered as soon as she sat down.

A paralytic fear suddenly overwhelmed her. At least he had the good grace not to address it directly. Still, even hinting at it made her wish he hadn't at all, mainly because it was something inevitable that she was fighting tooth and nail to avoid. She cleared her throat awkwardly, "Yes, certainly."

"About... things."

"Yes, I--" She paused then, but made no move to complete what she was about to say. Her look turned skeptical.
Great," Kili muttered something less than eagerly.

Then her look went from skeptical to verging on fearful. "N– Now?"

"No, not tonight," he appeased quickly, "but soon."

"Mm-hmm."

"Good."

"Yes... good."

The awkwardness was so tangible, it could be cut with a knife. There was something sinister behind her eyes that filled him with worry. He didn't really hold his hopes high for a positive answer, yet he had absolutely no idea for what he should prepare himself.

He pulled her lower from where she sat upright to bring her head on the pillow next to his. She was startled by the sudden pull, though he didn't make any rushed movements and kept a distance between their faces. He limited to use his hands alone; raked them over that lovely face he had missed so much, mindful not to touch her bruised nose—he made a mental note to inquire about it on the morrow.

The space between them inadvertently closed and her lips parted slightly. Bloody hell, she would let him do it, he could feel it. Once again, she'd let him do it if he wanted to. For a weird reason she wouldn't stop him, just like he was certain she wouldn't back then in Mirkwood.

Arya was dreading this conversation unlike anything else. Her mind was about as clear as someone's who had swigged down a whole barrel of wine, and she barely registered what was happening.

This time, however, Kili did not allow the beasts inside him to prevail. He wouldn't do this unless she wanted him to. So he swiftly changed the route of his mouth and pressed a kiss on the top of her head, pulling her closer. He only needed her to be his friend for tonight. Yet the traitorous little voice in his mind wondered if there was a chance his feelings could ever be reciprocated; if she, a Ranger of the Dúnedain, could love him, a Dwarf prince of the line of Durin.

Arya closed her eyes and gladly accepted the comfort his shoulder offered against the myriads of thoughts in her head. And in the spur of a moment, before she could afford control of her mouth, the words flew out of it and there was no turning back.

"Will you braid my hair?"

Chapter End Notes

Adâd = father
Winter is coming

Chapter Notes

Thanks for the kudos and comments, people! Sorry for the unreasonably long delay :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

There was a collective groan of increasing exasperation when no keyhole or even something remotely similar, such as a crack or crevice, shone upon the perfectly smooth rock the secret path led to. Nori had put his best foot forward to find it, using all kinds of tricks or items in his possession, while Dwalin was too preoccupied kicking and punching away his frustration. In the end, when none of this brought results, Thorin ordered them to break it down, which only resulted in breaking their axes, for the door was sealed with magic and couldn't be opened by force.

The last sunrays briefly illuminated the small clearing before the sun completed its duty and finally set for the day. And just like that, everything was seemingly over. Everyone stood dead silent, bodies completely stiff with dreadful anticipation. No light was there anymore to lead the way and dark clouds had covered the sky, heralding a bad storm.

The moment the sun set behind the mountain chain on the once pink and orange coloured horizon and a light darkness enveloped them, Thorin felt all his hopes dying a quick death. Clouds blackened his heart and soul too, and his so far hopeful disposition diminished into something dark and gloomy. He squeezed the map and the key so hard inside his palms, the precious items might as well end up molding into mush.

His whispering voice, full of despair and hopelessness, repeated the words that were written in the map again and again. "This is what it says," he muttered under his breath, unable to convince himself that this wasn't a tasteless dream, but rather harsh reality.

It reminded Balin of old times, back when Thorin was only a young lad, burdened with the weight the crown brought along with it. And not a real crown, for that matter; just the fact that he was Thrain's sole male descendant and inherited the title of the future king, once and if the Mountain was ever reclaimed. Otherwise, he was called a lord. But whoever had heard of a lord working in villages of Men under the cover of a mere smith so that his family and people could have the lives they deserved and were so brutally snatched away from their hands? And right now, that young lad had returned again and his innocent, helpless face made the white-bearded dwarf hurt.

