Summary

When Fíli was five years old, he had a dream on the last night of summer. The dream comes to him again on the same night every year, carrying a disturbing message. Every step, every thought and every choice he makes will either bring him closer to destruction or the salvation of his family.
The Last Light of Summer

Fíli gazed at the setting sun, willing it to stay in the sky. *Please, don't go. Please.* He felt the anxiety filling his chest, closing his throat, but no matter how much he pleaded, the sun sank behind the hills without a care for the young dwarf. His breath came in short, panicked gasps as the last of the fiery orb disappeared. He opened his eyes wide, hoping to stop what was about to happen. Unfortunately, as with every year, his lids snapped shut on their own, despite his efforts. And, like every time before, the dream came as soon as darkness took him.

He sits on a low bench in a moonlit garden. Tiny white flowers bloom in abundance around him, and dappled shadows play across the intricately carved stone beneath his feet. A gentle breeze stirs the leaves overhead, and he marvels, as he has every time, at the serenity of this quiet haven. A movement to his right draws his attention, and a tall man strides gracefully into the garden. Fíli watches him in silence, loathing his presence. There is nothing imposing or threatening in his appearance. It isn't the man that Fíli wishes to escape. It is the words he is about to speak.

Fíli woke just as the sun climbed over the horizon. His forehead gleamed with a cold sweat, and he shivered. He sat for a while, watching the sun rise until the rose left the heavens and was replaced by a deep sapphire. As ever, he pondered the man's words. They weren't frightening because they were harshly spoken or full of cruelty. On the contrary, the man spoke with kindness, and a deep sorrow weighed down each sentence. The words were frightening because they rang with a truth he couldn't deny. He sighed gustily. The man's identity would forever be a mystery to him, and, quite frankly, he could live with that.

Since he was five years old, the tall man had visited Fíli once a year on the last night of summer. At first the vision frightened him completely...so much so that he had been able to do nothing but cry until the man sighed in pity, patted his head and left him. As the time passed, however, and Fíli grew up, he began to realize that the man always carried the same message.

Fíli never told anyone about the man in his dream. All his mother knew was that he woke every year on the first day of autumn with tears in his eyes and sweat on his brow. His little brother knew that he whimpered as he dreamed, and that as soon as the sun set on the same night every year, he would lose his older brother to a slumber from which he would not wake until first light. Fíli knew that it frightened Kíli, but he could not explain. It was his burden to bear...his riddle to solve.
An Unexpected Visit

A joyous shout reached Fíli's ears, and his blue eyes searched the hills behind him for the black-haired, brown-eyed source. A grin split his face as Kíli shot over a rise in the distance. He was waving and shouting, and it was clear that something momentous had occurred. As excitable as his little brother was, Fíli had to admit that he'd never seen Kíli so full of energy. He trotted down the slope, weaving through tree trunks and grazing the bark with his fingertips to keep his balance. When Kíli was five feet away, Fíli braced himself and was immediately glad for it. The younger dwarf launched himself at the elder and would have tackled him to the ground were it not for his preparation.

"What's happened?" Fíli queried with a chuckle.

Kíli danced away from him with a shout and a skip. "Uncle Thorin's returned from his journey! He says he has news for us and sent me to fetch you. Come on, COME ON! He won't tell me what it is until we're all together, but I think I know already!"

Fíli smiled broadly, indulging his brother. His chest ached, and he had a feeling he knew what the news was as well. There were mixed feelings in his heart, but he refrained from showing it. Thorin's arrival following his dream wasn't a coincidence. And he knew it.

"Race you back, Kíli!" he said brightly, hoping to dispel the gloom in his mind.

Kíli whooped in excitement and took off a pace behind his brother.

The boys entered their mother's sitting area, and there he was. Regal, majestic and warm, their uncle sat next to the hearth in their father's chair, refilling his pipe. He glanced upward at the great cacophony that was Fíli and Kíli's arrival. Thorin's smile glowed in his eyes.

"Hello, Fíli."

"Uncle!" The joy of seeing his uncle again banished his misgivings. They clasped forearms, and Thorin tugged on one of Fíli's braids affectionately.

"It's good to see you again, nephew."

"It's good to see you!" Fíli was about to ask about Thorin's recent journey, but one glance at Kíli was all he needed to remind him that their uncle had pressing news. His little brother was nearly bouncing in place in an effort to contain his impatience and curiosity. His gaze shifted back to Thorin and they shared a knowing smile.

"I understand you have news for us, Uncle," he said instead.

Thorin's expression sobered a little, and he nodded. "The time has come -"

"I KNEW IT!" crowed Kíli.

Thorin shot him a quelling look before continuing. "to reclaim our homeland. During my travels I had a chance meeting with a wizard of some repute: Gandalf the Grey."

Kíli's mouth gaped in awe, and Fíli hid a smile at the sight. "The wandering wizard?" the latter
"The same," Thorin said. "You know that I've long planned to return to the Lonely Mountain and drive out the Great Worm. During our meeting, the wizard urged me to gather our people and return Erebor. I believe that his words are sound. The time is right, and if we don't go now, we never will. I have already spoken with some of our kin and a few trusted friends. They have all agreed to join the company, and I would ask the two of you to be our final members."

Kíli couldn't hold it in anymore. He released a triumphant shout and leapt upon Thorin, crushing him in a bearhug of youthful strength. The older dwarf untangled himself from the young one's limbs with a rumble that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

"I'll take that as a 'yes'," he said. His blue eyes turned to Fíli then, and the prince could tell that it was his king who gazed at him now, not his uncle. He swallowed hard, and the memory of his dream hovered at the edge of his mind and made his heart thud painfully in his chest. He knew what his answer was already. There was never a choice for him. He would give his life for his uncle, his king, should he ask it. The thought made him catch his breath as the voice of the tall man in his dream echoed in his mind.

"I will follow you, Thorin," he murmured, inclining his head in a gesture of fealty. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother in the doorway. Her expression was hard to read. The tall man's words whispered to him. Thorin smiled in approval.

So it begins.

Three weeks passed, and Fíli would often remark afterwards that they were the most peaceful
days of his life. There were many stories shared, and the laughter was loud and satisfying. Kíli was
so full of excitement that his words spilled over themselves in a hopeless jumble. Chuckling,
Thorin would hold up his hands in surrender and wait for Fíli to translate while Kíli flushed
crimson.

After those few wonderful weeks, Thorin announced that it was time for him to depart. There
were many preparations he needed to make, and he needed to call a gathering of envoys from each
of the seven dwarf kingdoms.

"We must be united against this menace," he said. "But if it comes to it, and there are only
fourteen of us, then so be it."

Fíli's brow drew together. "Fourteen? I thought there were only thirteen altogether. Who is the
last?"

Thorin frowned heavily. "The wizard claims to have found us a burglar of some repute, but we
shall see ourselves if he is as good as the old grey beard promises. Besides, as important as this
venture is, Oín won't allow us to travel with such an unlucky number."

The boys chuckled lightly, acknowledging the old dwarf's superstitions. Thorin held up his
hand, drawing their attention once more.

"We haven't much time," he said. "The journey to the gathering will take weeks, and there's no
telling how much longer it will take for us to sort everything out with our cousins. This is the
burglar's address."

Fíli took the scrap of parchment his uncle handed to him. "...'Bagshot Row, Hobbiton'?" he read
aloud. "This burglar is a halfling, then?"

"It would seem so. Make sure you two aren't late. We'll be running short on time as it is, and we
can't afford to wait."

"Yes, Uncle," they chorused.

Then he was gone. The boys spent the rest of the day poring over maps, planning their route,
and talking excitedly about the people and places they would see. It was quite late that night when
their mother snuffed the candles out, and Fíli and Kíli dragged themselves to bed. And somehow,
despite the decades that it had plagued him, Fíli had quite forgotten his dream and the tall man's
words. He grinned sleepily, rolling onto his side and burrowing deeper beneath his covers. A great
yawn escaped him, and he drifted off to sleep.

Fíli opens his eyes and discovers he is in the moonlit garden once more. His pulse begins a wild
gallop in his chest. What's going on? He shouldn't be dreaming this. Not now! The dream isn't due
for another eleven months and a week. He stands from the low stone bench, looking for the tall
man. After a few more seconds of nothing but the whisper of the breeze through leaves, he
appears. He doesn't say anything for some time. He stares intently at Fíli, and there is an accusation
in his eyes. Eventually, it becomes too much for the young prince.
"Why is this happening?" he asks. It is only now that he realizes he has never spoken in the dream before. The man arches an eyebrow and purses his lips.

"I think you know why, Fili, son of Dís."

Fili's blood pounds painfully in his veins. He swallows around a sudden lump in his throat. "Yes," he admits. "But I had no choice! I have to go!"

The man relents a little, and he sighs deeply. His brows draw together in what seems like pain. It occurs to Fili that the expression makes him seem very old. As old as his eyes, the dwarf thinks. Then the man speaks the same message he brings every year.

"Your life will be a short and precious thing if you follow the King Under the Mountain to his home. If you accompany him on this quest, your house will fall, and the line of Durin will be broken. Death waits for you, young prince. It is a fate you cannot escape."

"Surely there must be a way to succeed! Please! Please...there has to be."

Fili woke with a start, blinking away tears he hadn't been aware of. It was still dark outside, and he could hear Kíli's soft snores through the wall. Fili breathed deeply, somewhat comforted by the familiar sound. He was awake for a long time after that, pondering the end of this new dream. The man had not responded to his final plea. He had simply gazed at Fili without speaking. He wondered if that silence was an answer in itself. If they went through with their plans and accompanied Thorin on the quest, Fili and his brother would die.
In the morning, Kíli watched as his brother dragged himself to the breakfast table. There were deep shadows and heavy bags under Fíli's eyes, and the little brother noted these signs of poor sleep. He wondered if it was the dream again, and he wondered for the umpteenth time what it contained.

Once a year, Fíli arrived at breakfast like this and ate almost nothing, which always struck Kíli as odd and troubling, since breakfast was his favorite meal. In recent years, however, Fíli had taken to spending that night out of doors. He would reappear sometime around mid morning, and Kíli would secret him some of the food he'd saved. By the time he returned, his appetite seemed somewhat restored, but he remained quiet and steeped in his own thoughts. If these things bothered their mother, she did not show it. Though, being that Fíli had been dealing with this for as long as Kíli could remember, perhaps she knew more about what was going on in his older brother's head than she let on.

When Kíli went to find him in the woods three weeks before, he knew that Fíli had been acting overly bright for his sake. He chewed thoughtfully on another forkfull of egg. Something was wrong. Fíli never had the dream more than once a year, and he'd never been prone to nightmares outside of the one. Kíli nudged his brother's elbow. The older dwarf looked up at him with heavy lidded eyes, blinking once.

Kíli tipped his head to the side, asking a silent question. Fíli's eyes misted a little, and he squinted as if in pain. He turned his face away, signing that he was fine, though the other knew it wasn't true. Kíli leaned towards his brother, speaking low enough that their mother mayn't hear.
"You're going to have to stop keeping it to yourself."

Fili glanced at him. He took a shaky breath, and looked for all the world as if he was going to speak, finally, of the things he'd held deep inside for nearly eight decades.

"Tsk! Just LOOK at all the food left on this table! You two ought to be ashamed of yourselves!"

The two in question jumped at their mother's voice and the realization that she was standing right behind them.

"Sorry, Mum," they managed.

"I should think so! How on earth do you expect to be able to reclaim a kingdom if you don't keep your strength up?" she teased, her tone softening a bit. Her sons looked up at her, and though her mouth frowned, her eyes glittered with an amused light. "Now, tuck in, the both of you! I don't want to see a scrap of food left behind!"
"Yes, Mum!"

She nodded in satisfaction as they dutifully demolished the remainder of breakfast. "That's more like it! After you've finished, come out to the forge with me. We've got orders to finish, deliveries to make, and I have a surprise for the two of you, so hop to it!"

The boys set to with renewed vigor at the prospect of a surprise, and their mother smiled fondly. She noted with approval that some of the color had returned to Fili's cheeks, and the deep shadows beneath his eyes were fading a little. Yes, she knew what Fili dreamed last night because she'd had a dream of her own, and it told her the same thing that his told him. She could only guess that this dream must have been the cause of his annual night of poor sleep. Her poor son. To think that he'd suffered all these years in silence? It all but broke her heart. She set her teeth in grim determination; she didn't care what her dream told her last night. Her boys were clever, and she believed deep down that Fili would find a way to change their fate.
Fíli and Kíli watched their mother as she stepped through the door, heading for the forge.

"Make sure you do the washing up!" she called over her shoulder. Predictably, her sons groaned in harmony behind her back.

Fíli chuckled and glanced at his brother, half hoping he'd dropped the matter of his sleepless night. Kíli was grinning, but there was no smile in his eyes. Fíli ground his teeth together. He wanted to unburden himself. He wanted to share with Kíli, but he hesitated. Fíli just couldn't summon the courage to crush his brother's hopes and excitement over the quest.

He stood abruptly, nearly knocking his stool over in his haste. Collecting the flatware and avoiding eye contact, he all but ran to the creek outside and breathed a sigh of relief when his dark shadow did not follow.

Kíli leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. He watched as Fíli vigorously scrubbed away at the plates and forks with sand from the bank. His brows drew together in a dark line, and his lips pressed firmly together. Fíli's behaviour was troubling. Kíli hadn't pressed his brother because Fíli clearly didn't want to talk about it, but...somehow he knew it mattered in a way that it hadn't before. The sidelong glances, the pain and torture that huddled there, raw and heart wrenching, they were all directed at Kíli. He'd dismissed it in years past, but the looks had come more frequently in recent days. What is it that haunts him so?

Kíli wondered if he'd ever know the answer. He pushed away from the door frame as Fíli returned to put the flatware in its proper place. Stepping in front of his brother before he could bolt again, Kíli wouldn't budge.

"Will you speak of it later?"

Fíli swallowed hard, as if the words were stuck in his throat and fighting to get out. He took a deep breath, let it out slowly and nodded.

"Later," he agreed.
Fíli and Kíli entered the forge together and sighed in contentment. Of all the places they'd ever been, their mother's forge was their favorite. It was comforting in its familiarity, and the cracking and popping of the bright flames and the whoosh of the bellows combined in a rhythm the young dwarves knew by heart. Their mother stood at the anvil, her hammer beating a cadence to a melody only she could hear. Strands of hair slipped free from her braid and clung to the sweat shining on her forehead. She nodded to her boys, and they took up their tools, setting to work with enthusiasm. After a few moments, Dís began to sing to the ringing of steel on steel, and Fíli and Kíli joined her. Three voices rose and fell to the tune of pounding hammers, hissing steam and roaring fire.

So the day passed, as most days did for them, and Dís saw that her sons were smiling and laughing as they sang and worked. Her heart was full. As the light turned golden in the late afternoon, the last customer departed with profuse thanks, and Dís carefully counted out the income for the day.

Soon she felt the curiosity of her lads thick in the atmosphere. Smiling to herself, she continued the routine of closing up shop and jotted down Fíli and Kíli's wages for the week in the forge ledger. The boys accepted their income with thanks, and finally it was time for Dís' surprise.

She led them to the rear of the forge where a tall cabinet made of hardened oak stood. She unlocked the doors, flinging them wide to reveal her private collection - her best work. When she had spare time, Dís would create knew weapons of her own designs. Swords, daggers, knives, axes and bows lined the shelving in the broad cabinet, and her boys sighed in appreciation. She beamed.

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at them.

"Choose whatever you like, lads."

Fíli and Kíli gaped at their mother, who laughed heartily at their expressions of disbelief.

"Go on, then!" she prompted, still laughing.

Turning to face the weaponry, each boy studied his weapon of choice. Fíli agonized over the daggers and knives, picking up different ones and testing the balance. Kíli reverently touched the limbs of an especially attractive bow.

Dís watched with pride as they made their final choices, and she was pleased with the time they took to inspect the weapons and see the merits in each one. Fíli chose a pair of swords (he'd always preferred dual wielding) and a beautiful throwing knife. Kíli chose a sword that suited him and the bow that caught his eye.

"Fine choices," Dís said. "Take them with my blessing, and may they serve you both well."

Her sons thanked her profusely. Fíli kissed her cheek, and Kíli swung her in a merry dance.

"Now, then!" she said, and he released her. "You'd best be along to practice with Mr. Balin. You need to get used to those weapons, and there's no time like the present. Besides! You'll be late if you don't hurry!

As her boys tripped over one another in effort to leave as quickly as possible, they called more 'thank you's' over their shoulders. Dís shook her head. As exciteable as puppies, they were.

"Make sure you invite him to supper, lads!" she added as they ran.

"Yes, Mum!" they chorused.
Fíli and Kíli reclined in the grass after supper, enjoying the clear night sky. Fíli lit his pipe and managed to light his brother's as well before the match burned down. They smoked quietly for a while, blowing rings of varying sizes. The silence between them stretched, and Fíli knew Kíli was deliberately keeping quiet. He inhaled slowly, grateful for this uncharacteristic display of patience. He swallowed once. Twice. Oh, for pity's sake, why was his throat so dry?

He licked his lips, opened them to speak, and closed them again. How was he even to begin? Groaning in frustration, he buried his face in his hands. Finally, Kíli stirred. He sat up, nudging Fíli with his shoulder.

"Take your time," he said gently.

A surprised chuckle escaped Fíli's chest, unwinding all his pent up tension. He looked sideways at his little brother.

"Since when did you become the older one?"

Kíli smiled at him, his teeth glowing faintly in the moonlight. "Oh, I'd never take your place, Fíli. I like things the way they are. But I don't have to be the eldest to be understanding and patient."

Fíli leaned back, seeing his brother with deeper respect, if that was possible. "When did you grow up, little brother?"

Kíli smiled, but said nothing. He was waiting. Fíli smiled back and took another breath, appreciating the way his brother had calmed him. He closed his eyes, recalling the dream again, not that it was hard to. Kíli squirmed, and Fíli grinned. He should've known he couldn't be patient for long.

"What do you see?" Kíli asked.

"A moonlit garden," Fíli said. "Tall trees circle a stone dais, but their leaves don't block the light. Somehow, it's as if each leaf passes the light to the one next to it, hand over hand, leaf over leaf, until the moonlight pools and glows in the garden..."

"Since when did you take to poetry?" Kíli interrupted. Fíli cuffed him on the shoulder.

"Do you want to hear or not?"

"Alright, alright," he said, hands raised. Fíli shook his head and took another breath.

"There's a breeze...the kind that carries the smell of autumn." Fíli eyed his brother, who stared innocently back and gestured for him to continue.

"I'm alone, and I'm sitting on a stone bench. The patterns carved in the stone under my feet are all gentle curves and sweeping movement - nothing like our people's craftsmanship," he added quickly, halting another interruption. "I wait. After a few moments, a tall man steps into the garden with me -"

"A man?"
"A man. He has dark eyes and hair, and he's wearing a long robe. He doesn't say anything at first...just looks at me. His eyes are sad. They have a depth I've not seen in anyone since..." he paused, remembering a time when he and Kíli were quite young.

Their mother took them to market - a rare treat - and Kíli had disappeared into the crowd. Kíli had only been ten at the time and was therefore very difficult to spot, being as small as he was. Fíli had searched in desparation, and every minute that passed without a sign of his little charge was utter agony. Frantic and near tears, he stopped next to a silversmith's stall. Sucking in a ragged breath, he called once more.

"Kíli!"

"What?" said a small voice. Fíli jumped. Looking towards his feet, he spotted the little imp. Kíli's head was poking out from beneath the silversmith's stall, and he was wearing a puzzled expression.

"There you are!" Fíli sighed.

"Yeah, I know, I've been here the whole time."

Fíli gritted his teeth and allowed that comment to slide. "I've been looking for you for twenty minutes, Kíli."

His brother frowned. "Why?"

"Well, you kind of disappeared, and I didn't know where you'd gone. What if something had happened to you?"

"Aw, come on, Fíli! I'm okay. Nothing happened."

Fíli realized he wasn't going to win this argument, so he let it go. Instead, he changed the subject, if only slightly. "Why are you under there, anyway?"

Kíli grinned. "Looking."

"At what?"

"Them," he said, pointing.

Fíli turned, following his brother's pointing finger. There were three of them. They stood at least a head higher then the tallest men in the crowd. They were all slender limbs, high cheekbones and creamy skin. Fíli grimaced. *Elves.*

One had pale blonde hair and icy eyes. The other two had red hair, but the only female - one of the redheads - had green eyes whereas the other ginger had blue ones. Freckles dusted her nose like a constellation of stars, but what struck Fíli most was the fact that she was laughing. Her companions stood stoically to one side while she was doubled over in a fit of laughter. Fíli blinked. He didn't know that elves had a sense of humor. From everything Uncle Thorin had told him, they were a solemn and uncaring people.

Kíli sighed, drawing Fíli's attention back to him. He realized that the lady elf was the one who had attracted Kíli's attention to begin with.

"Her laugh is like little bells," his little brother said dreamily.
Uh-oh.

Fili glanced quickly around, searching for the place he'd left Mum. "Kíli, we'd better be getting b-"

His words died in his throat. Kíli was gone again. Where the devil? Oh. Oh, NO. He spun, but it was too late. Kíli had bolted straight for the elf, and there he was, in all his wee, cherub-cheeked, dwarfling glory, tugging on her hand. Fili's knees went weak with fear. Oh, Mahal.

The elfmaid turned to his brother, a delighted smile springing to her lips. She knelt, still holding Kíli's hand. Fili couldn't hear what they said to each other because his blood was pounding in his ears. She looked at him then, straight into his eyes. There was an intense depth there, an ancientness that Fili couldn't quite grasp, even if he tried his whole life. She smiled at him, but it was an understanding and somewhat apologetic smile. Kíli followed her gaze, and asked her a question. She answered him, then shooed him towards Fili. When Kíli was close enough, Fili grabbed his hand and ran in the opposite direction, hoping to put as much distance between himself and the elves as possible.

Her gaze had unsettled him. It reminded him of something unpleasant, but he was too shaken to
remember exactly what that was.

Now, however, as he sat with Kíli and finally recounted the dream that had haunted him for so long, he realized that the man in his dream wasn't a man at all. Inwardly, he cursed himself for a fool.

To Kíli, he said, "The only other time I've seen eyes like that was when we saw those elves in the market all those years ago. Do you remember?"


"So this man in my dream, he's an elf."

"Why's an elf visiting you while you sleep?"

Fíli blew out an exasperated breath. "Well, you'd know that already if you didn't interrupt every three seconds."

Kíli chuckled and nodded, conceding the point. He waved his pipe, gesturing towards his brother. "You may continue," he said graciously.

"Many thanks, your highness," Fíli replied, his voice dripping sarcasm. Ignoring Fíli's answering smirk, he continued.

"Anyway, the elf walks into the garden and just stares at me for a few moments. Then he speaks. He warns me that...," his voice trailed away, and he glanced at Kíli, suddenly unable to continue. Kíli frowned.

"Warns you?" he prompted. Fíli took a staggering breath but found he couldn't speak. His throat was constricted with emotion. Swallowing hard several times, he finally managed to find his voice again.

"He warned me every year that Thorin would ask us to join the quest for Erebor."

"What's to warn about? We've known the quest would be ours all our lives-

"-and that if we accompanied him, our house would fall," Fíli finished miserably.

Kíli said nothing for some time. They sat side by side, each lost in their own thoughts. The moon rose higher. Owls called to one another. Eventually, Kíli spoke. When he did, his voice was hoarse.

"Do you believe him?"

Fíli didn't answer. He didn't have to.

"What do we do? We have to go!"

"I know. Last night he came to me again, rebuking me for pledging to follow Thorin."

"How did he know that?"

"How does he know anything?" Fíli mused.

Kíli stared at the sky. "What do we do?" he repeated.
"We go."

"To certain death?"

Fíli's eyes hardened. "No," he said, steel in his voice. "We'll fight. We'll survive, and we'll change our fate for the better."

"We've taken whatever life has to throw at us so far. Why stop now?" Kíli said.

"Why indeed?" And Fíli meant it. All at once he felt lighter than he had since he was a child. He ruffled his brother's hair and blew another smoke ring. Now they were in this together. Fíli wasn't alone anymore, and he felt invincible.
Shortcuts and Meetings

Fíli groaned and consulted the map again, scratching his beard. He squinted as his eyes searched the horizon. Turning in a half circle, he groaned again and nearly stamped his foot in frustration. *Hang it all!*

Kíli was lounging on the hillside below. He'd been plucking at blades of grass, twisting them in his fingers, placing them between his hands and making obscene noises by blowing air through his thumbs. He was distracted by Fíli's near tantrum, and gazed up at him.

"Are we lost, then?" he inquired.

"I think so," Fíli admitted.

Kíli pressed his lips together and nodded. "Thought as much. What do the directions say?"

"That we should have found the East Road by now."

Fíli didn't understand it. They'd done wonderfully so far. The first few legs of the trip had gone exactly as the directions said they would. They'd reached the foothills of the mountains at the end of the second day, as expected. They'd skirted the Grey Havens by the evening of the third...well, not so much skirted, really. Kíli really was hopeless when it came to elves. Anyway, they'd been in the Far Downs for absolutely forever. Alright, it had only been four days, but Kíli had insisted on taking a more scenic route upon leaving the Havens, and Fíli was up for it if Kíli was. It seemed simple enough in theory, but Fíli realized only too late that cutting across a hundred and fifty miles of rolling hills without any unique landmarks was pretty much the worst idea ever. So, maybe he did understand it, after all.

Fíli worried at his bottom lip as he checked the height of the sun. It was late morning, so they had a decent amount of daylight left. He sighed and turned back to the ponies who were grazing contentedly a few paces away.

"Well, let's keep heading east. We should see something by nightfall...hopefully." He climbed into his saddle, turning his pony in what he judged to be true east. Kíli hopped to his feet and trotted uphill. He sprang into his saddle, but not before slipping his pony another apple from his pack. Fíli shook his head at his little brother.

"If you don't stop feeding her extra treats, we'll starve before we reach Hobbiton."

"Don't listen you to him, Daisy," Kíli whispered loudly to her.

Fíli rolled his eyes. Kíli grinned.

Just as the sun was setting, the brothers came to the crest of yet another hill, and suddenly, there was the road. Kíli crowed with delight.

"At last!"

He heard Fíli's answering sigh of relief and smiled. Daisy and Bongo sensed their lightened mood and accelerated to a spritely walk down to the beaten path. Kíli rejoiced in their luck when they rounded the next curve in the road and encountered the first creature on two legs that they'd
seen in days. Their luck seemed to only increase when the traveler proved to be a hobbit.

He wore a jaunty straw hat with a bright blue feather stuck in the band, and he hummed a light-hearted tune to the little brown pony that pulled his cart. When he saw the dwarves, he offered a great toothy grin and doffed his hat.

"Evening, friends," he called.

Kíli grinned in return. "Evening!"

"Excuse me, sir," said Fíli, "could you tell us how near we are to the Shire?"

The hobbit grinned all the wider and chuckled warmly. "Certainly, I can! Ye're in it, master dwarf!"

Kíli hid his mouth and coughed to cover his laughter. Fíli wasn't fooled, though.

"That's good news! Might you point the way to Hobbiton for us, sir?" Fíli asked.

"Be 'appy to! Just yew follow this road t'ord Rushock Bog, and take the left fork. That'll take you past the Water and down through 'Obbiton."

Fíli relaxed in his saddle, grateful that they were so close after all. Once they were in Hobbiton, they could use the little map their mother had drawn for them to find the Green Dragon and purchase a room before seeking the burglar as Thorin had instructed. "Our thanks, sir," he said.

"Think nothing of it, young master," the hobbit replied. He clucked to the little pony and was off once more with a song on his tongue. Kíli waved as he passed.

Thankfully, the Green Dragon wasn't difficult to find, though they had to travel to the east end of Hobbiton before they found it. After settling their ponies in the stable and purchasing a room for themselves, they acquired directions to the burglar's house from the innkeeper - a fine, stout hobbit named Cotton - and set out.

Hobbiton was charming in the moonlight, with the cheery lights winking in the windows and hanging over every brightly painted round door. Kíli beamed at any and every hobbit they passed, bobbing his head and murmuring greetings. He received mostly puzzled greetings in return, but greetings nonetheless.

"Do you suppose they've never seen dwarves before?" he asked his brother.

"It's possible, but it may be more likely that they're not used to seeing such heavily armed travelers," Fíli noted, glancing at the bow and quiver of arrows strapped to Kíli's back. Kíli smirked.

"True enough. Wait. Why are you looking at me? You're the walking knife gallery!"

"Ah, there's the mark!" Fíli said brightly, ignoring his brother.

As they stepped up to the green door, Gandalf's mark faded from the paint. Fíli was debating whether to knock or ring when Kíli couldn't contain himself anymore and tugged merrily on the bellpull. Presently, the round door swung inward, and a rather wary looking hobbit stood just inside. Quickly, the boys introduced themselves and bowed crisply.
"You must be Mr. Boggins!" gushed Kíli. Suddenly, in a case of ill manners, the door was closing in their faces.

"No! Sorry, you can't come in! You've come to the wrong house."

Kíli’s hand shot forward to block the door. "What?! Has it been cancelled?" he exclaimed.

Fíli frowned. Now that couldn't be right. Someone would have told them before they left home.

"No, nothing's been cancelled," the hobbit grumped.

Relieved, the brothers made themselves welcome. Down the hall came Mr. Dwalin's voice, and the two surged forward. Before they knew it, everyone had arrived, Thorin being the exception, and the little home was filled to bursting with laughter, song, good food and old friends. Stories and food were tossed about in equal measure, and for the moment the burglar was all but forgotten. The dwarves were all affected with such giddiness that soon they were throwing crockery through the house with reckless abandon and great skill. The hobbit was in such a state that they couldn't help but laugh at the flummoxed expression on his face.

A heavy hand falling on the door quieted the rowdy dwarves in an instant. Fíli sobered and looked to the door. No one needed to explain who stood on the doorstep. Gandalf stood carefully with a creak and a groan, all the while muttering about aching joints. The dwarves shuffled out of his way as best they could, but the wizard still had to shimmy between them all and nearly trod on more than one foot. Finally, he reached the door and opened it carefully while the hall behind him filled with Durin's folk.

Thorin tipped his head to the side and lifted a single brow.

"Gandalf," he said and entered. "I thought you said this place would be easy to find. I lost my way...twice. I wouldn't have found it at all, if it hadn't been for that mark on the door."

This last comment seem to cause the hobbit great mental strain, but Thorin ignored him and greeted his nephews with a warm smile as Kíli stepped forward to take his cloak. After the burglar was officially introduced to Thorin, everyone was seated around the table once more. Thorin brought news of the meeting of their kin, but it wasn't good news. Fíli's heart beat painfully in his chest as his uncle explained that they were on their own. There would be no help from the other kingdoms. The injustice of it all became too much for Fíli to bear, and he brought his hand down sharply on the table.

"We may be few in number, but we're fighters, all of us, to the last dwarf!"

"And you forget we have a wizard in our company! Gandalf will have killed hundreds of dragons in his time," Kíli chimed in. Then a ruckus started, and there were raised voices on all sides of the table. It was clear that the desparateness of the situation was felt by all, and only Thorin's voice silenced them. He reminded them that they weren't the only ones with their eyes on the mountain. Now was their only chance, but of course it was dear old Balin, ever the voice of reason, who brought them all down to earth again. He reminded them that there was no way into the mountain.

Then Gandalf leaned forward in his seat and produced a large key. He explained that it had come from Thrain, Thorin's father, and Fíli's mind raced. No one had known exactly how Thrain and Thror had escaped the mountain the day Smaug came. So this must mean that...

"If there's a key, there must be a door!" Fíli thought aloud. His heart leapt, and Kíli came to the
same conclusion that he had.

"There's another way in," Kíli murmured. The brothers beamed at each other, knowing what this could mean. Perhaps they wouldn't have to confront the dragon outright after all, and no one would have to die.

Kíli watched gloomily as the hobbit marched with head held high toward his bedroom. He hadn't taken the whole prospect of the quest very well, and Bofur's cheerful description of Smaug had only made things worse. Shame, really. Kíli'd actually begun to like the fussy halfling. Fíli leaned against the doorframe of the kitchen and puffed quietly on his pipe. Kíli leaned on the opposite frame and sipped from his tankard. He nudged his brother's elbow with his own.

"What d'you think, then?"

"About what?" Fíli answered.

"Mr. Baggins. Do you think he'll come after all?"

Fíli was silent for a bit, thinking it over. He noted Thorin and Balin speaking quietly at the end of the hall, and Thorin's expression seemed bitter sweet. He wondered briefly what they were speaking about, but he figured it was probably along the same lines of the conversation he was having right now. Speaking of which...

"Perhaps. It's difficult to say, but I suspect that he might."

"Think so?"

"Yes. There's something about him that wants to, but he's holding back. Did you see the way his eyes lit up when Gandalf brought out the map and key?"

"Yeah, he looked like Mum does when she's on a journey...bright as a full moon."

Fíli nodded. "I think he'll go. Sooner or later, that part of him will win out, and he'll come. To be honest, I'd feel a lot better about it if he did. Something tells me we need him more than we realize."

Kíli agreed. There was something about this hobbit that made him feel lighter and more confident. Perhaps it was because Mr. Baggins really did reminded him of their mother: polite, proper, fussy at times, but with a playful adventurous spirit that belied her strict royal upbringing. If Mr. Baggins would only come along, Kíli was sure everyone else would see what he and Fíli saw in him.

Thorin's heavy step drew Fíli and Kíli's attention, and he returned their eager smiles.

"Well met," he said. "I'm glad to see you two managed to arrive on time for once in your lives." There was a hint of something in his voice, and Fíli recognized the gentle ribbing. He smiled and decided to keep his and Kíli's little detour to himself.

"What can I say, uncle? We're a couple of reformed rogues." Kíli chuckled and nodded at that. Thorin's smile became gentler, and his eyes softened.

"How's your mother?" he asked.
A lump found it's way into Fíli's throat, and he swallowed around it. "She's well," he said finally. "She was just sorry she couldn't come along."

Their uncle's fondness for their mother shone in his eyes, and the boys smiled.

"She never did like being the one waiting at home," Thorin chuckled. "You are so like her," he added, placing his hands on their shoulders, "and I am grateful for that."

Fíli fought back unexpected tears, and Kíli sniffed quietly beside him. Thorin's eyes had misted as well, and then he was pulling them in and holding them close. They stood there, the three of them, basking in this quiet moment that belonged to only them, and they were happy. All too soon, the moment was over, and Thorin stepped back.

"Come," he said, his voice sounding suspiciously gruff. Fíli and Kíli followed him to Mr. Baggins' sitting room.

There was a heavy soberness in them all now, as the old ones recalled the day the dragon came, and the young ones thought about the journey that awaited them. Fíli never could recall who began it, but a deep hum filled the room and with a deliberate cadence, Thorin began to sing. He sang of mountains and caverns, dungeons and gold, and of moaning winds and burning pines. By the end, they were all singing, their voices filling the little home under the hill. Where one song ended, another would begin, and so the cycle would repeat itself.

In the wee hours, the dwarves made their way back to the Green Dragon, and Gandalf accompanied them. Cotton greeted them sleepily and with no small amount of bewilderment. Fíli and Kíli retreated to their rooms with Thorin's reminder to be ready to leave in time still fresh in their minds.

The boys flopped on their cots, grateful to be off their feet and in a bed for the first time in days. They kicked their boots off and had barely managed to strip to their tunics before falling back onto their pillows. Fíli was nearly asleep when he heard Kíli's soft call from across the room.

"Fíli?"

"Yeah, Kíli."

"Do you think we'll be alright?"

Fíli rolled to his side and propped himself up on his elbow. Kíli was lying on his back with his hands behind his head. He was staring at the ceiling, but Fíli could see the way his jaw worked and gritted his teeth together. He exhaled slowly, not quite sure of the answer himself. He came to a decision when Kíli finally looked at him, his eyes glinting with moisture.

Fíli managed a small smile. "Yeah. I think we will."

Kíli smiled back. "Okay."
Dís watched as her boys packed a few last minute essentials. They hurried around, agitated and excited, and they were each forced to hop around the other more than once. They tossed food and clothes across the room with a,

"Don't forget your spare breeches, Kíli!"

And, "Fíli! Put this in your pack! I've run out of space in mine."

Their mother hid a smile. When they were finally ready, the boys stood shoulder to shoulder in front of her. Adreneline made them jumpy, but it couldn't be blamed for the sudden moisture in their eyes. She pulled each of them into a warm hug and kissed their cheeks.

"Oh, my boys," she said. "Would that I could go with you."

"I wish you would, Mum," Fíli said with a quick grin.

"You'd slay Smaug single handedly!" Kíli added.

Dís chuckled and shook her head, her chest tight. "Be brave, my precious boys," she said, her voice thick. "I'm so very proud of you both."

Her words halted in her throat all together, and she had to stop, blinking hard. Her sons pulled her into a group hug, and they both trembled with pent up emotion.

"I love you, Mum," Fíli managed.

"Me, too," Kíli said gruffly.

She buried her face into their shoulders, and they gripped her tighter, as if for dear life. After a moment more, she stepped back from them, though it took everything in her to release her precious boys. "Now, then," she said briskly as she wiped at her eyes. "I have one more gift for each of you."

To Kíli, she presented a runestone. "You come back to me," she said tenderly. "Promise me."

He sniffed and let go a ragged breath. "I promise," he said hoarsely, and his heart ached. She nodded and ran her hand down his cheek, wiping away the tear he hadn't realized was there.
"Fíli!" she said, moving to stand in front of her firstborn.

"Mum."

She produced a pendant on a silver chain from her pocket, and he lifted his hair as she hung it around his neck. Fíli's knees nearly buckled when he saw what it was. The pendant was in the shape of a hammer. He'd never spoken openly about it, but the forge was his first love. If he'd had the choice and if Kíli had wanted it, Fíli would relinquish his right as heir and spend the rest of his life in a forge. As it was, it was his duty as the eldest, so the crown prince he must be. He couldn't hold back the tears anymore, and he wept openly at his mother's simple gift. She knew where his heart was.

"You'll always have a place here," she said. He nodded, at a loss for words, and dropped his head onto her shoulder. She held him, as she had so often when he was young. She spoke softly into his ear.

"Remember your strength, dear heart. It will bear you through the dark and deliver you to the light. You will find a way."
Fíli jumped and looked at her, startled. His mother just smiled and nodded. He glanced at Kíli, who looked just as stunned and quite innocent.

"I didn't tell her!" he said, indignant.

"He didn't have to," Dís said. "You're not the only one who dreams, Fíli."

Fíli gaped like a fish. Dís laughed heartily at his expression. "Now! You two had best be going, or you'll be late!"

Fíli and Kíli started, realizing how high the sun had risen above the horizon already. They each pecked a kiss on their mother's forehead and flew out the door to where Daisy and Bongo were waiting. They vaulted into their saddles and waved goodbye as they began their journey at a brisk canter.

Dís stood in the doorway with her hand raised in farewell. The full weight of what her sons were facing was crushing, but she stood a little straighter, knowing that they bore it together now. Fíli looked over his shoulder and waved once more before they rounded a bend, and she was lost from sight.

Fíli woke with a start as a rooster crowed in the yard below. He rubbed his face with his hands as the last image of his mother lingered in his mind. He wondered briefly why he dreamed of their last day at home, and he toyed with his hammer pendant absently. Perhaps it was all the excitement and long days on the road to Hobbiton. Perhaps it was the hobbit. His personality was so like Dís'. Whatever it was, he was glad to see his mother's face, even if it was in a dream. The memory of her smile and the familiar surroundings of home had been comforting.

He sat up with a groan and tossed his pillow at Kíli. His brother grunted on impact and grumbled something about it being too early. "Please, Fíli! Just a few more minutes!" he moaned.

"I wish we could," Fíli admitted as he rolled from the cot, "but Thorin said we must be ready on time. Late night or no, we need to get up now. Come on, you can doze in the saddle."

After they'd pulled on their outer tunics and jerkins, the boys stomped into their boots and staggered downstairs for breakfast. Fíli sipped gratefully from his steaming mug of coffee, and Kíli nearly burned himself in his haste to down his own mug of the delicious brew. The Company made short work of their breakfast, and as the time for the burglar to arrive came and went, Thorin decided it best to leave without him. Gandalf tried to stall for a few extra minutes, but Thorin was eager to be off, and nothing would keep him in Hobbiton any longer.

Kíli was disappointed. He'd really thought Mr. Baggins would come. Even now, as they passed into the outskirts of Hobbiton, he glanced frequently over his shoulder, hoping the hobbit would materialize. When they neared the edge of the Shire, Kíli looked one last time, more out of habit now than expecting to see anyone. Nothing. He'd just turned back around when,

"Wait! WAIT!"

And there he was. His eyes were bright, and his cheeks were flushed. He looked like an entirely different hobbit than the one they'd met last night, but it was Mr. Baggins! He presented the contract to Balin who examined his signature, and, seemingly satisfied, welcomed Bilbo Baggins to Thorin's Company.
Fíli and Kíli grinned stupidly at each other.

"Give him a pony," Thorin called to them. Mr. Baggins began to protest, becoming the same fussy hobbit from the night before. Fíli and Kíli just shook their heads, directed Daisy and Bongo to either side of the halfling, and hauled him straight up and onto Myrtle.

"Don't worry, Mr. Baggins!" said Kíli.

"She's the sweetest pony there is," added Fíli. Myrtle flung her head up and whinnied in agreement, but Mr. Baggins didn't look at all convinced. Kíli just beamed at the hobbit. The day was proving to be a grand one after all!

Towards the late afternoon of the next day, the company came at last to Brandywine Bridge and crossed over the river and beyond the Shire. Kíli noticed Mr. Baggins looking rather wistfully over his shoulder and back towards his home.

"Missing your home already, Mr. Baggins?" the young dwarf asked kindly.

"Well, yes, I suppose," answered the hobbit. "I haven't been this far from home since I was quite young."

The corner of Kíli's mouth twitched into a grin, and he could see Fíli smiling fondly as well.

"You know something? We've never been this far from home before either," said Fíli. Mr. Baggins looked at them both in turn, and there was gratitude in his gaze. He nodded and squared his shoulders as their ponies stepped onto the bridge, and he held his head high when they crossed over the gurgling river. Glancing over the hobbit's head at one another, Fíli and Kíli made a silent pact. This gentle soul was much like them, and they were going to look after him with the utmost care.

After a few days, they entered unsettled lands. The hills rolled, and the trees thickened around them as they traveled farther along the road. The company settled into a steady routine that consisted of a few brief rests throughout the day to water the ponies with one rest set aside at noontime for a short meal, much to the disappointment of Mr. Baggins. He commented aloud on the unfortunate lack of meal times, and Fíli and Kíli hid their smiles while slipping him a little extra from their portions. If Thorin noticed, he didn't show it.

Mr. Baggins began to open up as the days passed, and he shared stories of his own and taught Bofur a few new songs which he had composed himself. The entire company began to warm to Bilbo, as the boys now thought of him, with the exception of Thorin, of course. He remained coarse and unfriendly towards the poor hobbit, but Fíli and Kíli merely took his behavior in stride. Their uncle didn't trust people easily. It was his way, one which had served him well for many years. Fíli and Kíli knew that Bilbo would prove his worth eventually, and Thorin would accept him as a valuable member of the Company.

In the meantime, the boys endeavored to teach Bilbo a few new skills. They brought him along on their evening hunts (they'd discovered that he had an impressive knack for moving silently over any terrain), and they taught him how to track. Kíli was trying to teach Bilbo how to shoot, but the poor hobbit didn't seem to have any luck with that. The tracking interested him greatly, however, and he improved with great speed.

Fíli and Kíli grew very fond of their charge, and Bilbo of them. He began riding near them out
of choice during the day, and he complained much less about the lack of frequent meals, uneven
ground beneath his bedroll and his dew soaked state in the mornings. The boys tried to encourage a
love of coffee in the hobbit, but it became clear that he would only ever tolerate it, and little more.
Tea would always be his brew of choice, thank you, kindly.

In the evenings when they would stop to rest, Bilbo would offer his assistance with cooking the
meals, and Bofur would cheerfully accept. Everyone in the company appreciated the combined
skills of the two, and supper was often full of song and boisterous conversation. Bilbo would take a
bit of the food to whomever happened to be standing watch at the time, and within a very short
amount of time, he was accepted by quite a few members of the company. There were still some
who had their doubts about him, but Fíli and Kíli extolled his virtues to any with ears to hear,
faithful in their belief that the others would come around in the end.

One day, dark clouds swept down on them, and it began to pour in earnest. The rain fell in
heavy sheets, pounding relentlessly on the dwarves and hobbit. Gandalf had his hat at least to keep
the rain from his face, but the others were soon soaked through - even Bilbo, who'd been given
Dwalin's spare cloak.

That evening, Thorin finally called a halt. Oín and Gloín lit a cozy fire beneath an outcropping
of rock, and the Company huddled as near as possible while Bofur made a hearty stew. Fíli and
Kíli sipped the hot broth gratefully when it was finished, and as the dwarves filled their bellies,
their spirits lifted. Gradually, the pounding of the rain lessened to a gentle drizzle and finally
ceased. Fíli and Kíli cheered, and Bilbo joined in with the greatest enthusiasm.

After everyone had eaten, Balin was appointed to watch the ponies. Fíli and Kíli remained near
the fire with Thorin while everyone else bedded down for the night, content that it would not rain
again before morning. The clouds had cleared away, and bright stars watched silently above. The
moon was near full, and it would soon be June. The Company had been on the road for nearly a
month, and the Misty Mountains were only a week or so away. They were making good time, all
things considered, and the younger dwarves were optimistic that they'd reach the Mountain before
autumn. Thorin and the older members of the Company, Gandalf included, remained silent when
such comments were made, for they'd traveled frequently in the past, and they knew that journeys
rarely went as planned.

Thorin and his nephews sat in companionable silence around the fire for a little while. Kíli
pulled out a pipe he'd been whittling for Bilbo. It was nearly finished, and Kíli was eager to give it
to his newfound friend. Bilbo had left his home in such a hurry, he'd left behind a few things that
even a dwarf would miss, such as his pipe. The young dwarf was eager to make the hobbit feel as
comfortable as possible, considering the major adjustment this journey was in comparison to an
orderly life in Bag End.

Fíli and Thorin watched as Kíli worked, and they spoke little, if at all. This was their way, and it
was a dose of familiar that each appreciated. Many summer evenings were spent this way when the
boys were growing up. Dwalin would come and spend the season with them, and Thorin and Dís
would pack a basket and a couple of satchels, and the five of them would head deeper into the
mountains to camp for a week, sometimes two. It was a special tradition that Fíli and Kíli
cherished. Now that they were on the road with their uncle, it was like old times, almost...if you
took away the reason they were going, the fact that they intended to take on a dragon, the extreme
distance that lay ahead and the various dangers they were going to face...not to mention their
certain death. Other than that, yeah. Just like old times.

After a while, Thorin dozed off, and the boys smiled at one another when he began to snore.
The deep sound was echoed by the other dwarves, especially Bombur. Fíli glanced up as Bilbo
began to toss and turn at the sound, and finally it seemed as though he couldn't take it anymore. He stood from his bedroll, moving to stand by Myrtle. As he fed her an apple, Fili heard Kili snicker.

"See? I'm not the only one," Kili whispered. Fili kicked at him.

"Shut up."

A croaking screech-like sound in the distance startled Bilbo and alerted the boys.

"What was that?" Bilbo nervously asked. Kili couldn't help himself.

"Orcs."

"Orcs?!" Bilbo said, moving quickly to be near the fire.

"Throat cutters. There'll be dozens of them out there. The lowlands are crawling with them," Fili confirmed.

"They strike in the wee, small hours of the night when everyone's asleep...quick and quiet, no screams! Just lots of blood," Kili added, most unhelpfully. Bilbo's eyes were round as saucers, and the boys couldn't suppress their amusement. They hadn't noticed Thorin waking, but he addressed them now.

"Do you think that's funny?"

The boys looked at him, startled and shamefaced.

"Do you think a night raid by orcs is a joke?" Thorin prompted.

"We didn't mean anything by it," Kili said in a low voice.

"No, you didn't," Thorin spat as he stalked away. "You know nothing of the world."

Kili's head dropped, and his heart burned in his chest. He'd wanted so badly to prove to Thorin that he was ready and capable, but now he'd mucked it up.

Then Balin was at Fili's side, explaining Thorin's loathing for orcs. He told them of the battle for Moria, something they knew a little about. It was a history that their mother said they needed to know, a battle in which many great heroes had fallen, including Balin's father and their Uncle Frerin. But Balin was recounting the facts from his own point of view, and the history took on new life and deeper meaning. He spoke of the beheading of their great-grandfather, the last King Under the Mountain, at the hands of the pale orc, Azog the Defiler. He described the anguish and rage in Thorin's roar as he leapt to avenge him. Balin told them how Thorin cut off Azog's fighting hand and led the final charge. With the loss of their leader, the orcs fled back into the mines, and the dwarves had the victory that day.

Fili looked from Balin to where Thorin stood looking out over the valley below them, and his heart ached for him. While Balin spoke, the other dwarves woke and stood listening to the tale.

"But there was no feast nor song that night," he continued, "for our dead were beyond the count of grief. We few had survived, and I thought to myself then, 'There is one who I could follow. There is one I could call king.'"

When he'd finished, Thorin turned, eyes misted. He nodded once to the dwarves facing him, acknowledging the silent honor they offered him.
"And the pale orc," Bilbo asked, "what happened to him?"

Thorin sneered. "Slunk back into the hole from whence he came. That filth died of his wounds long ago."

A movement caught Fíli's eye, and he looked to see Balin sharing a glance with Gandalf. He'd barely begun to wonder what the look might mean when the ponies all started at some sound. He stood, preparing to go to them and see what the matter was, when one of the pack ponies bolted down the hillside. Without a thought, he took off in pursuit, and there was shouting as a few other dwarves followed him.

Luckily for Fíli, the moon shone brightly and the pony's gray fur reflected the light. At the bottom of the valley, the moonlight reflected off something else. Fíli's heart shot straight into his mouth. The pony was headed straight for river. Now, if this had happened a few nights before, it wouldn't have been such a big deal, but the incessant rain throughout the day had caused the river to swell beyond its normal limits. Against Fíli's desperate hope, the pony charged into the water, and the current immediately began to pull him under.

Fíli bit back a curse and turned sharply, running along the bank as he considered his options. Behind him he heard Thorin shouting,

"Bring the rope!"

Fíli made a decision - a crazy one, but it was something. Angling toward the water, he leapt.
Generally, dwarves aren't swimmers. On the whole, they have a healthy fear of the water, as their compact build and heavy muscles don't allow them any buoyancy. Every now and then, however, a dwarf will brave his or her natural fear of the water, and learn to swim. Dís' older brother, Frerin, was one such dwarf. He was a curious and adventurous lad, and he had many adventures and did many things in his short life that few dwarves ever dreamed of. Although swimming eventually became a favored activity for him, he'd been forced to learn how under rather desperate circumstances.

When Frerin was 11, and Dís was all of 2 years old, they were playing on the frozen surface of Long Lake. The King Under the Mountain's son, Thrain, had decided to take his wife and children on holiday that winter, and they were enjoying the change of pace immensely. Thrain sternly warned his sons and daughter not to venture out on the ice, but of course, children have a tendency to do exactly what their not allowed to as soon as they're reminded of it.

All too soon, Frerin and Dís found themselves several yards from shore and giggling as they scooted along the slick surface. Frerin was busy keeping his balance when he heard Dís's feet go
out from beneath her for about the twentieth time. He began to turn with the intent of helping her up when he heard a sound that turned his stomach. It was a creaking followed by a series of sharp pops, and Dís stared at him with wide eyes as the ice began shifting beneath her. Frerin held his breath, afraid to move, but it didn't matter.

With a shriek, the ice gave, and his sister disappeared beneath the surface.

Without thinking, Frerin dove through the hole and followed her down into the water. The cold was so painful that he nearly blacked out altogether. His hand brushed against something, and his fingers were so numb he almost didn't realize he'd touched something until whatever it was wrapped itself around his arm. Suddenly understanding that it was Dís scrabbling for purchase, he tucked her into his chest, ignoring her feeble kicks into his abdomen. He kicked and clawed with his free hand at the water. For a moment he didn't make any progress at all, and then he managed to force his limbs to cooperate. He established a rhythm, and suddenly his hand broke the surface. Dís had grown still in his grip, and the cold was clouding his mind and vision.

Frerin floundered, trying to find something to hold onto and pull himself out, but he was so cold, and his fingers had lost their feeling. Then someone was there, gripping his arm and hauling him up, and the winter air stung his skin as he was finally free of the water. He coughed, sputtering and shaking. Thorin's voice was in his ears, and he realized that his older brother was carrying both himself and Dís back to shore.

Suddenly there were voices and hands everywhere, and Dís was plucked from Frerin's arms. A great bearskin was wrapped snugly around him, and he could see that his little sister was likewise swaddled. They were placed near the fire which was stoked almost unbearably hot. After the feeling returned to their bodies, the royal family breathed a sigh of relief.

When spring came, Frerin worked hard to improve his new found ability to swim. He began to enjoy it, and after some coaxing, he taught Dís how to swim as well. The years passed, and Dís had children of her own. She taught them to swim in the stream near their home, firm in her belief that it was a skill they would need. She wasn't wrong.

Fíli gasped as his head surfaced. The water rushed and roared around him, and dimly above it he could hear the shrill screams of the pony and the other dwarves shouting from the riverbank. Sucking in another breath, he swam towards the pony with strong strokes. Before he reached him, Fíli yelled,

"Throw me the rope!"

In answer he heard, "Kíli, NO!"

Confused, he glanced at the shore in time to see his brother flying through the air. And now, there's that. He gritted his teeth and struggled nearer the pony as his brother allowed the current to bring him near.

"Fíli!"

"Kíli! What are you doing, you idiot?!"

"Helping! I have the rope!"
Fíli grunted in response as he was briefly pulled beneath the surface. He came up again with a cough. He suddenly recalled his distaste for getting water up his nose as it began to burn. "Toss me the end! I'll pass it under him."

"Be careful!" Kíli called as the rope left his hands.

Fíli nodded and caught it. Taking a deep breath, he gripped the pony's mane and dove down as Kíli attempted to calm the poor thing. The dull roar of the water filled Fíli's ears as he clung beneath the surface. He stretched, slipping the rope beneath the pony's belly, and he felt a tug as his brother gripped it on the other side. He was pulling himself back up when a rock caught him in the ribs and forced the air from his lungs.

Kíli secured the rope and cupped a hand to his mouth. "PULL!"

Immediately, the line went taught. He turned to flash a smile at his brother, and realized something was amiss. He searched the surrounding water frantically. His heart pounded. Turning back to the others, he called,

"Fíli's gone! Does anyone see him?!

There was a murmur from the dwarves, but none could give Kíli an answer. Then Bilbo was running and shouting, "THERE! He's there!"

Kíli looked sharply at the hobbit to see where he was pointing. Down river was the barest hint of a rock peeking above the surface - and Fíli was clinging to it. As the Thorin continued to direct the dwarves pulling the pony to safety, Kíli released his hold on the rope and swam with the current towards his brother.

"Fíli!"

He was clearly in pain, and Kíli's stomach rolled a little at the pallor of Fíli's face.

Fíli raised his head at his brother's call and winced. His ribs were on fire. Kíli slid next to him on the rock and put a hand to his forehead.

"You're hurt," Kíli stated.

Fíli shook his head. "Just my pride."

Kíli pursed his lips, but didn't press. The others had finally managed to haul the pony onto dry land, and Thorin and two others were making their way down river with the rope to where Bilbo was standing. The hobbit gestured to Fíli and Kíli, and Thorin called across the water.

"FILI!"

"Yes, Uncle?" Fíli called back, grimacing at the pain that ripped through his torso.

Thorin visibly sagged in relief.

Kíli studied Fíli's face and came to a decision. "Uncle, will you throw us the rope?" he asked. "I think we've both had enough swimming for today."

Fíli glanced at his brother and recognized the gesture for what it was. He nodded in thanks.
When the rope came, Kíli looped it under Fíli's arms and signaled that they were ready. As they were pulled away from the rock, Kíli helped Fíli keep his head above water level as best he could. There were a couple of moments when the water covered both their heads, but there was little Kíli could do about that. It seemed a long time before they finally felt hands gripping their arms and lifting them clear of the water.

The boys lowered themselves to the ground gratefully, and Thorin knelt near them as they caught their breaths. "Are you both alright, then?" he asked.

"Right as rain," Fíli answered quickly. Kíli eyed him, but said nothing. If Thorin noticed the look, he didn't let on.

"Well, then," said Thorin, "we'd best get back to camp. All of us could do with some sleep."

As the dwarves began to make their way back up the hill, Bilbo dropped behind to walk beside the boys. Kíli smiled at him.

"And how's that for an adventure, Bilbo?"

The hobbit grinned in return. "Quite exciting, but I am rather glad it's over for tonight."

"You're not the only one," Fíli said, his voice strained.

Bilbo put a hand out to stop Thorin's nephews, and he looked Fíli full in the face.

"Begging your pardon, but are you ill?" he asked.

Fíli shook his head, but Bilbo looked at the way the dwarf leaned on his brother's arm for support, and he wasn't fooled. Every step Fíli took seemed to make him sick to his stomach, and he had one arm pressed to his ribs. Bilbo squared his shoulders and adopted his most matter of fact tone.

"Fíli. You're going to tell me what's the matter. You're clearly in a great deal of pain, and we need to see to whatever's wrong with you. Now, let's have it."

Fíli and Kíli looked at the little hobbit in surprise. He sounded just like their mother, which is probably what made Fíli cave in the end.

"It's just a little bruising," he admitted.

"Where?" Bilbo pressed.

"My ribs. It happened just after we looped the rope around the pony. There were some rocks in the water. The current pulled me right into them."

"Come on," said Kíli, "we'd better have Óin take a look at you."

"I'm sure it'll pass," Fíli insisted. "I just need some sleep."

"Oh, come off it! You know you'll only feel worse in the morning. Best to have it taken care of now instead of later."

Fíli sighed, and it obviously hurt him very much. Finally, he nodded tightly. Bilbo stepped to his side, and together, he and Kíli helped him back up to camp.
Óin hummed softly as he wound the bandage snugly around Fíli's bare torso. "You're lucky you're young," the old dwarf commented, "and that you only took a bruising. You'll bounce back, lad, and sooner than you think. Just mind you don't put too much strain on your ribs for a few days."

Fíli nodded, grateful. "I'll be careful."

There was a twinkle in the physician's eyes as he answered, "I doubt that, but if it makes you feel better to say it."

Fíli couldn't help but grin. The old ones knew him and Kíli better than he gave them credit for.

"Now! Get some rest, and don't even think about standing watch. You're not to move from this spot until we set out in the morning. Clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Sleep well, lads."

Fíli and Kíli bade him goodnight. They'd stripped to their breeches and laid their clothes near the fire to dry. The flames dried them as well, and they enjoyed the feel of the breeze on their skin. Kíli pulled a blanket over his brother and patted his shoulder.

"How're you feeling?" he asked.

"Dreadful."

Kíli laughed. "At least you're honest about it now."

Fíli looked over at him. "Well, you read me like a book anyway, so I don't see why not."

"Why'd you even bother trying to hide it to begin with?"

"I don't like being a burden, Kíli. And I didn't want to admit to myself that it hurt as much as it did."

Kíli flicked him on the forehead. "Don't be such an idiot, okay?"

Fíli smiled, and his eyelids were heavy with fatigue and the medicine that Óin made him drink. "Okay," he mumbled.

Kíli undid the braids in Fíli's hair and combed his fingers through, ridding it of knots and bits of debris from the river. It was still wet in places, and Kíli let it dry before braiding it again. At somepoint, Fíli must've fallen asleep because he didn't protest when Kíli encountered snarls and tangles in his mane. After rebraiding his hair, Kíli stretched out on his own bedroll and drifted off himself.
Thorin watched his nephews with sad eyes. They were so loyal and eager...so willing to do what was necessary. Deep down, Thorin hated himself. He hated that he took his sister's sons away from her. He hated that the Company was so small, and that their limited number didn't stop him from organizing the quest. He hated that there was a higher chance of failing than succeeding and that it didn't make him turn around.

He hated that he had to be so hard on his nephews. Their hearts were wild and their spirits free. Every moment, Thorin was aware of how he'd robbed them of their freedom, their innocence, and if the quest failed, their lives. He buried his head in his hands. Even if they succeeded, he was never going to forgive himself. Forgiveness was the last thing Thorin Oakenshield deserved.

He stood and moved to where Fili and Kili had fallen asleep. He knelt next to Fili and examined his face. Some of the color had returned, and his breathing was easier. Thorin sat back on his heels, relieved that there was some improvement. He lifted the blanket gently and examined the bandages. Some bruising was showing at the edges of the linen. Thorin's brows drew together, and he pinched the bridge of his nose, cursing himself.
This boy. This beautiful boy was too precious, and all the pressure Thorin was putting on him wasn't fair. Dis' son knew nothing about the type of life his forefathers had in Erebor. He was born for open skies and sunshine, not echoing caverns and torchlight. His heart broke for Fíli - so eager to please and so willing to put duty first.

Kíli, bless him, would never now the burden that lay on Fíli's shoulders. He was free to go anywhere, do anything or be anyone he wanted, while Fíli was bound by tradition. If he could, Thorin would spare him of that. He would spare them both. But as it was, there wasn't another dwarf he'd rather have succeed him than Fíli. Thorin ran his hand from the boy's forehead to the end of his hair. He was a born leader - strong, courageous, understanding. The most important thing about him was easy way with others. A recent example was the ease with which he'd befriend the hobbit, but all his life Fíli had a natural ability to befriend others, no matter their race or way of life. He was a king worth waiting for, and Thorin was proud to have such a one at his side.

Thorin's hand paused in it's rhythmic journey up and down Fíli's hair, and in his sleep, the boy leaned into the touch. Thorin felt his heart twist painfully in his chest. No, he didn't deserve this boy, or his brother. But it didn't stop him being grateful for the love they bore for him. He stood and, after tucking Fíli and Kíli's blankets in around their bare skin, he made his way back to his own bedroll and curled into it. He felt more weary than he ever had in his life. He grinned sardonically. And we're not even halfway there.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, guys! I just wanted to drop you a quick note to say a great big thank you! Your support of this project is incredible, and appreciate every single one of you!
Fíli stood in front of Bongo while Kíli tightened the saddle strap. Bongo nuzzled into Fíli's chest, but he was gentle, as though he sensed his little friend's discomfort. Fíli grinned and wrapped his arms around Bongo's head, resting stubbly cheek on furry forehead. Bongo rumbled deep in his chest, and the sound was one of contentment. Kíli patted the shaggy grey pony's shoulder.

"I think he's glad you're feeling better this morning," he noted.

It had been two days since the incident at the river. The first day was a rough one, and mounting and dismounting had been extremely difficult. Óin changed the bandage and applied fresh poultices every time they rested, but by the second evening Fíli was so stiff that he could hardly move. Then Gandalf, with permission from Óin, laid a large, ancient hand on Fíli's ribs. His eyelids fluttered shut, and he whispered something in a language Fíli didn't recognize. When the wizard removed his hand, the pain was significantly reduced, and the blonde dwarf inhaled slowly, taking the first proper breath he'd had in more than a day.

"Thank you, sir!"

"Oh, no! Don't mention it, my lad," the wizard said, patting his knee. "Just see that you take care of yourself."

Now, however, despite his improvement, Fíli eyed Bongo's saddle with some unease. The memory of how painful climbing into the saddle had been was wreaking havoc in his mind. Kíli saw the haunted look in his brother's eyes, and he put a hand on his arm.
"You okay?"

Fíli swallowed and patted Bongo, who nipped playfully at his sleeve when he stepped away.

"We'll find out."

Kíli hovered near, ready to help. Fíli placed his boot in the stirrup. To his relief, the action caused him no more than a brief twinge of discomfort, and it was only a mild one at that. Gaining confidence, he hoisted himself up and swung into place. He chuckled and sighed. He was still a little sore, but it was nothing compared to the crippling ache he'd endured since the river.

"Better, I take it?" Kíli asked.

"Much."

"Good." Kíli mounted Daisy as Thorin began to lead the Company forward.

The color returned in full to Fíli's face, and his laugh carried full and hearty over the others for the first time in days. By early evening, they came upon the skeletal remnants of a little house. A thick treeline bordered the clearing around it, and the trees themselves marched right up the hillside to great pillars of rock that thrust themselves into the sky. Thorin looked around and nodded to himself.

"We'll camp here for the night. Fíli, Kíli! Look after the ponies. Óin and Glóin, get a fire going."

Kíli promptly dismounted as Gandalf followed Thorin under what was left of the little house's roof.

"Hear that, Daisy?" He cooed as his pony munched an apple he'd produced from some inner pocket. "Your old pal's keepin' you company tonight."

She swatted him with her tail, and he swatted her mane in return. She nickered at him and nibbled on his sleeve, searching for another treat. Kíli laughed. "Now, now, my lady. Let's save some for later."

"Spoiled," Fíli tutted. "Just spoiled."

Kíli's jaw fell open. "The nerve! Daisy, are you going to let him talk about you that way?"

The pony shook her head violently and turned a brown eye on Fíli. She lifted her chin and blew a raspberry at him. Bongo nickered and sounded for all the world like he was laughing.

Kíli guffawed and scolded, "Let that be a lesson to you!"

Fíli laughed with him and tugged gently on Bongo's mane. "Traitor."

Bongo dipped his head twice.

Fíli was about to comment on this despicable behaviour his pony was displaying when Gandalf and Thorin's increasingly heated conversation distracted him. Gandalf came storming out of the little house.

"Gandalf, where are you going?" Bilbo asked as the wizard passed him.

"To seek the company of someone with some sense."
"And who's that?"

"MYSELF, Master Baggins! I've had quite enough of dwarves for one day."

Gandalf stalked away and mounted his horse, riding away in a huff.

"Is he coming back?" Bilbo asked Balin. The old dwarf just sighed and shrugged his shoulders.

Thorin stepped to the doorway - no longer a doorway, really, it was more a misshapen, gaping hole - and growled imperiously, "Come on, Bombur! We're hungry."

Bombur hurriedly pulled food from the packs, more eager to eat than to please Thorin, truth be told.

Fíli swung his leg over Bongo's head and tossed the reins over the pony's neck, trusting him to stay near Kíli and Daisy.

"I'll go see," he said, more to Kíli than to Bilbo, and his brother nodded, his eyes serious and concerned.

The other dwarves nodded encouragement as he passed, and Balin wished him luck.

Yeah, that's comforting.

Thorin saw Fíli coming, and he harrumphed and stomped back into the house. Fíli took a deep breath and followed his uncle across the threshold. He stopped just inside and clasped his hands at his waist. Thorin didn't speak, so Fíli took another steadying breath.

"Uncle?"

"Fíli."

"Why did Gandalf leave?"

Thorin bristled. "He advised that we go to Rivendell."

Fíli blinked. Ah. It didn't even take him a second to figure out why Gandalf had stormed off. While Fíli and Kíli were growing up, their uncle never had any warmth for elves. The only explanation that Thorin would offer them was that the elves abandoned the dwarves when they were in most desperate need. Being that Fíli and Kíli were not alive to remember it, they'd never quite understood Thorin's disdain. Kíli developed an uncommon interest in elves from quite a young age, and over the years Fíli had done his best to keep his little brother's interest hidden from their uncle. He was not always successful, which called for some rather creative improvisation and antics in effort to convince Thorin that they didn't care for elves at all.

Their mother knew of Kíli's interest, of course, and she let her sons know at every opportunity that the mistake made by one or two elves should not govern their opinion of an entire race.

"Would you hate all dwarves if one of them slighted you?" she would ask.

Fíli only wished his uncle felt the same way. He knew that Thorin's heart still ached with the betrayal he suffered at the hands of some elven king more than one hundred years ago, so he remained quiet a moment while he considered the safest course forward.

"What does he hope we'll gain by going there?"
"Essentials, mostly. Things we could certainly find elsewhere."

Fíli chose not to mention the fact that there were no other settlements between their current location and Lake Town itself. "Anything else?"

"Advice," he spat.

So there it is. Thorin's pride was a tangible thing. At times it served him well, but other times it caused more trouble than it was worth. That Rivendell was the home of elves was difficult enough for Thorin, but to be going to them for advice? Fíli pursed his lips, unsure of how to proceed. Tangling with Thorin's pride was like wrestling a bear: difficult and highly dangerous.

His uncle gazed at his face and released a slow breath.

"I do not expect you to understand," Thorin said.

"We could use the rest. Balin says that crossing the Misty Mountains will be arduous, and who knows what's going to happen in the future? Things don't always go according to plan, as you well know," Fíli said quickly when Thorin opened his mouth to argue.

"Uncle, this decision may prove to be the making or the breaking of us." As the statement left his mouth, Fíli was thinking about his dream. The easiest way for the quest to fail was for them to go into it bullheaded and ill prepared. The memory of the elf's words was making Fíli more prudent, the incident at the river aside. Then again, he was beginning to understand that certain situations just couldn't be expected or prepared for, and one must improvise - something he and Kíli were especially good at. Hopefully that would be enough to save their lives.

Thorin moved closer to his nephew, placing his hands on the boy's shoulders.

"You are wise beyond your years, Fíli. I will consider what you have said."

"Thank you, Uncle," Fíli said, a bit surprised and more than a little relieved.

Thorin smiled. "Now, get back to those ponies."

Fíli and Kíli were bored. They'd been sitting with the ponies since early evening, and the sun had only just set an hour before. They decided to explore the area a bit. The ponies would be fine for a few minutes, surely?

The wandered a little ways along the treeline, making different owl calls. It had been some time since they'd seen their owl friends back home, and they were curious to see if there were any in this area. After a few minutes of no answering calls, Fíli turned back towards the ponies.

"Let's head in the opposite direction," he said. "We'll see if we have any luck over there, and we can check on the ponies as we pass by."

"Okay. I'm getting hungry, anyway. Do you think supper will be ready soon?"

"Probably."

"Great!"
Fíli cursed, then counted again. He fought the urge to panic.

"Um, Kíli?"

"Yeah?"

"Where are our ponies?"

"They're right over...oh, Mahal."

"That's what I was afraid you'd say."

"Fíli..."

"What?"

"Look over there."

Fíli turned, and had to fight panic all over again. There were whole trees uprooted and lying on ground. A couple of them had huge chunks torn from the bark. There were tree limbs scattered all over. The rest of the ponies stood nervously in a group.

"What on earth did this?" Kíli wondered.

"Something big."

The two were still standing shoulder to shoulder when Bilbo stepped up behind him with a bowl of stew in each hand. He paused between them, holding the food out. When Fíli and Kíli didn't take them immediately, Bilbo glanced between their faces, taking in the solemn and distressed expressions he found there.

"What's the matter?" he asked hesitantly.

"We're supposed to be looking after the ponies," Kíli replied immediately.

"But we've encountered a...slight problem," Fíli added.

"We had sixteen -"

"Now there's...fourteen."

Kíli stomped over to one of the downed trees, becoming increasingly worried. "Daisy and Bongo are missing!" he informed Bilbo.

"Well that's not good," the hobbit said, then after seeing the tree, "and that's not good at all. Shouldn't we tell Thorin?"

Fíli blanched and shook his head hastily. "Ah, no! Let's not worry him. As our official burglar, we thought...you might want to look into it," he said hopefully.

Bilbo cleared his throat. "Well...it looks as if something BIG uprooted these trees -"

"That was our thinking," Kíli said.

"Something very big, and possibly quite dangerous."

Fíli resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Something glinted in the corner of his vision. He looked
sharply at what caught his attention and dropped into a crouch.

"Hey!" he hissed. "There's a light!" He gestured to Kíli, and they crept forward with Bilbo on their heels. Fíli dropped behind a fallen tree, the others sliding next to him.

"What is it?" Bilbo asked nervously.

Deep laughter reached them through the trees, and Fíli shot Kíli a look. They'd encountered these creatures before. Their jaws set, and Kíli growled,

"Trolls."

Fíli vaulted the tree, and Kíli was right behind him. They moved closer in a series of weaving sprints, utilizing the cover of the shadows. Bilbo followed in their path, trying to mimic their movements as much as he could while holding two steaming bowls of stew.

Fíli stopped a relatively safe distance from the trolls, though Bilbo looked like he felt it was a bit too close. Fíli and Kíli craned their necks, trying to catch a glimpse of their ponies.

"Do you see them?" Kíli asked anxiously.

"No...wait. Yes! They're in a pen just beyond the trolls. They're still alive."

"Thank goodness. Poor Daisy, she must be terrified...I count two trolls."

"Me too."

They froze. Fíli swallowed. "Did you feel that, Kíli?"

"Unfortunately."

The vibrations they'd felt through their boots and the tree in front of them were soon accompanied by crashing. A third troll lumbered by, and he had two more ponies under his arms. When Bilbo saw them, he leapt out from behind his tree, and Fíli and Kíli nearly had heart attacks in fear that he might alert the troll.

"He's got Myrtle and Minty! I think they're going to eat them. We have to do something!"

Fíli stared at him.

"Yes!" Kíli agreed. "You should!" He stepped forward, taking a bowl from Bilbo's slackened grip.

"What? Me?! No, no, no, no, no," the hobbit protested.

They just needed a little time to get back to the others and warn them, and if Bilbo could free the ponies while they were getting help, then all the better. Besides, the hobbit had a much lighter step than himself or Fíli, and that was saying a lot. Kíli hurried on, trying to convince him.

"Mountain trolls are slow and stupid, and you're so small. They'll never see you! It's perfectly safe. We'll be right behind you."

Fíli leapt in, "If you should get into trouble, hoot twice like a barn owl, and once like a brown owl." He pushed the hobbit forward, taking the other bowl.

When the hobbit turned around, they were already gone.
The two dwarves paused a little ways into the trees and set the bowls down.

"Is he going?" Kíli asked.

"Yep."

"Do you think he knows how to make owl calls?"

Fíli blinked. "I have no idea." Whoops.

"I guess we'll find out. Let's get Thorin."

Fíli grabbed Kíli's hood and hauled him back. "No, stay here. I'm faster, and someone needs to keep an eye on Bilbo, in case things go sour. Don't do anything crazy."

Kíli grinned. "When have I ever?"

Fíli cuffed his brother's arm. "Get going, you cheeky fool."

"You get going."

And with that, they tore off in opposite directions.

Fíli stumbled into camp, hugging an arm to his side. Oh, come on! Not now! With all the activity, his ribs had begun to ache again. He muscled his way through the pain.

"Trolls!" he shouted as he reached the fire.

Bofur dropped a ladle into the stew pot. "What?"

"Trolls," Fíli repeated. "Bilbo and Kíli are keeping an eye on them. They took four of the ponies."

Not the whole truth, but there's no time. In a flash, every dwarf had a weapon out, and Thorin was at his side.

"Lead the way!"

Fíli spun on his heel and did just that.

Kíli crouched in the underbrush just outside the circle of light. He watched anxiously as Bilbo crept around the trolls and reached the ponies. He was almost discovered a couple times, and Kíli's heart was galloping in his chest. He saw a light dawn in Bilbo's eyes, and he realized that the hobbit planned to burgal a knife from one of the trolls.

Oh, Mahal. Kíli watched, heart in his throat, as Bilbo ducked the troll's hand once. Kíli's excitement built as it seemed the hobbit was actually going to pull off the theft, but then the troll grabbed him and...ugh...sneezed on him. Kíli fought the urge to gag. Drawing his sword, he took stock of his surroundings and was just about to emerge from his hiding place when the troll dropped Bilbo. Kíli froze, hoping that he would use the chance to escape, but before long the trolls had him again and were speaking of torture.
Kíli drew his sword and erupted from the bushes, hacking at the nearest troll's leg. The beast squealed, and Kíli struck him again.

"DROP HIM!" Kíli roared.

"You wha'?" the troll holding Bilbo said, dumbfounded.

"I said," Kíli said deliberately, so as to be sure that the slow creature would understand, "drop him."

The troll snarled and threw Bilbo at Kíli.

Thorin burst into the clearing with the others right behind, and everything was chaos...for the trolls. The dwarves worked in a cohesive unit, their years of training and fighting together making them a devastating force. The trolls swung their huge fists and tried to catch the dwarves, but surprise made them even more clumsy than usual. Fíli helped Kíli to his feet.

"Where's Bilbo?" he asked. Kíli spun in a circle.

"I don't know! He was right here with me."

Fíli ducked as one of the trolls got too close and swiped at him. "Keep an eye out for him!"

Kíli grunted and rolled between the troll's legs. Fíli kept it busy while Kíli sliced at its thighs. The troll squealed in pain, and brought an arm around to retaliate. Kíli rolled back between its legs and ended in a half crouch, and Fíli leapt onto his shoulders as he straightened. Fíli glanced around, looking for the closest dwarf. Gloín was running toward them, and Fíli called his name, gesturing for his axe. The redhead tossed it up to him as he passed, and Fíli caught it, swinging it hard into the troll's shoulder. Now the beast roared, and backhanded Fíli from Kíli's shoulders. The blonde hit the ground and tumbled, trying to get back onto his feet. His knees gave a little, and he felt lightheaded. Someone pushed him from behind, and a giant foot came down where he'd been standing a moment before.

He was on his feet again in a moment, and he looked up to see poor Ori dangling from the grip of one of the other trolls. Fíli brought his sword down hard on the creature's wrist, and Ori slipped from his hand.

"Alright?" Fíli shouted.

"Yes!"

Everything seemed to be going well for the dwarves, and the trolls were yelling frantically to each other. Then Fíli spotted Bilbo. He was freeing the ponies, and Fíli felt a surge of pride. Unfortunately, Fíli wasn't the only one to witness the hobbit's heroic act. One of the trolls was on Bilbo in a second, and he never saw the great beast coming.

"Lay down your arms," the troll commanded, "or we'll rip his off!"

All the dwarves stood still when they saw Bilbo suspended between the trolls.

"BILBO!" Kíli surged forward, prepared to take on all three at once. Thorin threw out a hand, stopping Kíli in his tracks. He gritted his teeth and let his sword fall.
Fíli was lying on his stomach, thinking about how relieved he was that Kíli wasn't on the spit the trolls were slowly turning over the now roaring fire. As soon as he thought it though, he regretted it. He was just as concerned seeing half their number bound above the flames as he would have been if Kíli had been up there alone. The other half of them had been tossed in a pile, each dwarf stuffed in a sack.

What a horrible way to go. His mind was working overtime, trying to figure out a way to get them all out of this mess. Kíli nudged him with a boot.

"Any ideas yet?"

"Not one," Fíli admitted.

The trolls were quarreling among themselves about the best way to cook the dwarves, and Fíli knew they were running out of time. Then one of them mentioned something about dawn and turning to stone, and suddenly, Bilbo was on his feet.

"Wait! You are making a terrible mistake."

The trolls gazed at him, stunned, and Fíli tried to twist and look up at him. What's he up to?

"You can't reason with them, they're halfwits!" Dori shouted.

"Halfwits? What does that make us?" Bofur wondered.

Bilbo ignored them. "I meant with the, ah, with the seasoning."

One of the trolls must have been the culinary artist of the group because he wore a rather stained apron. He bent down to peer at Bilbo.

"What about the seasoning?"

"Well, have you smelt them? You're going to need something stronger than sage before you plate this lot up."

The dwarves roared in response.

"Traitor!" Thorin accused.

The troll on the opposite side of the fire rolled his eyes. "What do you know about cooking dwarf?"

"Shut up!" said the one in the apron. "Let the, uh, flurgaburburrahobbit talk."

Fíli kept quiet, realizing that the hobbit was stalling.

"The secret to cooking dwarf is, um -"

"Yes, come on! Tell us the secret!"

"Y-yes, I'm telling you the secret is...to..." Bilbo paused to think, and the dwarves held their breaths. Then, "Skin them first!"

The dwarves lost it. Kíli shouted abuse, outraged that this hobbit he trusted was proving to be a
The apron-troll asked for a knife, and Dwalin threatened Bilbo from the spit. The other
troll, the one turning the spit, wasn't convinced by the hobbit's words.

"What a load of rubbish! I've eaten plenty with their skins on. Scarf 'em, I say, boots and all!"

"He's right!" agreed the third troll. "Nothing wrong with a bit of raw dwarf."

He reached down and hauled poor Bombur up by his feet. "Nice and crunchy!" he said happily.

"No, not that one! He's infected! Yeah, he's got worms in his...tubes?" Bilbo said frantically.
The troll gasped and released Bombur, which was bad news. The rotund ginger dwarf landed
squarely on hapless Kíli. He groaned, unable to remove himself from beneath Bombur's
considerable bulk.

"In fact, they all have! They're infested with parasites. It's a terrible business! I wouldn't risk it. I
really wouldn't," Bilbo was saying.

Kíli's jaw popped open in indignation. Óin leaned close to him with a puzzled look on his face.

"Parasites? Did he say PARASITES?" he asked overly loud.

Kíli nodded, completely put out. "Yeah, he said...we don't have parasites! YOU have parasites!"
He couldn't believe it. Betrayal was one thing, but PARASITES?! For pity's sake, that was hitting
below the belt. He opened his mouth to hurl a few more choice insults when Thorin kicked him in
the shoulder. He spun confused. Thorin's expression was neutral, and Kíli finally realized that
Bilbo was actually helping. He cursed himself for a fool.