"We've lost the light," he said quietly. "We had but one chance. There's nothing more to be done. Come away, lads," he then urged, tapping Thorin's shoulder comfortably, although little comfort could the dwarf king find right now. "It's over."

The hobbit couldn't believe in his eyes when the dwarves slowly started to retreat to the path to descend the stairs on the side of the enormous statue.

"Where are you going?" he snapped behind their backs, though only one or two turned to face him and shot him unmatched looks of frustration. "Come back!" he yelled. "You can't give up now!"

The only reply these protests ever received was Thorin's hand dropping the key on the ground and then harshly shoving the map against the burglar's chest.
Bilbo refused to believe they had made this journey, survived all these dangers, captures and hardships for naught. And somewhere deep in his mind, though he would always be too embarrassed to admit it, he refused to believe that he had walked all this distance and climbed up those bloody stairs, only to fail at the end of it. So deep he was in denial. Absentmindedly he began murmuring the words of the prophecy that was coded on the map like a mantra, with Lord Elrond's voice in his head, that night the elf had translated it under the moonlight.

Grey stone, thrush, moon... the words became a tumbling mess in his head. It felt like the answer was right there before his eyes and he was too blind to see how absurdly obvious it was. Before three seconds passed there was a whistle in front of his nose that made his shut eyes snap open. A little bird flew past him and landed upon a small boulder, holding something in its mouth and knocking it against the rock. He drew in a sharp breath as his jaw fell open and he swiveled around to see a few moonbeams managing to sneak through the heavy clouds and casting their light upon the grey stone.

The bird then chirped happily and flew away, and a nervous chuckle left Bilbo's mouth when he realised what the last light was supposed to be.

A thick ray of the lunar light moved torturingly slow across the rock and finally came to rest upon a certain spot, revealing an otherwise invisible crack that the eye would definitely miss.

"The keyhole!" Bilbo urgently exclaimed and ran to the edge of the clearing that had view of the valley below. "Come back! It's the light of the moon! The last moon of autumn!" he chirped merrily, almost resembling the little bird — the thrush, apparently — that visited him not a minute ago.

"Where's the key? Where's the bloody- It was right here."

Before he completed the agonising musing regarding the key's fate, his foot tripped over something that produced a metallic sound and hopped away. Bilbo watched in slow motion the source of the sound taking a dangerous tendency to fall over the edge of the clearing, until a bulky boot cut its route short.

Thorin determinedly lifted the key off the ground, feeling his heart ready to burst from all the accumulated tension, despair and subsequent relief of the past minutes. The mix of these feelings seemed to balloon to epic proportions the moment a light click was heard within the wall and the king put all his strength to push the invisible door open.

Indeed, after applying force that made Thorin's arm muscles tense considerably, the stony wall admitted defeat and opened with the characteristic sound of something that was used again after a long period of slumber.

A thick mantle of dust rose in the air when the door opened further widely and caused the hobbit to cough a bit. No one else seemed to pay attention to that petty detail when the moonbeams found their way into the passage that lay behind the door and cast some light into the so far sealed Mountain.

Had Bilbo not known better, he would have thought the dwarves to be statues that guarded an open door at the western spur of the Mountain, only smaller than the gigantic one that had the intricate staircase carved on it. He completely justified their reaction, though, for themselves could hardly believe the scenery unravelled before their very eyes; before some of their teary eyes. The hobbit inwardly wished he could empathise with them, but he figured he only would achieve it the moment he returned to the Shire again, back to his own home, however short the period was that he was gone and hardly compared with the whole decades the dwarves lived away from Erebor.

"Erebor," said Thorin breathlessly, voice almost drowned by myriads of emotions that flooded his mind and heart.
Balin could barely hold his tears when he stepped through the door and finally into the Mountain, and squeezed Thorin's arm.

The king squeezed back and smiled at his friend and advisor. "I know these walls," he murmured, not caring if anyone could hear him or not. "These halls... this stone... You remember this place, Balin," his tone was bordering on that of a question. A touched smile split his face in half when the older dwarf nodded encouragingly.