Óin turned quickly back to the trolls as he too began to understand. "I've got parasites as big as
my arm!"

Kíli added hysterically, "Mine are the biggest parasites! I've got HUGE parasites!"

Bilbo nodded in satisfaction. The rest of the dwarves chimed in, each extolling the terribleness
of his parasites.

"What would you have us do, then? Let 'em all go?!” asked the tallest troll irritably. Fíli glanced
at the sky. It had been turning from gray to golden at an achingly slow rate. Just a few more
minutes! But from the way the troll stomped toward Bilbo, Fíli judged that they may not have that
long. The hobbit's luck seemed to be running out.

"You think I don't know what you're up to?!” the troll demanded. "This little ferret is taking us
for fools!"

"Ferret?!" said Bilbo, insulted.

"Fools?" said the apron-troll, equally insulted.

"The dawn will take you all!"

Fíli smiled beatifically at the sound of Gandalf's voice. The wizard split the boulder he was
standing on, and sunlight shot through the opening, turning the trolls to stone where they stood.
The dwarves erupted in cheers and laughter.

Fíli and Kíli sat outside the trolls' cave. There was no way they were going inside. After
extracting themselves from the sacks and cutting the others free from the spit, the dwarves, Gandalf, and Bilbo located the foul hoard. The stench exuding from the mouth of the cave was positively nauseating, so Fili and Kili, along with a few others, elected to stay outside and keep watch.

The pair watched Bifur pick through some odds and ends strewn about the mouth of the cave while they waited. Kili's brows were drawn down over his eyes, and he picked absently at the embroidery on his coat.

"What's on your mind?" Fili asked.

"We nearly died - all of us. We were lying there, and I thought that would be the end of us. Our first real challenge on this journey -"

"What, the other night at the river didn't count?"

"No. As I was saying, our first real challenge, and we're only sitting here now because Gandalf showed up in the nick of time. What are we going to do when we face a more dangerous challenge and Gandalf isn't there? We haven't even crossed the mountains yet, and last night we were no better than babes lost in the woods."

"Kili, it's not the first time we've been in a tight spot or been dealt a poor hand."

"I know, it's just...fate is proving to be a difficult thing to change."

"Who ever said it would be easy?" Fili questioned, tipping his head to the side. "Anyway, I like a challenge. And look at us! We're very much alive, and I think that's very promising."

Kili's smile was fleeting. "But what if it just wasn't our time yet?"

Fili sighed. He dipped his head and caught Kili's eyes with his own. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there, yeah?"

"Let's just hope there is a bridge."

Nori trotted out of the cave and gestured to Fili.

"Oi, Fili! Give us your shovel!"

Fili stood and moved to where the ponies cropped grass at the base of the hill. Ori waved, and Bongo raised his head, snorting in greeting.

"Hello, Bo!" Fili pulled the shovel from his saddle. He handed it to Nori and watched the redhead disappear back into the cave.

"Ugh! I don't envy him!" he said to Bongo, who blew air through his nostrils and returned to eating. Fili leaned against his pony's side and picked at his fingernails. Ori stepped closer and stroked Bongo's mane.

"Thank you for earlier."

Fili looked up at him and smiled. "Don't mention it, Ori. You'd have done the same for me, and besides, I couldn't leave my oldest friend at the mercy of a troll, now could I?"

"No, I suppose not." Ori grinned, and Fili clapped him on the shoulder.
When they were small, Ori was the only other dwarf near Fíli's age before Kíli came along. As they grew up, the three of them spent a lot of time together, and Fíli and Ori learned quite a few life lessons together. During Fíli's twenty-fifth year, Ori and his older brothers moved away down the mountains, and they didn't get to see each other as often as they used to. Family reunions were wonderful and rowdy, the only thing wrong with them being that they didn't happen often enough.

Fíli always appreciated Ori's shyness. He had a gentle nature that belied an inner strength, and his way with others had always been an inspiration for Fíli to better himself. Ori longed to have even a tiny portion of Fíli's confidence and courage. In short, it is safe to say that they each held the other in high esteem.

They'd been standing for a short while in comfortable silence when the ponies began to shift nervously. Fíli drew his swords and spun in a slow circle.

"What is it?" asked Ori. "Another troll?"

"No...I'm not sure. Kíli," Fíli said, keeping his voice low.

Kíli turned, and one look at his brother's face told him everything. His bow was in his hand in an instant, and he already had an arrow lying on the string when a flock of birds were startled into flight. There were eight dwarves in all, plus Bilbo, who remained outside the cave, and within a moment, they all had weapons readied. Oín and Dori edged nearer the ponies, both to ensure their safety and to make certain they didn't run off. Bilbo, Balin and Bombur hung near the cave entrance while Bifur disappeared inside.

Kíli stood his ground between the two groups. A not so distant howl echoed through the trees, making everyone's hair stand on end. The ponies squealed and shied, and Bilbo asked,

"Was that a wolf?"

"No," said Balin.

Another howl reached their ears, and it was closer this time. The bushes shook, and the dwarves tensed. A large brown shape exploded from the undergrowth, feral maw gaping, and clawed paws reaching forward.

"WARGS!" Fíli shouted.

Kíli brought his bow up and fired once into the creature's mouth, bringing it down. Two more wargs attacked. Kíli fired again, but he was surprised. The arrow flew a little wide and stuck fast in the shoulder of one of the beasts instead of causing any real damage. One warg broke to the right, heading for Balin and the others as Bifur emerged from the cave with Bofur right behind. The other turned on Fíli and the rest, snarling and snapping.

Fíli bared his teeth and snarled back.
The skirmish with the wargs at the mouth of the troll hoard ended so quickly that Thorin and Gandalf were still in the cave when Bifur signalled the all clear. Nori and Dwalin came yelling out of the cave, their war cries ceasing when they saw the dead wargs. They shouldered their weapons, looking a bit embarrassed and more than a little upset that they missed the fun.

Thorin emerged with Gandalf right behind, and he took in the situation at a glance. Ori, Dori and Óin were working to calm the ponies, and Fíli was cleaning his swords in the grass. Kíli checked to see if any of his arrows were salvageable - they were not. Thorin grimaced at the dead wargs. Wargs were bad enough, but as the saying went, where the warg howls, there the orc also prowls.

"Mount up!" he ordered.

The dwarves hurried to do so, hearing the tension in his voice. Thorin shouldered a sword he'd discovered in the troll hoard and headed toward his pony. Minty moved toward him, and he stroked her cheek tenderly, grateful that she and the other ponies hadn't bolted. Over his shoulder he heard Dwalin calling to Bilbo.

"Here you are, Master Burglar!" he said. "It's about time you had a proper weapon, and this one looks about your size."

"Oh, no, no! Please!" the hobbit protested, but the burly dwarf ignored him and thrust a little sword - knife, really - into his hands. Thorin eyed the weapon, nodding in silent approval, but he hoped Master Baggins wouldn't need to use the weapon anytime soon.

"Dwalin," Thorin said, eager to be away.

His cousin nodded. As Dwalin and the hobbit mounted, Fíli and Kíli rode over.

"Where to, Uncle?" Fíli prompted, though Thorin knew what his nephew was really asking. He inhaled slowly as his heart and logic warred within him. Finally, he gritted his teeth and committed himself.

"Rivendell."

Orcs aren't fond of sunlight, which seemed to be the only thing the dwarves had going for them at the moment. At least we still have the ponies, Fíli thought. The idea of having to escape the orcs and wargs on foot was so ridiculous that he nearly laughed out loud.

Bongo stumbled beneath him, and he called anxiously to Thorin, "We need to rest! We can't push the ponies any further today."

He leapt from Bongo's back without waiting for his uncle's answer. The little pony shook and huffed, and Fíli despised himself for pushing his friend so hard. The wargs and orcs had been pursuing the dwarves for three days, and such miserable days they had been. The Company traveled at a forced march throughout the day when the orcs couldn't follow, and the nights were long and cold. They lit no fires, and sleep was no longer a comfort. The dwarves slept fitfully and kept watch three at a time. By now, the ponies were exhausted, and the over all temper of the Company was nearing its boiling point.
"How much farther, Gandalf?" Thorin barked.

"Nearly there! We should enter the Hidden Valley soon, but we must keep moving!"

Thorin locked eyes with Fíli and shook his head. There was an apology in his gaze. Fíli's jaw clenched, and he buried his face in Bongo's neck. He groaned in frustration, and the little grey pony brought his head around and pressed Fíli close. After a moment, he took Fíli's sleeve between his teeth and tugged.

When the young prince looked up, the others were moving forward around him. Bongo was gazing steadily at him with one big blue eye, and the pony's breathing had become more even. *What are you waiting for?* he seemed to ask.

Fíli grinned. He couldn't have found a better pony in all the world, even if he searched for an age. He swung back into his saddle and Bongo stepped forward with renewed energy.

In the end it was a good thing they didn't pause to rest. The sky was thick with clouds for the better part of the day and unbeknownst to the Company, the orcs were using the cover to gain ground. As one might guess, this was most unfortunate, especially since the road began to wind and climb up a rather treacherous slope. To make matters worse, it had been raining all afternoon just to spite them.

"Quickly!" Gandalf yelled urgently.

The dwarves did their best, but the ponies were too uneasy. On top of that, the road was becoming so narrow that it no longer merited the name. Eventually, the ponies in front refused to move. The dwarves dismounted quickly, attempting to coax them forward. Fíli and Kíli were at the rear of the Company, and they waited somewhat impatiently for the others to start moving again. Seeing that the others were trying to lead their ponies forward, Fíli slid to the muddy track. Howling reached his ears, making the hair on the nape of his neck stand to attention. Kíli was at his side in a moment.

"They're coming!" Fíli warned the others.

Kíli signed a command to Daisy, which told her to follow Bongo, and Fíli trusted his little pony to guide her to safety. The two brothers turned and stood shoulder to shoulder, guarding the Company's retreat.

"Ready, Kíli?" Fíli asked. His brother flashed him a grin.

"Nah."

Fíli shook his head and smiled in spite of the situation. Then the orcs came.

*At least it's stopped raining,* Kíli thought as he shot the first orc. Fíli made quick work of the dead orc's warg as the rest of the pack struggled toward them. The boys stood side by side, and Kíli would shoot at any that came within range while Fíli took care of the ones who got too close.

Then the clouds broke near the horizon, and the orcs were blinded by the light of the setting sun. They squealed and shrieked, and more than one slipped off the side of the track with his warg, falling down into the darkness below. Fíli and Kíli laughed and descended on the orcs and wargs, roaring war cries they made up on the spot.
The orcs were confused and blind. They didn't stand a chance. A couple of them realized the folly of staying in the path of the two wild-eyed brothers, and they fled in terror back the way they came. Kíli laughed and shouted abuse as they ran. The other orcs and wargs were dead, and Fíli wiped his swords clean before sheathing them.

"And don't come back," Kíli was shouting, "or you'll have US to answer to! Fíli and Kíli! Mighty and powerful dwarves! HA HA!"

Fíli backhanded him. "You act like you've never been in a fight before," he chided, but a smile lit his eyes. He extended his fist, and Kíli knocked his knuckles against Fíli's. On the track above them, someone cleared his throat. They turned to find Dwalin with his arms crossed.

"Lads."

Kíli twiddled his fingers at the burly dwarf. Fíli clapped his palm to his forehead.

"For pity's sake, Kíli," he said.

"What?"

"Well," said Dwalin, "I was coming to lend you a hand, but it looks as though you didn't need it. You could at least saved me one."

Kíli beamed at him. "If you'd been here a few minutes sooner, I wouldn't have wasted so many arrows."

"It was a good thing you had the environment on your side. You'd have been overwhelmed otherwise," Dwalin mused as he stomped down the slope towards them. Fíli put his hands on his hips and ducked his head a little.

"We had a good teacher," he replied, and his dimples became more pronounced as he surpressed a grin.

Dwalin shook his head and chuckled, clapping his hands on Fíli and Kíli's shoulders. He pulled them both into an embrace that would impress a bear. The boys groaned and strove to return the crushing hug with little success.

"Right, then," Dwalin said as he released the gasping boys, "let's get back before Thorin worries you've wandered into a warg's mouth."

Another hour passed, and it was dark by the tie they came to the edge of the Hidden Valley. The Company stood on a ridge overlooking a glowing haven. Rivendell seemed to grow out of the very rock, and thousands of lights winked like stars in the trees. Bilbo sighed in appreciation, and Fíli could tell that his little brother was likewise transfixed, if the sound of Kíli's jaw falling open was anything to go by. He reached over and closed Kíli's mouth, glancing quickly at Thorin who stood bristling a few feet away, but he grinned at his brother. It was a beautiful sight.

The Company picked its way along the narrow path to the elf haven, which Gandalf referred to as the 'Last Homely House'. Fíli was pretty sure he saw Thorin gag over the name. As they neared Rivendell, lilting voices began to float through the trees. They sang of welcome and called the travellers by name. They teased Bilbo about the eating habits of hobbits in their song, and the poor creature blushed, bless him.
The path brought them to a bridge just wide enough for a pony to cross, and the dwarves led their mounts over with no small amount of coaxing. Finally, they stood in a cluster on a large round dais at the top of a waterfall. A flight of stairs faced them, and a handful of elves descended these with fluid steps. One of them, a tall, dark-haired elf, strode forward and greeted Gandalf warmly.

Fíli stared at him. He couldn't move or breathe. Rage and horror made an unstable concoction in his chest, and the heat of it filled his head and made it difficult for his eyes to focus. Kíli laid a hand on his arm and said his name once, twice in a low voice. Fíli ignored him, the sound of his own blood roaring in his ears as the elf welcomed Thorin's Company. The elf scanned the dwarves, and his eyes rested on Fíli's face. He nodded so imperceptibly that the blonde dwarf was the only one to notice. Fíli blinked, and his pulse quickened. There was no doubt in him now. This was the elf from his dream.

As soon as the ponies were settled and fed, the dwarves sat down to a meal prepared by their hosts. Bilbo ate with relish and gusto but the dwarves stared at their plates in disgust.

"Where's the meat?" Dwalin grumbled.

"I don't like green food," Ori said mournfully.

Fíli sat beside Kíli and gawered at the salad on his plate while Thorin ate with Gandalf and Lord Elrond Half-elven. The name explains why I mistook him for a man all these years, Fíli had thought when Gandalf made the introductions. After the welcome at the entrance, Elrond gave no sign that he recognized Fíli. Even now, as the dwarves and elves supped together, the half-elf-half-man wouldn't acknowledge him.

He was pulled out of his ruminations when Dwalin noticed Kíli making eyes at one of the elfmaids. His brother tried to explain away his actions, saying that elfmaids just didn't have enough facial hair for him, and Fíli rolled his eyes at that. Kíli had never in his life fancied a bearded lady, which was probably because their mother didn't have one. They'd asked her about it once, and she'd explained that the relatives on her mother's side had very little facial hair. Often times, the dwarf women on that side had no facial hair at all. A few months before he'd left home, Dís commented to Fíli that those traits were probably what caused Kíli's beard to be so sparse.

"But who knows?" she'd said. "Perhaps the traits of your grandfather's line will win out in the end."

In any event, Dwalin appeared unconvinced by Kíli's words, and Bofur just smiled and nodded, not really believing him either. Then Kíli really stuck his foot in his mouth.

"Although," he'd said, nodding to an elf behind him, "that one there's not bad."

Dwalin leaned forward and replied conciliatorily, "That's not an elfmaid."

Even Fíli allowed himself a small smile as the others guffawed over Kíli's mistake.

"Very funny," the youngest dwarf said moodily, his ears turning bright red. Everyone returned to eating - tried to, anyway - and soon Nori was complaining about the gentle music the elves were playing behind him. Then, of course, Bofur took it upon himself to set it right. The cheeky dwarf hopped up on the table and began a jaunty tavern song he'd learned from Bilbo, who looked suitably aghast and embarrassed. Fíli might have pitied Bilbo in that moment, but his anger burned far too hot. Thus, he proceeded to be just as boisterous and disrespectful as the rest of his kin. Even
Thorin stamped his foot in time and sang even louder than Dwalin. It all boiled down to a food fight - begun, it must be said, by Fíli and Kíli - and the dwarves finally found a use for the 'rabbit food' as Dwalin dubbed it.

And so the Company came to rest in the house of Elrond in the end of June. The elves ushered the dwarves to their sleeping quarters, bidding them goodnight and scolding them lightheartedly over the mess they'd made in the courtyard. The members of the Company fell onto cots and benches and slept almost immediately and quite soundly. Even Fíli found that sleep came quickly. Though his heart was full of turmoil, the night was restful, and he did not wake until mid morning the next day.

When he woke, the other dwarves still dozed. He sat up, rubbing his eyes to clear them. On the couch beside his cot, Kíli flung out an arm and muttered something about muffins. Fíli smirked. Typical.

Bilbo's bed roll was empty, and Fíli guessed that the hobbit was taking the opportunity to explore. He couldn't blame him. Bilbo's love and respect for elves was ever present, and he spoke their language fluently. He'd been tutoring Fíli and Kíli in elvish when Thorin was out of earshot - attempting to, anyway. So far, Fíli had mastered a greeting and a butchered farewell. He learned the word for 'friend' easily enough, though given his present mood, he didn't much feel like using it.

Fíli rose, arching his back and stretching his legs. He glanced at Kíli one more time before deciding that his brother probably wouldn't wake anytime soon. The thought of Bongo crossed his mind, and he began moving toward the door, hoping to visit his friend. Stepping carefully and lightly as he could, Fíli hopped and maneuvered around the other dwarves sprawled about the room. When he reached the doorway, he paused. Rivendell lay before him with open arms, inviting him out. Still, he hesitated. He stole one last glance at his sleeping kin, sucked in a breath and slipped outside.

Fíli wasn't having any luck finding the ponies. He wandered for a long while, and despite himself, he loved the place. The graceful columns and delicate architecture were a marvel. Eventually, he found himself in a quiet garden. He froze at the edge of an intricately carved dais and stared at the low benches in alarm. Though the golden afternoon sun lit the place instead of moonlight, Fíli recognized it at once.

Of course, it exists, he thought hysterically. Elrond, after all, proved real enough. Fíli sank onto the nearest bench and buried his face in his hands. Of all the things to happen, this was the last thing Fíli expected.

A hand on his shoulder made him jump.
"Peace, Fíli," Elrond said.

Fíli scowled and said nothing, eying the elf warily as he moved to sit beside him. Elrond was silent as he enjoyed the beautiful afternoon.

"I thought you might find your way here," he said after a time. "I often come here to think and reflect."

"And terrorize dwarves while they sleep," Fíli muttered.

"Fíli, why are you here?"

"We needed supplies, and there are orcs following us," the dwarf said irritable.

"No, Fíli. Why are you here?"

Fíli looked up at Elrond. "You know why."

"Your loyalty to your uncle is commendable, but you know what's at stake."

A bark of laughter escaped Fíli, but there was no mirth in it.

"How could I not, with you reminding me for seventy-seven years?!" he erupted. "Do you know how cruel it is to be told from childhood that my destiny is to die for the sake of what you believe to be a doomed quest? Do my choices in life count for nothing?!" Fíli's voice broke, and he stood before Elrond now, having left the bench in his outburst. His chest heaved with labored breath.
Elrond regarded him steadily.

"Your choices count for everything."

Fíli blinked, and he stepped back, stunned. "What?"

"Had you not accompanied Thorin, you and your brother could've lived full lives in Ered Luin, but the quest would have ended quite a bit sooner than it has the potential to right now. However, it isn't your choices alone that seal the fate of your house. Thorin Oakenshield will make a series of decisions that will bring him face to face with a foe he cannot overcome on his own."

"The line of Durin has many enemies," Fíli stated flatly. "And if you don't mean the dragon, how am I to know which one it will be?"

Elrond gazed at him, and to Fíli it seemed as if the elf was measuring his worth. He nodded after a moment, satisfied.

"You will know. You possess a wisdom rarely found in one so young, but understand that the choices are still yours to make."

"Why haven't you told me any of this before? And why tell me now?" Fíli said, exasperated.

"Because Thorin chose to come to Rivendell of his own free will. Things are beginning to shift in your favor, but much more must be accomplished if you are to save your uncle and yourselves."

Fíli's heart galloped in his chest. Things are beginning to shift. The sudden uncertainty of the future was so liberating that he laughed. Elrond smiled then, and it was a genuine smile that reached his eyes.

"You have great courage, young Fíli, and a strong heart. I cannot guarantee where your path may lead or whether it will end well."

"I know," Fíli said. He looked up at Elrond then, and his eyes were shining. "But there's hope."

Elrond smiled fondly at him. "Indeed."

Fíli actually found himself smiling in return and was quite surprised by it. He felt so free, so unencumbered by the weight he'd carried for most of his life. The dangers still existed, and the possibility of failure was still there. But there was a chance, however slight, of success, and Fíli clung to it.

Then the elf surprised him. Elrond stood and extended his hand. Fíli took it, and the two shook hands firmly.

"I wish you all the luck in the world," Elrond said, "and forgive me for doubting you."

Fíli's eyebrows shot skyward. He breathed deeply, and years of tension unwound in his chest.

"Thank you, sir."

Kíli was looking for Fíli. He'd been walking for hours - okay, it was only twenty minutes - but there was positively no sign of his golden-headed brother.

"How hard is it to find one dwarf?" he grumped and kicked at a pebble. He wondered if this
was how Fíli felt all those times he'd disappeared as a kid.

"If this is payback, I swear..."

A child's laugh interrupted his muttering, and his curiosity took over. The sound trickled through the trees, and he stepped off the path he'd been wandering on to find the source. As he threaded between the trunks, he realized he'd never seen an elf child before, which of course made him go faster. In reward for his haste, he didn't look at the ground at his feet and promptly tripped over some particularly gnarly roots.

He cursed and lost his footing altogether, falling right over the edge of a hidden fold in the landscape. He tumbled down a steep slope and landed in a heap at the bottom. Rolling onto his back with a groan, he opened his eyes and was justifiably startled. A double image of an elf's face swam above him, making him wonder how hard he hit his head.

"Woah, there, Master Dwarf!" said the first head.

"That was quite a spectacular tumble!" added the other.

It took Kíli a five-count to realize that he wasn't seeing double and that his head didn't actually hurt. Still, the fact that the two elves looked exactly alike made him a bit dizzy. They helped him to his feet and dusted him off.

"You alright, then?" asked the first - at least Kíli thought it was the first.

"I'm fine, thanks," he replied with a bemused smile.

"Fantastic!" said the second. "And whom do we have the honor of assisting today?"

"Oh! Right, sorry. I'm Kíli, son of Dís."

"Pleasure to meet you, Kíli! I'm Elrohir, son of Elrond, and this ugly bloke," the second one said as he clapped the first on the shoulder, "is my twin Elladan."

Elladan cuffed Elrohir's arm good naturedly. "Not as ugly as you!"

Kíli beamed at them. They were so similar to himself and Fíli that he couldn't help but like them. Now that he had a proper look, he could see that there was in fact a difference between them: while Elladan had bright blue eyes, Elrohir's were a startling green. Kíli thought about what a blessing that must have been for their parents because apart from their eyes, they really were exactly alike.

"And this," said Elladan as a boy with a black mop of hair bounded over, "is our little brother Estel."

"Look!" cried the boy triumphantly. He held out cupped hands, and in the hollow rested a wee hummingbird.

"Excellent work!" praised Elrohir. "You gentled him like a champ."

Estel glowed with pride, and Kíli couldn't help but recall all the winged creatures he and Fíli had befriended and brought home to their mother. The little bird flew away then, and Elladan ruffled the boy's hair with all the affection and pride of an elder brother.

"Estel," said Elrohir, "this is our new friend, Kíli."
The blue eyed boy stood nearly eye to eye with Kíli, who realized rather belatedly that Estel didn't have pointed ears like the twins. Perhaps he's more man than elf, he thought to himself.

"Hello, Kíli," the boy said with a smile.

"Pleased to meet you, Estel," Kíli replied with a grin.

"I must say," mused Elladan, "that it's a relief to meet a dwarf who isn't so guarded against elves."

Kíli shrugged. "My mother taught my brother and I not to judge a person by their appearance."

"Your mother is a wise lady," Elladan said warmly, "to raise her sons with such a view of the world."

"I've always thought so," Kíli chuckled.

"Now then, friend Kíli," said Elrohir, his michievous eyes belying his crisp and business like tone, "what brings you tumbling down into our little corner of Rivendell?"

"I was looking for my brother, Fíli, actually. And I'm embarrassed to say that I got a bit turned around."

"Ah! No shame there! We'll soon set you right. Follow us!"
Kíli.

There's blood on Kíli's hands, on his coat, face and hair. Black blood, wretched smelling and thick.


Fíli woke, lightning striking his heart. He blinked several times, unsure of his surroundings. Then it came back to him: the journey, meeting Bilbo, the river, the trolls, the orcs and wargs, Rivendell, and his conversation with Elrond in the garden. He looked quickly at the couch beside him, and his bleary eyes recognized Kíli's sleeping form. His throat constricted with sudden emotion, and he sobbed into his fist. It seemed he would never find respite, not even in this place.

The Company had been in Rivendell for about a week now, and ever since the day he spoke with Elrond, Fíli had been plagued by dreams. He wasn't certain whether they were the product of his own imagination and misgivings or if they were actually glimpses of what might come to pass. Either way, he was sure of one thing. The dreams weren't coming from Elrond. The elf had promised to leave him in peace.

Fíli glanced at Kíli again, shuddering at the memory of this latest dream. The others had not been so clear or real. Mostly, they'd been images and faint sensations: a view of a rosy sunset from atop a spire of rock, wind in his hair as he moved faster than he ever had in his life, snowy mountains, a dense forest, dark caverns. None of these had been as intense as the nightmare that threatened to suffocate him.

It was still in the wee hours of the morning, and dawn had not yet begun to light the eastern sky. Fíli was exhausted, and his eyelids were heavy. He rubbed them furiously, though, and was afraid to go back to sleep lest the nightmare return and drag him down. Finally, he stood and stalked out into the night.

Elrond's sons, to whom he'd been introduced by Kíli, had shown him the way to the stables, and he desparately wanted to see Bongo. Maybe it'll help.

When he stepped through the large double doors, the ponies lifted their heads and exhaled gustily in greeting. Bongo whinnied and turned in a circle.

"Alright, I'm coming!" Fíli chuckled. He slipped into Bongo's stall, and Daisy poked her nose over from the next one, looking for a treat. Fíli winked at her and held an apple out. She accepted it and licked his hand for good measure.

"We'll keep that to ourselves, yeah?" he said in a hushed voice. Daisy snorted at him.

Behind him, someone giggled. Fíli turned, searching for the culprit. When he spotted him, he grinned.

"And what are you doing up, if I may ask?"

"Couldn't sleep," Estel said. His mouth twisted a little, and he added, "Nightmares."
Fili's smile faded as he replied, "Seems to be a common problem."

Bongo nuzzled his arm, and his easy grin returned as he scratched Bongo's furry forehead.

"The horses make me feel better," Estel murmured. "They understand in a way others don't."

"I've always thought so."

Fili studied Estel as the boy fed Bongo a handful of grain. He was gentle, and he murmured softly in elvish as the pony munched. *He certainly has a way with horses.*

Over the past few days, Fili and Kili had spent quite a bit of time with Elrond's sons. The twins took the dwarven brothers out of the valley to hunt, and the other members of Thorin's Company rejoiced that there was meat on the table once more. Their spirits improved, and their strength began to return.

Estel's origin remained a mystery, for clearly he was no elf, but Fili and Kili didn't pry. They were strangers in this place and had their own fair share of private information. But the boy was energetic and curious, and he seemed to have become quite attached to them during their time together.

He cleared his throat now, and Fili gestured for him to speak.

"What do you dream of Fili?"

The dwarf's brows lifted, and he pursed his lips. *What a question.* He thought for a moment, trying to find an answer.

"Many things that I don't understand."

"Does that scare you?" Estel's voice trembled, and Fili wondered if the boy also saw things that baffled him. He nodded.

"Sometimes."

"Do you...see things that seem real? Things that haven't happened?"

Fili's lips parted in shock as the conversation took such an unexpected turn. Estel wasn't looking at him, but it was clear he was waiting for an answer. He swallowed, throat suddenly dry.

"Now that you mention it, yeah."

"Do these things ever come to pass?"

Fili paused for a moment, thinking about Elrond and how real he proved to be.

"All too recently," he said softly.

Estel said nothing for a long time after that, and Fili was beginning to wonder whether it would seem rude to ask the boy more about the subject when he heard a whispered,

"I dream of fire."

Fili hesitated, trying to decide if he should speak or keep silent, but he needn't have worried. Estel continued on.
"Rivendell is burning. Lands I've never seen before lie in ruin, and everywhere are flames and ash. Then the darkness comes. It's not night because the night is kind, and there are no stars to guide me in the blackness. I scream, but there is no sound. I try to run, but I cannot move. There is no hope, and somehow I know that every person, every living thing has been wiped away as if by a flood."

**Woah.** "How often do you have this nightmare?"

"I've lost count, and sometimes it comes when I'm still awake." Estel was shaking, and when their blue eyes met Fíli saw himself reflected in the boy's face. Such empathy filled him then, and he removed his outer coat, wrapping it around Estel's shoulders.

"It is not easy to live your life plagued by such nightmares, especially when you're young. You should not have to bear such a weight, Estel. At the very least, don't bear it alone. Talking about it with someone helps. Trust me."

Estel regarded him, and there was soulful appreciation in his eyes. "What did you see, Fíli?"

Fíli's vision blurred a little, and his heart rate picked up. *Kíli's ragged gasps. Kíli stumbling, falling...* He blinked away the image. He swallowed hard.

"I saw my brother die."

Estel moved forward then, and he wrapped his arms around Fíli's ribs, hugging him tight.

"What's this?" Fíli asked, surprised.

"You looked like you could use one," came the half muffled reply.

And Fíli melted. He folded his arms around the boy and hugged him back.

"Thank you."
Thorin watched Fíli and Kíli as they laughed and ate with Elrond's sons. Honestly, he was still trying to decide how he felt about their easy camaraderie. He knew his sister would be proud of the way they overlooked the differences between them, but Thorin was still struggling.

For years he'd wrestled with his distrust of elves, knowing that the decision of one king didn't reflect the views of an entire race, but his anger burned too hot. The day the dragon entered Erebor, Thorin's people lost their home and many lost their lives. Those who were able to escaped, and his grandfather Thror led them into Mirkwood, seeking aid from the elven king, Thranduil.

The dwarves were humbled, and Thror all but knelt before Thranduil's throne, begging for help. All they wanted was food, shelter and a safe place to rest, but the king was cruel and full of ice, demanding they leave his forest immediately. He dispatched his soldiers and archers to 'escort'
Durin's folk out of his kingdom, and by the time the dwarves crossed the western border of Mirkwood, they were exhausted, disheartened, and starving. Still, the elves did nothing. With a final warning never to return, the elves melted into the trees, and that was the last Thorin saw of them.

Bitterness clawed at the young prince's chest, and anger churned in his stomach. Thror was not one to beg, and to see him brought so low and turned a way just the same was the killing blow to Thorin's already weakened spirit. It shattered him and his faith in the goodness of others. Forever after his trust was a hard won treasure, and it was one he guarded as jealously as Smaug now guarded Erebor.

Thorin's fear of being spurned in the same way was what made him grit his teeth now. When Gandalf gave him the key in the hobbit's home, he'd also produced a map of the Lonely Mountain and the nearby lake. Now, the wizard wanted him to show that map to Elrond, but Thorin had been stalling for days. He was concerned not so much that the elves wouldn't approve but that they would try to keep the Company from continuing on. He didn't want to risk being stopped now that the quest was well and truly underway, and he had too few dwarves behind him to take on an entire city of elves.

As the days passed, however, a sense of urgency grew in Thorin's mind. There were runes on the map that even scholarly Balin couldn't read. Gandalf didn't understand them either, and if the wizard spoke true, the only creature with a memory long enough to translate them sat across the table from him. Elrond had deciphered the writing on the weapons found in the troll hoard, and Thorin toyed with the hilt of his sword, Orcrist, thinking about how old the writing on the blade must be. He gritted his teeth, fighting with himself, and the old wounds in his heart ached.

He needed to know what the map said. And seeking advice is not begging.

"Fíli."

The blonde in question snapped to attention. Thorin's tone - which Fíli and Kíli often referred to as his 'king voice' - was firm and full of authority. Kíli looked up, mildly curious, but the look on their uncle's face made him glad for the umpteenth time that he wasn't the heir. Speaking with Thorin when he was this moody was not a past time that Kíli craved. Fíli was much more suited, much more confident, and hands down more tactful when taking on the king voice. Fíli stood and walked away, waving to Kíli who wished him luck.

It was early evening, and the dwarves had all gathered in the courtyard outside their sleeping quarters. Laughter, light-hearted insults and scuffling created a pleasant hubbub as they enjoyed themselves. Thorin pulled Fíli to the side, along with Balin.

"You both know the wizard has asked me to show the map to the elf," he began. "We must leave this place as soon as possible, but I need to find out what the runes on the map say. If they can help us find the hidden door, so much the better."

Balin grumbled a little into his beard and shook his head. Thorin said nothing, allowing Balin this moment, because he understood. Balin was there when Thranduil turned them out, and he bore the same scars on his heart. He had just as little faith in elves as Thorin did. He looked to his nephew then, and Fíli, Mahal bless him, was considering. Thorin knew that were he to ask his youngest nephew, Kíli would not hesitate to seek help from the elves here. He was greatful for Fíli's moment of silence and that even though the boy had discovered friends among these elves, he still thought carefully about sharing such precious information. Fíli stood, bearing most of his
weight on one foot, and his hands were clasped at his waist. Thorin couldn't help thinking about how much older he looked.

"Fíli?" he prompted.

"I think you should let him see it. He will not stop our quest."

Thorin lifted his chin, blinking in surprise.

Balin coughed, surprised as well. "What makes you think he won't?"

Fíli lifted his own chin, and suddenly, there it was. Thorin saw himself as he was before the fall of Erebor: proud, confident, strong and...full of hope.

"Well, then," said Thorin, voice thick. "Perhaps it is time we put our prejudices aside."

"Thorin, are you certain?" objected Balin.

Thorin gazed at his old friend, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "Sometimes we must trust despite our fear of falling."

Balin took a deep breath and sighed wearily. "Very well."

Fíli listened as he walked with Thorin and Balin. They were accompanied by Gandalf and Bilbo, who spoke softly to one another about the daily lives of elves, but Fíli wasn't listening to this. He had ears only for the elves themselves. They crooned to each other somewhere in the trees, and though they sang no words, it seemed their song spoke to Fíli. It reminded him of water, ebbing and flowing through the leaves of the trees and trickling down around him with the moonlight. The stars seemed to shimmer and dance with the melody, and he had never felt so peaceful in his life. He was tempted to close his eyes and just savor it all, but then he would trip, and he couldn't do that, lest he'd fall against Thorin.

They found Elrond in his study, and Gandalf must have already informed him of their coming because he waited patiently. Thorin cleared his throat.

"It is said that you know about runes of every kind," he began. There was no beating around the bush with Thorin Oakenshield. Elrond inclined his head.

"This is true."

"I would be most grateful if you would examine this map," Thorin said as he held out the old parchment. The elf accepted it, and he carried it to the window where the midsummer's eve moon shone in. Elrond read some of the runes aloud, almost to himself.

"Five feet high the door, and three may walk abreast..."

The moon rose in a broad silver crescent, and as he held up the map, the white light shone through it.

"And what's this?" he murmured. "There are moon-letters here."

"Moon-letters? What are those?" Bilbo inquired, extremely interested. Fíli grinned at him.

"Moon-letters are runes, Master Hobbit, but you cannot see them unless the moon shines behind
them. They were invented by the dwarves and written with silver pens and can only be read by a moon of the same shape and season under which they were written. These must have been written on a midsummer's eve by the light of a crescent moon, a long time ago," explained Elrond.

"What do they say?" asked Thorin, and Fili could tell how hard he was working to conceal his eagerness. Elrond squinted his eyes and adjusted the map for a better view as he recited:

"Stand by the grey stone when the thrush knocks, and the setting sun with the last light of Durin's Day will shine upon the key-hole. What is Durin's Day?"

Here it must be said that dwarves are a most secretive folk. Very little is known about them by those outside their own kin, which has given rise to various rumors that dwarves are not born but spring out of the ground fully grown, that there are no dwarf women - this is a result of the abundant facial hair grown by some dwarf women and clever trickery by others as well as the fact that most dwarf women go about in similar garb as dwarf men, and the belief that dwarves live forever - which of course is ridiculous, but many dwarves live so long that the mistake is a somewhat understandable one. They guard their traditions and language jealously, and very few are privileged enough to hear their native tongue. So you must understand that Elrond was quite justified in his lack of knowledge concerning Durin's Day.

"Durin was my ancestor," Thorin said, "and his day marks the first of the dwarves' new year which takes place on the day when the last moon of Autumn and the sun are in the sky together." He explained more for the hobbit's benefit than Elrond's, really. He supposed the halfling would be better off knowing since he was a part of this now.

"We haven't much time," Balin commented.

"Is there any more writing?" Gandalf asked.

"None that this moon will show," Elrond responded. He folded the map and handed it back to Thorin. "I would very much like to do all that I can to aid your quest."

Thorin gaped in a very unkingly manner. Gandalf seemed likewise stunned, Bilbo grinned in pleasant surprise, and Balin took a step back in his incredulity. Fili coughed to cover a fit of laughter that threatened to choke him. Elrond's lip twitched, and Fili could have sworn there was a smile lurking there. Then his uncle managed to compose himself.

"We would be most grateful," he said, voice deep and gruff with emotion. Fili grinned like an idiot. Yes, things were definitely beginning to shift.

In the end, it was decided that the ponies would stay in Rivendell until the Company could return to collect them. Elrond advised against bringing the ponies over the Misty Mountains, for there were all sorts of narrow tracks and hidden dangers along the way. It was safer for their hooved friends in Rivendell. The dwarves saw the sense in this and agreed. Elrond promised that the ponies would be well looked after.

The Company was given many packs full of food and provisions light to carry but strong to carry them over the mountains. Their plans - not just to cross the Misty Mountains, but also traversing the Wilderland beyond - were greatly improved with the best advice. Elladan and Elrohir told them of hidden springs and safe places to hunt, and Elrond warned them of the various dangers they would face in the mountains. They were ready to set out before the week was over, and the Company thanked their host with the truest of gratitude.
Elrond's sons stood to one side with Fíli and Kíli as the dwarves shouldered their packs early that last morning. It was a difficult thing, parting with such wonderful newfound friends so soon after meeting.

"Come back and see us," Elladan invited. "You'll always be welcome here."

"And if ever you should need us," added Elrohir, "don't hesitate to send for us. We'll be just as quick in coming to you."

Kíli smiled so wide, his cheeks ached. "We'll do that."

Estel gasped softly, and Kíli glanced side-long at him. The boy was looking toward Fíli, but his gaze was distant, as if he was seeing something halfway across Middle Earth.

"Are you alright?" Kíli asked gently.

Estel blinked, coming back to himself.

"Yes." He smiled at Kíli to reassure him, but when he glanced back at Fíli, there was a weight in his expression. It seemed full of awe and some private knowledge, and Kíli wondered what on earth he'd just missed.

Fíli just put a hand on Estel's shoulder. "You're not alone," he said for the boy's ears alone. Estel nodded.

"Will we ever see you again?" he asked, loud enough for Kíli to hear.

"Yeah," Fíli said.

"Promise?"

Fíli didn't even hesitate. "Promise."
Bofur was one of Fíli's favorite people, but right now he could just throttle him.

Weeks. They'd been traveling for weeks. At first it wasn't so bad. They left Rivendell just after midsummer, and their spirits were high. For days they climbed, going up, up and up, and even then they enjoyed themselves. It wasn't until it began to turn bitter cold that their moods faltered. Then it started to rain, and that was that. The dwarves were grumpy and surly, and Bilbo found that he wasn't any happier. Gandalf guided them in safety...as safe as one can be when traveling along tracks narrower than a man's shoulders with terrifying drops and crumbling rocks above and below. There were many tracks and passes through the Misty Mountains, most of which were dead ends with evil things lying in wait at the end of them. The wizard helped them avoid these, and they trudged along forever ascending, which became increasingly dull and exhausting. With the addition of the rain, the path became slick and more treacherous than ever, and there were no songs or conversation as the Company concentrated on putting one foot in front of the other.

The rain only got worse, pouring down in torrents. They slipped more than once, and what horrifying moments those were. Mighty claps of thunder crashed and roared, echoing between the peaks and rocks around the Company, and if more than one dwarf survived the night without a migraine, it would be no small wonder. Lightning blinded them, making it impossible to see in already difficult circumstances.

"We must find shelter!" yelled Thorin.

The Company continued to struggle along, hoping for an outcropping of rock they might huddle beneath. Fíli and Kíli spotted the boulder before it was too late.

"LOOK OUT!" they cried in unison, and everyone pressed back, covering their heads as a chunk of mountain splintered against the rock above with a terrible shriek and groan. When the pieces seemed to settle, the dwarves chanced a look around.

"This is no ordinary storm!" Gandalf bellowed. "It's a thunder battle!"

The dwarves and hobbit strained their eyes, and in the brief flashes of light loomed giants of stone. They were hurling rocks back and forth to one another, occasionally throwing some down into the dark ravines below. Unfortunately, the Company happened to be in the middle of all the fun.

"Bless, me!" said Bofur. "The legends are true!"

"We must move!" Gandalf cried. "QUICKLY!"

The dwarves hurried to comply, but before they could even take a step, the mountain shook and trembled beneath their feet. Gandalf looked back in time to see the mountain itself sit up and stretch, and his face paled when he saw the dwarves and Bilbo trapped on the craggy skin of yet another giant.

Then the giant stood.

The dwarves yelled and cursed, scrambling for a hold of any kind as the rumbling and quaking of the giant threatened to pitch them down into darkness. Fíli's throat was raw with panicked gasps,
and his heart beat so painfully fast that he feared it might explode. _Well_, he thought wryly, _it would at least spare me the trouble of falling to my death._

The ground continued to shake and tremble fiercely, and he felt Kíli grip his sleeve as a sharp crack and a groan split the stone between their feet. Fíli's stomach soared into his mouth. The rock began to separate and fall away.

"Kíli!" he shouted, groping desperately for his little brother's arm.

"What's happening?" Kíli gasped.

"Grab my hand!"

Kíli tried, but everything was so wet, and curse his numb fingers, he couldn't get a decent hold! Fíli fumbled, trying to grab Kíli's wrist. He might have been able to if he hadn't lost his balance. His foot skittered to the side, and he nearly toppled down. The rocks fell further and further apart, and Fíli wasn't strong enough. Kíli slipped from his grasp. His brother was frozen, eyes wide as they were pulled away from each other. Fíli crouched, muscles coiled and ready to spring when Bofur flung an arm around his chest from behind.

"No, don't!" Bofur cried.

"Let me go!" Fíli snarled, wishing he could strangle Bofur for stopping him.

"It's no good, Fíli!"

The blonde dwarf stared as the ledge his brother teetered on shifted toward Gandalf's position. A horrendous crunching noise filled Fíli's ears, and Kíli followed the others as they tumbled from their ledge to the wizard's stationary one. Fíli managed a choking sob of relief as his younger brother reached safety. It was only then that he realized how much danger he was in himself.

The rock jarred under him, and his chest ached with panic. Bofur and the others were screaming, and Fíli did his best to tuck into the fold of stone behind him. For the next few moments, his whole world was shrieking stone, crashing thunder, stinging rain and slipping feet. And then, dimly over it all,

"Fíli! NO!"

Lightning flashed, and Fíli saw it. The mountain side was rushing towards him with alarming speed. He clutched at anything within reach, breath hitching in his throat. There was a sickening crunch as the two sections of rock collided, and Fíli was thrown from his feet. To his surprise, he landed and rolled, ending up in a heap with the others. The rock giant fell away into the ravine.

"Fíli!" Thorin roared. Before Fíli could react, his uncle was on him, scooping him up and holding him tight.

"I thought I'd lost you;" Thorin mumbled into his hair. Fíli blinked back sudden tears. It was rare for Thorin to show such affection in front of the others. It never made Fíli and Kíli doubt his love any less, but it spoke volumes when he set aside his kingly demeanor for a moment and was just their uncle. Fíli hugged him back.

"I thought you had too."

When Thorin pulled away, his eyes were downright misty. Kíli was hovering near, and Thorin reached over and hauled him down as well. They clung together for a brief moment that ended too
soon. Thorin leaned back and stood.

The Company was sitting below an outcropping of rock that sheltered them only somewhat from the wind and rain. Oin was checking everyone over for injuries, and in general the dwarves were just lying where they fell, grateful to be alive. Thorin considered trying to spend the night where they were - they'd spent many nights in similar places, after all - but something told him they needed more of a shelter tonight.

"Fíli. Kíli," he said, and they looked up at him. "See if there's a safer place to rest ahead."

Kíli took Fíli's arm and helped him to his feet. They dropped their packs near the others, taking only the lanterns, and moved carefully down the path which took a sharp turn after only a few paces. After walking for a few minutes, Kíli grabbed Fíli's elbow.

"What is it?"

Kíli nodded toward a cut in the rock that Fíli's tired eyes had dismissed as no more than another shallow depression. In fact, it was an opening of comfortable size for a dwarf to pass through, but Gandalf would have to stoop. Fíli slipped inside while Kíli lingered in the entrance. It was an act of caution, one they'd practiced and employed countless times through the years. Should something go wrong or a trap be sprung, it would not be prudent for them both to enter a foreign space without care.

Fíli lit his lantern as soon as he stepped inside, no longer afraid that the wind would put out the flame. He walked to the back of the cave which was not very deep at all, and signed the all clear to Kíli - who'd moved inside and out of the rain - after making sure there weren't any holes or crevices to be concerned over. Fully prepared to head right back to Thorin with the good news, Fíli stepped back out into the storm. He paused, puzzled, when Kíli didn't follow.

"Kíli?" he asked, moving back inside. Kíli was quiet and wouldn't look at him. His younger brother sniffed a little, and though he tried to hide his face, Fíli could see a glint of light reflected from the lantern on Kíli's cheek. His fists clenched and unclenched.

Fíli pressed his lips together in understanding. He closed the distance between them in a few long strides and clasped his brother in a firm hug. Kíli gripped Fíli's coat and hiccupped a sob into his shoulder.
"We're alright," Fíli said.

"I thought you were gone," Kíli replied brokenly.

Fíli leaned back, holding Kíli at arm's length so that he could see his face. Fíli shook his head, and he was grinning despite the moistness of his eyes.

"I know how desperately you want to be king, but you're not getting rid of me that easily," he chuckled.

Kíli smiled, a goofy, lopsided thing. "I guess I'll just have to try harder next time."

The dwarves settled in for the night, and while they grumbled about the lack of a fire and a warm meal, they were quite glad for a dry place to sleep. The thunder carried on making a considerable racket outside, but the Company could have cared less. They spread out their bed rolls and curled into their blankets. Gandalf settled himself into a corner with Bilbo nearby. Thorin appointed Bofur to first watch, and snoring began to echo around the small cave.

Fíli and Kíli lay with shoulders touching, and Thorin gazed at them fondly as he drifted into the
first real sleep he'd had in days.

Thorin's eyes opened. It was dark. What time was it? Has Bofur been relieved? No one stirred, but Thorin's instincts told him something was off. He wouldn't wake so suddenly otherwise. Keeping his breathing even, he scanned his Company and the surrounding cave again. Still nothing. A sliver of blue light caught his eye. Orcrist glowed at his side, a tiny portion of the blade peeping above the sheath. A sharp clack and a deep groan reached his ears. His eyes flew wide.

"Wake up!" he shouted. "WAKE UP!"

Gandalf was the only one who stirred before the cave floor gave way, and he disappeared in a flash of light and a crack of thunder just as the rest of the Company was dumped down a roughly chisled chute.

Fíli was becoming accustomed to nightmares, but it was a bit disorienting to wake up to one instead of from one. It was the sensation of falling that woke him - that and Kíli's elbow in his stomach. For a while his mind processed little more than slipping, bumping, yelling, limbs and darkness everywhere. He was flying through the air with torchlight spinning all around, and then a bone rattling impact jarred him as his flight came to an abrupt end.

Fíli groaned and started to sit up, but he was kocked flat by the arrival of his brother...and everyone else. He was relentlessly pummeled by sharp elbows and knees. He whimpered in relief when he thought it was over. Then came Bombur.

"OH!" Everyone wailed. Before they had a chance to sort themselves out, goblins appeared from every side! Pinching and grabbing, they hauled the dwarves out of the pile one by one, and Fíli only realized what was happening - being buried as he was - when the grotesque creatures latched onto Thorin. They yanked him this way and that, trying to pull him away, but he fought and wrestled like a bear. Fíli and Kíli gripped his arms, straining against the goblins in some absurd rendition of tug-o-war. Unfortunately, there was a terrible lot of goblins, and they were quite determined. Thorin slipped from his nephews' hands.

The goblins grabbed Fíli's ankles, and he roared, kicking and snarling. He landed a couple crippling blows, but it didn't matter much to his utter disappointment. They grabbed fistfuls of his clothes and hair, hauling him up and passing him along with his brother right behind.

The dwarves were jostled, pushed, shoved and beaten through the dark for what seemed like hours, and in fact, it may well have been. Eventually, and quite suddenly, they emerged into a giant cavern. The walls were covered in scaffolding, torches and goblins. The Company was herded across a rickety wooden bridge towards an island of scaffolding precariously perched in the center of the cavern.

Their ears were assaulted by clamoring and banging of an awful sort, and Fíli realized that they were...singing, if it could be called that. On the scaffold ahead sat some sort of throne built from odds and ends of cast off relics and debris. Before the throne cavorted a goblin of giant proportions. He was hideously huge, and he stomped around in the vaguest imitation of a jig. His skin was covered in boils and warts, and the stench of him was enough to make Fíli gag. The Great Goblin flapped his arms around as he bellowed and croaked off key, and it only made the smell worse. The dwarves were shoved unceremoniously before this odious being, and it wasn't until the end of the terrible song that the goblin actually acknowledged their presence. When he finally
closed his mouth, he retreated back to his throne of refuse.

"Canny, isn't it?" he said, sounding rather pleased with himself. "It's one of my own compositions."

"That's not a song!" Balin huffed. "It's an abomination!"

The other dwarves grumbled in agreement.

"Abominations," sniffed the goblin, "mutations, deviations...that's all you're going to find down here."

As he spoke, the other goblins stripped the dwarves of their weapons and threw them to the planking at the Great Goblin's feet.

"Who would be so bold as to come armed into my kingdom?!" he demanded. "Spies? Thieves? ASSASSINS?"

"Dwarves, your malevolence," offered a particularly disfigured goblin with a crooked spine.

"Dwarves?!

"We found 'em on the front porch."

"Well, don't just stand there! Search them! Every crack, every crevice!"

The goblins weren't exactly polite with their searching. Then again, goblins aren't polite about most things. They ripped open the dwarves' coats, hoping to find hidden pockets and such. Fíli slapped at the hands of one particularly uncouth goblin and was rewarded with a cuff on the ear. He growled at the ugly creature, and managed to intimidate it enough to keep a few of his better hidden knives. Poor Óín's ear trumpet was stolen and stamped flat without mercy, and another goblin snatched up Nori's bag and emptied its contents. A collection of elven and hobbit made items clattered to the planking along with a few things from the troll hoard. The goblin picked up an elvish sconce between two fingers, clearly not wanting to touch it more than it had to.

"It is my belief, your great protuberance, that they are in league with elves!"

The Great Goblin grabbed the sconce, studying it for himself.

"Made in...Rivendell! Ach! Second age...couldn't give it away," he scoffed, throwing it away into the abyss below them. The members of the Company turned baleful eyes on the helpless thief.

"It's just a couple of keepsakes," he muttered pathetically.

"What are you doing in these parts?" the goblin demanded.

Thorin opened his mouth to speak, but Óín - bless him - put a hand on his shoulder and stepped in front of him.

"Eh, don't worry, lads. I'll handle this."

"No tricks!" said the Great Goblin. "I want the truth, warts and all!"

"You're going to have to speak up! Your boys flattened my trumpet," the old dwarf said mournfully.
"I'll flatten more than your TRUMPET!" threatened the goblin.

Bofur shouldered in front of Oin, hoping to distract the odious giant. "If it's more information you want, I'm the one you should speak to!"

The goblin looked skeptical.

"We were on the road," Bofur began. "Well, it's not so much a road as a path. Actually, it's not even that, come to think of it...it's more like a track. Anyway, the point is, we were on this road-like-a-path-like-a-track, and then we weren't which is a problem because we were supposed to be in Dunland last Tuesday..."

"Visiting distant relations!" interjected Dori.

"Some inbreds on me mother's side," agreed Bofur happily.

"SHUT UP!" exploded the goblin.

Bofur grinned cheekily in response.

"If they will not talk," decided the goblin, "we'll make them squawk! Bring up the Mangler! Bring up the Bone Breaker! Start with the youngest!" And here, he pointed to Ori.

Fili, it must be admitted, felt an intense surge of relief in that moment as the goblin mistook Ori as the youngest instead of Kili. He immediately regretted this, however, as he didn't want any harm to come to Ori either. His shy, well meaning friend didn't deserve torture. Besides, Kili was stronger in spirit and would cope with torture better, perhaps, but that didn't mean that it would be any easier for Fili watch.

Then Thorin stepped forward.

"WAIT!" he roared. Thorin tried not to grin when the Great Goblin looked suitably startled.

"Well, look who it is," said the goblin when he'd recovered. "Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thror - King Under the Mountain. Oh, but I'm forgetting you don't have a mountain! And you're not a king, which makes you...nobody, really."

Thorin gritted his teeth as the insult dug deep. He stared the creature down with all the intensity he could muster.

"Someone's looking for you," the goblin all but giggled. Thorin frowned.

"You don't know him, I think, but you knew of his father," the creature continued.

"Could you possibly be any more vague?" asked Thorin with practiced disdain.

"It was, after all, your blade and that of the Ironfoot which slew the pale orc's sire."

Thorin's chin lifted. There was only one the goblin could mean. Azog the Defiler was slain in the Battle of Nanduhirion. After Thorin severed the orc's hand, the Defiler retreated to the gates of Moria, and it was there that Thorin's cousin Dain Ironfoot struck him down. This was no small feat, and Dain roared defiance into the darkness of Moria where the rest of the orcs fled. It was in this battle that Thorin lost his brother Frerin, and the death of the pale orc did little to ease the pain in his heart. But the orc the Great Goblin referred to had sworn revenge on the entire line of Durin:
Bolg, son of the Defiler.

Orcs weren't an affectionate race. Bolg's desire for revenge came not from pain or a sense of loss but simple thirst for blood. His sire's death was nothing more than an excuse to sever the line of dwarven kings. For pity's sake, if Azog had survived, they probably would have used his dismemberment as an excuse.

Thorin's lip curled in a snarl. "That's not news to me," he spat.

"Perhaps not," the goblin simpered, "but it matters very little, I'm afraid."

Turning to a shaky little lackey at his feet, the Great Goblin ordered, "Send word to the pale orc! Tell him I have found his prize."

The little goblin rasped and wheezed what may have been his idea of maniacal laughter, but Thorin was unimpressed. He also wasn't worried. The wizard must be about somewhere, biding his time as he had in the Trollshaws. No. Thorin was cool and composed. The corner of his mouth lifted in a lazy smirk. Then the Great Goblin began a new song, and the cavern was filled with that clamorous racket all over again.

Kíli slid to Thorin's side and gripped his shoulder. Thorin tipped his head toward his nephew to better understand his hasty whisper.

"I can't find him."

"Who?" Thorin asked taking a quick headcount.

"Bilbo. He's missing!"

Kíli didn't know when the hobbit had disappeared. He fretted, hoping that his friend was alright. Smooth talking trolls was one thing, but a mountain full of goblins was something else entirely. Considering the twisted labyrinth they'd passed through just to get to the central cavern, Kíli had a hard time believing Bilbo would make it out on his own. He couldn't help thinking that it was their fault he'd come to such a miserable end: lost in the dark, wandering until he starved or was captured by goblins. Poor Bilbo! He deserved so much better.

The planking rumbled beneath him, and when he turned to look he could see evil looking torture devices rolling towards them. Ori shook beside him, afraid of what was coming. Kíli's heart twisted in his chest. It should be him going first, not Ori. He gripped his cousin's hand and squeezed, hoping to offer some kind of comfort. Ori looked at him then, eyes round.

\begin{quote}
Bones will be shattered!  
Necks will be wrung!  
You'll be beaten and battered,  
From racks you'll be hung!
\end{quote}

Ori squeezed Kíli's hand tighter as the Great Goblin sang, and Kíli winced a bit at the pain of it.
You'll die down here and never be found!
Down in the deep of Goblin Town!

One of the goblins was picking through the weapons and chanced upon Orcrist. As it drew the blade from the sheath, a horrible screeching sound filled everyone's ears. The goblin dropped the sword, hissing and spitting. The Great Goblin howled, clawing back toward his throne.

"I know that sword!" he said, quite hysterically. "It is the Goblin Cleaver! The Biter! The blade that sliced a thousand necks! Slash them! Beat them! Kill them! Kill them all! Cut off his head!" he screamed, pointing at Thorin.

The goblins overwhelmed the dwarves like a flood. They were attacked and beaten, knocked on their backs and held down. They struggled, but it was no use. Kíli roared his brother's name, but he couldn't find him. No, no, no, no!

A concussive blast shook the cavern, and all the torches exploded in to showers of white sparks. The goblins were scattered, shrieking and wailing as the sparks landed on them and burned their skin. Kíli's ears rang painfully. He sat up slowly, dazed. In the darkness he could see the glowing blade of a sword, and it swung at the Great Goblin, cutting the creature in half. The other goblins shrank back a little in fear of the sword.

"Follow me! Quick!" shouted Gandalf.

The dwarves were on their feet in moments, snatching up their weapons and racing after the wizard as his staff ignited with light and shone brightly in the dark.

The goblins chased them, naturally. The dwarves ran hard and fast, but these were the goblins' tunnels. They knew them better than anyone. More than once, the Company was forced to stand and fight. Goblins fell from cracks in the ceiling and leapt up from the depths below. They threw themselves at the dwarves and Gandalf without regard for personal safety.

The dwarves pushed forward, upward, downward and sideways for a long time with only Gandalf's staff to see by. They didn't know where they were headed, but Gandalf seemed to. Finally, after a long time, throats raw, lungs burning and limbs like jelly, they saw a flash of sunlight. The outside world was beckoning, and they were all too happy to oblige it. The dwarves shot from the mouth of the tunnel, inhaling the fresh air with gasps and hiccups. Gandalf led them a ways down the mountainside before he allowed them to rest. The sunlight would protect them for a short while, and more than anything, the wizard wanted to take a quick headcount.

When he came up one short, he counted again, looking frantically about.

"Where is our hobbit?!!"

Fíli and Kíli hung their heads as the others bickered about where Bilbo could have gotten too.

"I should have been watching!" Kíli rebuked himself.

Fíli patted his back. "We both should have, but how could we? We weren't negligent, Kíli. There's nothing we could have done..." He stopped speaking as Nori spoke up.

"I thought I saw him slip away when they first collared us."
Fíli grinned. *Clever Bilbo*. He only hoped the hobbit had been as lucky in finding a way out.

"What happened, exactly? Tell me!" demanded Gandalf.

"I'll tell you what happened," Thorin growled. Fíli studied his uncle's face. He was angry.

"Master Baggins saw his chance, and he took it!"

Fíli knew where Thorin was going with this, and he didn't like it. "Uncle, Bilbo wouldn't -"

Thorin held up his hand and cut Fíli off, saying, "He's thought of nothing but his soft bed and warm hearth since he stepped out of his door. We will not be seeing 'our' hobbit again. He is long gone."

Thorin knew he wasn't being fair, that he was prejudging, but in truth, the hobbit had spoken of little else since they left the borders of the Shire. The hobbit's safe home and stable, quiet life were the envy of Thorin Oakenshield. It was everything he'd ever wanted for his family and his people, and every time the hobbit mourned the lack of his comforts, Thorin wanted to rage and roar until he was hoarse. These were things that the hobbit had always been blessed with. Baggins complained about a few weeks without simple and extraordinary comforts alike, when Thorin's people had gone without for decades and more.

Baggins bemoaned not having his customary half a dozen meals a day and his fully stocked pantry, when Thorin had to skimp and save, work and toil, day in and day out for years so that his family might have even a morsel to swallow. Baggins didn't understand the value of what he had. It wasn't even the belongings or well stocked pantry Thorin craved. It was at the heart of it all: a sense of peace...that feeling of home.

"No," said Bilbo, appearing as if from no where, "he isn't."

The Company jumped as one at the sound of his voice and breathed a collective sigh of relief.

"Bilbo Baggins!" exclaimed Gandalf. "I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life!"

"Bilbo!" gushed Kíli. "We'd given you up!"

"How on earth did you get past the goblins?" wondered Fíli.

"How, indeed," mused Dwalin.

The hobbit chuckled nervously and slipped his thumbs into the pockets of his waistcoat.

"Well, what does it matter?" asked Gandalf. "He's back."

"It matters!" said Thorin in a tone that brooked no argument. "I want to know. Why did you come back?"

This hobbit was constantly surprising Thorin, and what Bilbo Baggins said next he would not have expected in a thousand years.

"Look, I know you doubt me. I know you always have," Bilbo began. "And you're right. I often think of Bag End. I miss my books, and my armchair and my garden. See, that's where I belong. That's home. And that's why I came back because you don't have one...a home. It was taken from you. But I will help you take it back, if I can."

Thorin blinked. It seemed this hobbit was not so indifferent and entitled after all. That such a
normal person would care so much about a bunch of boisterous, moody and roaming dwarves was a refreshing breeze after the cloud of bitter resentment and apathy of so many others Thorin had come in contact with over the years. Suddenly Thorin saw what his nephews did in Master Baggins. And it humbled him.

"Bilbo Baggins," said Gandalf. "You never cease to amaze me."

Everyone was complaining about dust in their eyes when a howl split the air.

Thorin's heart nearly stopped. *Oh, for pity's sake.*

"Out of the frying pan," he growled.

"And into the fire," finished Gandalf. "Run. RUN!"
Fíli swayed in the upper branches of a tree. The sky still held tinges of orange and pink, but the sun was long gone. It would have been quite picturesque if he could forget about the wargs prowling at the foot of his tree.

The Company had been trapped up different trees for at least an hour. The wargs had chased them partway down the mountain until everyone was forced to either climb trees or be overtaken. They had no choice but to wait out the wargs, hoping they'd get bored and leave them in peace. Unfortunately, the foul creatures below seemed to be waiting for something themselves. Occasionally one would test the strength of the lower branches here, or jump up and snap at the dwarves there. Poor Bombur clung to his branch, but soon gravity would win out and pull his considerable girth down. Fíli and Kíli were scanning the surrounding trees, wondering if they could somehow find a path through the branches.

Fíli was weighing the pros and cons of leaping to the tree beside him when the sound of shrieking and many running feet filled the air. Not long after, dozens of goblins poured into the clearing beneath the trees. When they spotted the dwarves, they pointed and laughed with glee, congratulating the wargs. It was then that the dwarves really began to worry because goblins can climb and chop down trees, where as wargs cannot.

Curse their thumbs.

The goblins heckled and taunted the Company, savoring their awful predicament. They built a huge fire in the middle of the clearing, but still, they did nothing.

"What are they waiting for?" asked Kíli. There was a nervous edge to his voice. Fíli shook his head. He didn't know. He looked toward the other members of the Company, wondering if anyone had some sort of plan. Gandalf, Bombur, Oín and Gloín were in one tree. Balin, Bofur, Bifur and Ori were in another. Nori, Dori and Bilbo had scrambled up a tree near Gandalf's, and Thorin and Dwalin were a few branches lower in Fíli and Kíli's tree. Since Thorin was the closest, Fíli hopped down a couple branches, limber as a cat, to where Thorin was perched.

"What did you see?" his uncle asked.

"Not much," Fíli said. "I might be able to make it to the next tree, though."

Thorin nodded, pondering this. Fíli and Kíli had been climbing trees since they'd mastered the ability to walk. Growing up, they spent more time in trees than on their own two feet. They could probably make an escape through the treetops, but what about the rest of the Company? The majority of them were too heavy and clumsy sitting still in a tree, let alone trying to jump successfully from one to another.

Thorin grimaced. He had no idea what to do. He realized suddenly that the goblins and wargs below had gone quiet. He didn't have long to wonder why. A large orc with pale, mutilated skin stood at the edge of the clearing. His teeth were bared, and the look in his eyes was hard and predatory. At his back were at least a dozen orcs astride more wargs. When he spotted Thorin, his mouth twisted in a hideous mockery of a smile. He pointed at the trees and ordered something in Black Speech, the harsh, grating language used by many evil creatures in the world.
The goblins screeched in excitement and leapt toward the bonfire, taking up burning sticks and logs. They rushed to the trees and set the trunks ablaze. And Bolg, for it was none other, laughed in victory.

The dwarves scrambled as high as they could, trying to evade the flames, but they were running out of time. Fíli thought furiously. If he and Kíli jumped to the next tree, they could help the others make it across. He looked at his brother, seeing the same intention clear on his face.

"I'll go first," he told Kíli.

"Okay."

Fíli edged out a bit on his branch and steadied his balance. He crouched low, keeping his breathing even. Then he jumped. Landing was a bit tricky, but he managed it and was grateful for the leather protecting his palms. As he pulled himself up, he heard Kíli yelp. When he turned, Kíli, as well as half the Company, was gone. They weren't on the ground, and the orcs and goblins looked just as stunned as he felt. His kin had simply vanished. *What on earth?*

"Kíli?!" he yelled. A dark shape blacker than the night sky blocked out the stars above and swooped down on Fíli. It caught him up and carried him away. Far below he could hear Bolg's frustrated roar and the triumphant calls of...eagles? The orcs and goblins scattered, along with the wargs, yowling and howling in the worst way.

Whatever was carrying Fíli gripped him by both arms, and his feet dangled as they soared straight up. A screeching cry erupted from the creature, nearly deafening the poor dwarf. Fíli groaned involuntarily over the piercing sound, and the creature laughed at him.

Laughed?

"Fear not, little one! You find yourself in the capable talons of Baranthor!"

"Baranthor?" Fíli managed.

"The same!"

Baranthor screeched again as he rolled in the air, releasing Fíli at the height of his spin. Fíli's heart was in his mouth as he began to fall, but the thrill of it made him laugh in spite of the danger. He landed with a *woomph* on the creature's back. Enormous feathers cushioned him, and strong muscles flexed and relaxed as giant wings flapped up and down. Fíli recognized the creature's call...

"You're one of the Great Eagles," he realized.

Baranthor chuckled deeply, and Fíli could feel the vibrations of it in his hands and chest.

"That I am, little one!"

In the light of the rising moon, Fíli could see the eagle a little more clearly. He truly was gargantuan, and his feathers were dark, even in the moonlight. Around them, Fíli could make out the forms of other eagles with small figures on their backs or in their talons.

"Is my brother alright?" he asked.
"Which beardling is your brother?"

Fíli actually had to stifle a laugh at that. It bothered Kíli a little that his beard wasn't coming in as quickly as Fíli's had, and Fíli did his best to be sensitive of his brother's feelings on that.

"Well, he doesn't have much of a beard."

"You don't mean the one with hairy feet, do you?"

"Ha! No, no. I'm sure if Kíli heard you thought he had hairy feet, he'd be quite miffed."

"What about the dark-haired, laughing one?"

"That'll be Kíli," Fíli chuckled in relief.

"I'd say he's doing just fine."

They flew for a long time. Baranthor and Fíli spent most of the flight in animated conversation. Baranthor was very interested in Fíli's life in general. The daily habits and doings of the two-legs intrigued him, especially the doings and peculiarities of dwarves. Baranthor knew almost nothing about their race, and he just couldn't seem to get enough information to satisfy his curiosity. The subject Fíli and Kíli's friendships with different birds was a particular favorite for him, and every now and then he would bring the conversation back around to it. Fíli, for his part managed to learn a bit about the eagle himself. They were the same age, as it happened, which both surprised and delighted Fíli. According to the eagle, eighty-two was still quite young in the life span of his race.

"How long can eagles live?" asked Fíli, curious.

"It's hard to say, really. I think perhaps we could live as long as we cared to. We're not like the pointy-ears, of course. We can't live forever, but some of the elders have been around for at least an age or more."

Fíli smiled. Baranthor's comment about living as long as they cared to sounded very similar to his mother's description of a dwarf's lifespan.

After a while, the other eagles began to descend, and Baranthor actually groaned.

"What's the matter?" Fíli asked.

"We're nearing the Great Shelf - my home. It's not often I'm allowed on patrol. Father says I'm too young, you see, and tonight's been more fun than I've had in ages."

Thorin stood on the Great Shelf, waiting for the rest of his Company, and Dwalin was at his side. Gloín and Oín had built a merry fire behind them, and the eagles supplied them with fresh game to eat. The savory smell of rabbit and mutton filled Thorin's nostrils, and his mouth watered, answering the growl of his stomach. Dwalin chuckled at the sound.

"I call the best cut," he said.

"Like hell," muttered Thorin with a smirk. He shoved Dwalin for good measure, and his cousin just grinned.

Kíli arrived with a crow of delight, and as the eagle that bore him landed he rolled down the great bird's wing with flushed cheeks and an excited laugh.
"Now *that* was fun," he said, climbing to his feet.

Thorin smiled. He didn't intend to make a habit of it, but he had to admit that flying was an incredible experience.

"Where's Fíli?" Kíli asked, still a bit breathless.

In answer, an eagle call split the air between them. A smaller eagle with dark brown feathers was diving toward them at tremendous speed and before it was too late, he opened his wings and swooped to a graceful stop on the edge of the shelf. He lifted his head in a chortle of laughter which was joined by a familiar voice.

Fíli sprang from his perch between the newcomer's wings, breaking his fall neatly by landing on his little brother.

"OOF!"

The pair began to wrestle about, as brothers are inclined to do, and Baranthor, as Thorin later discovered his name to be, watched the struggle with amused interest. After a few minutes of an intense row, Kíli yowled,

"UNCLE!"

"What?" said Thorin, intentionally misunderstanding him.

"No, I mean - AH! Fíli, UNCLE!"

Fíli relented and stood, hauling Kíli to his feet by his hood and sleeve.

"Go get some food, lads," Thorin advised. Well, they certainly weren't going to argue with him on that.

Thorin and Gandalf stood before the Lord of the Eagles after the Company had eaten its fill.

"My lord, Gwaihir," Gandalf was saying, "allow me to introduce Thorin Oakenshield."

"We are most grateful for your aid," Thorin said and inclined his head.

The eagle blinked at him. "The goblins have ever been a thorn in our side. We could not resist spoiling their fun, and it would not have been just to leave you to suffer at their hands. What brings you this far east, Oakenshield? It has been many a year since dwarves have passed through our lands."

Thorin's jaw clenched. *Are we to tell everyone from here to the Mountain of our intentions?*

"We're going home."

Gwaihir studied him. "Smaug has terrorized the land for long enough, I think. I should be glad when his reign comes to an end."

An understanding passed between Thorin and Gwaihir, and the dwarf smiled.

"As will I," he said.
"My eagles and I will take you down to the Great River, but it is there we must leave you. To go any further would risk the lives of my people, for the men just beyond do not trust us and would bring us down with their longbows."

"My thanks," said Thorin.

"In truth, you do not owe me gratitude for this. The Grey Wizard did me a kindness once, and I am bound to repay him. My people are proud. We are not ferriers, Oakenshield. We are creatures of the sky, not beasts of burden."

Thorin bowed his head to the eagle. "In that case, my gratitude is only magnified. I understand the rarity of this privilege, and I am honored, my lord."

"Then you must rest. We will take flight with the dawn."

Fíli is drowning. His clothes are too heavy, and his boots pull him down. He struggles to the surface, but there is no relief in the world above. Flames. The surface of the water is covered in fire, and the smell of burning makes his already exhausted lungs seize and rebel. He flounders, searching for something to support him. His fingers tell him something is there, and he latches on without a thought. After a few brief moments that seem like forever, Fíli catches his breath. Suddenly he realizes the object he's clinging to is covered in fabric. He freezes, afraid to look, but he can't stop himself. When he does, the blood drains from his face. The sudden wave of emotion is so strong that it nearly numbs him, and his palms start to buzz. His chest aches. His mind reels. His throat closes. The figure's empty eyes are fixed on the sky above.

There is no breath.

There is no life.

He's clinging to Kíli, but Kíli is gone.

Fíli bolted upright. Every part of him shook, and he was drenched in sweat. He blinked furiously, trying to anchor himself in the present moment. He focused on his breathing, drawing one slow breath after another. Finally, his pulse steadied, and his vision cleared. When he looked around, Baranthor was perched at the edge of the shelf, and he was gazing at Fíli.

Baranthor tilted his head slightly, gesturing toward the sky with a silent question in his eyes. Fíli stood without hesitation and nearly ran in his haste to be free of the nightmare. Baranthor stooped low, and the blonde dwarf was settled on his back in a moment. Then eagle and dwarf slipped from the edge of the shelf, and the night welcomed the pair with open arms.
Chapter End Notes

A quick note about Baranthor! If you've played Lord of the Rings: War in the North, you might recognize him. My sister and I have always loved that chocolate feathered eagle, and I couldn't help but give him a nod. Will you be seeing more of him? Perhaps. ;)

[Image of Baranthor, a humanoid figure riding a large eagle]
Baranthor flew. He did not speak. Whatever it was his new little friend had dreamed, it must have been truly terrible. The golden beardling had tossed and turned in his sleep, emitting sharp sounds of distress. Baranthor watched in silence, wondering what ailed him. When the little one suddenly woke, sitting up straight with a gasp, their eyes had met, and Baranthor knew what Fíli needed.

So there they were, soaring to heights that would make most land dwellers dizzy. Baranthor loved to fly. It always made him feel better, and he thought it might help his friend. For a long time, Fíli said nothing, but his breathing became more even as his heart calmed. They'd come quite a distance from the Misty Mountains, and Baranthor recognized the territory of the Skinchanger as it slid beneath him. He began to descend, hoping to see the ponies in the pasture near the Skinchanger's home. The spotted and bespeckled creatures had always intrigued Baranthor, with their funny faces and silly sounds.

Unlike the other eagles, Baranthor enjoyed spending time with the master of the ponies. They'd developed a fast friendship, and their conversations were always rich and full of stories of other lands and great feats accomplished long ago. Beorn, as the Skinchanger called himself, was a member of a dwindling race. There were only one or two of his kind left, and Baranthor considered it a great privilege to know such an impressive fellow. As the young eagle flew lower, he spotted Beorn sitting in his garden. The large man hailed him and waved him down, and Baranthor thought perhaps that Fíli might enjoy the company.

"Where are we?" Fíli asked after a moment.

"Over the house of a Skinchanger."

"Skinchanger? What does he change into?"

"A bear, usually."

"A WHAT?"

Baranthor laughed. "Don't worry, Fíli. I'm certain he'll like you!"

"How do you know?"

"Because I like you."

"Right."

As Baranthor landed, Fíli could feel his stomach twist into an even tighter knot. The skinchanger stood slowly, fixing him with a dark, animalistic stare. Danger emanated from him, and the sensation of it made Fíli's flesh crawl.

When the skinchanger spoke, his voice was deep and rough. "Do you have a growth on your back, Baranthor?" he asked.
The eagle chuckled. "No, indeed, Beorn. It is a new friend of mine. His name is Fili."

Beorn grimaced as Fili slid from Baranthor’s back, but the dwarf stood as tall as he could, endeavoring to look at least confident if he couldn't manage brave.

"At your service," Fili murmured, and to his surprise and pleasure, his voice did not shake.

"I don't need your service, Fili," Beorn replied.

Fili shifted a little on his feet, not quite sure how to respond to that.

"But who knows?" Beorn continued. "Perhaps one day, I might. You are lucky that you've come on a night when I am in such a good mood."

Fili's eyebrows shot up at that, and he was pretty sure he heard Baranthor choke on what sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

Beorn regarded the eagle with a slight smile. "Please," he said, "sit and make yourself comfortable, Fili. Would you like some honeycomb, Baranthor? The bees have been doing their best this summer."

"Yes, please!" the eagle said eagerly.

To Fili, Beorn offered some warm milk to accompany the honeycomb. Any fears Fili had of the skinchanger were quickly put to rest. He was charming, in his way, and he proved to be a very considerate host. The knots in Fili's stomach began to ease and unwind, and even the lingering terror of his most recent nightmare faded enough for him to relax. The milk was fresh and creamy, not to mention delicious. And the honeycomb! Oh, Fili had never tasted its equal in all his life. It was sweet and pure, yet not so sweet that it was overwhelming.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, watching Baranthor play in the pasture with the ponies.
"Where do you come from, little lion?" Beorn asked.

Fíli blinked. *Lion?* He'd heard of lions, but he'd never seen one. Kíli was interested in all sorts of exotic animals, and he learned of new species all the time from traders visiting the Blue Mountains. But still, *I look like a lion?* He hoped that wasn't a bad thing. He wasn't terribly vain, but that didn't mean his ego couldn't be bruised. If he remembered correctly, Kíli said it was some kind of oversized cat. Fíli liked cats, so maybe it wasn't so bad after all.

"The Blue Mountains, sir."

"Interesting. What brings you so far from home, and in the company of Baranthor, no less?"

Looking back, Fíli knew he hadn't intended to tell Beorn everything, but somehow it just spilled out, word after word, bursting like a beaver's dam after a severe storm. Beorn was silent while he spoke, taking in every sentence with kind, guileless and understanding eyes. Fíli began at the beginning, speaking about the first night Elrond had ever visited him. He spoke of his fear and violent tears upon waking, and how his mother held and soothed him even though he couldn't speak of what he'd seen.

He described how the dream returned every year, and how it shaped every decision he'd made
from that first night to this. He explained Thorin's quest to reclaim his homeland. Fíli couldn't
refuse Thorin's call to serve, and he didn't want to. He told Beorn all about Kíli and how the fear
inspired by his dreams was only ever for his little brother. He spoke of the year his father became
gravely ill and passed from this life and the difficult years that followed as he learned to cope with
the loss and having to grow up at such a young age as a result of it. Through it all, Beorn learned of
Thorin, his faults and virtues. Fíli detailed the quest so far for the skinchanger - the perils they'd
faced and the decisions that had been made. And he told Beorn of the meeting with Elrond in
Rivendell and the peace they'd made with each other. When he mentioned Elladan and Elrohir,
Beorn's eyes twinkled and he smiled most affectionately.

"Fine boys," he commented.

Lastly, after the telling of the events in Goblin Town and the dangers that followed, he
described his flights with Baranthor and the beauty of the moonlight on the land far below. When
he'd finished his mouth was quite dry, and his lids were heavy with exhaustion. Beorn smiled and
poured a half a glass more of the delicious milk.

"Sounds like quite an adventure, little lion."

Fíli nodded as he sipped the milk, ignoring the white line of liquid forming on his mustache.

"And we're not halfway there."

"I hope that the end of your story is a happy one," Beorn said gently. "I find that I like talking
with you. You and Baranthor are excellent companions. If you need a safe place to spend the night,
feel free to stay whenever you are passing by."
Fíli's heart warmed as his lids drooped even lower.

"Thank you, sir. You are most kind."

"And you are most tired. Baranthor!" he called.

The eagle called a merry farewell to his hooved friends and hopped over.

"Your friend is ready to return, I think," Beorn said. Baranthor nodded his head and chuckled
softly.

"So it would seem."

Beorn lifted the nearly asleep dwarf onto Baranthor's back.

"Be careful when you stop by," he warned Fíli. "I do not know what state you will find me in.
When you come, get inside and lock the door. Do not open it for any reason. If I am in a pleasant
mood, I shall let myself in with a key."

Fíli's tired mind didn't know quite what to make of these instructions, but he did his best to tuck
them away in his mind where he would not forget them.

"Until we meet again, Fíli."

Fíli nodded as Baranthor launched into the sky. When the eagle had climbed to a height he was
comfortable with, he stretched out his wings to catch the wind and glide.

When Fíli woke next, Baranthor was landing carefully on the Great Shelf. The dwarf dragged
himself to the empty bedroll beside his brother, and as soon as he stretched out on it, he was fast
asleep again. No more nightmares haunted him before the dawn.

Kíli woke him with what must have been his idea of a gentle nudge.

"Ooooh!" Fíli groaned.

"Get up, already! You missed breakfast, but I saved you some bacon."

Fíli rolled to a sitting position and struggled to make his eyes open. Before he could force his vision to focus, Kíli's thumb and forefinger were pinching his chin and pulling his mouth open while his other hand popped a slice of the promised breakfast inside. Fíli closed his mouth and his eyes, savoring the crispy bacon.

"Where did the eagles find a pig?" Fíli murmured as he chewed. His brother placed more slices on his open hand and shrugged.

"Fíli, it's bacon. Don't overthink it."