Thorin felt unable to keep his hands off the walls around him, probably to ensure that this was all real, for this place felt like a distant memory from a dream. He remembered feeling safe and warm in the chambers that were filled with golden light; remembered the mines, the kitchens, the large halls, the whole Mountain bustling with figures of dwarves and dwarrowdams that strolled about with smiles across their faces; remembered their people dwelling happy there. Memories from a time that felt like centuries ago, glowing dim as a fire's embers in a domestic hearth, overwhelmed his mind; places he once used to know and places he now yearned to remember and see again.

One by one, the rest of the dwarves entered through the door, brothers patting each other on their shoulders with smiles of unmatched happiness, totally contrasting with their masks of despair when entering the Mountain seemed to be doomed to fail.

Something about the haunting beauty of the place really got under everyone's skin, whether they had lay eyes upon these walls before or not. Even Gloin, the most rigidly tough dwarf for someone or something to affect him, shed one or two tears. The old, everlastingly grumpy warrior struggled to hide it from everyone's sight, especially the burglar's who was standing right beside him, but a few light sniffs betrayed him. Bilbo, in turn, tried to hold back a smile at the sight and coerced his eyes to focus on the place, allowing him a semblance of privacy.

The red bearded dwarf felt grateful for the hobbit's discretion and immediately cleared his throat, straying his gaze towards the direction Bifur and Nori pointed at. "Herein lies the seventh kingdom of Durin's Folk," he translated the dwarven runes that were carved above the secret door and all the eyes followed his own. "May the Heart of the Mountain unite all Dwarves in defense of this home."

Beneath the runes was also carved the depiction of a majestic throne, with something that seemed to emit light placed directly on top of it.

"The Throne of the King," Balin explained when he took notice of Bilbo's quizzical brow and slightly lost look.

"Ah..." the hobbit acknowledged with a light shake of his head. "And what's that above it?"

The already tense atmosphere tensed even further and the smile that previously occupied Balin's face gave its place to a mask of solemnity. "The Arkenstone," he said seriously.

"Arkenstone," Bilbo repeated with another shake of his head, allowing his mouth to taste the name. The word made no impression on him, for he had absolutely no idea what it meant or what represented. He frowned in confusion. "And what's that?"

Thorin was dwelling in past memories all this time the conversation was taking place. His thought shortly travelled to his nephews and Oin, who had remained in Lake-town, and how they were faring. From the depths of his heart, he wished all three were there; wished Bofur was there; and also wished Frerin and their father were there too. Yet the moment one word —the most crucial word— was uttered, just the sound of it snapped him out of his thoughts and made him shove them in a disturbingly deep place of his mind.
"That, master burglar," he muttered darkly, "is why you are here."

Several hours after the events at the Mountain, very deep into the night, a momentous happening occurred in Lake-town. More specifically in Bard's house, on the bed beside the door that was occupied by two people, one of who decided to ask a question that would change history as it was known and currently produced a mental string of expletives that, if uttered out loud, would make Bard want to seal his children's ears with wax.

All Arya could think of the moment she realised what she'd said was a sole question. Why? Just... just why? Why couldn't she have kept her bloody mouth shut?

Yet the words were out in public. It was a bed of her own making and now she ought to lay on it. Besides, she had promised it to him, even though he hadn't been in a state that allowed him to discern dream from reality. He had even uttered the redhead Captain's name in his delirium, after all, and also tried to reach for her. And Arya couldn't help but have a strange feeling prickle her insides.

This was so wrong; twisted and warped in the worst of ways. Had someone placed a blasted bet against her? If she ever encountered the demented fool who said that love was easy, she'd hang him by the balls. Was that jealousy that she felt? Was she actually jealous? Jealous of someone who had been on the brick of death and uttered another woman's name and reached out a hand to her? Well, that's mature. The voice of reason dictated that she paid no mind to fevered ravings.

Kili, on the other hand, thought he misheard and had the pretty distinct impression of having relieved this moment, even though he hadn't. The scene of his father telling him of a braid he had to give to someone struck him with the force of ten punches. What in the name...? What kind of sorcery was this?

"Is this one of your cruel jokes?" Upon noticing the confused look on her face, he explained, "I have twice so far asked you to let me braid your hair and you've refused. What has changed all of a sudden?"

"Forget what I said," she muttered nervously and almost leaped up from the bed.

"Excuse me?" exclaimed Kili, bolting to sit upright, but his leg had a different opinion. It sent a sharp pain as a form of complain, making him freeze at place and groan a curse.

"Don't move," Arya rushed back to his side, gently pushing him down on the mattress and pillow again, despite the urge to put as much distance between them as possible after her big blunder. But he was wiggling around like a rebellious toddler, so every option to move away was out of the question. "The wound has not closed yet and you don't want to bleed all over a good man's bed, do you?"

"Don't dodge the question!"

She had no answer at the ready and only huffed in frustration. It set the dwarf even more on edge. He eventually resolved to comply with her command for immobility, let her rearrange the pillow and the blankets and thoroughly check the wound with the soaked cloth tied around his thigh, yet refused to back away from the subject.

"You don't just drop something like that, and then expect me to forget it!"

The Ranger was practically a step away from opening a hole on the floor; whether by pacing up and down nervously, or by her eagerness to let the earth swallow her, she didn't know. Having no idea whatsoever how to save it, she was currently trying to figure out a way to get her exceptionally large
feet into the void she had for a mouth.

"Arya," Kili called when he noticed how thoughtful her face had turned. He guessed she was trying to find an excuse to cover it up. "I'm waiting for an honest answer here."

She let resigned sigh, positively feeling like a boar ready to be put upon a spit and roasted over a sizzling fire. The bruise on her nose was momentarily erased from her mind and only when she pinched the bridge was she painfully reminded of it, along with a thumping headache that ensued. She almost whimpered at her inability to pull her thoughts and tongue together whenever he was around.

"Don't make me stand up," warned Kili.

"No point in threatening me," Arya countered casually. "It is you who will start bleeding, pass out again and might not wake up this time." Her sinister words had no success in hindering his curiosity and he only gave an expectant glare. "Look... I said something," she muttered angrily, hesitation emanating from her posture and manner galore. "I doubt you were conscious enough to hear it, but I promised that if you didn't die, I would let you braid my hair."

"And...?"

"And it has obviously upset you," she added quickly, "so maybe it wasn't wise on my part to suggest—"

She might as well not talk, for all the words were lost in Kili's ears. The grin on his face made him seem far healthier than what he did mere minutes ago. "You asked, you did not suggest. And, yes, I will gladly do it."

And there was the crucial question. What kind of braid would he give her? This was a matter he'd worry about later, although the idea was pretty much formed in his mind and somewhere deep in there, he had already made his decision. More than anything he wished he could give her a courting braid. Yet this was of course unheard of, for the respective parts had not agreed to a courtship and, as things stood, they would doubtfully ever enter into any kind of courtship.

But if —hypothetically speaking— they had, they also needed to gain the approval of the heads of both members' families, which begged the question of how Kili would get the approval of her dead parents. Who would he subsequently have to gain approval from? Lord Elrond, perhaps? Or —since she was a member of the Rangers' camp— from that odd man, her said Chieftain? All that, suggesting that that Thorin had already granted his blessing, which was a whole other matter to ponder on.

Too many obstacles. Far too many obstacles and what if's, in fact. Yet Kili was willing to go through all this in order to achieve his purpose. If only...

The whole notion was bordering on painful. But he shoved it aside and tried to fill his mind with something less sinister than the upcoming, promisingly bleak future. "I wager that had your mother been here, she'd be proud to know your hair will finally look decent once I get down to work."

Arya exhaled loudly, far from amused by the way things turned out. "Had my mother been here," she said with a weary sigh, "she'd be busy reminding the dwarf who was cuddling with her unmarried daughter on a bed earlier, quite forcibly, which of you had more years of combat experience."

"I thought your mother was a healer, not a soldier," Kili said with a quizzical look.
Arya arched an eyebrow. "She had received basic training, which means she could break every bone in your body while naming them."

The man on her opposite snorted with mirth, "Thorin would have liked her."

"I'd gladly pay a shitload of gold to witness that," Fili's chirpy voice emerged from his supposedly sleeping spot, along with a raised arm to enhance his testimony.

"Fili!" Kili and Arya cried in unison, with her continuing to rebuke the blond, "You were supposed to be asleep, not eavesdropping!"

"I asked if you wanted me to leave the room and you refused. Then I am trying to take a nap and your voices are loud enough to wake all the fish in the lake," he listed tiredly. "Forgive me, but I do not see how listening to this is my fault."