Gwaihir, with perhaps a bit of persuasion from Gandalf, allowed the Company to sleep a little over an hour past sunrise. The poor dwarves and Bilbo had been through a great deal the last couple days, the wizard explained, and could do with a bit of extra rest. Gwaihir consented. After they'd roused themselves and had their breakfast, the members of the Company clambered onto the backs of the eagles and were once again on their way. They made for a landmark called the Carrock, which the younger dwarves and Bilbo could only just make out as a faint blue spot on the horizon from the vantage point of the Great Shelf. The eagles, of course, could see it much more clearly, and assured the Company that it would not take long to reach. Fewer eagles departed this time, as some of the dwarves rode double.

Baranthor enthusiastically began peppering Kíli with questions as he and Fíli climbed up his back. Kíli responded just as eagerly, and the brothers enjoyed the company of their inquisitive friend. All too soon, the eagles began their descent to the great hill of rock that was the Carrock. Kíli grumped about the trip not being long enough, and Baranthor was just as moody. Fíli couldn't help but laugh about how similar they sounded. One by one, the eagles landed on a plateau which capped the Carrock, allowing the dwarves and Bilbo to slip off their backs before taking to the sky again. As Baranthor swooped down to perch on the flat stone, Gwaihir was speaking to Gandalf and Thorin.

"Farewell," said the Lord of the Eagles, "wherever you fare, till your eyries receive you at the journey's end!"

"May the wind under your wings bear you where the sun sails and the moon walks," Gandalf replied. Then Gwaihir spread his massive wings and erupted into the air with a piercing cry.

Baranthor sulked a bit, reluctant to leave.

"I wish I could come with you," he said.

"We would be all to happy to have you along," said Fíli gently.

"I never thought I would meet a beardling, or that he would prove to be such a good friend."

Baranthor tucked his beak into his wing and plucked one of the smaller feathers. He held it out to Fíli. The dwarf accepted it, somehow understanding just how precious the gift was.
"My duty is to my people," the eagle said. "But my heart flies with you. I hope your journey has a happy ending, Friend Fíli, and that we find each other again."

"Thank you," Fíli said, and his voice caught a little in his throat. A gift from a Great Eagle was a most precious thing indeed - even more so if that gift was one of the eagle's own feathers. Fíli had discovered that much from his lengthy conversations with Baranthor.

One of the other eagles called sharply from the air. Baranthor flinched. "Farewell, Fíli! And farewell, Laughing Kíli!" he said, leaping up into the sky.

"Farewell, Baranthor," the brothers called after him. They watched the eagles disappear, which didn't take long, and when they turned, the other dwarves had gathered together around Gandalf to discuss what they were going to do next.

They had no provisions, no packs, and no ponies. They really were in quite a pickle, despite how much further east they'd managed to come in only a couple of days, thanks to the eagles. To make matters worse, Gandalf had some bad news.

"I'm afraid I must leave you all," he said.

This quite distressed poor Bilbo, and even some of the dwarves were upset. To leave them now when they had naught but their weapons and no idea how to remedy that? The wizard held up his hands, and when the dwarves quieted, he explained,

"I have some pressing business to attend to, and though I don't wish to leave you, I fear I have no choice. Now, now, Bilbo! Don't look so glum. I'm not leaving this instant. We are all in an awful state and are in need of more than a few of the essentials required for travelling. We are quite a ways north of the road you were meant to take down from the mountain pass. Very few people live in these parts, but there is someone I know of - the very one who made the steps leading down from this rock. It is he who named it the Carrock, and he lives quite near. He does not come this way often and certainly not in the daytime, so it would do no good waiting for him. Besides, while we evaded Bolg, the orcs, wargs and goblins last night they are sure to be scouring the countryside for us now. If we wait too long, we are certain to become trapped up here. I'll escort you to the house of my friend, and there you can resupply and rest. Then I must leave you."

While Gandalf spoke, Fíli had a brief recollection of honeycomb and milk. If there were as few people in these parts as Gandalf said, perhaps he meant Beorn. Fíli found that the idea eased his apprehension over their current problem a great deal.

"What is this person's name?" asked Thorin.

Before Gandalf could answer, Fíli ventured, "Is it Beorn?"

The wizard looked at Fíli. He'd been very much awake yet when Fíli woke from his nightmare, and had seen him leave with Baranthor. Their return wakened him again sometime later, and he'd wondered momentarily where they'd gone. Now he had his answer. Perhaps they would be well received by Beorn after all.

"It is, indeed," he said with a small smile. Dwarves, he thought, could be just as surprising as hobbits, sometimes. There was more than one curious glance thrown Fíli's way, the most intense of which came from Kíli himself. Fíli looked at his brother and shrugged a little, signing something to him. They would discuss it later.

Gandalf looked around, getting his bearings and checking the height of the sun. "We might as
well get started," he said.

Chapter End Notes

I had a lot of fun writing this chapter. Thanks for all your support, guys! It means SO MUCH!
Fíli and Kíli's father, Zefur, loved living things. He grew up with his brothers, Bofur and Bombur, in the southern ridges of the Blue Mountains where he learned all he could about different creatures and the habits unique to each. When it came time for him to choose an apprenticeship, he decided that the best field for him was medicine. His parents didn't quite understand - theirs was a family steeped in generations of miners and smithies - but they knew how much he wanted to preserve life. And so, after much discussion, they agreed.

He studied with the local apothecary for a few years, but eventually the poor old dwarf had no more knowledge to feed Zefur's insatiable curiosity. The opportunity to further his education came when exiled dwarves of Erebor began trickling into the land South of Ered Luin. They were poor, exhausted, and looking for a place to call home. They were welcomed with open arms, and many of the newcomers possessed skill sets that were very much desired by their neighbors. One such newcomer was none other than Óin, son of Gróin, a physician of the highest quality.

Zefur begged Óin to take him on as his apprentice, and eventually the older dwarf was convinced of the younger's sincerity. Óin had much to teach Zefur, and to his surprise, the younger dwarf had much to teach him in return. They were often seen together, wandering the mountain side and studying different plants and creatures. In fact, it was rare for them to be apart.

Then came the autumn that Thorin, son of Thrain, arrived with his family. He established himself as a prominent member of the growing community, and once word spread, more and more of the scattered remnants of Erebor came flocking in. Zefur, for his part, struck a fast friendship with Thorin's younger sister Dís. Her energy and enthusiasm were infectious, and she shared Zefur's passion for all creatures, great and small.

But when she first arrived, Dís was a shadow of a dwarf. Her family had suffered terrible losses in the Battle of Nanduhirion before the East-gate of Moria. Her grandfather and her brother Frerin were slain, and her grief was a tangible force that followed her like a cloud. She wouldn't eat, and she barely slept. Thrain and Thorin became so concerned for her that they consulted Óin on multiple occasions. She wouldn't speak to the old dwarf. She wouldn't even look at him. Dís simply stared at her hands, unresponsive to any of Óin's queries or ministrations, and Thrain and his son were at the end of their rope.

Zefur was usually dismissed during these visits because Óin didn't want Dís to feel overcrowded or put off by the presence of a stranger. Thus, she never actually saw Zefur. He was usually gone by the time Thorin carried her into Oín's home. One morning, however, everything changed.

Zefur was outside one of the windows, tending to the latest in a long list of injured or abandoned animals. It was a little bear cub whose mother was killed quite recently, and Zefur was attempting to feed the fuzzy creature. The little one was in no mood to eat, however, and his antics were so amusing that Zefur found himself chuckling out loud. The little cub rolled around on the ground, swatting at blades of grass and tottering around on clumsy feet. Zefur's laughter increased until a shout from the house drew his attention.
The shout had come from Thorin, he knew, and he turned to find a wild eyed Dís staring at him. She stood a few feet beyond the door, as if she'd come tearing out and stopped suddenly, rooted to the spot.

Zefur stood quickly, worried that he may have upset her with all the noise. "I'm sorry," he managed when she continued to stare.

Thorin trotted outside, eyes on his sister. "Dís, what on earth?! Why did--?"

The dark haired dwarf glanced up, spotting Zefur. His mouth dropped open, and he gasped slightly.

"Oh."

Zefur began backing away, horrified that he may have caused Dís some kind of serious set back, but the girl shot out a hand to stop him.

"Wait!" she croaked.

Thorin's attention snapped to her. Now that he thought about it, Zefur had never heard her speak to anyone...ever. Judging from her brother's reaction, she must not have spoken in quite some time.

"I apologize," she continued shakily, and she straightened a little, composing herself. "It's just...you're so like him."

Thorin breathed a sigh of relief at the sound of her voice.

"Who?" Zefur ventured to ask.

"Our brother, Frerin," Thorin answered. Dís' chin trembled dangerously, and she strode forward,
stopping just short of Zefur.

"May I..." She paused and swallowed. "Might I hug you?"

Zefur, still quite shocked and unsure what to do, glanced over her shoulder at Thorin, asking silent permission. Thorin nodded, tears in his eyes.

Zefur opened his arms, and Dís stepped into them.

It was decided that Zefur would spend an hour or so with Dís every day. She began to improve steadily, and her appetite returned little by little. She was not so naive that she believed that Zefur was her brother restored to her, and he soon proved to be different from Frerin in many ways. But they had the same build - stocky and a bit on the shorter side; the same bright eyes, golden hair and quick smile; and most striking of all, they had the same laugh.

He wasn't Frerin, but he was just what Dís needed. She began to heal. She accompanied Óin and Zefur when they went up the mountain to gather herbs, and one day, she met Zefur's brothers. They all got on well right off, and when Bofur joked that his little brother was finally showing interest in something other than his wee critters, Zefur's ears turned bright red in embarrassment. Bombur guffawed mightily, and Dís' laughter pealed like merry bells. Zefur smiled, appreciating the sweet gift that was her joy.

Many years passed before Zefur asked Thorin's permission to court her, years in which he realized she'd become his best friend and the one he wanted to spend the rest of his days with. Thorin consented with great enthusiasm, and Zefur and Dís were happy. There were difficult days, as there are with all marriages, but they learned and grew together, muscling through even the worst of times.

Then came their little ones. Fíli was first, and Dís was delighted that he bore his father's unruly golden curls and bright blue eyes. Then came little Kíli, and Zefur rejoiced that they'd been so blessed as to have two children. The boys grew, following Zefur everywhere as soon as they could crawl. He taught Fíli about plants and creatures - Kíli being too young yet to understand, though Fíli relayed the information anyway - and mostly, Zefur found himself teaching Fíli about predators. If Fíli ever found himself at the mercy of a dangerous animal, his father wanted him to be as prepared as possible.

It was Zefur who comforted Fíli those first few years when he woke from the terrible nightmare. Kind, gentle Zefur listened to his little boy's fears and rocked him back to sleep. Then Dís' smiling husband was taken from her.

In the middle of an awful winter when Fíli and Kíli were still quite young, a terrible illness swept through the Blue Mountains. Óin was away in the north, taking care of cases higher in the mountains, so Zefur was called from home to take care of an elderly couple who lived several miles out of town. The journey through the snow and lack of sleep weakened his body, making him more susceptible to the illness. He couldn't shake it, and after days of fighting he slipped quietly from the world.

It was so very hard for the young ones to understand what had happened to their father, and Dís was devastated by the loss of her dearest friend. The family, extended and close, gathered around her, supporting her, encouraging her, and loving her. The memory of her Zefur shone brightly in her precious sons, and the lessons he taught his family continued to inspire them and preserve their lives long after he passed from the world.
"Really, though, what's he like?" Kili asked for the twenty-seventh time. Fili grinned at his brother's irrepressible curiosity.

"Well, he's...big. I mean, HUGE, Kili. You've never seen anyone so tall. And he's not lean, as you'd expect someone that tall to be. He's thick and burly...rather like Dwalin would look if he was three times taller and broader."

Kili was silent, an intense look on his face as he mulled this over.

Fili continued, "He's hairier than anyone I've ever met."

"Even the trader we met that time we escorted the silversmiths south?"

"Oh, I forgot about him. Alright, so hairier than almost anyone I've ever met. His eyes are large, warm and dangerous at the same time. When he speaks, it's with a deep, gravely voice and a lilt that I've never heard before. And apparently he shifts into a bear from time to time," Fili finished, and the last comment was muttered as an afterthought.

"Wait. What was that?"

Fili glanced at his brother. "I said that he transforms into a bear, according to Baranthor."

"A BEAR?"

"I was sure I'd mentioned that before. I must've forgotten."

"How could something like that just slip your mind?!"

"Kili, it was a long night, and I'm still half asleep, you know."

Kili harrumphed.

The Company was moving at a brisk pace, and it had been only a few hours since they'd descended the Carrock. It still loomed behind them despite the distance they'd covered, and the sun drifted up and overhead, passing its zenith. Gandalf kept casting nervous glances over his shoulder, and Fili was trying not to let that bother him as Kili badgered him with questions about Beorn. Unfortunately, he couldn't ignore the somersaults his stomach was performing. Something was wrong.

"We must move faster!" called Gandalf from the front. The older dwarves complained of aching joints, but they increased their pace to a forced jog, their feet pounding the earth steadily.

"Dwarves weren't made for running long distances!" Glóin huffed.

Fili smirked. He and Kili were used to extensive jaunts. For years they ran for at least an hour every morning, a training regimen set in place by Dwalin and Thorin. Every now and then they would go on day trips consisting of endurance training and little else. This pace was pretty much a walk in the park for them.

The Company passed over wooded hills that dipped and rolled pleasantly until they came to a stretch of flat land. The trees became slightly more sparse, and flowers began to appear around them in small beds here and there. There were all kinds of flowers, large and small, and the farther they jogged, the thicker the flowers became.
Bilbo fell to the rear of the Company, his endurance being of a much lower level than that of even the elder dwarves. Fíli and Kíli slackened their pace to match his. He breathlessly named the different types of flowers for them as they waded through the sea of color, though there were several that he'd never seen before.

Fíli, it must be admitted, was only half listening. Gandalf was still casting nervous glances around, and his anxiousness was unsettling the blonde dwarf. After descending the Carrock, the wizard assured them that Bolg and his swarm of orcs would not pursue them onto Beorn's land. He feared the skinchanger too much. The flowerbeds marked the edge of Beorn's territory, so they'd been safe for some time, right? If they were safe, why the forced march? And why was Gandalf half expecting something to come tearing out of the underbrush at any moment?

In the late afternoon, the woods thinned further and morphed into the orderly rows of an orchard. Golden light filtered through leaves and boughs heavy laden with fruit. The Company followed Gandalf as he wove through the rows, moving toward a pattern only he understood.

A flock of birds suddenly scattered from the woods behind them, and when the wizard looked back, his face was white as snow.

"RUN FOR YOUR LIVES!" he yelled.

A bellowing roar drowned out his words, and the dwarves shot forward without hesitation.

Fíli's heart skipped a beat. Although he knew that Beorn often roamed in the form of a bear, he hadn't really believe it until he heard the roar. He ran just behind Kíli, making sure that he was between the threat and his brother. The orchard rows came to an abrupt end, and across an open stretch of lawn was a large, long house. Gandalf directed them to this, shouting, "Get inside! Hurry!"

The creature was gaining, and a glance over his shoulder told Fíli that it would burst out of the orchard any second. They wouldn't all make it inside in time, and he racked his mind for some kind of distraction that would allow the others to reach safety. From some small, quiet corner, his memories whispered of lessons taught many years ago by a dwarf with golden hair and smiling eyes.

"They charge as a challenge, but you mustn't run," his father said. "Running is a sign of weakness, and the bear will chase you down. Instead, be very still and calm. Most bears are either curious or just frightened of you."

"Frightened of me?" little Fíli asked, jabbing his chest with a tiny thumb. Zefur chuckled.

"Yes, Fíli. So you must be careful not to make any sudden moves, and you must be brave. Do you understand?"

"Yes, Papa."

Fíli gritted his teeth and skidded to a stop. He turned slowly, trying to steady his breathing as a huge bear tore out of the orchard. It spotted the retreating dwarves and lowered its head, mouth open, preparing to charge. Then it saw Fíli standing halfway between the orchard and the house. It bared its fangs, trying to intimidate the little person. Fíli's breath became uneven, but he didn't budge.

The bear bluffed a charge, but Fíli still didn't move. The dwarf's heart was hammering so hard,
he feared he might have a heart attack. The bear stopped. Its eyes searched Fili's, who stared back with a steadiness that belied his shaking hands. The others must have reached the door because Fili could hear many voices calling his name, Thorin and Kili being the loudest of all, but he didn't take his eyes from the bear. Oddly enough, Kili was shouting at Thorin to stay back. Fili fought the urge to look as Kili said,

"NO! He knows what he's doing!"

Fili couldn't help the smile that crept onto his lips. The bear tipped its head slightly, and there was a glint of familiarity in its expression. Slowly, oh so slowly, Fili sank until he was sitting on his heels. He never broke eye contact, and he saw the moment the creature recognized the gesture for what it was - an act of submission. The bear lifted its head a fraction and rumbled deep in its throat. Then it turned and ambled back into the orchard. Once it disappeared from sight, Fili stood and sprinted to the house.

He and the bear may have reached an understanding, but he was no fool and wasn't about to wait around for it to change its mind.

The Company spent the rest of the afternoon and evening in relative peace, for the bear did not come back. Fili, of course, was congratulated and scolded in equal measure, though the latter did not fall from ungrateful lips. The scolding came mostly from Thorin, who was only trying to keep his emotions under control. He gripped Fili's upper arms, glaring fiercely, but Fili could feel the tremor in his uncle's hands and see the glint of moisture in his eyes.

"Don't you EVER do that again!" Thorin commanded.

Fili grinned in spite of Thorin's severity. "I can't make any promises there," he whispered cheekily. Thorin chuckled and lightly tugged one of Fili's mustache braids.
Then some of the dwarves, and Bilbo as well, wanted to know where Fíli had learned such a skill as braving a charging bear - these being the members of the Company who had never met Fíli's and Kíli's father - and Bofur regaled them all with numerous anecdotes about his younger brother's exploits and adventures in the woods. Oín and Bombur would interject here and there, adding bits and pieces to stories that Bofur had either forgotten or never learnt of to begin with. It became an evening of storytelling and laughter, the sort that the Company hadn't had since leaving Bilbo's home. Gandalf located Beorn's pantry, and though the dwarves took enough to fill their bellies, they didn't even make a dent in the great store of food and drink. A good thing this was, too. Can you imagine Beorn's reaction to finding an empty pantry? He would not be so accommodating as one Mister Baggins.

By the time they settled in for the night, choosing various odd places to spread out their bed rolls, Beorn hadn't made an appearance, and Fíli supposed that the giant man was still somewhere out in the night. As he drifted off to sleep, he wondered what being half one thing and half another must be like.

Sick. Oh, Fíli feels so sick. His limbs won't obey him. They won't move. No...they can't move. There's something sticky and thick clinging to his face, but he can't lift his hands to clear it away. He tries to keep his breathing even, but he can't fight the panic. He begins to hyperventilate. The sticky substance is all over him, binding his arms to his chest and pinning his legs together. His limbs must have fallen asleep at some point because the pricking sensation of a thousand needles begins in his toes and fingers, creeping along his flesh as his circulation returns. The agonizing pain of it makes him groan, and the hoarse croak that leaves his throat makes him worry.

He forces his eye lids open, but it's so dark that it makes little difference. He can't see. His hearing seems to be improving, and he can hear hitched breathing from several different directions. A wheezing cough came from somewhere to his right, and the familiar sound of it makes his chest ache in sympathy.

"Kíli?" he rasps.

There's only a sickly moan in response, and Fíli starts to lose it a little. He kicks and writhes, trying to free himself, but it's no use. He only bobs, and the realization that he's hanging in the air is followed swiftly by a wave of nausea that sweeps from the top of his skull to the pit of his abdomen. He takes a slow breath through his nose, fighting the violent urge to retch.

There's a sudden release above him as the sticky substance is cut, and Fíli falls down, down...

Fíli woke just as he landed hard on the wooden floor. "Ow."

He rolled onto his back, groaning and rubbing his poor shoulder, which suffered the brunt of the impact. When he finally opened his eyes, Kíli was peering at him from his place on the floor beneath the shelf were Fíli had been lying only seconds before.

"I've seen better landings," his brother remarked.

"Would you have preferred it if I'd done a flip?" Fíli asked grumpily.

"You would have gotten more points for style, anyway."
Fíli grunted and punched Kíli's shin.

"OW! That was uncalled for."

Fíli ignored him and stood, stomping over to the fire which burnt low in the center of the long lodge. He plunked down near it, staring at the embers without seeing them. Kíli heaved a sigh and followed. They sat quietly for a while, but when Fíli didn't speak, Kíli cleared his throat.

"What was it this time?" Kíli asked.

Fíli pinched the bridge of his nose and roughly rubbed his eyes, trying to find the words. Kíli knew about all of the dreams - every one. Fíli never went into detail, though. He couldn't, and luckily, he didn't have to. Kíli knew. He knew that almost every nightmare ended badly for himself, and he also knew that it was tearing Fíli apart. How much more could Fíli take before he crumbled completely? The thought of watching his older brother slowly waste away under the weight of these nightmares was almost to much for Kíli. Fíli was strong. Fíli was, well, Fíli. Nothing could break Fíli. Right?

"We were trapped," Fíli said, "like flies caught in a web. I couldn't move or see, and I felt so ill..."

Kíli stared at the fire, giving Fíli a few seconds to compose himself.

"I could hear you nearby, but you wouldn't answer when I called. Then I was falling."

"Right off the shelf."

"Right off the shelf," Fíli confirmed.

"You okay?" Kíli asked, nudging Fíli's shoulder gently with his own.

Fíli nodded slowly, but he seemed undecided. "I just wish they'd stop."

Kíli's heart rolled over in his chest. It was tough to see his brother like this, but it was even more difficult knowing that there was nothing he could do to help. He would take on Smaug with his bare hands if it meant Fíli could get a decent night's sleep.

A soft click in the lock of the door drew their attention.

They stood as the door opened, and an enormous man stepped inside. He eyed them for a moment, then smiled. "Please," he said, "there's no need to stand. Sit."

The brothers complied, and Beorn closed the door behind him. He took a seat opposite the dwarves and smiled over the fire at them. "This must be Kíli."

"At your service," Kíli said, ducking his head.

"You dwarves and your service," Beorn grumbled.

Kíli shot Fíli a questioning look, but Fíli just shrugged and grinned.

Beorn gazed steadily at Fíli. "You were brave, to stand boldly in my path while I was in my other form," he remarked.

Fíli exhaled a little. "Not brave, I think. I was terrified."
Beorn waved off Fíli's modest reply. "Being brave does not mean that one is fearless. You have the heart of a lion, as well as his mane. Perhaps you are a skinchanger as well?"

Fíli caught the twinkle of mischief in Beorn's eye, and he grinned. "Not that I'm aware of," he chuckled. "Just your average dwarf."

Beorn shook his head. "Not average. Not at all."

Fíli wasn't quite sure how to respond to that.

"Your eyes are red, little lion. More unpleasant visions?"

Fíli nodded. He explained the nightmare as he had to Kíli, and the fire burned bright in Beorn's eyes.

"Giant spiders," the skinchanger growled.

Fíli and Kíli gulped in unison. "Giant spiders?" they repeated.

Beorn nodded and grimaced. "They grow abnormally large within the borders of Mirkwood, and they attack and eat travellers who wander off the path."

"Oh, well, that's good to know," Kíli said brightly. Fíli elbowed him. Although Beorn was a kind host, sarcasm may not be a good choice when speaking with him. Even as a man, he could still be unpredictable.

"You should not go that way," Beorn continued. "The forest has overrun the path, and if the magic under the trees does not lead you astray, the elven king is not kind to travellers of any kind. Once he was kind, but years of seclusion in the growing dark of Mirkwood have twisted him and made him hard and cold."

"We don't have much of a choice," Fíli murmured. "We only have a certain amount of time to find the hidden door, and going around the forest, be it north or south, would take too much time. We may never get another opportunity like this."

"Be careful of your motives," Beorn warned. "Gold is a terrible master. It warps the mind and corrupts the heart. It was not the dragon that destroyed Erebor. It was greed."

They stayed at Beorn's house for three days. On the morning after their arrival, Gandalf made his farewells and departed south. The Company watched with mixed feelings as he rode away. Given Beorn's warnings about Mirkwood, a wizard would have been most helpful in case things went wrong, as they tend to do. But Gandalf was insistant that he wouldn't leave them unless it was completely necessary. Thorin remained skeptical of this long after the wizard disappeared in the distance, but there was nothing to be done.

Toward the end of that day, Thorin became increasingly restless. He was eager to be gone, but prudence forced him to wait another day. His people were tired, and the rest would be much needed if Mirkwood had grown as perilous as Beorn and Gandalf said.

The skinchanger provided them with plenty of food and supplies for their journey, replacing the necessities they lost in Goblin Town. In addition, he allowed them the use of his ponies, provided they turn them loose before entering Mirkwood. They would find their way back home well enough. Fíli went to see the ponies at one point, but none of them possessed Bongo's mischief or
knowing eyes. In the end, he only spent a few minutes with the ponies before he had to leave them, overcome with a deep longing to see his shaggy grey friend again.

It was mid morning by the time they departed on the last day, and Beorn stood before his house, watching them leave as they had watched Gandalf two mornings previous.

All of Beorn's warnings buzzed in Fíli's head like the giant bees in the skinchanger's garden, and he couldn't shake the feeling of dread that settled deep in his stomach.

Chapter End Notes

DISCLAIMER: My research of bears and their habits wasn't as extensive as I would have liked, so please don't take Fili's actions to heart and put them in practice should you ever find yourself in such a situation.

That being said, thank you guys for being so patient! I have a lot to thank my editor - LadyCavil as she's known here- for, and there are many wonderful happenings in this work which wouldn't have made an appearance if not for her. And honestly, I may not have had the courage to develop the idea for this fic or post it at all without her.

Thanks, sis!

Enjoy, everyone!
"I don't like it."

"You don't have to like it, Kíli," Fíli sighed. The Company was camped at the very edge of Mirkwood where the road beyond the yawning entrance stretched away under the trees.

"It's like looking down something's throat!" Kíli protested again.

"Kíli, shut up."

Everyone was antsy, and none of them was eager to set foot inside the forest. Beorn had given them a list of instructions, explaining that while they might be able to remember them well enough outside Mirkwood, having something tangible would help keep their minds grounded to a bit of reality - which of course wasn't comforting in the least. He warned them to expect the journey to take quite some time, and he loaded them down with an excess of food and water skins because of it.

It hadn't taken them very long at all to reach the border of Mirkwood. The light was fading quickly, however, and since Thorin had no desire to begin their trek through the forest in darkness, he called for a halt. No one argued. They set the ponies loose as Beorn requested, and the beasts trotted back the way they'd come. The dwarves were sad to see them go - mostly because ponies provided an excellent early warning system if something was wrong. Their instincts were much more attuned than that of the dwarves to the environment and would detect something amiss much sooner than the Company would have. Considering Beorn's warnings, though, they were loathe to bring the faithful creatures with them, and the ponies balked at the entrance of the wood, anyway.

The night spent at the border was rather restless for all concerned. The dwarves took turns on watch, but the proximity of the trees and what lurked beneath them was so unsettling that no one got very much sleep at all.

Before leaving Beorn, Fíli and Kíli told Thorin about the threat of the giant spiders, and he shook his head, grumbling that they already had enough to worry about what with the elves and other dangers of the wood. In spite of everything they'd already gone through, this was quickly proving to be the most dangerous stage of their journey.

And so, on the last day of August, the Company stepped into the shadows of Mirkwood with Beorn's instructions in hand and deep breaths taken by all.

The first few days weren't necessarily terrible. The sunlight streamed down through the leaves, and the trees stood far enough apart that claustrophobia wasn't an issue. The nights were unpleasant, though. Every time they lit a fire, hundreds of eyes would appear on all sides. The creatures belonging to these never allowed themselves to be seen, which made the Company even more uncomfortable, and eventually they decided that no fire was better than all the attention they were attracting. After a week, it began to grow increasingly dim during the day, and the nights were so dark that the dwarves couldn't see one another, let alone the ends of their own noses.

Fíli silently repeated Beorn's instructions to himself. *Don't leave the path for any reason - you'll never find it again. If you come to water of any kind, don't drink it, no matter how thirsty you are.*
Don't eat the animals - their meat is fouler than swamp water. Beware the wood elves - especially their king. He doesn't trust strangers.

Beorn had also warned them that the forest would try to deceive them. No one quite knew what this meant, but the level of the Company's stress was high. In the end, perhaps it was their anxiety that got them into so much trouble. That and the fact that their supplies ran out.

They'd been traveling for days and days, and the forest just kept going. They had no idea how far they were or if they'd ever come to the end of that cursed forest. Tension began to grow between them all, little by little, and by the time the food ran out, they were bickering constantly among themselves. The darkness was unnatural, and the eyes following their every move were so unsettling that they began to take out their frayed nerves and anxiety on each other. Thorin tried to maintain control as much as possible, but it was difficult.

Every night Fíli dreamed of webs and spiders. He'd wake only to find eyes watching him, and his sanity was beginning to slip. It was increasingly difficult to distinguish between dreaming and waking, and everything began swirling together in some strange combination of the two. He was tired all the time, and his limbs and muscles quivered and shook. He felt fevered and irritable, and everyone's quarreling was eating away at his already precariously balanced frame of mind. Then came the day they heard the sound of running water.

Their supplies ran out a few days previous, and the trickle and gurgle of water was such a welcome sound that everyone forgot themselves and Beorn's warnings. They surged forward, shoving and tripping over one another in their desperation, and it was only Thorin's command that stopped them all before they plunged into the black water of a river.

"WAIT!"

The others froze, blinking in confusion. Thorin was gripping Beorn's instructions tightly in both fists, his struggle to maintain some kind of control over himself, his Company and reality all too evident in the whiteness of his knuckles.

"We can't drink the water," he ground out through gritted teeth. His words had the effect of icy water splashed on one's face, and the members of the Company came back to themselves enough to back away from the river's edge. By sheer luck or something else entirely, they hadn't strayed from the road in all this time, but it didn't seem to be doing them any good at the moment. The river flowed straight across the road, and there wasn't a bridge of any sort.

The dwarves and Bilbo gathered together, trying to decide what was to be done. It was too far to jump, and since there was no telling how deep it was, wading across was out of the question.

"We could swim it," Kíli suggested, but the idea made Fíli's stomach churn. He didn't like the look of that water, and if they shouldn't drink it, he wasn't very keen on immersing himself in it either.

"No," Thorin said. The idea didn't appeal to him either, mostly because there were members of the company who had never learned to swim. Now didn't seem like the best time for a crash course in doggy paddling.

"We could take the boat across," Bilbo said, almost to himself.

Everyone looked at him. He was staring across the river at something, and Fíli and Kíli stepped to his side, straining to see what he was talking about. Dimly, they could make out some sort of row boat, but it was on the opposite bank.
"Well it's of no use to us over there," Kíli scoffed.

"We could cast a line out and pull it over," Bilbo suggested.

"If it's tied to the bank, we won't be able to haul it in anyway," Thorin grumbled.

Bilbo looked a bit crestfallen, and seeing as the poor fellow was only trying to be helpful, Fíli spoke up in favor of the hobbit's plan.

"The least we can do is try, Thorin," he murmured.

His uncle huffed, too weary to argue the point further, and nodded.

It took a few tries on both Fíli and Kíli's part - the distance was difficult to judge in the eerie dimness - but Fíli finally managed to catch a hook bound to a coil of rope on the boat. All the dwarves took hold of the line and heaved - nothing. Grimly, they reajusted their hold and groaned with effort. Suddenly, something gave on the other end, and the boat jerked free of the opposite bank. It slid toward them over the water, and the dwarves grabbed it quickly once it was near enough. A short length of rope with a frayed end hung from the bow, proving that the boat had indeed been tied off on the opposite bank. The rope was old and decayed, explaining why the dwarves had managed to pull it free. The boat hadn't been used in quite some time.

In small groups, the dwarves crossed the river as quickly as possible, leaving the line tied to it so that the dwarves on the opposite bank could haul it back for the next group to cross. Bombur came last and on his own, being that any more weight added to his may very well have sunk the boat. He didn't much care for the idea of having to wait alone on the opposite bank. Fíli and Kíli wanted to hang back and let him go first, but he wouldn't hear of it. He patted his older brother's sons on their heads, much as he had done when they were small, assuring them that he'd be fine. If only that had been true.

The crossing wasn't the problem. It was exiting the boat that proved to be an issue. It rocked precariously as Bombur tried to stand, eager to be on land as soon as possible, and before anything could be done the boat was capsizing. In went Bombur. Fíli and Kíli cried out in alarm, scrambling to uncoil another length of rope and toss it to where Bombur floundered. He heard their calls to grab the line, and he grasped it tightly with one hand. Bofur and Bifur joined the lads on the rope as they hauled Bombur to the bank.

"You clumsy fool!" Bofur scolded, but his tone was kind. It wasn't until he reached them that they realized anything was wrong. As soon as he set foot on the road, Bombur collapsed on top of poor Kíli.

"Bombur, honestly!" Bofur protested, but when he, Bifur and Fíli tried to haul Bombur off of Kíli, the rotund ginger emitted a snore of fantastic volume, startling everyone.

"Is he...sleeping?" Bilbo asked incredulously.

"It. Certainly. Seems. That way," Fíli grunted as they tried rolling Bombur enough to free the squashed dwarf below.

"Hurry!" came the muffled plea.

Finally, they managed to shift Bombur enough for Kíli to wiggle out. When the large dwarf continued to snooze despite their efforts to wake him, the dwarves began question what had happened - and what they should do about it. Apparently touching the water was just as bad or
worse than drinking it. Fili and Kili were grateful that Thorin hadn't allowed them to swim across. How long would Bombur sleep, then? Should they make camp and wait to see if he'd wake before the morrow? And if he didn't? What then? In the end, Thorin decided to wait until the following morning to see if Bombur would wake. The members of the Company moved a little further down the road, putting some distance between themselves and the water. Thorin didn't want anyone accidentally wandering into it. Bofur, Bifur, Fili and Kili took turns sitting with Bombur through the night, hoping that there would be some change. In spite of their hopes, he continued to sleep deeply into the next morning, and Thorin determined that they couldn't stay in one spot any longer.

He'd seen abnormally large cobwebs early in their journey along the road, and they'd appeared much more frequently than he cared for over the past few days. He didn't want to linger, especially with Bombur incapacitated, so he came to a decision.

"Cut some branches," he said. "Lash them into a litter. We'll have to carry him until he wakes."

Understandably, this statement was met with quite a few groans and complaints, but the others did as they were told. The stronger dwarves carried Bombur for the next hour, calling for someone to relieve them when their arms began to shake with fatigue. With the lack of food and water, everyone began to tire that much sooner and breaks were so commonplace that it felt as if they weren't making any progress at all.

They carried on like this for a few days, wearily putting one foot in front of the other until one morning when Bombur shot upright on his litter, throwing everyone off balance and into a heap on the road. His waking was cause for a certain amount of joy, considering that they wouldn't have to carry him anymore, but their lightened moods soon turned slightly sour again when he began to describe all the wonderful food he'd dreamt of while he slept.

"SHUT UP, BOMBUR!" they all roared when he went into detail of a particularly succulent roast pig.

"I've had enough of this accursed forest," Thorin said moodily. He needed to know if they were close to the edge. They were out of provisions, and if they didn't get out soon, they would die.

It was decided that Bilbo would climb up above the canopy and get a sense of how close they were to the border and in retrospect, Fili only had himself to blame for everything that happened next.

Fili should have realized something was off when he saw his father standing in the trees beyond the path. Unfortunately, exhaustion clouded his judgement, and hunger disoriented him.

"Dad?" he whispered.

Zefur stood several yards away, beckoning and smiling. Fili took a step forward and was about to take another when Kili gripped his wrist.

"Fili, where are you going? We can't leave the path." But Kili sounded unsure of this statement even as it left his mouth.

Fili was confused. Couldn't Kili see their father? Or perhaps Kili just didn't recognize him? He turned back, but Zefur was still there. He looked just as Fili remembered him: blonde hair braided in a pattern that was copied by Fili's own curly mane, beard parted in two short braids, simple
clothes made of sturdy fabric and his physician's kit in a leather satchel at his hip. His hand was extended toward his sons, his expression kind and patient. Fíli took another involuntary step toward him.

"Fíli!" Kfli shouted, scrambling to pull his older brother back.

"Let me go!"

"No!"

Zefur looked disappointed. He turned and started walking deeper into the forest.

"Dad, wait!" Fíli cried desperately. Kíli still wouldn't let him go, and the others were beginning to notice. If he didn't follow his father now, he may never see him again.

He whirled on Kfli, snarling. "I can't lose him again!"

But still, Kfli wouldn't understand. "Fíli, listen!"

"NO!" Fíli threw a punch, something that Kfli didn't expect. It caught him on the jaw, stunning him enough to loosen his hold. Fíli seized the opportunity and wrestled free, leaping away and into the foliage. Whether it would prove fortunate for them both or not, Kfli followed right on his heels.

"Fíli! Kíli! Get back here!" Thorin shouted, but the boys were quickly lost from sight.

As soon as Fíli and Kfli were out of sight of the road, the image of Zefur disappeared.

"NO!"

Fíli yelled and cursed, spinning in a wild circle. "This is all YOUR FAULT!" he accused his brother. "If you would have just let me go, I could have caught up to him! I could have...RAAH!"

He cursed again, attacking the foliage with both fist and boot. Kíli kept his distance while his brother paced. He still had no idea what Fíli was talking about. Quite frankly, he was more than a little put out, to be honest. He ruefully rubbed his jaw. The spot where Fíli’s knuckles had connected was angry and throbbing. What on earth was going on? Fíli was always the level headed one, not the reckless dwarf who prowled in front of him now. Not to mention the fact that Fíli never struck Kfli. Ever. Beorn's warning about the forest trying to lead them astray echoed in Kfli's mind. Fíli wasn't himself. It had to be the forest.

"Who are you talking about?" Kfli asked when the other had calmed a little.

Wide eyes flicked to his then away again.

"Fíli," Kfli prompted, "tell me what just happened." His tone was far too reasonable to be his own. _Mahal, when did I become the calm one?_

Fíli blinked, seeming to come to the same conclusion. "You didn't see him?"

"Who?"

"Dad."

Kfli narrowed his eyes and frowned. When he'd heard Fíli call to their father before, he thought he'd imagined it.
"Fíli, Dad's gone. He died a long time ago." He hadn't meant to be so blunt, but it seemed the only way to reach his brother at the moment.

"You didn't see him, then?"

Kíli's brows drew together. "No."

Fíli didn't seem to hear him, so Kíli turned back toward the road. *Might as well let Thorin know we're...wait.*

"Fíli, where's the road?"

"What?"

"The *road*, Fíli. You remember what a road is, right?"

Finally, Fíli came to his senses. The color fled from his face as he realized what he'd done. "Oh, Mahal."

"Yeah, I was afraid you'd say that."

Chapter End Notes

No illustrations this time, but I promise that Chapter 18 has at least one.
Decisions, Decisions

Logically, Fíli and Kíli should've found the path hours ago. After realizing his horrible mistake, Fíli headed back in the direction he'd come with Kíli close behind. A few minutes later, he began to doubt his sense of direction, but Kíli agreed that they were indeed retracing their steps. So they kept walking.

Now, however, the weight of the forest's deceptiveness was all too clear to the brothers. Despite repeatedly calling for their companions, they received no answer. The apparition of their father made no second appearance, which was a relief. It unnerved Fíli to no end that the apparent...hallucination?...was so like he remembered. But perhaps that was the power of the forest - to twist one's hopes and fears into physical manifestations that fool the senses and lead one astray.

"Alright, I've had enough," Fíli said as he halted abruptly.

Kíli walked right into his brother's back. "Good grief, Fíli! A little warning next time?"

"Sorry," the blonde said absently. "We can't keep walking without a clue of where we're going."

"Okay, Mister Compass, what exactly are you going to do about it?"

Fíli frowned and looked over his shoulder. His brother wouldn't look at him, and his brows were drawn heavily over his eyes. Kíli was sulking.

"What's the matter?" Fíli asked, though he knew full well and felt horribly guilty about it. A dark bruise was forming on Kíli's jaw. Fíli worried at his bottom lip with his teeth, and his elder brother instincts kicked in. He reached forward, intending to brush Kíli's hair away to better inspect the bruise, but Kíli flinched at the movement. Fíli's heart twisted painfully in his chest.

What have I done?

The last thing Fíli ever wanted was to hurt his brother. Admittedly, they'd had their moments throughout the years - they were brothers, after all, so roughhousing wasn't unheard of - but...

This? Never this. Fíli pursed his lips, inwardly cursing himself.

"Kíli, I -"

"Forget it," Kíli said, offering a lopsided grin. "It wasn't you, I know that. I just...I'll be glad when we're free of this place."