The ones who pressed the charges quieted immediately and Fili triumphantly turned his back to them.

Perhaps no voices could be heard afterwards, but Kili's motions were pretty ardent as he beckoned her towards him. She sat literally on the edge of the bed, in as much distance from him as possible, while he focused on braiding her hair. With eyes closed from all the frustration and suppressed emotions as he gently combed through the numerous knots and carefully pulled a few strands into an intricate braid, she finally glanced over her shoulder and saw him securing it with one of the two beads that held the simple braid that was on his own head—an actual miracle that it had remained intact this long, especially after everything they'd been through. He used the bead he had made in the forge back in Ered Luin for her braid and kept the other that Fili had given him for his own hair.

Arya felt as though she was taking part in some kind of a ritual. And she didn't like that feeling at all. A voice in her head was thundering to abort mission, but he was already halfway through with it. Upon finishing his task and running his hands over the braid with joy, she felt a drop of self-loathing spilling and poisoning her insides. It was not fair, what she did, she knew that. But she preferred to hurt him now, when it was still early, rather than later when hell might break loose.

Ignoring the painful thumping of her heart, she thanked him as politely as she could and made to walk away, but he tried to pull her back to the bed. Each and every single attempt was doomed to fail, for her mind was too disturbed and not even remotely clear to allow herself to slip into such kind of intimacy again. So, after snuggly tucking him in the bed, she occupied one of the chairs around the table, using her folded arms as a pillow in order to welcome the troubled sleep that came to her later.

Morning finally came and a few sunrays happily managed to pierce the thick veil of clouds that had covered the sky anew. Last of all in the house to doze off was the Ranger and first she was to jump awake the moment the door of the room creaked as it opened. Her hand reflexively moved to the hilt of one of the daggers, but Bard's figure convinced her drowsy eyes that there was no threat. Her head slumped forward over her arms again and she let an almost inaudible, complaining groan for being roused so soon. Soft snores came from the two dwarves' mouth that lay upon the bench and the bed respectively, sign that they were both still fast asleep.

Bard took in the woman's appearance; bruised nose, dark circles beneath her eyes, her whole face a mask of exhaustion. He almost felt sorry that the door made that noise and woke her. It seemed like she could really use a few good hours of sleep.

"Good morning," he greeted her, keeping his voice as low as he could.

The Ranger arched an eyebrow and almost glared at him for having the nerve to offer even a
remotely cheerful greeting. Oddly enough, she still got a feeling akin to that of someone torturing her. Sleep might not be a nightly visitor, but in the occasions she had not slept well for days in a row, she tended to sleep like a log afterwards, albeit for three of four hours at best. And she had the bad habit of being cranky if awoken abruptly in the midst of those really necessary hours of sleep. Of course she held herself and did not glare at the poor man who had done nothing but be polite and, as manners obliged, she gave him a nod in reply.

Slowly and as the hour grew late, the other occupants of the house roused from their beds and gathered at the table in the small kitchen to take a frugal breakfast consisting of some bread and fruits. Fili, specifically, refrained from being within a distance of several inches from the apples after the unforgettable experience of the ride in the blasted barrels; the smell still made him heave. In vain did the dwarves inwardly wish and pray for something like eggs and bacon.

The guests had several matters to discuss, such as how Bofur and the Ranger had survived, making them recount their entire trek from the place the river washed them up up to Lake-town, and why the rest of the company had left the other three dwarves behind.

Once the eventful breakfast ended, Bard announced he had some business down in the market and that he would return home before supper. Oin was fussing over Kili, satisfied with the healing course of his injury, while Bofur was trying to amuse Tilda by carving toys out of broken wooden boards from the roof; the little girl was delighted. Sigrid bustled about the house to clean up whatever debris was left laying on the floor from the night before. Fili offered to help but soon, after her polite dismissal, ended up sitting by and keeping an eye on his brother. Finally, the Ranger along with Bard's son were in a corner of the house and had a lively conversation about fights and weapons while helping Sigrid clean up.

Kili had blinked drowsily after breakfast, his dark hair mussed from the few peaceful and relatively painless hours of rest he got. His gaze wandered about the house, watching each one busy themselves with something and slightly envying them for being able to move about with no injuries hindering them—not that he'd ever admit it. He was abnormally quiet for awhile, fact that had Fili curious.

"What's the matter?" asked the blond as he passed him a cup of herbal tea.

"Nothing," muttered Kili, "I've got something in my head."

"It is not brain, I assure you."

The remark fell on deaf ears. Fili followed his gaze that was pinned on a particular spot at the far corner of the room, where Arya and the boy, Bain, were talking rather vividly. He shook his head in mocking frustration. "If you actually are jealous of a boy half her age, you are certifiably daft. On another note, however," he added with a devilish smirk, "he's greater chance to reach her face to snog her than you do. I doubt you'll get any taller."

His brother had that mischievous glint in his eye, and something in Kili's gut told him that the verbal torment was nowhere near the end.

"If the time ever comes," Fili pondered loudly, "shall I have a box at the ready for you to stand on?"

Kili glared at him from the corner of his eye. "You should know better than tease me over matters like these, brother dear," he warned. "Wars have been started over less."

"If I ain't going to tease you over matters like these, what am I supposed to tease you for?" the blond mused with a look of confusion. "Surely, personal hygiene plays an important part too," he then
added thoughtfully. "It's not really helpful that you still reek of fish. Poor Miss Sigrid might have to wash the bed covers twice or even thrice to get the smell off."

Kili brushed him off with a brisk motion of his hand, but the seed of doubt was planted. In a deep part of his mind he set it as a crucial priority to scrub up very well once his leg got better, in order to cast the smell of fish off him. He imagined Arya would really appreciate that, even though her chortles when he told that particular story two hours ago were simply indescribable. Somewhere between laughs she'd wished she could have seen Thorin and Dwalin's faces the moment their heads had popped out of Bard's toilet. That would've been a glorious sight to behold, she had noted, and Kili had laughingly agreed with her on that. All things considered, she didn't seem to mind not being part of the whole experience and, well, he couldn't blame her.

"Weird dreams visited me whilst unconscious yesterday."

His brother raised a quizzical eyebrow. "Oh?"

"I saw father," said the other without hesitation and Fili was visibly upset. "Not a nightmare," Kili rushed to explain. "'Twas a rather good dream. He told me not to get mum dead from worry and be more careful. And not leave you alone."

The older remained silent and regarded his brother with an examining look, cautious not to let any emotion take over his face.

"There's more," Kili added hesitantly. "I... There was an elf--"

"An elf?" the blond asked, dumbfounded. "Who? The redhead, Tauriel?"

"No, no," Kili said quickly and saw his brother ready to speak again. "Do not even dare ask me if it was the blond elf or the Elvenking."

"E--"

"Or Elrond."

Fili laughed breathlessly. "Who then?"

"It– She– I don't know!" Kili burst in frustration. "I swear I've never seen her in my life. And I haven't seen too many elves to be mistaken. But... she felt familiar, somehow."

His hand rubbed his chin thoughtfully as Fili went through all the possible explanations. "Perhaps you happened to pass by her in Rivendell or Mirkwood."

The brunet shrugged his shoulders in complete unawareness. "And that's not even the weirdest thing I saw." He saw Fili wiggling his head curiously, nodding him to continue. "I..."

"Bloody hell, stop beating around the bush."

He hesitated for another long moment. "I also saw me... I saw me playing with myself."

Fili squinted his eyes and gave him the dirtiest of looks. "And what am I supposed to get from that?"

The younger answered with one of his own. "Honestly, from time to time, you have the maturity of a ten-year-old. What I mean is that I saw another me, smaller, but I was there, too. We were playing around under a big tree. It was..." His face turned pensive as he searched for the word that would do the imaginary events justice. "All things considered, it felt quite... odd."
His already bright blue eyes were further brightened by a luminous twinkle, and Fili cracked a wide grin.

"I must be losing my mind--" he paused mid-sentence when he noticed the disturbingly broad smile on his brother's face. It scared him to his very bones. "What?"

Fili took his sweet time to reply. He slumped further into the chair, sitting as comfortably as a king would, and idly stroked the braids of his golden moustache. "Well..." he savoured the word, utterly amused by his brother's discomfort and tendency for suspicion, waiting for the perfect moment to reply. "As long as the miniature Kili doesn't sow the fright and terror you did when you were young," he bantered, "I'd personally delight in having a nephew pester me all day long."