Fíli nodded. "Here, here."

"So," said Kíli, "what are we going to do?"

"Well, we need to get a feel for where we are, but it's getting too late. It'll be best to try and get a bit of rest."

"You're getting poetic again," Kíli noted.

Fíli grinned. "Shut up. As I was saying, we need sleep, but I'd rather not sleep on the ground. There's no telling what kind of creatures live here."

"Right, well, it wouldn't be the first time I slept in a tree."
Fíli chuckled and stepped up to the nearest tree. "Let's get settled, then. I'll take first watch."

"No," said Kíli, "I think I'd better."

Fíli was about to protest, but considering his behavior earlier, perhaps his brother was right. He laced his fingers together to create a foothold and braced himself as he nodded.

"Alright, then. You first. Up you go."

Snow.

Snow is drifting down and sticking to Fíli's eyelashes. He's weak and exhausted, stumbling forward and catching himself with his hands.

Blood.

Blood covers his fingers and soaks everything. *That's my blood*, he thinks...he knows. *That's a lot of my blood*. He coughs, a horrid racking thing that shakes his entire chest and makes his ribs ache. Bright red drops speckle white flakes.

Kíli.

Kíli is calling. He sounds concerned, but Fíli can't find his voice. He's so tired. If he could sleep, just for a little while, maybe he'll be strong enough to answer Kíli.

Cold.

Cold air bites his fingers and cheeks. A stiff breeze makes his eyes blur and water. He takes a shaky breath, and the cool air sweeps into his lungs, giving him a brief respite from the pain.

Hands.

Hands grip his shoulders and lift him up, cradling him against a warm chest. He struggles to see the face above him.

He breathes once.

"Fíli."

Twice.

"Fíli?"

Thrice.

"Fíli!"

He can't breathe.

"FILI!"

Fíli was instantly awake, knife in hand.
"Woah, woah, woah!" Kíli leaned back as far as keeping his balance allowed, hands raised.

"What happened? Are you alright?" Fíli asked.

"Aside from being nearly skewered, sure, you bloody porcupine! Anyway, you nearly fell out of the tree."

"Oh...sorry."

"You'd think I'd be used to it by now," Kíli muttered.

"Is it day yet?" Fíli asked, peering up at the canopy.

"I can't really tell, but it seems a bit less dim if that's anything to go by."

The two had slept in shifts all night, agreeing that they'd climb up above the canopy in the morning as Bilbo had done the day before. Fortunately, they still had their packs with them, and Fíli and Kíli had secured themselves with rope to the tree limbs in hopes of preventing a terrible fall should they toss and turn in their sleep. Somehow, though, Fíli's knot had come loose while he slept, and had he rolled just a little to the left or right, he'd have been in for a terrible surprise. They were quite a ways up the tree already, and the trip down would have been quite a nasty one, what with all the branches below.

Fíli released a shaky breath as he took hold of the failed knot and undid it with one swift movement. He glanced at Kíli, and a knowing look passed between them. Kíli shook his head in amazement.

"Where did you learn to tie such an awful knot?"

Fíli took the insult in stride and chose not to comment. Kíli's knots were usually the worse, truth be told, so Fíli allowed his little brother this small moment of victory.

"Alright," he said, shouldering his pack. "We might as well head up and see what's out there."

They climbed as carefully as they could, trying to find secure hand holds while avoiding the webs - which were everywhere up there. It wasn't that the webs disgusted them. The things were just so ridiculously sticky that touching one meant spending the next few minutes trying to free their hands or feet.

The higher they went the more the air seemed to clear until they finally and quite suddenly reached the top of the canopy. They lifted their heads above the leaves with gasps of air that were much like surfacing after being under water for too long. The rush of fresh air made them light-headed at first, so they paused for a moment or two and just breathed. The leaves were strangely shaped up here and so black that they were almost blue. Before either brother could comment on this, a breeze passed over them, tousling the leaves and causing them to flutter.

"They're butterflies," Fíli realized.

At the sound of his voice, thousands of the black creatures erupted from the canopy, flitting about Fíli and Kíli's heads.

"Black Emperors," Kíli said in awe. "I've never seen so many before."
The butterflies flew up and over the trees, disappearing into the distance. Once the air cleared, the brothers looked around. The sun was indeed rising, and it was to the left and just behind them.

"That's the way we need to go," Fíli said and pointed at the bright orb. To be honest, they had nothing else to go by. They knew the Lonely Mountain lay somewhere in the east, but there were no landmarks to guide them. There were only trees as far as they could see. Here they faced a dilemma. Should they go on and hope to meet the others at the border? Would it be better to stay put and wait for the others to find them? The second option wasn't much of a choice at the moment, considering how long they'd walked before resting. Trying to find the path again had already proved pointless, so that left option number one.

Fíli and Kíli rested on their perch for a little while and discussed the next step. Neither one was keen to go back to the forest floor, and considering that they couldn't see the sun down there, they could just as easily lose their bearing all over again. They decided to keep to the treetops as much as possible so that they could constantly check their position throughout the day and regularly clear their heads of the stifling air below.

So, with jaws set and determined breath, they slipped below the canopy once more.
Bilbo descended the tree when he heard the shouting. *Something terrible must have happened*, he thought. The argumentative hollering from before was decidedly different from the frantic yelling that flew up to him now, and he skittered back down as quickly as he could. When he reached the bottom, Dwalin and several others were wrestling Thorin to the middle of the path and pinning him down. He roared, eyes wild, and Bilbo couldn't understand the stream of dwarven words Thorin expelled with great passion - which, between you and me, was probably for the best.

Bofur and Bifur stood at the edge of the path, calling for Fíli and Kíli until they were hoarse. Ori was wringing his hands and seemed quite on the verge of tears. Dori was fretting over him, and for the most part, everyone else seemed to be trying to calm Thorin.

"Thorin, stop it!" Dwalin was yelling.

"LET ME GO, DAMN YOU!" Thorin raged.

After reviewing his options, Bilbo decided he might get the most reliable information out of Bofur. He trotted to the edge of the path and had to raise his voice quite a bit to be heard over Thorin and the others.

"What happened?!"

"It's the lads," Bofur croaked. "We've lost them!"

"Excuse me, what?"
"They went mad and took off into the trees."

"Why would they do that? They know better!"

"It's this place," Bofur moaned, and Bilbo saw that his face was wet with tears. "It drove Fíli to madness, and he thought he was seeing my brother."

"So he ran after him."

"Aye, and Kíli tried to stop him, but he wasn't strong enough."

Thorin and the others had quieted considerably behind them, and Thorin was allowed to sit up.

"And what happened there, then?" Bilbo asked.

"He tried to go after them. Lucky for us all, Dwalin always was the stronger. It gave us just enough time to each grab a hold and pull him back."

They all gathered in the middle of the path then and debated. There was no question that someone should go after the boys. The difficulty was just who that should be. They argued for a long time about who would go and who had the right to, and there was a great deal of no-you-can't-go-you'll-get-lost-for-sure's, I-have-the-most-right-to-go-because-they're-my-nephews', and all sorts of ridiculous explanations of why some should and others shouldn't. In the end, it was decided that they all would go because no one really wanted to be left behind, and if someone was going to be lost, they might as well all be lost together. This of course made perfect sense to them at the time.

Fíli couldn't ignore the heavy breathing behind him anymore. Kíli was spent. He'd been trying to hide it for the last hour, and the only reason Fíli hadn't addressed it was because Kíli would have vehemently denied his condition and pushed on anyway. Now, however, he just couldn't allow Kíli to push himself any harder.

It was barely afternoon, but the lack of food and water was taking its toll. Kíli's lips were pale and chapped, and Fíli knew he probably didn't look any better. Traversing the treetops would have been simple enough with strong muscles and plenty of nourishment, but they were tired and it was slow going. The webs only made things worse. The farther east they moved, the thicker the webs became. They had to be careful where they placed their feet and hands now because it was getting harder to see anything through it all.

"Let's rest," Fíli suggested, and he was relieved when Kíli didn't argue. They wedged themselves into forks in the branches and sat for a little while, catching their breaths. Fíli had no idea he'd dozed off...not until Kíli's scream jarred him awake, that is.
"MUM!"

Kíli was frantic as he cast wild glances in all directions. Fíli scrambled toward him.

"Kíli!"

"MUM, WHERE ARE YOU?!"

"Kíli, calm down before you fall!"

"Can't you hear her?" Kíli asked hysterically. "She's screaming!"

Fíli couldn't hear anything. In fact, aside from Kíli's exclamations, it was eerily silent - more so than usual.

"She needs us!"

"She's not h- Kíli, WAIT!"

Kíli was already half-climbing and half-falling down as quickly as the webs would allow. Fíli made a grab for his hood and only just missed. He skittered after his younger brother, hoping to catch him before he hurt himself. There came a point when Fíli lost sight of him and was achingly grateful that he could at least hear him. And who wouldn't? Kíli's voice reverberated among the trees until it seemed to echo all around. Suddenly, that fact didn't sit well with Fíli at all.

"Kíli!" Fíli shouted when he caught a glimpse of a blue hood. "Stop!"

Without warning, the forest floor rushed up to meet him, and the impact of landing jarred his legs. He stumbled to his knees with a groan. He realized with a start that Kíli had gone quiet, and the fear of having lost him squeezed the breath from his lungs.

"Kíli?" he called hoarsely. "Kíli?!"

Then he spotted him. He could barely see him for all the webs and roots, but it was Kíli. Fíli sprinted forward, tripping half a dozen times before he reached him. All the while, Kíli didn't move. He didn't turn. He was facing away from Fíli, body rigid. Fíli swallowed.

"Kíli?"

Still, Kíli didn't move. Each breath was a labored gasp. Fíli gripped Kíli's shoulders, swinging him around to face him.

"Kíli, what is it?"

Kíli was pale. His skin was clammy with sweat, and his breathing became more difficult each second. He tipped forward onto Fíli, the control of his limbs no longer his own. Fíli caught him and lowered him to the ground, calling his name and patting his face.

"Kíli!"

_What's happening?!_
Kíli's eyes stared beseechingly at Fíli. He was trying to tell him something, but his mouth wouldn't obey him. The light began to ebb from Kíli's eyes, and Fíli's panic rose in his throat, choking him. As Kíli's eyes glazed, Fíli sobbed, rocking his brother.

"No, Kíli. Listen to me! You've got to wake up...Kíli?"

There was no response. What do I do? There's got to be something...

A string of mindless babble fell from Fíli's lips as he murmured comfort to his brother, encouraging and begging him to stir. He didn't hear the creature creep up behind him. There was no warning - only a searing pain in his back, then nausea followed quickly by darkness.

Consciousness returned slowly, and the pounding headache that accompanied it nearly made Fíli violently ill. He tried to inhale as slowly as possible and discovered that breathing was extremely difficult. He tried to move his arms, but they were pinned tightly to his torso. His left arm was glued to his chest, while the right wound behind him. There was little feeling in his limbs at first, but after a couple moments the pins and needles feeling of restored circulation crawled up and down his arms and legs.

"Ugh," he groaned. It really was one of the worst sensations ever. He struggled with his eyelids which refused to open. After several attempts, his lashes brushed and stuck to something. What the...?

Somewhere in the foggy recesses of his mind, Fíli recalled the nightmare about being trapped in a spider's web. If it was coming true, then where was...

"Kíli?" he croaked.

"Nnngh."

Fíli struggled against the webs. If he could only reach a knife! Just one...

His left fingers fumbled for the lining of his coat, straining to reach the dagger in the inner right breast pocket. A little more...yes!

With a practiced flick of the wrist, the dagger was free and slicing through the web as if it were butter. Fíli tore the horrid sticky stuff from his face, gasping for fresh air but regretting it as a wave of nausea washed over him. He took a few even breaths to settle his stomach as he looked around. He was suspended high in a tree, and there were many old web cocoons around him, the contents of which he had no desire to know.

"Kíli?"

Another weak groan floated up from somewhere below, followed by a whispered, "Here."

Fíli detangled himself as best he could, trying to keep his movements fluid and slow. Any attempt at moving quickly was rewarded with sharp pain in his muscles and the nearly uncontrollable urge to vomit.

"I'm coming, Kíli."
Fíli sounded as tired and sick as Kíli felt. He tried to move, but any attempt left him exhausted and frustrated. He was bound head to foot in some extremely strong substance, and couldn't free himself. Claustrophobia had never been an issue for Kíli, but being confined like this was threatening his sanity and making his heart sprint in his chest. Fíli sawed through the cocoon with awkward fingers made clumsy by the spider venom.

"Don't cut me," Kíli mumbled.

"Kíli, please," Fíli scoffed, though his words were sluggish and slurred. He tugged at the webbing over Kíli's face, and his little brother gasped at the sudden rush of extra oxygen. Kíli tried to free himself of the rest of his cocoon, but it was too difficult because his hands didn't want to cooperate.

"Easy, Kíli. I've got it. You'll have to hold still if you don't want me to cut you," Fíli said with a smirk.

Kíli's left brow shot up, but a wave of nausea made him forget the retort he'd prepared.

"Ugh. Fíli, I'm going to be sick."

Fíli slipped an arm under Kíli's shoulders and helped him sit up - a good thing, as Kíli promptly keeled to the side and was violently ill. His body shook afterward. Tremors seized his muscles, making them twitch and jump in the worst way. Fíli waited patiently for that to subside. He squeezed Kíli's shoulder in sympathy. Kíli weakly wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

"Thanks," he managed.

Fíli lightly patted his back. "You're welcome."

"We should get moving," Kíli said and tried to rise.

"Yeah, but take it easy, Kíli. We'll have to climb down. You up for it?"

Kíli looked down, judging the distance. He could see the forest floor, but the height nearly made him sick all over again. He reeled back, dizzy.

"Yeah, no sweat," he croaked. "It'll be grand."

"Uh-huh."

With careful movements and more sliding than anything, Fíli and Kíli somehow made it to the ground. They leaned against the tree for a moment, catching their breaths and allowing their stomachs to settle.

"Okay, Kíli-"

"Fíli, please! I can't, not yet. Can't we rest for a little longer?"

Fíli eyed Kíli, taking in his hagard appearance and the pallor of his skin. A sheen of sweat coated his brow. Fíli sighed, considering. A flicker of movement above caught his attention. Huge spiders were inspecting the remains of Fíli and Kíli's recently vacated cocoons, and there were a LOT of the horrid creatures. They were at least twice the size of a dwarf in the body, and their long legs only made them seem bigger. They had enormous, beady eyes and glistening fangs, and they were very, VERY angry.
"Yeah, not an option, Kíli. Come on!"

He grabbed his brother's arm and was intensely grateful for the wonderment that was adrenaline.

The spiders came after them, of course, and quite frankly, it was inevitable. The webs were everywhere, and the dwarves couldn't avoid touching them. Every time they brushed, tripped over and cut through a web, it sent vibrations through the sticky network, alerting the spiders to their every move.

"They're too fast!" Kíli panted after glancing back. "We can't outrun them!"

Fíli skidded to a stop as more spiders dropped to the forest floor in front of him.

"Then we fight!"

Somehow, Kíli managed a laugh. "I do love a good fight."

They stood back to back with spiders on every side as they drew their swords.

"Well, it's been nice knowing you."

"Only nice? You wound me, Kíli."

The spiders attacked.

Fíli and Kíli fell into a desperate rhythm. Hacking and slashing, they each covered the other as best they could, but there were dozens of spiders who were decidedly better fed, well rested and ferocious in the extreme. It was quickly becoming too much, and the brothers' arms began to fail them. Their muscles were weak and exhausted, and their stomachs rebelled at the overexertion. Fíli was bitten twice in quick succession - once in the shoulder and again in the left thigh - and Kíli couldn't keep from being bitten either. One of the spiders latched onto his foot, its serrated teeth tearing through the tough leather and sinking into his skin. He cried out in pain and surprise.

"Kíli!" Fíli yelled as his little brother's feet were yanked from beneath him. Kíli landed hard on his back, and the air left his lungs. The spider tugged him away as he tried to restore his breathing. Fíli shouted and sliced at the spider's legs while Kíli kicked at its eyes with his other foot. The spider released him with a hiss, but more and more spiders were coming.

This fresh poison was different than last time. Fíli's blood was on fire, the nausea overwhelming, and the pain alone was paralyzing. He stumbled and fell next to Kíli who was retching and writhing. The spiders all hissed as they surrounded the two dwarves, and Fíli could have sworn they were laughing with glee.

Then everything was chaos. Suddenly, the spiders seemed to be turning on each other, but that didn't make sense...did it? The last things Fíli knew were flashes of red and gold, green eyes and words he didn't understand chanted fervently above.

The smell of Dís's cooking pulled Fíli from sleep. He opened his eyes, confused. He was lying on his bed - boots, coat, knives and all - and the most disorienting thing was that he was still covered in Mirkwood webs. What in the name of...?

"Fíli?"
He propped himself up on his elbows. Was this another trick of the forest? It wasn't a nightmare...he hoped. His mother called his name again.

"Come out, darlin'. There's coffee on," she coaxed. Well, there was no doubt about it. That was indeed his mum. But how? He swung his legs over the side of his bed and paused. He ran his hand over the patchwork cover spread under him. The sight was such a comforting dose of familiar. After all the uncertainty and foreign experiences of the forest and everything leading up to it, the cheerful colors of the well worn patches made his eyes sting.

"Fíli?"

And there she was. She stood in the doorway, a steaming mug held in each hand. Her cheeks were flushed a bright rose - she must have come from the forge - and the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes crinkled as she gave him a warm smile.

"Here you are, darlin'," she said, striding over and handing him a mug.

"Mum," he breathed. He swallowed hard and blinked fast. Mahal, how he'd missed her. She took a seat beside him on the edge of the bed.

"You look like you've had a tough time of it." She'd always been one for coming right to the point. Fíli nodded.

"If you only knew."

Dís patted his knee as he sipped his coffee. His eyelids fluttered shut in appreciation. Was there anyone in the world who made better coffee than her? Fíli didn't think it possible.

"What's happened?"

Fíli told her. He didn't even leave out the particularly dangerous parts. If anyone could handle hearing about it all, it was his mum.

"And the last thing I remember is Kíli and I being surrounded by the giant spiders. Have I died, do you think?" he asked, only half jesting. She chuckled, shaking her head.

"No, I don't think so."

"How is this possible, Mum?"

"That you're alive?"

"That I'm here. And if I am alive, what happened to Kíli? Why isn't he here? Is this all some trick of the forest, or has he...?"

She thought for a moment, nibbling on her lower lip. It was a gesture he knew all too well, and he smiled in spite of his misgivings.

"I'm not sure, about the 'why's', love. But I know," she said, laying her hand over her heart, "that he's not gone." She reached over and tapped his chest in the same spot.

"And you know it too."

Fíli released a shaky breath. She was right, of course. Mothers know everything, after all, he thought, but it was a relief to have her reinforce his hope.
"As for whether or not you're really here, that's another matter entirely," Dís continued. "You're as real to me as I must be to you. The proof is in the coffee."

Startled, Fíli burnt his tongue and choked on the sip he was taking. "What?"

"You took the mug," she said simply.

"Was that a test for you or me?"

She lifted her right shoulder in a shrug and grinned lopsidedly. Not for the first time, Fíli was reminded just where Kíli got his smile.

"Perhaps a bit of both," she admitted. "But then, this is not unlike your dreams of Elrond, is it?"

Once again, Fíli was stunned. "How do you know that?"

She laughed, and light danced in her eyes as her head fell back. "How does a mother know anything?"

Fíli cocked an eyebrow at her mischievous tone. "Mum."

She sobered a little and sighed. "He came to me too."

"What? When?"

"Before you left." His mother leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees and carefully turning her mug round and round in her hands. "He told me about his visits to you and the things he said. He hoped I might do something to convince you to stay."

Fíli's brows lifted. "But you didn't."

She snorted. "I didn't. I told him there was no way I was stopping you."

"Why?"

"I have faith in you."

"You're my mum. Isn't that a given?" Fíli chuckled.

She smiled. "It's one of my favorite parts of being your mum," she said and swatted one of his mustache braids. When she spoke again, there was a solemn, mournful note in her voice. "All your life, you've known the risks, Fíli. In this, more than anything, it was important that you make your own decisions. Your duty as heir takes away most of your choices to begin with. Besides, the future isn't written in stone, and who knows that better than a dwarf?"

He grinned, dimples deepening. "So what did he say to that?"

She shook her head, remembering. "He seemed a bit speechless at first, I suppose. He smiled, though it was a bit sad looking. He said perhaps there was hope for you after all."

_Hope_. The very word was like a spark near one of Balin's experiments. It caused a reaction in Fíli that began in his chest and burned through the rest of his body like wildfire. He gasped and dropped his mug, spilling coffee across the floor.

"Fíli?" Dís said, gripping his elbow as he teetered on the edge of the bed.
"Mum-" he rasped.

"Fíli!"

Darkness claimed him.

Thorin was livid. He could have actually throttled someone.

After the Company decided to leave the path together, tension only escalated. The longer they searched without finding the lads, the more heated words became. There were more insults thrown than leaves in the trees, and everyone had had just about enough of everyone else. Bombur continued to describe the foods he'd dreamt of in agonizing detail, and more than one dwarf threatened to feed him his own beard.

Time seemed suspended, and no matter how far they walked in one direction, they always ended up going in circles. More and more often, they heard laughter and voices somewhere in the trees, but when they tried to find the source, they always seemed to be moving further away instead of closer. That's when they started seeing the lights.

Luminous figures flitted through the trees. They hovered just in the corner of one's vision, and whenever someone tried looking straight at them, the beings would disappear. Eventually, the desperation of the dwarves became to much to bear, and the forest was driving them mad.

At some point, members of the Company began disappearing. In ones and twos, they simply vanished. In the deteriorated state of the remaining members' minds, they couldn't be certain exactly when the others went missing or how. By the third day, the only ones left were Thorin, Dwalin, Balin, and Bilbo. They sat together, trying to decide what to do when they saw a cluster of lights through the trees. Sounds of laughter and song floated to them, and the smell of food made their stomachs ache. The four crept closer, uncertain if it was just another trick of the forest. When the lights didn't go out and the sounds and smells only intensified, Thorin called a halt to decide what to do. Dwalin said they all should rush forward together and catch these strange people by surprise, while Bilbo advised stealth. Balin suggested that someone go forward as a representative. Perhaps these people would be willing to spare a bit of food for a few very hungry travelers? And they might even get help with finding the missing members of the Company.

In the end, Balin was the one cautiously stepping forward into the circle of light. Unfortunately, before he could even say so much as a "begging your pardon", shouting erupted and the lights were doused. Poor Balin yelped and babbled, but whoever it was wouldn't listen. Dwalin tried to go to his aid, but some form of sense woke in Thorin's mind, and he grabbed his cousin's ankles, tripping him. He whispered fiercely to Bilbo, telling him to help keep Dwalin down, and the two had a hard time holding him back.

Some order seemed to be restored in the clearing where Balin was now held captive, and the beings began moving quickly away through the forest.

"Come on," said Thorin in a low voice, and as Dwalin surged to his feet, "but stay low!"

Dwalin grumbled agreement. The trio crept through the trees, staying close enough so as not to lose Balin's captors, but far enough away so they wouldn't be noticed.

Of course, the captors were the elf king's folk, and they brought Balin right up to the front gate. Thorin, Dwalin and Bilbo crouched out of sight, helpless as the doors closed behind their friend. Guards stood watch outside, and it was clear there would be no entering that way.
"What do we do?" asked Bilbo.

"We find another way in," Thorin growled.

And now they were hiding beneath Thranduil's halls. Thorin was seething with rage, and he swore an oath to himself. This elf was going to pay for all the wrong he'd committed against the dwarves of Erebor. One way or another, Thorin would see it done.

Kíli sat on Fíli's bed and glanced for the umpteenth time at the elven guards posted at the door. The king's guests they might be, but it was clear that the blonde elf didn't want them to leave.

The events directly following Kíli and Fíli's fight with the spiders were hazy at best. The facts that Kíli was aware of were mostly provided by the captain of the king's guard. A patrol had discovered the nest and the captured brothers just in time. The elves descended on the spiders and slew the ones that Kíli and Fíli hadn't managed to defeat before being overcome. The brothers required a physician's attention as soon as possible. The final bites they'd received were filled with a venom that attacked and broke down the victim's insides, effectively liquefying them for easier eating on the spider's part. The patrol administered what help it could to slow the poison enough for them to reach a physician with more experience and skill in time.

Kíli wasn't so ungrateful that he was sorry for the help, but he couldn't stop the gnawing irritation over being trapped in the elven king's halls. Kíli's every need was attended to, and he wanted for nothing. He even had quite lengthy conversations with the captain and the physician, but he knew that it was all a facade. He'd never liked learning about politics - Fíli was always more adept when it came to that - but it didn't mean that Kíli couldn't understand it. He saw the truth of the situation; he and Fíli were prisoners.

Fíli had been sleeping for days. The physician told him it was a lingering side effect of the venom and that it was working through his system. Kíli wished his brother would wake. He wanted to talk to him about what was happening, and he didn't like feeling alone. The king came to speak with him every day, but Kíli never said much. He would feign illness or exhaustion just so the king would leave, and though he knew the elf probably saw right through his act, he didn't care. He would close his eyes and hope against hope that he would wake and find the whole time in Mirkwood had been nothing but a dream. He was always disappointed to open his eyes and see that it was all too real.

Fíli's first day of sleeping was uneventful, which was frightening for Kíli. Fíli laid as unmoving as stone, and just as cold. The next day, his temperature climbed at an alarming rate, and his cheeks were flushed and feverish. The elves chanted and applied poultices to his wounds, and the fever broke. His temperature returned to normal, and the elves said he'd come through the worst of it. After that, Fíli's eyes twitched restlessly beneath their lids, and a low stream of incoherent words fell from his lips like water. He murmured different things in the Common tongue and the language of their fathers alike, but Kíli couldn't understand any of it. He wished his family were with him and his brother. Thoughts of what might have befallen his uncles and cousins plagued him night and day until they nearly drove him out of his mind. Were they alright? Would they ever make it to the Mountain? Was this truly a fool's errand? Or, the most unnerving thought of all, was Fíli's nightmare coming true?

Kíli groaned and buried his face in his hands. He had far too much time to think in this place. A finger jabbed into his ribs, making him jump.

"What's the matter?" Fíli asked.
Kíli twisted and smiled so brightly that Fíli actually shaded his eyes.

"You're awake!" gushed Kíli. He cringed inwardly at such an obvious statement, but he couldn't help it. "Finally!"

A tired smile creased Fíli's face. "How long have I been out, then?"

"Ages."

"No, really."

"A few days."

"Days?" Fíli groaned. "What happened?" He sat up and winced.

"Stiff?" Kíli asked. His brother nodded. There were still shadows under Fíli's eyes, and his face was a bit pale. Kíli reached over to the table beside the bed and picked up a small bowl containing steaming liquid. He offered it to Fíli with a sympathetic smile. "The physician said this would help."

Fíli tried to take the bowl, but his fingers were so clumsy he spilled a bit of the broth before Kíli could recover it. "Sorry," Fíli mumbled. "My fingers are a little numb."

"'S'Alright. Here." Kíli raised the bowl to Fíli's lips for him. His brother sipped gratefully at the warm broth and sighed.

Kíli grinned. "Better?"

"A bit. Thanks. It's not often that you're the one taking care of me. Usually it's the other way around."

"Yeah. There was that one time though...the winter when you came down with the lung sickness."

Fíli coughed and frowned. "Ugh. Even this is better than that."

Kíli fed him another sip. It wasn't a happy memory. Fíli had been ill for weeks. He was bedridden for nearly the entire time, and he'd been too weak to even feed himself. Dís and Kíli looked after him in shifts, and Oín came by every day to check on him. It had seemed his fever would never break, and he was unable to keep much of anything down. Eventually, the fever broke, and little by little he improved.

Kíli shuddered. Not a happy memory at all. He watched as Fíli took in the room.
"Elves?" Fíli asked.

"Yeah. They killed the spiders and brought us here. It's been...four? Five days, maybe?"

Fíli fell against the pillows with a frustrated noise. Kíli knew his brother was thinking of their family. Had they made it through the forest? But even as he wondered it, Kíli knew the others wouldn't have left them behind. Only chance or no, they wouldn't have forsaken them in favor of the Mountain.

Kíli was about to tell Fíli about the king's visits - and more importantly, his questions - when the doors swept open and the king himself walked in. The elf's eyes bored into Fíli's.

"I am most pleased to find you awake," said Thranduil. "How are you feeling?"
Charismatic.

That was Fíli's first impression of Thranduil. Quite surprising, given that Thorin's brief and vehement descriptions left the elf in a rather grotesque light. Even so, Fíli was wary of the king's charm. The stories he'd been told - coupled with Beorn's warning - left him skeptical, and all of Thorin's, Balin's and Dís' teachings on politics crowded to the front of his mind. Among royalty and nobility, the charming ones often proved the most dangerous.

Thranduil reclined in a delicately carved chair next to Fíli's bedside. Kíli had been dismissed under the pretense of some sort of tour. Fíli imagined that it would be anything but informative of possible escape routes, but he knew his brother would be keeping his eyes open for even remotely promising possibilities.

Fíli eyed Thranduil, keeping his expression neutral. The king raised his hand and held it over Fíli's chest, murmuring elvish under his breath.

"The poison is steadily working its way out of your body," Thranduil said aloud as he pulled away. "You will need more rest, but the worst has passed."

Fíli blinked slowly. "My brother and I are most grateful for your help," he said, choosing his words carefully. The king inclined his head and the corners of his mouth curved upward.

"It was the least I could do for two weary travelers."

Thranduil was fishing for information, but Fíli wasn't about to give him any. If the king learned anything about Fíli and Kíli or their quest, it would be on their terms - not the king's. So Fíli just smiled. Perhaps the king had expected such a reaction. He didn't seemed phased by Fíli's tight-lipped manner. Fíli knew then that Thranduil must have received much the same from Kíli. He yawned, overcome by a wave of exhaustion.

"It seems, Master Dwarf, that you are quite spent. I will leave you to your rest, but please, do let me know if you need anything," Thranduil said and rose.

Fíli inclined his head, much as Thranduil had done only moments before. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

Thranduil's lips curved once more into a smile, and though it appeared kind, Fíli couldn't shake the thought that it was rather wolfish in nature. The elf swept through the door and was gone, the guards following in his wake. Fíli frowned. The guards had remained in the room the entire time he'd been awake. They couldn't have been there to protect the king. Kíli's behavior had suggested that their presence was an accepted normality. If Fíli and Kíli were prisoners, and the guard had been stationed at all times previously, why withdraw them now?

When Fíli tried to sit up and reach for the remaining broth, he discovered the answer. A spasm of pain shot through his muscles, making him grit his teeth. As it subsided he nearly laughed at the injustice of the situation. The guards left because he wasn't a threat in the least, despite his one hidden knife that the elves hadn't confiscated. Fíli couldn't stretch enough to retrieve it, let alone wield it. He made a frustrated noise. For pity's sake, he couldn't even sit up! The elves viewed Kíli
as more of a threat than him, which explained the constant guard while his little brother was around.

That fact left him with another question. If Thranduil saw no threat from him, why did the elf want to speak with him so badly? What information could Fíli possibly know that Thranduil believed Kíli didn't? Or perhaps the king was tired of trying to learn anything from Kíli. After all, Fíli's little brother had to be the most mulish person he knew - aside from Thorin, but even then it was hard to tell who was more stubborn.

Whatever Thranduil's motives, Fíli had a few of his own. There were questions that Fíli needed answered, and he knew that getting them wasn't going to be easy. Getting those answers without revealing everything about the quest was going to be near impossible.

Fíli smirked and shook his head at himself, and his eyes closed on their own. He'd already taken on two impossible challenges. The quest itself was improbable at best, and while Elrond had originally believed the outcome inescapable, even he now thought there was hope. Why not add a third? he thought. After all, what's an adventure without a few impossibilities?

"Dinner!" Bilbo announced crisply. Dwalin and Thorin jumped as Bilbo once again appeared as if from no where.

"Mahal's undergarments!" Dwalin swore. "You've got to stop that! I'm jumpy enough as it is."

Thorin declined the food with a wave of his hand. The only thing he was hungry for was information. "Have you heard anything?"

The three of them had been hiding in the cavern beneath Thranduil's hall for a few days. Every several hours, Bilbo would sneak up into the elf's home to search for Balin and scrounge for food, returning some time later. So far, he hadn't had much luck in his search for the first, and while he found plenty of the second, it wasn't always up to the dwarves' standards of nourishment.

"Couldn't you have found some meat?" Dwalin grumbled.

"Forgive me for the culinary deficiency, Master Dwarf," Bilbo said tartly, "but procuring anything at all isn't exactly easy. I suggest you accept that and eat what there is."

Dwalin growled at him. These dwarves really could be hopeless sometimes.

"Bilbo," Thorin prompted impatiently.

The hobbit pursed his lips and shook his head. "Nothing yet, I'm afraid."

Thorin's jaw clenched, and his eyes hardened. "You've been up time and again for days -"

Bilbo held up his hand and interrupted the dwarf. "Now, wait just a minute. I'm not going to argue with you again about this. I'm doing the best I can. You've no idea how vast this place is, and there are a lot of elves up there. If you think you'd do a better job, I certainly invite you to try. But seeing as neither of you understand elvish, and you're not exactly light on your feet either, you need to trust me. I will find Balin, I promise. You've got to be patient."

Thorin ground his teeth and took a sharp breath through his nose. The hobbit was right on all counts, and it only stoked his irritation. "You have one more chance."
"You can't be serious -"

"I WILL NOT LOSE HIM TOO!" Thorin roared. "Haven't we sacrificed enough for the sake of this cursed quest?"

Dwalin laid a hand on Thorin's shoulder. Their eyes glinted with fresh moisture, and Bilbo pitied them. They'd lost everyone to the horror of Mirkwood, and Balin was all they had left.

Thorin's brow furrowed deeply, and his eyes were broken and haunted. "What am I going to tell Dís?"

Dwalin covered his face with his hands, and Bilbo averted his eyes. This moment was too private, too sacred for him to watch. It was no secret how much Dwalin and Thorin - how much the whole Company - cared for Fíli and Kíli. Until now, the two dwarves before him had held their emotions in check because they had no choice. The forest was such a strange and terrifying place, they couldn't stop and grieve the loss of their youngest family members. Their only hope had been to keep moving and looking, but then they'd lost everyone else. The quest fell apart before their eyes, and where were they now? Cowering beneath their enemy's halls like rats was where.

Thorin took a steadying breath and gave Bilbo a piercing glare. "You have one more chance," he repeated. "If you don't find him, I'm going up there myself. I'll tear Thranduil's halls apart stone by stone if I must, but we WILL find him."

Bilbo nodded curtly and spun on his heel. Usually, he snatched an hour or so of rest before heading back up to continue his search, but Thorin's words left him shaken and far too edgy to sleep for even a moment. If Thorin and Dwalin came roaring from the depths and cracking every elvish skull they could get their hands on, they were all lost anyway. Bilbo shook his head and muttered to himself.

"You better think of something, Bilbo Baggins. One enraged dwarf is one too many."

The lower sections of the Woodland Realm were an absolute labyrinth. Bilbo had only been able to explore a small percentage of it all, and he'd had to be careful not to lose his way lest Thorin and Dwalin think he'd gotten lost or worse, abandoned them. He tried to follow a system such as always taking a left turn - or only ever a right, but this time he was desperate. He reached into his pocket and slipped on a golden ring he'd found discarded in the tunnels beneath Goblin Town. His body disappeared instantly. He let his feet carry him where they wished, and his mind was clouded with fearful and despairing thoughts. He nearly walked right into an elven guard at one point, but he hopped and danced out of the way as lightly as he could, nearly toppling off the pathway and into the open space below. He settled against the wall on the opposite side and sighed in relief. When he looked up, he realized he had absolutely no idea where he was.

Now you've done it, Bilbo Baggins! he scolded himself. He was trying to figure out what to do when he heard a mournful voice lifted in song. The familiarity of it seized Bilbo and pulled him along twists and turns until eventually, he recognized where he was. It was a section he'd explored on the first day, though no one had been there at that time, surely? The lilting voice was close, and Bilbo didn't know whether to weep in relief or crow in victory. The words sung were of azure mountains, warm sunshine and cool breezes, and the sorrow that weighed the words down all but broke Bilbo's heart and made him wish to see the sun again and feel those breezes on his face.

He found the singer behind the bars of a locked door, and his delight only increased when he saw the singer wasn't alone. Bilbo considered slipping his ring off before speaking, but a guard might have walked by at any moment, so he thought better of it. Instead, he hovered outside the cell - for that is what it was - and knocked lightly on the bars.
"Bofur!" he hissed. Of course, that made the dwarf in question jump and cease his song. Bofur looked through the bars, confused.

"Bilbo?" Hope and caution filled his voice, and Bifur and Bombur looked up sharply from their corners of the cell. Bifur began signing as quickly as he could, and Bombur turned positively beet red with excitement.

"Yes, my friends, I'm here!"

"Where?" Bofur asked, still bewildered.

"I can't explain why just now, but you can't see me."

"Well, I had figured that much for myself, lad." Amusement made Bofur's eyes sparkle. Bilbo chuckled at himself.

"Yes, alright, good point, but I'm right here. Put your hand through the bars."

Bofur did so and yelped when Bilbo pinched the back of his hand.

"Ouch! Steady on, you didn't need to prove it. I believed you!"

"Forgive me, I just can't believe you're all here! What happened?"

Bofur shrugged and looked to his brother and cousin. "The details are a bit hazy, but there were some elves, some shouting, and - I'm rather ashamed to say - some insults thrown...possibly some punches, I can't really remember."

Bifur was pantomiming Bofur's explanation with gusto while Bombur nodded vigorously to confirm its veracity.

"-anyway. The point is, they weren't very pleased with our behavior, so they threw us down here," Bofur finished.

Bilbo shook his head and laughed. "You three are positively incorrigible."

"No denying that, but how did you get here?"

"Never mind that just now, Bofur. Have you seen or heard anything of the others?"

"No, but I'd wager she'd be the one to know something," Bofur whispered and pointed. A red haired elf strode down a flight of steps toward the dwarves' cell, and Bilbo pressed himself back into the wall so she wouldn't trip over him. She paused briefly and glanced inside, making sure that all prisoners were accounted for. After testing the door and making sure it was locked tight, she moved on. Bilbo hesitated only briefly, wondering if he should follow her or go straight back to Thorin.

Hastily, he hissed to Bofur, "Does she come by often?"

He nodded quickly and whispered back, "Twice a day."

"I'll come back," Bilbo promised, and he hurried as stealthily as he could back down to Dwalin and Thorin.
It's dark.

Fíli can hardly see his own hands as he stretches them out, much less Dwalin walking before him. Hot wind sears his skin rhythmically as the Great Worm breathes in and out. The dragon is there, somewhere in the darkness, and he's hunting them. Dwalin whispers for a halt, and Fíli reaches behind himself to touch Kíli's chest - a silent signal to keep his brother from walking straight into his back. They hear scraping over head, and the heat becomes nearly unbearable.

And the stench! Ugh! Fíli fights to keep from retching. Sharp clinking fills their ears as bits of treasure are knocked free of Smaug's scales and fall to the carven stone. The creature moves away, and as silence returns Fíli closes his eyes in relief.

But then comes a growling voice that shakes the walls.

"You think you can hide from me, dwarves?"

Sudden orange light blinds them as the dragon's chest fills with fire.

"YOU WILL BURN!"

The flames engulf them before they can react.

When Fíli woke, he was screaming, and Kíli's hands were on his shoulders.

"Fíli! It isn't real! Wake up!"

Fíli coughed and rasped, and before he could even ask, Kíli was holding a cup of water to his lips. Fíli told himself he should sip it, but his body wouldn't listen and gulped it down instead. As he expected, some of the water slipped into his windpipe and he doubled over in a coughing fit. Kíli patted his back as he choked, and someone chanted calmly in elvish. The coughing subsided as quickly as it started. Fíli collapsed back onto the pillows in exhaustion.

A slender male elf with reddish-blonde hair mopped the sweat from Fíli's brow with a cloth and nodded encouragingly at him.

"You'll be alright now," the elf said.

"Thank you," Fíli breathed.

"You are welcome. Here." He reached for a fresh bowl of medicinal broth and placed it in Kíli's hands. "He must drink all of that broth now," he instructed, "and I will return later with more. If you require my services before then, Master Dwarf, please speak with one of the guards. I will be nearby."

"Thank you, sir," the brothers said in unison.

As the doors closed behind the elf, Fíli asked, "Physician?"

Kíli nodded. "Yeah. He's just about the only elf here who doesn't treat us like prisoners."