The mouthful of tea Kili drank at that moment was sprayed out of his mouth. In fact, he didn't manage to keep even a single drop of it inside and the hot liquid ended up soaking the front of his tunic, as well as part of the blanket. "What the devil are you on about?" he spat out in dread after the light coughing that the choking caused ebbed away.

Fili almost cackled at the sight, for it served Kili right. At least in his opinion, his interpretation of Kili's weird vision was accurate, for he was determined not to believe that his brother was turning loony.

The blessed moment for the main meal arrived and the dwarves had half a mind to grovel at Bard's feet for giving them the chance to eat something other than half-rotten fruits. They were, after all, hungrier than the average Man and too eager to consume amounts of food that people outside of their race could only describe with the word 'exaggeration'. Only Kili was limited to eat a runny, soup-like, hopefully edible thing that according to Oin would help in his recovery, so he sat on the bed and grumpily ate in silence.

The single person missing from the table was the Ranger, who had long ago withdrawn to the peace and calm of the small balcony of Bard's house, even if the chilly wind and grey clouds might herald another storm that would hit the town in a few hours. She just couldn't sit at the table along with the rest of them. It felt as though someone had put a chain around her neck and was pulling her to sink to the bottom of the lake.

Her absence naturally engendered questions and a few worrisome thoughts. Not that Kili was particularly prone to fretting over many other people —Fili took care of that task quite effectively for the both of them— but he had developed something of a habit of worrying about Arya.

If someone had told the Ranger a year —no, actually half a year ago— that one day she'd be in Lake-town with a dwarf prince who had almost died of a poisoned wound and she'd used whatever skill she had to save him, all this on her way to guide a company of dwarves and a hobbit to the Lonely Mountain, on top of the fact that she would fall in love with the aforementioned dwarf, she would have laughed in their face... so easily; so haughtily.

Right now, she called it bloody life. And she was desperately trying to come up with a way to wriggle herself out of it, uncaring of how cowardly an action it was.

She was standing on the small balcony with arms upon the railing, quiet and unmoving; her gaze was pinned on the east where the Lonely Mountain stood tall and imposing. A chilly breeze seemed to drive the clouds north. White drops were falling on the ground, the rooftops of the houses, and the dark, tranquil waters of the lake, melting almost as soon as they touched the surface. Moments of peaceful silence like this were seldom to find anymore.
Until the wooden floor creaked not far behind. And just like that, that beloved silence was broken.

Too absorbed by her unsettling thoughts, she didn't find it in her to pay any attention to whomever was pacing behind her, but did hear their footsteps; and subsequently was rather startled by the pair of hands placing something over her shoulders in lieu of a greeting. Turning to face the intruder, she was met with someone's chest. Her eyes rose and saw the owner of the house looking down at her as he draped a thin coverlet around her. Her immediate response was to recoil from him.

Confusion and curiosity were evident in her gaze. "What is this?"

"This is a blanket," a deep voice supplied. Slight irritation flashed behind her eyes, sight that almost made him smile.

"Obviously. But why--?"

His hand rose towards the sky, interrupting her. A few snowflakes landed onto his palm and he lowered it right before her. "Winter is coming, lady Arya."

Even though she barely felt any of the bite of the early winter, the Ranger gave a slight inclination of her head, hoping it'd be enough to discourage him from any attempt in conversation. Manners be damned this time.

"What is it that they say..." Bard pondered loudly after quite a few minutes of awkward silence, "a silver for your thoughts?"

She scoffed. "I doubt they are worth that much."

He shook his head, giving a condescending look. "I presume you cannot find rest anywhere? It's only natural, I reckon, after last night--"

The Ranger craned her neck to the side, eager to relieve the tension in the joints there, but it didn't do her the favour of cracking. She frowned and gave him a look. "Why do people think that everyone copes with events in the exact same way?"

Bard gave a breathless laugh, mimicking her manner and taking hold of the wooden railing, and let his gaze stray towards the direction she was staring at. "We pretty much do," he shrugged. "Perhaps our egos want us to think we're unique, but really, we all want the same things; peace, health, family, money and hoards of gold..."

"Well, the only thing I want is for everyone to leave me alone," Arya said with a weary sigh. "Do you know how I get this?"

It was obviously a rhetorical question, one that she did not expect him to answer and one that he did not know how to answer. "I believe Tilda has found a friend on Kili's face."

The woman blinked, startled. Indeed, watching Kili and the little girl's exchanges was something that evoked long forgotten sentiments of affection. She couldn't tell why. "If anything should happen to me, you shall find yourself a good lad, have a son or daughter, and everything will go swimmingly."

Just at the remembrance of her cousin's words, she felt her stomach churn.

Right at that moment her subconscious was granted free rein and created a fleeting image of Kili playing with an excited, charming little terror. Hazel green eyes suddenly flicked up and locked with hers. He threw a lazy smile at her, the gesture private and discreet despite their little imp.

Arya hadn't realised how hard her grip was on the railing; not until the first few small jags of wood
pierced through the outer layer of the skin and the force applied made her hands start to tremble and sting from the friction. Her teeth clenched in anger the moment her ever sensible mind decided to go as far as to produce such absurd images.

She hadn't come all this way to find something like this; was determined that only the thought of it was foolish and fraught with peril. She had other duties, a purpose that needed to be served. There was no time for heart flutters and feelings that should never be made known. Now that she mused on it with clearer mind, heaven forbid they did. She already was a moving bearer of bad luck; there were plenty more than a handful of creatures upon this earth —Men and orcs— that would be rewarded with a pretty decent amount of gold should they bring her and her cousin's heads to their masters. And who says that she wasn't carrying the family curse that boded an early death for each of its members, as well as the people close to them? She couldn't bear to live with herself if any harm found Kili because of her.

Bard seemed blissfully unaware of these thoughts. His gaze was still turned towards the east as he gushed about his children, "...she is pleased that you saved him. And Bain is in raptures over your and the Elves' fight against the orc pack. Although it was slightly frightening, he hopes to learn to fight equally well as you when he grows older."

No, Arya did not possess the luxury to afford such feelings affecting her at all. She was one of those dark cloaked, hooded figures who went wandering around old Arnor, served their Chieftain and guarded those who were heedless, with neither glory nor thanks; never she sought any of these, nor would she seek them now. She was a Ranger; not a lady, not a princess, not someone's caring wife, not someone who was allowed to maintain any feelings of the sort. Only a keen, skilled warrior who was quite efficient at killing and, after the debacle ten years ago, at protecting too. This is what she was, this is what she was born to become, even if some people had been pointing to the contrary ever since. She had proved herself worthy of the bearing of her fair and noble of spirit forefathers that bore the blood of Númenor.

But above all, she'd like to be able to fancy herself a good player. Good players never revealed their emotions during the game. Emotions were defects that were found in the losing side. And Arya decided that she had no desire to be on the losing side again; she had been and it wasn't a very pleasant experience. All this was a product of her heart, which she had never so far allowed to rule her head. It wouldn't do any good to start now.

"–shouldn't you better go inside with your prince?"

She jumped at the question that snapped her out of her long silence. Her gaze swung from the Mountain that still stood magnificent far away at the east to the bowman beside her. She looked up to him as though he had insulted her.

"My prince?"

"I had been married once, lady Arya," Bard said quietly. "I know affection when I see it." The woman immediately wore a thunderous look on her face and he registered the subtle shift in her stance, now verging on predatory, almost as if she was ready to dart against an invisible foe.

"Perhaps you are mistaken this time. My task is to escort the dwarves to the Mountain. Once it is completed, they won't see me again. They have no reason to see me again."

"Pardon my word, it was not my intention to pry. I may not be an expert on dwarven culture, but from what I've heard, a braid is of some significance," he motioned towards her head, "so I presumed—"
A muscle in her jaw twitched. "You are wrong in presuming. It's just a bloody braid—it means nothing."

"Humour me."

For a fraction of a second, Arya thought that Bard was the one to have spoken, but watched with wide eyes the man's mouth not even budging to open. The reply abounding with sarcasm apparently did not appear out of thin air, but rather from the mouth of a person who currently stood limply under the door case, with arms crossed and a furious look on his face.

Chapter End Notes

Keep an eye out for the next, it's going to be emotional.

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