"Maybe it's a healer's trait. Oín treats all of his patients with the greatest respect. So did Dad."

"I don't think that applies to all healers, though."
"It might not, but it's certainly the mark of a great one. On another note," Fíli said after he sipped some broth, "did he tell you what's wrong with me?"

Kíli chewed on his lip before answering. "Something about your insides turning to soup because of the spider venom - I'll spare you the gruesome details - but he said you should keep from moving for a few days and eat the broth."

"So I'm eating soup to keep from becoming soup?"

"Pretty much."

Fíli shook his head. He wasn't going to pretend to understand elvish medicine, but he did feel a little better than the last time he was awake, so it must be helping. When the broth was gone, he leaned into the pillows and made himself comfortable. Despite the fact that he'd just been sleeping, the medicine was pulling him slowly under again. Kíli sat crosslegged near his feet and toyed with his runestone, tossing it up and snatching it out of the air.

"Bored?" Fíli asked. Kíli grimaced.

"Yeah. And frustrated. We have to get out of here, Fíli. We're running out of time!"

"But I thought you liked elves," Fíli joked.

"Yeah, well, not all of them are likable," Kíli grumped.

"Ha! Maybe elves are more like dwarves than they'd have us believe."

"Whether or not I like them isn't the point," Fíli said moodily. "We need to find our family."

Fíli nodded sleepily. "Keep looking for a way," he said. "You have keen eyes, little brother. You'll find one."

"It isn't easy. They watch me like hawks!"

"I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault, Fíli."

But that was just it, wasn't it? The two of them wouldn't be in this predicament if Fíli had kept his head and stayed on the path. Perhaps that was the true disease of Mirkwood - an evil powerful enough to drive normally sane and rational people absolutely mad.

"Maybe we could dig our way out," Kíli mused.

"And where would we dig to?" Fíli chuckled. "Besides, you've never tunneled before in your life."

"We're dwarves! It can't be that hard."

"You're stereotyping, Kíli," Fíli drawled. It was getting harder to resist the medicine.

"I can't help it. I'm desperate!"

"I know you are."

Fíli yawned, and his eyelids drooped shut. "We'll think of something."
"Later," Kíli said and patted Fíli's foot. "Go ahead and sleep. I'll look after you."

Fíli smiled and did as he was told.

Thranduil twirled an eagle feather between his fingertips. When the dwarves were brought by his patrol, their confiscated items held little or no interest for the king - aside from this. Strange that a dwarf would possess such a token, for a token it must have been. It was a smaller feather from a Great Eagle's wing and not one that would be lost easily. Thranduil tapped it lightly on his chin as he thought.

What is so special about this dwarf that he should possess a gift from a Great Eagle?

And why did he look so familiar?

Chapter End Notes

Not a whole lot of excitement and drama in this chapter, but I hope you guys enjoy it!
Three weeks passed in the Woodland Realm, and Kíli was about to go out of his mind.

True to his word, he searched whenever possible for a way out, and ditching his elven shadows became simpler over time. His easy smile and lighthearted manner seemed to put many of them at ease, and Thranduil himself seemed to be giving the brothers a little more space. Guards were no longer posted inside the room, so Fíli and Kíli were finally allowed a bit of privacy. Fíli suspected it to be a trick on the king's part - perhaps he hoped they'd become more trusting and open up about themselves. With that in mind, the two remained wary.

Fíli's health was improving slowly, but the physician at last allowed him out of bed. Although he became exhausted quickly, those first few moments on his own legs were such a relief. It was recommended that he walk a bit every day to exercise his muscles and gradually regain his stamina. Kíli was usually the one to accompany him - along with an elf or two - but every now and then, Thranduil would join them. It was on these days that Kíli began to wander off.

The captain of the guard or one of her elves would go with him, and for the most part he was allowed to explore as he liked with the occasional subtle nudge away from areas that were off limits. He noted these places in his mind, though, hoping to return to them if ever the elves left him unattended. One day he was granted just such an opportunity.

Kíli had to force himself to walk, smile and wave at those he passed as he tried to remain as inconspicuous as possible. There was a particular stairwell that struck him in particular, and he was eager to see what he could find. Perhaps it was the nature of his blood that drew him deeper underground, for surely the exits were on the upper levels? Whatever the reason, he wove his way down along twists and turns, stepping lightly and quickly along pathways carved and worn into enormous roots that grew down from the forest above. These trees were ancient, indeed.

There were fewer elves down below, and if he encountered one at all, he strode with confidence and did his best to appear as if his being there were the most natural thing in the world. For the most part, the elves only spared him curious glances. He hoped he would find a way out before word reached the captain of his whereabouts. There was no doubt in his mind that she'd keep him from wandering on his own in future, but if he could find an escape now, he was sure that Fíli could think of a way to slip past the elves later.

Thorin and Dwalin were waiting anxiously when Bilbo returned. In the weeks since his discovery of Bofur, Bifur and Bombur, the hobbit closely followed the redheaded captain, finding the other dwarves singularly and in pairs. In this, his most recent search, he finally found Balin.

"Well?" Thorin prompted. Bilbo didn't bother to hide his grin, and relief glowed in Thorin's eyes. "Now we find a way to get them out, but we can't sneak them out through here. Eleven dwarves will never make it past those elves, and I'll not leave anyone behind in this place, not even for a moment. I won't risk it."

Bilbo nodded and began to pace, running through his mental map of the labyrinth above. Once or twice, Thorin and Dwalin tried to speak, but Bilbo shushed them with a frustrated flap of his hand. After several minutes, an idea started to form. It had to be one of the craziest ideas a Baggins had ever had, but it was something.
"I've the beginnings of an idea," he announced.

"What do we need to do?" Thorin asked. He and Dwalin watched Bilbo expectantly, and the hobbit found himself quite at a loss for words. A month ago, he wouldn't have thought a day would come when Thorin Oakenshield, world-wise King Under the Mountain would defer to the judgement of hobbit from the Shire. Now here he was, putting the fate of his people in that same hobbit's hands, and Bilbo didn't know what to do with that. Realizing Thorin and Dwalin were still waiting and he was gaping at them, he shook himself and adopted his most confident and matter-of-fact tone.

"Right, well, yes. We can't do anything just yet. There are some things I need to see to first. If we're going to get them all out at once, we need a distraction. Luckily, there'll be one in a couple days."

"What do you mean?" interrupted Dwalin.

"They've been preparing for a huge feast up there - some sort of holiday. All the elves can talk about is how potent the king's wine is. Our best chance will be then."

"What do you need?" Thorin asked.

"For now, stay here," Bilbo said. "I need to go check on the others and tell them to be ready. Then I need to figure out a way to get the captain's keys. Once I've got the first dwarves out, I can't parade them all over while I get everyone else. I'll bring them here to you - as quick as I can - and I'll need you to wait until we're together. Once I've freed everyone, we'll make our escape."

Thorin and Dwalin nodded and grinned at eachother in a way that left Bilbo with a vibrant image of two young mischievous dwarves. What absolute terrors they must have been! he thought to himself. That image was immediately followed by one of Fíli and Kíli, and he sobered instantly. He'd seen no sign of them in the dungeons, despite the small hope he'd held, and sorrow took root in his chest. They'd lost them so early in the forest. It was becoming more and more likely they would never see the lads again.

Fíli's knees gave, making him stumble, and Thranduil took his good arm to steady him. He nodded his thanks and wiped at the sweat beading on his brow with the cuff of his sleeve.

"Catch your breath," the king murmured. "We are almost there."

This walk had been longer and more exhausting than the others previous, and Fíli was fighting to hide just how lightheaded he was. His shoulder and leg throbbed where the spider had bitten him, and his breathing was ragged in his own ears. He glanced up at Thranduil, but the elf's gaze was patient and kind. When Fíli's pulse steadied and his breathing became more even, he straightened and squared his shoulders, signaling that he was ready to continue.

Thranduil smiled obligingly and glided forward once more. Not for the first time, Fíli was reminded of a stag - strong and proud. The king led him through a pair of intricately carved doors of immense size which were flung wide. Thranduil and Fíli stepped between them and into a space that was much smaller in comparison to the other rooms Fíli had seen thusfar.
It was cozy and comfortable space with low furniture and a table covered in parchment and scrolls of varying sizes. A decanter of red liquid sat near the edge of the oddly cluttered surface, and Fíli couldn't help but wonder at the lived in appearance of the space. A statue of an elven maid stood in the center of it all, and at her feet was a shallow pool of water in which lotuses bloomed. Her lips curled in a delicate smile, and her hair fell in soft waves across her shoulders and down her back. The adoring look on her face reminded Fíli of his mother when she looked at himself and his brother. A glimpse of what lay beyond her shoulder caught his attention. A great opening like the mouth of a cave yawned behind her, offering a spectacular view across the treetops of Mirkwood all the way to...

Fíli's jaw dropped. A peak thrust above the horizon - a mountain standing alone beyond the forest. *The* mountain. It was so close! Fíli realized Thranduil was gazing evenly at him, so he promptly closed his mouth.

"Beautiful, is she not?" asked Thranduil, though from the look in his eyes, Fíli got the feeling that he wasn't necessarily speaking about the statue. Hoping to steer clear of the topic of the mountain, Fíli nodded and cleared his throat as Thranduil led him to a chair.

"She's lovely," he agreed, glancing again at the maiden. "Who is the lady that inspired the
Thranduil's eyes softened when he answered. "She was my bride."

The fact that the king was speaking in the past was not lost on Fíli. He was quiet for a short time, wanting to ask what had happened to the beautiful queen while knowing full well that it was not his place to pry. He rubbed his bad leg, trying to ease the throbbing. Thranduil noted the action and moved to the table, reaching for the decanter. He poured a small glass and offered it to Fíli.

"It will ease the pain."

Fíli took the glass and sniffed at the liquid. The smell of the wine alone began to numb his mind to the pain. He took a tentative sip, and warmth spread through his body. He chuckled.

"Potent stuff."

Thranduil smiled. "There is no finer wine in all the world," the king boasted.

The statement only solidified Fíli's resolve not to drink any more of it. He needed a clear head at all times when Thranduil was around. A loose tongue was not an option. The king settled into a chair across from Fíli, and he poured himself a glass, taking a long, appreciative swallow of the dark liquid. Then he fixed his eyes on Fíli's, and the silence stretched.

"Who are you?"

Fíli blinked. He had suspected that he'd been brought here for interrogation, but he hadn't expected Thranduil to be so blunt. Fíli decided to stick to the truth as much as possible.

"A blacksmith and part time escort for merchants."

Thranduil's eyes narrowed. "I very much doubt that is who you truly are."

Fíli shrugged. He hadn't lied, really.

"You bear a remarkable resemblance to someone I've met before," Thranduil murmured.

Fíli chuckled. "This is the first time I've ever been in this part of the world," he said.

"Indeed. And what, pray, brings two young dwarves into 'this part' of the world?"

"We're travelling to see our kin in the Iron Hills."

"Do you take me for a fool, dwarf?"

Thranduil's voice had a steely edge. Fíli swallowed. It had been the first and only excuse to come to mind.

"I would not make such a mistake, Your Majesty," Fíli said.

"Tell me, then, Fíli: why are the heirs of Thorin son of Thrain in my realm?"

Fíli's heart skipped a beat.

Kíli stopped at an intersection, trying to decide which path to take. He'd been exploring for
what felt like a long time, and he figured that the captain or someone else would come looking for him soon. He frowned heavily and glared at each option. So far he hadn't seen anything that even remotely looked like an exit, and it was frustrating him to no end. It was for this reason that he didn't notice the presence behind him.

"Kíli?!"

The dwarf nearly jumped out of his skin. "What the-?"

He whipped his head this way and that, searching for the speaker. It sounded like...

"Bilbo?"

The hobbit suddenly appeared out of the shadows and pulled Kíli into a tight hug. Kíli laughed, so relieved was he to see his friend again.

"Bilbo, how did you get here? What happened to everyone else? Are they alright?" he asked, pulling away.

"Yes, they're all alright, considering the circumstances. It's a long story, but I don't have the time to tell it just now," Bilbo said. "Where's Fíli? And what are you doing wandering free?"

"He's walking with Thranduil...HA! Bilbo, you should see your face! I suppose I have some explaining of my own to do, but what do you mean 'wandering free'?"

"Haven't they been keeping you locked up?"

"No...are the others?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so."

"It figures that Thranduil would keep that to himself," Kíli growled.

"Don't worry!" Bilbo said. "I have a plan to get us all out of here. Can you come back again?"

Fíli shook his head. "I may not get another chance after today. I'm not usually allowed to wander off."

"I see." Bilbo folded his arms and tapped his temple while he thought. "I'll follow you back, then, so I can find you when the time comes."

"What? No! You'll be seen."

Bilbo grinned. "No I won't. I'm a burglar, remember?"

Fíli swallowed and placed his glass on the table. He had no idea how much the king knew about him, but Thranduil was waiting for an answer. His gut told him to tell the truth - all of it - but his head warred with that feeling. This was the Thranduil that stood by and did nothing when Smaug destroyed Dale and invaded the Lonely Mountain. This was the Thranduil that refused aid to the refugees of Erebor. So why did he feel like telling this elf everything was the best course? Over the king's shoulder, he spotted the queen's statue. He remembered the soft look Thranduil wore when he spoke of her and the aid and hospitality he and Kíli had received.

"We are going to reclaim our homeland."
Thranduil blinked slowly. "Some forthrightness at last," he said and rose from his chair. "I am pleased to find you as honest as Elrond believes you to be."

Fíli's lips parted in surprise. "What?"

Thranduil's brows lifted. "Elrond is an old friend of mine, and he knows I don't take kindly to surprises, though he omitted the minute detail of your lineage. I admit that your kinship to Thorin was not immediately apparent, but aside from the blonde hair, you bear a striking resemblance. You must be special indeed for Elrond to claim you as one of his own. I am bound by honor to allow you safe passage through my realm."

Well, then. Fíli didn't know how to respond to that at all.

"However...I am not sure that I can keep my word."

A knot formed in Fíli's stomach, and he could feel his brief good fortune slipping through his fingers. Thranduil strode over to the likeness of his queen and stood with his hands clasped behind his back.

"There was another promise I made long ago. If I must choose between one or the other, my vow to her far outweighs my duty to Elrond."

Fíli stood, cringing over the stiffness of his limbs and limped to Thranduil's side. "O King," he began. Balin's lessons resurfaced in his mind as he prepared to petition Thranduil for he and Kíli's release. "Surely we can come to an understanding."

When the elf looked down at him, it was with a smile that did not reach his eyes.

"Have you ever battled a dragon, young prince?"

"No."

"I have. They are merciless terrors with impenetrable hides. They have no remorse. They destroy entire settlements - entire kingdoms in the slightest fraction of the time it took to build them. Dragons have no weaknesses, save for their own greed, and even the strongest and most clever warriors fall among the numerous victims who lie in their wake. Many lifetimes ago, my people fell prey to a waking nightmare. A series of attacks left us ruined, and a kingdom that was once widespread and prosperous had become a withered shadow of its former glory. When we finally drove the dragons back into the north there were countless dead, and she..."

Thranduil's voice trailed off as he gazed into the statue's eyes. He lifted a hand and traced slender fingers down her cheek in a soft caress. "I found her among the dying. Her wounds were too severe for the skill of the healers - all they could do was ease the pain of her passing. I swore that I would never allow such a tragedy to befall us again."

Fíli saw then something that he never expected. The same burden - the same loss - that he often beheld in Thorin furrowed Thranduil's brow and glistened in his eyes. How different were the two of them, really?

"You're worried we won't succeed."

Thranduil blinked rapidly and looked down at him as if he'd forgotten he was there. "How can you?"

Fíli pursed his lips. He didn't want to tell Thranduil about the hidden door, and without the map
and key, what did it matter? They were with Thorin, wherever he was.

"We have an advantage. It's a small one, but it's all we have."

"Indeed?" Thranduil waited, but it was clear Fili wasn't going to elaborate on that point. The king gazed out at the mountain for a few moments. He slipped a hand into a hidden pocket in his robe. When he drew it out, he was holding a feather. Baranthor's feather.

"I believe this belongs to you," Thranduil said.

"Yes," Fili murmured. Just the memory of his flight with his friend calmed him considerably.

"Great Eagles possess insight like no other creature in this world. It is rare for them to form a bond of any kind with land dwellers. And yet, you've made a friend of one. The gift of this feather is no small thing."

Fili nodded. "I know."

"I am compelled to believe that you mean well, but I cannot allow you to reach the mountain."

Fili couldn't answer. He was too furious.

The king changed tack. "The physician tells me you suffer from nightmares."

"What of it?"

"Elrond told me of your fate - that you are determined to fight it."

"So?"

"You are not the first to war against fate, Prince, and in all wars, there are consequences. These terrible things you see in your sleep - they are fates you have avoided."

"What do you mean?" Fili limped back to the chair, his energy spent. He dropped onto it with a grunt.

"Choices, large or small, each have an impact on the course of the future. Your fate is so pivotal that diverting from that path affects countless lives. The consequence is having to experience each altered event. Fate is not changed easily. There must be a balance in all things, and because of the shift you've caused, fate is attempting to correct its course in order to restore that balance."

"If every nightmare is something I've avoided, then...what does it mean if I have the same one twice?"

"Have you?" Thranduil asked.

"Well, no. But if I did...?"

Thranduil tipped his head to the side, regarding Fili steadily. "Not all possibilities are wholly separate. Some paths overlap, with multiple choices leading to the same outcome. A repeating dream would most likely mean that that particular fate is not based on your choices alone. Someone else will have to alter their own path as well."

"FILI AND KILI ARE ALIVE!" Bilbo erupted as he returned. Thorin and Dwalin looked up
"They're alright! They're somewhere in the upper levels."

"You saw them?" Thorin asked, his voice unsteady.

"Yes!" Bilbo nodded vigorously. "Well, I saw Kíli - ran into him, more like. He said that Fíli was brought here too."

Thorin stared at the hobbit for a moment before he started laughing, and pretty soon Dwalin and Bilbo joined him in the high that accompanies intense relief. Once more, it seemed to Bilbo that the years melted away from the dwarves as the weight of sorrow fell from their shoulders. They stood straighter now, with a light in their eyes that he hadn't seen since that night in Bag End all those months ago.

"Bless your luck, Bilbo," Thorin laughed. "You've made us whole once more."

Kíli leapt up as Fíli limped slowly through the door. His older brother was pale, his eyes sunken and shadowed. His knees gave beneath him as Kíli took his weight, and the two shuffled toward the bed.

"Fíli, you're not supposed to push yourself!" Kíli grunted as he helped Fíli roll onto the soft
mattress. He reached quickly for the waiting broth and lifted Fíli's head to help him sip it. After a few minutes, the elder's face relaxed and the pained look in his eyes disappeared.

"Better?" Kíli asked. Fíli sighed.

"It's no use, Kíli. He'll never let us go."

Kíli frowned. His brother's tone was dismal and defeated - not like Fíli at all. "Well, you'd best cheer up, then," Kíli said with a grin and a wink, "because in two days he'll no longer have a say in the matter."

"You found something?" Fíli struggled to sit up. Kíli pushed him back.

"Not something. Someone. Or, more specifically, someone found me."

Fíli couldn't help but grin. "Just tell me, already."

"Bilbo."

For the third time that day, Fíli's jaw fell open. It was getting to be a terrible habit. "Bilbo's here?"

"Everyone is!"

"Wait. Where?"

Here Kíli grimaced. "Thranduil imprisoned them."

"Has he, now?" Fíli's voice was dangerous, and his eyes glinted with a hard light. Any similarities he saw between the elf king and Thorin faded into the back of his mind. There was only indignation in its place now - a smoldering rage over all the injustices Thranduil had committed.

"Easy, Fíli," Kíli said. "The vein in your forehead is bulging."

"The sooner we get out of here, the better. What does Bilbo have in mind?"

"There's a big celebration in two days. He said all the elves can talk about is the king's wine and how potent it is. The party is supposed to last a few days, but Bilbo said our best chance will be the first night."

"Will we meet him somewhere?"

"He'll come find us."

They fell silent as a knock sounded on the door. The physician stepped inside, a smile on his face. "Time to change those dressings, Master Fíli."

The elf tutted and tsked as he unwound the bandages, looking severely displeased with the state of Fíli's wounds. "You shouldn't have had to be active so soon. He must stop pushing you this hard," he muttered.

Kíli looked up at him in surprise. He had not heard any elves speak ill of Thranduil before, and this outburst, however small, was quite unexpected. The physician cleaned the wounds and applied new poultices, wrapping them neatly and snugly with fresh bandages.
"There, now. Are you in a lot of pain?"

"A bit," Fíli admitted.

The physician nodded and pulled a vial out of the pouch at his side. "This is a more concentrated dose of the medicine with a bit of something for the pain."

Fíli accepted it without question and knocked it back with one swallow. Kíli lifted a hand to protest, but his brother was already burrowing into the pillows, his breathing coming more even. Light snores followed soon after.

"He must've really been hurting," Kíli mumbled.

"So it appears," said the physician. His tone was sad, and when Kíli glanced at him, he was shaking his head.

"What is it?"

"It burdens me to see someone who is so unwell abused like this. He's not well enough for such activity. I said brief walks on this level. But then, His Majesty shows little regard for those other than his own people - if you call secluding and smothering them in this place high regard."

Kíli frowned. Is everyone kept here against their will? The thought brought his mind back to Bilbo's plan. There was something Kíli desperately needed to know.

"How long until Fíli won't need the medicine?"

The physician scratched his jaw as he thought. "Nine days. Though the poison is gone, he will need regular administrations to fully repair his muscles and organs."

Kíli crossed his arms and worried at a thumbnail with his teeth. "What would happen if he missed a treatment?"

The elf was already shaking his head before Kíli finished speaking. "At this stage, he is too weak. Without the medicine, his body would be unable to repair itself, and he would suffer a relapse."

Kíli looked at him, horrified. "His body would break down all over again?"

The elf nodded. "At a much more accelerated rate, I'm afraid. He would not last more than a week."

Kíli glanced at his brother and covered his mouth with a fist to hide the slight tremor in his chin.

"Not to worry, Master Kíli. I will make sure he has the medicine when he needs it."

After the physician left, Kíli punched the bed in frustration. There had to be a way to get his hands on that medicine.
"What have you gotten yourself into, Bilbo Baggins?"

The hobbit faced row after row of shelves which held vials, tubes and glass jars containing every kind of concoction imaginable. When he'd agreed to find Fíli's medicine, he had no idea the physician's study would be filled with such an extensive supply of remedies. Bilbo sighed and rubbed his face with his hands. He knew what the medicine ought to look like - Kíli had explained that much at least - but there were several different vials in separate sections that appeared identical. Bilbo was too short to reach many of these to begin with. As he pondered the present problem, he almost missed physician's return.

The ginger haired elf dropped his satchel on his work bench with a sigh and raked his fingers through his hair. Bilbo sidestepped out of his way as he moved to the rows of shelves. The elf murmured calculations to himself and pulled ingredients from this jar and that, emptying them into a mortar. He hummed, his face softening as he worked. It was clear he enjoyed his vocation, and Bilbo watched him closely, wondering if he was working on Fíli's medicine. Picking up the pestle, the elf ground the collection of herbs and such into a fine powder. He tapped equal measures of this into three separate vials and reached for a small cone-shaped instrument and a pitcher of water. After pouring a bit of water into each, he capped the vials and shook them vigorously until the color of the solution resembled freshly brewed tea. At the thought of a good steaming cup of tea, Bilbo's stomach growled.

The physician stiffened a little and turned his head slightly, scanning the room with his peripheral vision. Seeing and hearing nothing, he returned to his work, taking up a quill and printing neatly on scraps of parchment which he bound to the vials with string. Bilbo stood in the corner as the physician continued muttering under his breath and making various other remedies and mixtures. Of what little Bilbo could understand, the elf was speaking of the king in no amount of high regard. The insults were rather colorful, and the reason for them became evident soon enough. When Fíli's name crossed his lips, Bilbo perked up.

"Treating him as if he has nothing better to do than jaunt about all day. The poor dwarf has barely recovered enough to stand, let alone walk all that way. What is the point of being a healer if he's only going to thwart my efforts the first chance he gets?" He ground the pestle into the mortar with emphasis on each word.

"The dwarf needs rest for his body and his mind. Couldn't the interrogation have waited?"

The physician fell into silence as he became further absorbed in his work, which seemed to calm him a great deal. After a while, Bilbo grew tired and began to nod off. He'd been scuttling about through and under Thranduil's halls with little rest for days, and it was catching up with him. So when the physician spoke aloud, he nearly jumped out of his skin.

"I know you are there."

Bilbo automatically checked to make sure the ring was still on. Satisfied that it was in place, he looked around the room. Had someone else entered? No...surely he's not addressing me?

"Why do you linger in the shadows?" the elf prompted. His celery green eyes swept the study,
searching the places where the candles cast shadows. His eyes stopped their roaming when they spotted something just to Bilbo's left. Ever so carefully, moving as little as he dared, the hobbit turned his head to look. His heart leapt into his throat. There, in the space beside him, was a faint outline of a silhouette: his shadow.

It was not the first time Bilbo had noticed such a phenomenon. Wearing his ring rendered him invisible up to a point: in the right light, he still threw a faint shadow. In this place, that hadn't been much of a problem, being that the light was mostly suffused and therefore not very bright at all. But then, he hadn't accounted for the keen eyesight of the elves. What reason had he to do so? Most people only see what they expect to. Why should an elf, or anyone for that matter, expect to see a shadow without its master? But for some reason, this elf saw it.

Bilbo pressed his lips together, hoping that the elf would lose interest and return to his work, but as the silence stretched, his gaze grew even more piercing. He stood, moving closer.

"Who are you?"

Bilbo swallowed, wishing that the floor would swallow him. He saw no way out. He opened his mouth, hoping desperately that his elvish didn't sound as rusty as it was.

"Im mellon."

The elf's chin lifted, and his expression was thoughtful. "A friend, you say? Do friends hide from each other in plain sight?"

Bilbo chewed on his lip. "Well, no. Master, I come to you in confidence concerning a matter of great importance."

"I see. Does my 'friend' have a name?"

The hobbit didn't want to hesitate, so he said the first name that came to mind aside from his own.

"Im Tum - I am Underhill."

"Indeed? Very well, then, Master Underhill. I am Fallaner," the physician said. He pressed a hand to his chest and inclined his head. "What important matter brings you to my little corner of the realm and in such a transparent state?"

Bilbo's mind flashed back to Fallaner's earlier complaints.

"One of your patients: the sickly dwarf."

Fallaner's eyes narrowed. "And what interest does he hold for you? I'm beginning to think less and less that you are an elf, Master Underhill. None of my people seem to care what happens to him."

His tone betrayed him, for it was very clear that he did. And it was also clear that he bore great scorn for those who dismissed the dwarves in his charge so easily.

"But you do," Bilbo said, almost a whisper. Fallaner gazed at the spot where the voice had come from, and it seemed for a moment as if he could actually see Bilbo.

"He is my patient," Fallaner said evenly. "How can I not?"
"May I speak freely, then?"

The elf sat back down on his chair, gesturing for Bilbo to do so.

"You don't like the way the dwarf is being treated."

Fallaner worked his jaw as if he was rolling around an answer in his mouth. Finally, "No. I do not. If this mistreatment continues, my skills and all the medicine in the world will not matter. The dwarf will die. He needs sunlight and fresh air, but it is too oppressive here. And he needs something else too. I'm not sure what it is, but being here is sapping him of any strength he might have regained. He's not improving as quickly as he should have. Then again," he said with a sigh, "I'm not an expert on dwarven anatomy."

"What if he had an opportunity to go outside? Would he get better?" Bilbo couldn't disguise the hope in his voice.

"Perhaps it would help. He would still need the medicine, but it doesn't matter. The king will never allow him to leave."

"What if it wasn't up to the king?"

The elf glanced to the door and back at Bilbo's shadow. "What you speak of is treason," he warned.

Bilbo grunted in frustration and ground his teeth together. They were running out of time. "What is your first duty?" he asked, praying that the answer would be what he hoped.

It was several heart beats before Fallaner parted his lips to reply. But when he did, the hobbit could have danced.

"My first duty is to my patient."

"Listen, Fallaner! He needs to get out of here! You said yourself that staying here would kill him. I'm not asking you to betray your king," the hobbit said quickly when it seemed the elf might protest again. "I'm asking that you abide by the creed of your practice and provide the dwarf with the medicine he needs to be well again. Please, I beg you to give him a chance. Let him live."

"Stop pacing, Kíli. You're making me dizzy."

"Sorry. I can't help it...he's been gone a long time."

"Relax."

"You can't tell me you're not worried about him too."

Fíli sighed. "Of course, I am. But worrying isn't going to help him. Bilbo's resourceful. He'll be alright."

Kíli took a deep breath and let it out through his nose. "You're right. He'll be fine."

"Course I will!"

Fíli jumped, and Kíli cursed. Bilbo tutted. "What would your mother say, Kíli?"
The younger dwarf laughed and put his hands on his hips as he recovered from shock. "She'd cuff me on the ear."

"It would serve you right," said Bilbo with a smile.

Fíli grinned sleepily at them both. "Did you run into any trouble, Bilbo?"

The hobbit shook his head, a look of pleasant disbelief flitting through his expression. "It seemed I might for a moment there, but there are wonders here still. The physician willingly gave me what you need - or at least as much of it as he could."

"He gave it to you? You mean he caught you?" Kíli glanced at the door, growing concerned.

"Yes. Well, no...it's complicated." Bilbo's fingers twitched towards his pocket. "But it's alright! Nothing to worry about, I promise. He's a friend."

The dwarves looked skeptical. Bilbo sighed.

"He wants you to be well, Fíli. He said sunshine and fresh air would be the best thing for you, and you won't be getting it here."

"What about his loyalty to the king?" Fíli asked.

"His first duty is to his patient. I believe that's something you understand quite well."

Fíli closed his eyes, brief images of his father appearing in his mind.

"How much did he give you, then?"

Bilbo smiled and offered Fíli a small pouch. "Here."

The blonde quickly counted the vials. Enough for four days.

"He said he left out the valerian this time," Bilbo was saying.

"Valerian?" asked Kíli. "Why does that sound familiar?"

"It's a flower used to help one sleep," Fíli murmured absently. "They're small white blossoms that grow in tight clusters."

Kíli snapped his fingers. "That's right! Óin uses them."

Fíli nodded, but his mind was on something else. "What are we going to do when we run out?"

Bilbo brightened. "Ah!"

The brothers watched as the hobbit rummaged through his pockets. Finally finding what he was looking for, he produced a scrap of paper. Handing it to Fíli, he said, "A list of the necessary ingredients and how to prepare it - in the common tongue, you'll be pleased to know."

"Bilbo, you're a genius!" Kíli exalted.

"Not at all!" Bilbo rocked on his heels and ran his tongue along his teeth. "Just the practicality of a Baggins."

The hobbit found himself in a crushing hug before he quite knew what was happening. He

"Mind your enthusiasm doesn't shatter his bones."

"Right! Sorry," Kíli said giddily.

Bilbo grimaced what may have been a smile as he stretched and rolled his shoulders. "Right then! I'll be back later. Make sure you're ready. We're going to have to move as quickly as we can."

"Be careful, Bilbo," Fíli and Kíli said.

A cheeky grin quirked the corner of the hobbit's mouth skyward. "When am I not?"

As Thorin embraced Balin, the last dwarf freed by Bilbo, the hobbit was already disappearing back up to retrieve Fíli and Kíli. Balin chuckled as Thorin stood aside for Dwalin to have his turn. The burly dwarf pulled his older brother into the gentlest bear hug Thorin had ever seen, withdrawing just enough to press their foreheads together. The other dwarves chattered in low voices, laughing here and there.

"Alright," Thorin said. "Let's move."

Bilbo's plan hinged on a hatch in Thranduil's wine cellar which opened downwards, dispensing emptied barrels into an underground river below. The hobbit had followed this river long enough to see that it flowed out of the Woodland Realm and down through the forest. The elves spoke of the barrels being collected downriver by men of Lake-town, and this was an unexpected stroke of luck, even if the idea of floating in barrels down a violent river wasn't a pleasant one.

Thorin and Dwalin hadn't been idle while Bilbo explored the upper levels. They'd been doing some exploring of their own, and through all the twisting, maze-like tunnels beneath Thranduil's realm, they'd discovered an alternate route to the cellar. To be on the safe side, they showed Bilbo their discovery the next time he returned, and he confirmed that it was indeed the same cellar. It was agreed that Thorin would lead the bulk of the Company there through their shortcut while Bilbo led Fíli and Kíli straight there without the extra trip down to Thorin and Dwalin's original hiding place. This pleased Thorin as much as it did Bilbo because if Fíli became easily exhausted from even a short walk, Thorin didn't want his sisterson to exert more energy than necessary.

As the dwarves grew quiet and gathered behind him, Thorin sighed in relief. They were finally going to be free of this cursed place.

Fallaner gave Fíli the last vial of medicine - valerian free of course. It wouldn't do for Fíli to fall asleep in the middle of their escape. The dwarf struggled to find the words to express his gratitude. The physician smiled at him, somehow knowing what was in his mind.

"Try not to push yourself too hard," he said in a low voice.

Fíli nodded solemnly. "How can we repay you for this kindness?"

Fallaner tipped his head to the side, considering.

"Live, Master Fíli," he said at last, sweeping them both with his gaze. "Both of you."
The elf may not have known the difficult path that lay ahead for the dwarves, but in that moment it seemed as if he understood their situation better than anyone.

"Thank you."

Kíli echoed the sentiment. Fallaner pressed a hand to his chest.

"I will make sure that the guards here don't trouble you."

"Again," said Fíli as he reached to shake the physician's hand, "thank you."

"I only wish I could do more. I could not retrieve your personal effects for you. They're held under lock and key."

Fíli felt a moment of sorrow wash over him. He saw the feeling reflected in his brother's eyes. Weapons they had crafted themselves and the gifts from their mother would have to be left behind. Perhaps they could return for them after they reclaimed the mountain - Fíli was determined now more than ever that they would reclaim it - and maybe Thranduil would be willing to accept a trade. Maybe.

"The celebration is fully upon us," Fallaner said. "You shouldn't have much trouble. Good luck."

The brothers thanked him once more before he slipped out the door.

Bilbo arrived soon after, much to Kíli's relief. He was eager to be away, and he kept checking Fíli incessantly - so much so, that Fíli had to swat his little brother's hands away more than once.

"Stop fussing," Fíli begged. "You're making me anxious."

It was then that Bilbo slipped through the door, and Kíli nearly tackled him.

"Sh-SHH! Kíli, please! We have to hurry. Fíli, can you walk?"

Fíli swung his legs over the side of the bed with considerable effort, his boots weighing his feet down. He looked up at Bilbo rather sheepishly.

"I'll need some help."

"I think we can handle that," Bilbo said with a grin. He must have caught a bit of Kíli's excitement, infectious as it was. Kíli stepped to Fíli's side, looping an arm around his waist while Bilbo moved to his other side. Fíli's arms draped loosely across their shoulders as they slipped to the door.

"I should be alright for a little while."

"Just stay close," Bilbo said, "and do exactly as I say."

Fíli and Kíli nodded. "Lead the way, Bilbo."
True to his word, Fallaner made sure that their way was clear down to the next level. Bilbo took them along narrow paths and down even narrower stairwells where Kíli had to take Fíli up on his back and edge carefully down one agonizing step at a time. Sounds of merriment and celebration floated to them from certain directions, and the hobbit steered them clear of these. There were several places where Bilbo left the brothers tucked into a shadowed fold in the wall while he scouted ahead, making sure the path was clear.

It soon became evident that Fíli was in some pain, but they couldn't stop. Kíli had no choice but to bear his brother's weight in full, and he was privately grateful that Fíli didn't have all his knives. He would have been unbearably heavy. Without all his weapons, however, Fíli was quite light - lighter than Kíli remembered - which caused him no small amount of concern.

"How you doing, Fíli?"

Fíli grunted, his face set in a grimace of concentration. He was covered in sweat.

"Almost there," hissed Bilbo from up ahead.

Kíli readjusted his hold on his brother. "Hear that, brother? Not far now."

"Don't drop me."

"Fíli! I would never."

"Uh-huh." Fíli managed something of a chuckle, and Kíli grinned at him.

"Let's get out of here."

After an eternity of going down, down, and down a little more, Bilbo raised a hand.

"Just a minute."

He inched forward, disappearing into an opening the brothers hadn't noticed before. After minutes of anxious waiting, the hobbit reappeared with Thorin and the rest of the Company at his back. Once the others caught sight of the youngest members of their family, the descended on Fíli and Kíli in a wave, sweeping them up into hugs that might well have been crushing, were it not for Bilbo and Kíli's protestations. And yet, even if they had squeezed the life out of him, Fíli couldn't have been happier. His uncles pulled himself and Kíli into much gentler embraces, taking care this time. There were hands everywhere, patting and squeezing arms and shoulders, as everyone basked in the joyful reunion.
All too soon, Bilbo was urging the Company onward. They weren't free yet, and the dwarves sobered as quickly as was possible, considering the situation. Thorin tucked Fili into his side, pressing a firm kiss on the top of his head. Fili sighed and leaned in to the contact, relieved to finally be surrounded by his family again. The hobbit led them down one more flight of stairs to the king's wine cellar. Three guards were collapsed in a drunken stupor over a table where two empty decanters sat. A third that was considerably less than half full lay cradled in one of the elves' arms. A brief glance told the dwarves that these three wouldn't be roused easily.

The Company crept down to where over a dozen empty barrels were stacked and ready to be dumped. It took a fair amount of maneuvering and no small amount of teamwork to pack the dwarves into each barrel, and Fili was gently lifted and settled into his with extra padding. Kili handed him the pouch of medicine, and Fili cradled it to his chest as his uncles and brother made sure he was comfortable.

Of course, it was only after most of the barrels were sealed that Bilbo realized something rather important. There was no one to seal him into his own barrel.

"Oh, Bilbo, you bumbling bungler of a burglar!"

He glanced sharply at the elves as one of them stirred and groaned at the sound of his voice. A slow smile crept across Bilbo's face. Slipping on his ring and hopping into his barrel, he shouted in the most imperious elvish he could muster,

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING, YOU LAZY EXCUSES FOR GUARDS?!!"

Two of them snapped to attention, the third still hopelessly lost in dreaming.

"Send those barrels on their way! The bargeman will be waiting for them!" Bilbo commanded. He tried not to laugh at the sight of them tripping over each other in their haste to reach the lever as quickly as possible. Once they pulled it back, he could feel the rumbling of gears turning beneath him, and he hoped the dwarves would keep quiet for their own sakes. Suddenly the barrels were shifting and sliding, then Bilbo's stomach crowded into his throat as the bottom of the world fell out altogether.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaaaand they're out! Finally, huh? I don't know about you guys, but I am so glad they're finally leaving Mirkwood. The illustration is a bit different from the norm, but I really like the way it turned out!

Thanks for reading, you guys! This wouldn't be possible without all of you. *hugs*

and to those of you who may not like hugs: *smiles and waves*

Thank you, all!
The Bargeman

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The bargeman's gaze ticked between the sun's position and the bend just up the river for the umpteenth time. If the elves made him wait much longer, he'd have to spend the night moored on the riverbank, and that thought was most unpleasant. He should have collected the barrels and returned home by now. No doubt his children would begin worrying soon, and he couldn't blame them. The air was crisp with the onset of autumn, and foul creatures had been seen lurking with growing frequency in the region.

No. He did not especially like the idea of sleeping out here. An admirable shot with a bow he may be, but a man cannot shoot what he cannot see. Speaking of seeing... He looked upriver just in time to see the first of the barrels bob and slide into view. Glancing again at the sun, he whistled to himself. Cutting it a bit close.

He waited until the barrels drifted into a calm section of river near his barge where he guided them closer to the bank with a long pole. The barrels ground into the pebbles that littered the floor of the shallows, finally coming to rest. The man lashed his pole back where it belonged on the port side of the barge before wading into the water to begin his work. He hefted the nearest barrel, understandably surprised when it didn't budge.

"Now that's peculiar."

It was obviously still full of something, and it was clearly quite a solid and heavy something. He heaved and rolled the barrel onto the bank, wondering how in blazes the elves failed to realize that the thing hadn't been emptied. He hopped back over the rail of the barge, retrieving an iron bar. With a swift jab and a mighty pull, the lid was free, revealing the strangest thing. A pair of boots greeted his eyes, followed by a low groan.

"What the devil?"

He seized the boots and hauled the creature free.

Kíli reentered the world with a swift and unwelcome tug on his ankles. He kicked out, unsure of who or what had taken hold of him in such a rough manner, and his 'attacker' released him with a curse as his boot heel connected with firm bone. Kíli scrambled to all fours, ready to launch himself at his opponent's legs. An arrow head pointing straight at his nose, however, gave him pause.

"I've no wish to harm you, Master Dwarf, but if you try that again, I will let this fly," the tall man behind the arrow said. Kíli swallowed, forcing himself to relax so that he no longer appeared to be a threat.

"Wait! Don't shoot him!"

The arrow snapped toward a soggy hobbit. Bilbo looked more like a wet cat than a Baggins, but he did his best to seem confident, lifting his hands in a gesture of peace. It was quite a comical sight, really, and Kíli might have laughed if he wasn't concerned about something more important.
"We mean you no harm, either," Kíli said quickly. "My family is trapped in the other barrels. We only wish to free them."

"And once they're free? How do I know you won't overwhelm me with numbers once I've helped you?"

Kíli and Bilbo shared a glance. Reaching slowly toward his belt with one hand while the other was raised, Kíli removed Fíli's last hidden knife from his belt and held it out, pommel first. When the man narrowed his eyes, Kíli dropped it and pushed it toward him with the toe of his boot.

"I am unarmed," Kíli said. Bilbo followed suit, removing his short sword and laying it on the ground. The bargeman still appeared unconvinced, and Kíli clenched his jaw in frustration. Desperate, he shook his runestone free from his sleeve, catching it in the opposite hand.

"I offer you this," he said. "It is a token of a promise I made to my mother. Please, accept it as a testament to my honor and proof of my oath that we will not harm you."

The bargeman's gaze bored into Kíli's as he spoke, and the tip of the arrow dipped a fraction. After a tense eternity, he lowered his bow and replied, "I have no need of your gift, Master Dwarf. Keep it. I believe you speak truth and will honor your word, which I accept as your token."

"You'll help us?" Bilbo asked as Kíli threw himself at the nearest barrel, calling his brother's name.

"Aye," said the lake-man as he joined Kíli in the water.

Fíli didn't know how long it took for them to pry his barrel open. His only thoughts were for the pounding in his skull and the churning nausea in his stomach. When Kíli and Dwalin finally pulled him out and up onto dry land, he was shaking violently. He sucked desperately at the fresh air, seeking to rid himself of the smell of stale straw and his own vomit.

The ride in the barrel was far from enjoyable, and the rolling and heaving of the river had caused him to be sick more than once. Being trapped in the dark while he was tossed about, turned upside down and shaken about had wreaked havoc on his brain, leaving him with a splitting headache. The last light of the setting sun seared his eyes, and he raised a hand to cover them, fighting the new wave of nausea that the sudden brightness caused.

"Kíli," he croaked.

His brother understood his plea, and plucked the pouch from Fíli's numb fingers. Loosening the cord and retrieving a vial, he broke the wax seal and removed the cork with one twist. Dwalin cradled Fíli in his lap and lifted his head, gingerly brushing stray hairs away from his mouth while Kíli tipped the contents of the slender glass between his lips. Fíli swallowed thickly several times. When he felt brave enough to open his eyes, he was greeted by Oín's sharp gaze.

Kíli was explaining Fíli's condition to the old physician, and Dwalin was absentmindedly patting Fíli's shoulder when Thorin's face appeared above him.

"How is he?" Thorin asked tensely.

"The lad's a fighter, Thorin," said Oín. "He'll survive. But he needs to rest."

The voices around Fíli became distant as his mind unfocused, detaching him from his
immediate surroundings. He found himself wishing that the dose he'd just swallowed did contain valerian. His body ached, and all he wanted to do was sleep. Sluggishly, he became aware that the voices had gone quiet.

"Fíli."

The prompt came from Dwalin, accompanied by a light pat on the side of his face. He blinked blearily, trying to focus.

"What is it?" he slurred.

"Yer brother asked you a question, lad."

Brows drawn, Fíli eyes shifted to Kíli's face. "Sorry, Kee...say again?"

Kíli crouched down, bringing his face closer.

"S'alright," he said, though his eyes suggested that it was anything but. Fíli knew he must look rough, but the fresh air was already easing his headache, and the medicine was helping to calm his uneasy stomach. His brother laid a hand on his wrist as his eyelids drooped.

"Fíli, we have to go now. Can you stand?"

Thorin watched his nephew's jaw set in determination. Kíli grasped Fíli's forearm, and many hands reached to steady him as Kíli pulled him to his feet. He swayed a little, eyes closing in pain against the sudden change in altitude. Thorin glanced at Óín in a silent query. The old dwarf pressed his lips together and shook his head slightly. Thorin took a steadying breath and turned to look upriver. There was no sign of the elves, but that didn't mean that they couldn't appear in a moment. The Company had to move on as quickly as possible, for surely Thranduil was aware of their escape by now. Thorin cursed under his breath.

He hadn't yet had time to hear the full story of how his nephews came to be in the Woodland Realm, nor had he been made aware of the severity of Fíli's illness. But he did know that the condition of his sister's eldest son prevented him from moving quickly, which is exactly what they needed to do. He glanced downriver to where the bargeman was diligently loading the now empty barrels onto his vessel. Lake-town was the only settlement of men that remained in the area following the destruction of Dale, the great city that now lay in ruins outside the gates of Erebor. It wasn't a huge leap to deduce that this man was headed there. Thorin caught Balin's eye, a plan forming.

"Excuse me!" called the old scholar, taking the hint.

The bargeman looked up but didn't pause in his work.

"Yes, Master Dwarf?"

"Would I be correct in thinking you'll be heading to Lake-town?"

"Aye."

Balin smiled. "Do you take passengers, by chance? We'd be more than willing to pay, and the lad, you see," he gestured to where Fíli was being held between Kíli and Dwalin, "he's unwell. We need a place to rest and resupply."

The bargeman rolled the last barrel onto his barge. He glanced at Kíli. The dark haired dwarf
was murmuring something to his brother, and their closeness reminded him of his own children. He sighed. "I would help you if I could, but no one enters Lake-town without the Master's leave. He depends heavily on our trade with the elves, and I don't think he would take kindly to harboring more than a dozen of the elf king's escaped prisoners," he said pointedly.

Balin opened his mouth, about to protest and deny the bargeman's last words, but the man held up his hand.

"I have no intention of turning you in," he said. "I am a man of honor, and I'll not trade another's life for coin or comfort."

He loosened the mooring lines, preparing to cast off, and Balin looked to Thorin.

*Try again,* Thorin mouthed.

"Surely there are ways of entering the town unseen," Balin said quickly.

"Aye," grunted the man, "but for that, you will need a smuggler."

"For which we will pay double!"

The bargeman looked up sharply. It wasn't about the coin, not that it wouldn't be helpful. Being a bargeman wasn't one of the most profitable vocations, and his children could use some warmer clothes, what with winter closing in. He looked again at the two young brothers, a battle raging in his heart. No, it wasn't about the coin. He ached to help these dwarves. He wasn't the kind to turn away someone in need, but the Master already held him under close scrutiny as it was. Helping these dwarves would mean putting his family in danger. He would be arrested, and his children would be left to fend for themselves. It was a terrible risk.

The dark haired brother looked over then, locking eyes with him. The bargeman sighed and lost the battle with himself. He couldn't deny the plea in that gaze.

"Fine," he said. "Let's go."

**Chapter End Notes**

A rather brief chapter, but it was one of those moments where it's the best place to pause.
Bard the bargeman stood with feet shoulder width apart, balancing with the ease of one who is more accustomed to being on the water than dry land. His hand rested on the tiller, firm and steady, and his eyes focused on the way ahead. Every now and then, he'd glance down at the bow of the barge where the dwarves and hobbit huddled together. Autumn was quickly fading, and winter would be coming soon. Bard's passengers shivered as night washed over them, and they moved closer together to warm themselves and each other.

They murmured to one another at first, laughing here and there, but as the hours ticked by, the sound of snores replaced that of conversation. The bargeman found his gaze drifting often to the blonde nestled in the center of the huddle. It didn't take a clever man to see how much the others adored the young dwarf. They fussed over him, making sure he was comfortable. Bard smiled. Again, their affection for one another reminded him of his own family - whom he was very eager to return to - which brought his thoughts back to the problem at hand.

How was he going to smuggle a halfling and a baker's dozen of dwarves into Lake-town? Every time he returned home his barge was scoured thoroughly by the Master's right-hand stooge. He supposed he could fill the barrels with something, but that might antagonize the Master's lackey and make him more suspicious than usual. Bard shook his head at himself. How had he gotten into this mess?

Even as the complaint crossed his mind, his gaze landed on Kíli - the young rascallion he had to thank for the growing bruise on his shin. Kíli's head rested on his brother's shoulder, an exhausted but content expression on his face as he dozed. Whatever these dwarves had been through, Bard had the feeling that this was the first time in quite a while that things had even remotely gone their way.

He sighed, returning with renewed vigor to his attempts to come up with a plan.

Fíli grinned as Bofur tucked yet another blanket from the bargeman's bedroll around him. Just when he thought his uncle was finished, Bofur unwound the scarf from his neck and wrapped it around Fíli's.

"Honestly, I'm warm enough! I swear," Fíli protested. Bofur ignored him and dropped the finishing touch on his nephew's head: his own hat.


"Think nothing of it."

Bombur scooted closer, allowing Fíli to rest on the pillow that was his stomach. The warmth was almost enough to make the young dwarf sweat, but as the temperature continued to drop the further they travelled across the lake, he became increasingly grateful. Bombur patted his shoulder affectionately.

A tenor hum began in Bombur's chest, and the tune was one that filled Fíli with memories of childhood. Bofur joined soon after, singing the words softly, and the bass of Thorin's voice supported the melody. Dwalin hummed along with Bombur and Balin who added his harmony to the soothing song as well. Fíli could almost hear the sweet alto notes of his mother's voice bringing
it all together. It was a tune she'd crooned often to her boys when they were young, and though it made his heart twist a bit, it had the calming effect over him that his family had hoped for. His breathing slowed and deepened into snores as he drifted off to sleep.

Fíli is freezing.

He stands at the base of a ruined watchtower, and white snow covers the ground. A flake drifts down here and there, and the overcast sky feels oppressive and ominous. Kíli is a pace in front of him, and across a frozen river, Thorin, Dwalin and Bilbo stand on the edge of a collapsed bridge.

Kíli glances at them, but they're looking at something high above. It's only now that Fíli realizes he can hear the harsh language of the orcs from the same direction that the others are facing. Kíli leans forward and twists his head upward as a familiar voice desperately screams to be heard above the other.

"RUN!"

Then Dwalin is turning his head away because whatever has happened is too terrible to watch - which scares Fíli more than anything, because he knows Dwalin has seen some terrible things - and Bilbo stares in shock, and suddenly Kíli is recoiling back as something - no, someone - lands in front of him. Fíli barely hears the gutteral gasp from Thorin, and he doesn't even see Bilbo squeeze his eyes shut in pain.

The body lying broken at his brother's feet is his own.

Fíli stares at the empty eyes and stricken face and only teats his eyes away when Kíli startles him. His brother's face is twisted in a mask of pain and rage, and Fíli is terrified of him. Fury floods Kíli's veins and makes his eyes ignite with murderous fire. Suddenly he's moving, running, sprinting, tearing up the steps of the watchtower, and it's all Fíli can do to keep up. Orcs appear, and one by one, Kíli slays them all. He roars and curses and kills.

"Kíli!" Fíli shouts, but Kíli doesn't hear. He is deaf and blind to all but the inferno ripping him apart from the inside. Kíli doesn't see the numbers swarming towards him, or if he does, he couldn't care less. His blade beckons them all, challenging them as he screams for justice.

Fíli tries to help him fight, but his hands pass right through flesh and steel. When Kíli is overwhelmed, he is helpless.

Helpless.

Kíli is pinned, and an orc raises his blade. Kíli stares at it with the most unsettling relief in his eyes. A single tear slides down his cheek, and he closes his eyes, welcoming the end. Fíli screams his brother's name until he's hoarse.

Kíli doesn't hear.

The blade slices through the air, and -

"KILI!"

Fíli's eyes flew open as a dozen voices rose at once, but only one voice mattered.
"Here, Fíli."

There he was. Kíli's eyes were soft with sympathy. Fíli reached forward, pulling him into a tight hug.

"I'm here," Kíli repeated. "It's okay."

Only it wasn't, not really. When Fíli told the elven king that he'd not yet dreamt the same dream twice, he'd lied. The nightmare of his own death and its horrifying consequences had plagued him no less than four times already, and tonight was the fifth. Thranduil's explanation that a repeated nightmare of the future would require more than Fíli's own choices to be altered left the dwarf shattered.

After the escape, Fíli had hoped to never suffer from the nightmare again. Now it seemed that was not to be. He pulled back from Kíli, hoping to explain, but before he could speak a word, Bard called from the tiller.

"We're nearing the town!"

Bard stood to the side as Ben the fisherman filled each barrel to the brim with fish. Thanking him, he pressed a gold coin into his palm and stepped back aboard. The dwarves and halfling were silent during the short trip to the toll gate, praise be, and Bard grinned when he saw who was on duty at the gate.

"Goods inspection," an old man called. "Papers, please!"

"Morning, Percy!"

"Oh, it's you, Bard! Anything to declare?"

"Nothing but that I am cold, tired, and ready for home," the bargeman said with a smile.

"Well, then. Everything seems in order," Percy replied as he signed Bard's pass. Just as he extended his arm to return the slip of paper, a slithery hand snatched his wrist while another tore the paper from his fingers.

"Not. So. Fast."

"Good morning, Alfrid," Bard all but groaned. The greasy man stepped forward, and there were several members of the Lake-town militia at his back. He ignored the greeting and curled his lip in a snarl as he read the pass out loud.

"Consignment of empty barrels from the Woodland Realm. Only, they're not empty. Are they, Bard?"

Bard's mouth set in a grim line. Alfrid snapped his fingers and gestured to the barrels.

"Dump the fish over the side!"

Bard gritted his teeth. This weasel was determined to make his life as difficult as possible. "Oh, have a heart, Alfrid! The people need to eat!"

"Not my problem."
"And what about when the people starve...when the rioting starts? Will it be your problem then?"

The smaller man's eyes widened a little before he sneered at Bard. "You're bluffing, bargeman. DUMP IT ALL!"

Bard pinched the bridge of his nose as every single slippery fish was returned to the frigid lake. The now empty barrels were scattered across the length of the barge, and Bard didn't even bother returning them to their proper positions.

Alfrid spat at Bard and grinned, baring his horrendous teeth. "And let that be a lesson to ya! No one opposes the Master."

The Master's man spun on his heel and slinked away, the militia close behind.

"Sorry, Bard," said Percy when they'd gone. Bard winked.

"No harm done, Percy," he said in a conciliatory whisper. "There are plenty of fish in the lake."

Percy chuckled and called, "Raise the gate!"

Bard touched two fingers to his brow in thanks, and proceeded to navigate the maze of waterways that was Lake-town.

It was easier than an outsider might think to tell friend from foe in Lake-town. The community was pretty close-knit, despite the occasional snitch or weasel, and everyone knew everyone else's business. It was difficult to keep secrets, to be sure. That being said, the members of the Master's spy network weren't as devious or clever as they seemed to think they were. Bard knew exactly where each one was, which signal was unique to each man, woman and - sadly - child. His particular favorite was the simpleton who hid in a large basket and made absurd bird calls.

Bard moored his barge at a dock relatively near his home, yet still far enough away to avoid the spy network. A few of his friends greeted him with a nod or a wave, which he returned before rolling one of the barrels to the side. He reached down, sliding his fingers into a cleverly disguised knot of wood, and pulled. An entire section of planking swung up and open, revealing some rather claustrophobic looking dwarves. He quickly helped them out of the secret compartments beneath the deck, instructing them to keep low.

Kíli held Fíli's forearm, offering his brother an anchor if he needed it. Bard led them along back streets and narrow alleys that were no wider than a man's shoulders. Every so often, he would make them stop, waiting for the path ahead to clear. The people in this town were curious, and the bargeman wanted to avoid as many of them as possible. At the moment, the dwarves were huddled between two houses that leaned toward each other. Their construction was so poor that it seemed as if they were supporting one another - each the only thing keeping the other from collapsing into the lake.

Ahead of them was a market full of men, women and children as well as a couple members of the militia. They wore garishly colored uniforms and ridiculous helmets from which sprouted bedraggled red plumes. Given what the dwarves had already observed, these men weren't very bright and easily avoided, but in a market full of other people, a larger and more elaborate distraction was called for. Bard was wandering among the stalls, speaking with different merchants and pressing coins into their hands.
Behind Kíli, Glóin grumbled something about the frivolous spending of hard earned coin. Most of the money had come from Glóin's own pocket, and he was none too pleased about it. Thorin silenced him with a baleful glare. Before entering the market, Bard had instructed them to follow him through a few at a time.

"Stay low," he'd said, "and keep to the perimeter. Whatever you do, don't let anyone see you - especially the militia. Regroup in that alleyway on the other side of the market, and I'll meet you at the far end. Keep out of sight."

Suddenly, two of the merchants he'd spoken with began to fight. The matter was over something trivial, but it attracted everyone else's attention in the space of moments. All eyes were on them, and Thorin pushed Balin, Glóin and Óin forward.

"Go!"

They trotted quickly to the appointed place, being mindful to use stalls and crates as cover. Once they were safely to the other side, Thorin tapped Dori, Ori and Bilbo on the shoulders. The argument in the market was becoming rather heated, and more merchants were getting involved as the argument turned toward past personal grievances and grudges between the original squabblers.

As Dori, Ori and Bilbo slipped into the other alleyway, Bifur and Bombur moved forward at Thorin's signal. After them went Bofur, Nori and Dwalin, and as the militia decided to actually do something about the quarrel that was quickly turning seriously aggressive, Thorin took Fíli's other arm and led them forward. There was a terrifying moment when the three were trapped behind a stall as the fighting moved too close, but then Bard was there, beckoning and hurrying them out of harm's way.

As soon as the Company was together in the alleyway, Bard hurried forward and kept them moving.

"This way, quickly!"

By the time they came within sight of Bard's house, Fíli was breathing hard. He leaned heavily on Kíli and Thorin's arms, and his legs shook. Bard held up a hand as he scanned the people around his house. He cursed under his breath.

"I count three...four of the Master's men. They're waiting for me to come home."

"How do we get around them?" Thorin asked.

Bard was quiet for a moment. Then he turned to Thorin with a grim look in his eyes. "I have an idea," he said. "But you're not going to like it."
Sigrid was anxious, and she took it out on the laundry.

She shook out each garment with a loud snap before folding and throwing it down on the growing pile of clean clothing. Her little sister Tilda glanced at over from her place on the window seat, pursing her lips and turning quickly to look out the window again, afraid she might have missed some sign of their father coming home. Their brother Bain stood at the table, mercilessly pounding potatoes into a pulp. Then,

"I see him!"

Instantly, all three were at the door, opening it just as their father reached for the handle.

"Da!"

"There you are!"

"I was worried!"

They spoke at once, clinging to Bard as he closed the door. He embraced them back before releasing them quickly. "Girls, stay up here," he said. "Bain, come with me."

His son followed him downstairs to the privy while the girls hovered near the railing at the top of the steps.

"Da, what's going on?" called Tilda. Bard gave her a quick smile and touched a finger to his lips.

"Just a minute, darlin'."

He lifted up the lid of the toilet and motioned Bain over. "Give them a hand, son."

One by one, Bard and Bain pulled a halfling and thirteen shivering dwarves out of the toilet.
Fíli was so cold, he could barely lift his hand to grasp Bard's. Kíli released his hold on him as he was lifted up, and when he was settled onto the floor, his legs buckled. Bard caught him, telling Bain to help the rest of the dwarves. He lifted Fíli and carried him up the steps.

"Sigrid, stoke the fire, please. Tilda, love, will you get some blankets for our guests?"

The girls hurried to do as their father asked, and after seeing to the fire, Sigrid poured some fresh water in a kettle and hung it over the flames. Something hot to drink would certainly be welcome. Bard settled Fíli nearest to the fire, and the other dwarves gratefully accepted the blankets that his youngest daughter offered.

A short while later, Thorin's Company crowded in front of the fireplace with steaming mugs in their hands. Fíli reached into the pouch of medicine with shaky fingers, opening one of the vials and draining its contents. He winced at the soreness in his throat as he swallowed. It did nothing to ease the headache that had been throbbing in his skull for the past few hours, but it sent warmth from his chest to his fingers and toes. He sighed and pulled the blanket tighter around his shoulders, grateful that the shivering began to subside. He coughed a little and winced as his throat protested.

While the Company warmed themselves, Bain had returned to preparing dinner. His sisters and father helped, now that they had extra mouths to feed, and a great black stew pot was hung over the fire. While they waited for the stew, Bain gave the dwarves and hobbit some of the potatoes, and they gratefully spooned the hot food into their mouths. Fíli only managed a couple of bites before he was forced to give up. His throat was too raw, and he was too tired to eat, anyway. He leaned against Kíli's shoulder and tried to ignore the tightness in his chest as he nodded off.
If the sound of thousands of voices and the clashing of weapons fills the air, Fíli doesn't hear it. His heartbeat pounds in his skull and thunders in his ears, and combined with his own ragged breathing, it drowns out everything else. He's so tired, he just wants to lie down and sleep...

_No_, he thinks. _Can't_.

Thorin's there. Thorin needs him.

The battle below isn't over, not yet, but at long last the hill is won. Fíli sags, falling to his knees at his uncle's side. Kíli limps over, one hand covering the gash in his thigh. Thorin coughs harshly as Fíli lifts the torn edge of the chain mail over his chest. Fíli can feel the blood drain from his own face as Kíli inhales sharply. The wound...

Fíli tears his eyes from it, unable to look any longer. It's beyond any healer's skill, and Fíli grinds his teeth together. The pain in his heart is like a rabid beast, mindlessly ripping its way through his chest. He fights the sob that's choking him as Thorin smiles.

"Is it over?" their uncle asks.

Fíli nods.

"Then it is done," Thorin rasps. Fíli shakes his head, vehemently denying the inevitable.

"I'm sorry," Fíli says. "We failed you."

"No, Fíli," Thorin whispers, and sorrow threatens to overwhelm the eldest prince. "The choice was mine, as are the consequences."

He turned his head, gazing at the front gate of Erebor. "I have honored my promise. The mountain has been reclaimed...but not for me. It was for you...it was always for you."

"Uncle!" Fíli says urgently as the light in Thorin's eyes fades.

Thorin exhales.

Kíli roars in anguish.

Fíli sits back on his heels, numb.

Thorin son of Thrain is gone.

Fíli son of Dís is king.

A gentle hand shook Fíli's shoulder, pulling him from the nightmare.

"Wake up, lad," said Óin. "Kíli says it's time for your medicine."
Fíli rolled into a sitting position, groaning over his stiff muscles and the ache in his chest. He swallowed the medicine with a great deal of difficulty, his throat raw and aggravated by the action. A chill made him shudder. Óin eyed him critically, laying a hand on his brow.

"You're burning up. I'll make you some tea."

Fíli gripped Óin's sleeve as the old dwarf stood. "Let me tell Thorin."

The physician frowned, but he nodded. Kíli dropped down beside him then, bowl of stew in hand.

"Hungry?"

Fíli recoiled, his stomach rolling at the thought of eating. "Not really."

Kíli shrugged, digging into the stew. "Suit yourself," he said goodnaturedly. "There's plenty more when you want it."

Golden light filled the room, and Fíli frowned at the windows. "What time is it?"

"Dunno," Kíli said around a mouthful of potato, "late afternoon, early evening, I think. You've been sleeping all day."

Fíli pinched the bridge of his nose. He slept so much lately, he wouldn't need to do so again for weeks. He couldn't stand feeling so useless and burdensome. They were short enough on time as it was, and they certainly didn't need anymore complications to muck up the quest. But...Fíli was beginning to realize just how much of a complication he was, and as Thorin sat down in front of him, that fact became crystal clear.

"Fíli," Thorin said with a smile.

"Uncle."

"I'm glad you're awake. We have much to discuss. Durin's Day is the day after tomorrow, which leaves us little enough time to find the hidden door. The bargeman has offered us passage to the far shore, and though it took some bargaining, he has agreed to take us tonight."

"What about weapons?" Fíli asked. "Supplies?"

Thorin was shaking his head. "We don't have the time to bargain with these men for supplies, and if what the bargeman says about the Master is true, there's no use even trying. He'd lock us away sooner than help us, and it's a risk we can ill afford to take. The bargeman has gone to see to some supplies, but we will have to see about weapons when we reach Dale. Perhaps there will be something that we can salvage."

It was a small hope, and a desperate one at that. But then, the quest itself was a desperate hope in and of itself, wasn't it? Fíli sighed. An already impossible task was being made even more difficult. Thorin was still speaking, laying out plans and explaining the details of their departure, with Balin and Dwalin adding bits of information here or there. Óin caught Fíli's eye as a cold chill shook his body. Fíli's heart sank, and his chest tightened even more, threatening to squeeze a cough from his lungs.

He took a steadying breath. "I can't go with you."

Silence. All eyes were on him, and Fíli met their stares with sorrow and regret.
Kíli was first to break the silence. "What are you talking about?"

The cough overcame Fíli's resistance and tore from his throat. He felt old. His body ached all over, his head pounded painfully, and he was very, very tired. In spite of the fact that he'd slept all day, it wasn't nearly enough. He'd pushed himself too hard - the escape, the exertion of the route to Bard's house and the brief swim in the icy lake water - it was too much, too soon.

"The lad is seriously ill," Óin said, summing up Fíli's condition with such simple words.

"I'll only slow you down," Fíli rasped as the coughing subsided. "And you certainly don't need me waking the dragon prematurely."

"No, he can do it," Kíli said indignantly.

Thorin pressed his lips firmly together, shaking his head.

"Thorin, we can't leave him behind! I'll carry him if I have to!"

"Your brother knows his limits, Kíli, and we have never known him to back down from a challenge," Thorin began. "If anything, he often pushes himself too hard."

"Then I'm staying, too," Kíli said, and the words left his mouth in a hurry, as if he was afraid that if he didn't say them fast, he wouldn't say them at all. Fíli gripped his brother's forearm.

"Kíli, you don't have to," he said gently. All those stories, all of Kíli's dreams over the years, they were all centered on Erebor. Fíli couldn't let him give up something that important. Conflicted, Kíli glanced from his brother to Thorin, but their uncle raised his hands.

"The choice is yours alone."

"You should go," Fíli insisted with a forced smile. "You belong with them. I'll be alright."

Kíli looked down at him, and Fíli saw that the conflict was gone. "No. I belong with my brother."

Later, while they waited for Bard's return, Thorin and Dwalin stood to the side, watching Fíli and Kíli as they chuckled with Bilbo over some inside joke.

"D'ye think it wise?" Dwalin asked. Thorin glanced at his cousin and lifted a shoulder in a shrug.

"They are old enough to know their own minds, Dwalin. They have been for years. I must admit that I'm actually relieved."

"How so?"

"I thought I lost them once," Thorin said. "I'm in no hurry to do so again."

"They're capable, Thorin. More than handy in a fight! I might even go as far as to say that they're better than us, if it didn't wound my pride," the burly dwarf said with a chuckle.

"I know that. I do not doubt their skill. I just..."

Thorin's voice trailed off, his brow furrowed. Dwalin waited, knowing that he would continue
when he was ready.

"This was no life for them. I only wish I could have shielded them from all of this. And I am ashamed...ashamed that even now, if Fíli was well, I would lead him to the mountain in spite of my feelings."

"You have only ever done your best, Thorin."

Thorin exhaled heavily. "And it was never enough."

A knock at the door interrupted them, and Bard slipped inside. Instantly, the little one room house was bustling with activity. The dwarves and Bilbo gathered what few possessions they’d managed to keep on their persons during their imprisonment in Mirkwood while Bard tensely watched the street outside. The sun was beginning to set, making the light uncertain. It was perfect cover for the Company to slip back to the barge, and Bard urged them to hurry before they missed their chance.

The dwarves and Bilbo made much more hasty goodbyes than they would have preferred, though Thorin lingered longer than even Bilbo. He took each of his nephews into his arms, pressing his forehead to theirs.

"Rest," he ordered, and his voice softened as he added, "and join us when your strength returns."

Fíli and Kíli nodded, and Thorin moved to clasp forearms with first Óin then Bofur, both of whom had elected to stay behind with the lads. Finally, he encompassed them all with a fond look.

"Look after one another," he requested. They nodded.

"Be careful," Fíli said thickly.

Thorin smiled. "I will."

Then he slipped out into the growing dark.

Before following the graying dwarf outside, Bard was surrounded and fiercely hugged by his children. "I'll be back before morning," he promised. "Help our guests in any way you can."

Turning to the dwarves, he said, "My home is your home. If you need anything at all, let the children know."

"We can't thank you enough," Óin replied as he shook Bard's hand. "May fortune favor you and return you home in safety."

Bard nodded, accepting the blessing, and he took his leave.

"Now then, lad," the old physician said crisply as he turned to Fíli. "Let's get you to bed. You need some sleep, warmth, medicine, plenty of fluids..."

Fíli smiled as Óin prattled on, and he allowed Bofur and Kíli to guide him away from the door.

A few hours later, Fíli could not sleep. Kíli lounged on a chair beside the bed, puffing at his pipe - the one luxury the elves had allowed him to keep. Smoke rings lazily drifted to the ceiling, and though it was calming him a great deal, Bard's children remained tense. From what Fíli had gathered, a strict curfew was enforced at night. Citizens weren't allowed to go outside the town
after dark, and none were permitted entrance before dawn. Breaking curfew was apparently quite a serious offense, and the children were justifiably afraid for their father. If the Master of Lake-town truly hated Bard so much, it was the perfect excuse to lock him away...and the blame would lie squarely on the shoulders of Thorin's Company. Fíli shook himself free of such brooding thoughts and caught Bofur's attention.

"Uncle Bo," he said with a discreet nod toward the children, "I just can't seem to fall asleep. How about a story?"

Interested, Tilda glanced over. "Aren't you too old for stories?" she wondered. Sigrid shushed her, fearing that the dwarf might take offense.

Bofur grinned at them both. "You can never be too old to hear a good story," he said pleasantly. "Let me see, now. 'Many years ago, in a land far to the west, there lived a dwarven lass with a beard longer than the trees are tall...''"

Fíli settled deeper into the pillow as the familiar tale flowed from Bofur's lips like a song. The telling of tales had always been unique to the dwarf who spun them. With Bofur, they tended to be comic love stories. When Dwalin told tales, epic fights and feats of bravery were the focal point. Bombur's stories always evolved, never playing out the same way twice. Balin's versions had a habit of being more fable than fanciful, usually focusing on flawed heroes who learned hard lessons. Thorin's words usually called forth warriors and rulers of times long past. Real life heroes of ancient history were brought to life again as Thorin recounted the details of their heritage. Some of it could be pretty dry to listen to, but there were some parts that Fíli and Kíli had enjoyed and reenacted with the greatest of enthusiasm. Dís' tales were always full of adventure and discovery, inspiring her little boys even as they dreamed.

After a several minutes of Bofur's story, the girls and even Bain were engrossed, leaning forward in the seats and eager for every word. Óin checked the dressings on Fíli's wounds in the background, making sure that the bites were free of infection and healing well. As the younger dwarf's skin continued to heat up, the elder applied cool, damp cloths to Fíli's forehead and buried him beneath blankets, attempting to draw the fever out.

The children became sleepy. Kíli continued to puff quietly on his pipe. Bofur ceaselessly wove his tale over them all. Fíli drifted off to sleep with a smile still on his face, but when morning dawned, Bard had not returned.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry it's taken so long, guys! The project I've been assigned the last couple weeks in my workplace has left my hands swollen and stiff. No illustrations as a result, but when my hands feel better, they will be added. Thanks for your patience and support, everyone! It means so much.
Durin's Day

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Durin's Day dawned clear and bright with no sign of the bargeman.

His children anxiously regarded each other, but Sigrid offered her siblings a weak smile. "He's a bit late, is all," she said. "He'll come."

Tilda solemnly nodded. "He promised."

Bain shifted uneasily and glanced through the window once more before carrying the basin of fresh water to Fili's bedside. Kili accepted the cloth the boy held out, soaking it in the cool water and draping it over his brother's forehead. Fili murmured restlessly in his sleep, hands fisting in the blankets heaped over him, the words falling from his mouth in an endless stream of babble in both the common tongue and the ancient language of their forefathers. Óin shuffled over. He'd prepared the last of the medicine Fili would need for the next few days, and he held a vial in his hand as he checked the temperature of Fili's skin.

"Lift him up," he said.

Kili nodded and slipped an arm under Fili's shoulders, raising him as Óin prised his jaw open. The old dwarf poured the contents down Fili's throat, and Kili waited as his brother swallowed before laying him back down. When Fili was settled once more, Kili leveled dark eyes on Óin.

"Don't look at me like that, lad. He'll be just fine. The fever should break soon."

Kili resisted the urge to growl in frustration. Knowing that Fili would be alright didn't make watching the progress of his illness any easier to bear. His body shook with cold chills and spasms, heedless of all the blankets and the heat radiating from his skin. He'd been caught in fevered dreams for the last few hours with no sign of waking, and Kili worried. He knew the dreams that Fili already suffered from. How much worse would the fever make those already hellish nightmares?

Movement near the door drew Kili's attention, and he watched as Bain snatched his coat from its peg.

"I'll be back," the boy announced.

Sigrid opened the door. "Be careful, Bain."

Her brother nodded, leaning forwards to peck a kiss on her cheek. "Don't worry."

Sigrid blew at a stray hair caught in her lashes. "I always worry," she whispered as the door closed behind him.

Dark.

Don't be a fool.

Flashes of heat.
It was not the dragon that destroyed Erebor. It was greed.

Blistering cold.

Gold is a terrible master.

Bitter liquid...medicine?

Your choices count for everything.

Hands...a worried voice. Must be Kíli. Don't worry, Kíli.

You are not the first to war against fate, Prince, and in all wars, there are consequences.

Dreams. No...nightmares.

I have faith in you.

Mum?

Besides, the future isn't written in stone, and who knows that better than a dwarf?

Stifling heat.

Thorin Oakenshield will make a series of decisions that will bring him face to face with a foe he cannot overcome on his own.

No.

The choice was mine, as are the consequences.

Images.

Thorin sitting alone atop a mountain of treasure.

Thorin with a crown upon his head, eyes glittering and wild.

Thorin ruling with an iron fist.

Now comes the age of Thorin the Tyrant.

Fíli opened heavy lidded eyes. He was drenched in sweat and unbearably hot. He pushed at the heavy blankets, trying to free himself.

"He's awake," Kíli said.

Óin's gnarled hand rested gently on Fíli's forehead, and the blonde leaned into his cool touch.

"Fever's broken," the old one said with a satisfied smile. "He should be able to travel tomorrow, providing he takes it easy."

Kíli chuckled over Óin's pointed look. "Best listen to him, brother," he said.

Fíli smiled a little and nodded. "I have no intention of doing otherwise."
He spotted Tilda and Bofur over Kíli's shoulder. Their heads where bent together over something on the table. Kíli followed his brother's line of sight and grinned. "They're making an eagle...looks like one of Bifur's designs."

Fíli's gaze shifted to where the eldest daughter stood near the window overlooking the street. She stared out at the town, her eyes not quite focused. Fíli frowned. Something had her on edge. He looked around the room, noting the time of day and the absence of Bain.

"Has Bard come and gone?" he asked.

Kíli shook his head and kept his voice low. "He never came back. Something must have happened."

Fíli's stomach knotted and twisted, and his eyes returned to the reflection of Sigrid's face in the window. Her brow furrowed with worry, and she hugged her ribs tightly, as if afraid that she would shatter to pieces if she didn't hold herself together. He wondered how many times his mother had waited in much the same way for loved ones who never returned.

"Da!"

Bard's eyes snapped open. He rolled off the cot and onto his feet, peering through the barred window of his cell.

"Here, Bain!"

This wasn't the first time he'd found himself in the Master's ramshackle jail. He couldn't count how many times the Master had him arrested for minor offenses, but usually he was out within a week. Not so, this time. Breaking curfew was one of the most serious offenses - according to the Master - and Bard knew that he might spend anywhere from several weeks to several months in a reeking cell. Ben the fisherman was locked up for a little over a year for the same offense, once. In short, Bard didn't have time for this.

"Da, what happened?"

"I wasn't careful enough, son. They were waiting for me when I came back."

"I'll get you out!"

"It's not going to be as easy as the last time, Bain," Bard sighed. "They'll see you coming."

Bain's mouth set in a determined line. "Then I'll have to get some help."

"Anything?" Sigrid asked tensely as Bain slid inside. He flashed her a quick smile which she hesitated to return. "He's in jail, isn't he?"

Her brother nodded and moved past her, addressing the dwarves. "I have a favor to ask."

"Only too happy to help," Bofur said. "What sort of favor did you have in mind?"

"Do any of you know how to pick a lock?"

Bofur tried not to laugh as Óin replied, "I'm afraid our 'master locksmith' departed with the rest
of our kin."

"Nori's not the only one who can pick a lock," Kíli interjected. He was already on his feet and striding towards the door.

"Now, just a minute!" Óin protested. "You can't just go wandering about in broad daylight! If you're caught, then what?"

Kíli opened his mouth to argue.

"Kíli."

All eyes turned to where Fíli sat propped up on his elbows. "Óin has a point."

"You bet your brass, I've got a point -"

"However," Fíli continued over the mostly-deaf dwarf's grumbling. "We are at your service, Master Bain. But it would be prudent to wait for the cover of dark."

Bain nodded vigorously. "Thank you, sirs!"

The rest of the day was spent in careful planning. Pillows were propped behind Fíli's back so he could sit up and aid in the planning - he'd always been the one for planning their childhood schemes, after all, and as Thorin trained them, their battle strategies. The children and the other dwarves formed a crescent around him. As sunset neared, Óin handed him another vial which he drank absentmindedly, his focus still on Bain's descriptions of the town's layout around the jail and the building itself. He found he was feeling much better now that the fever had broken, and Fallaner's medicine steadily restored him. He wasn't about to go out and sprint to the Lonely Mountain and back, mind you, but moving around wasn't as taxing as it had been.

Kíli watched the sun's last rays play off of the peak of the mountain. "Do you think they found the door in time?" he murmured.

Fíli regarded the solitary peak. "I hope so."

"It's almost time," said Bofur. "Ready?"

The children shrugged on their coats and nodded. Fíli grinned, the high of the scheme causing adrenaline to flood his veins.

"Let's have some fun."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience, my friends! This chapter proved a bit more difficult to write than I anticipated. Enjoy!
Shine and Burn

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Thorin sat down and cursed. He stood back up and paced toward the large carving of his grandfather's head which disguised the location of the hidden door. He cursed again. The rest of the Company sat before the hidden door in various states of concern. Thorin stared over his shoulder at the open hidden door and drummed his fingertips on his thigh.

_How long is too long?_ he wondered.

It had been two hours at least - perhaps three - since the door had been revealed to them and Bilbo descended into the depths of Erebor. Finding the stairs to the entrance had been difficult, seeing as they were hidden in plain sight on a statue of Thrór, but find them they did. The climb up wasn't easy either, but finally, winded and exhausted, they made it to the ledge cleverly tucked out of sight behind the statue's head. Thorin had nearly lost hope of finding the door as sunset drew near and passed altogether. Still, no keyhole could be seen. Had they got it wrong after all? Had more time passed in the Woodland Realm than they realized? The hysteria of coming so close after everything they'd endured choked Thorin and squeezed his chest with a cold fist. It had to be there. **It has to!**

Then Bilbo's jaw dropped. "Of course," he whispered.

"What?" Thorin demanded.

"The inscription on the map! _The last light of Durin's Day._ Don't you see? It's a riddle!"

"And what, pray tell, is the answer?" spat Thorin as he held tightly to the remaining shreds of his patience.

"The last light of the day isn't sunset," Bilbo explained. "It's-"

"The moon."

As if summoned, moonlight shot through the smattering of clouds above, illuminating a keyhole in the rock face. Crazed and relieved laughter took them all, and it was hard for Thorin to fit the key in the lock, his hand was shaking so badly. He managed it in the end, and a slight turn of the wrist caused the mechanism inside to clack and groan over years of disuse. An outline of a rectangle no taller nor wider than a dwarf appeared with a burst of released air. Thorin placed his palms on the door, arms shaking and heart pounding sharply in his throat as he pressed forwards. After a brief moment of resistance, it gave and swung inward on silent hinges. Stale air filled Thorin's nose, and in it was a stench he had long hoped to never smell again: the scent of a dragon.

And yet...Thorin's heart ached in his chest as he took one step inside, then another, his fingers trailing reverently over the chiseled stone. "I know these walls," he whispered, voice breaking, "This stone..."

He leaned in, touching his forehead to the cool stone, the scent of it briefly overcoming that of the dragon. His eyelids fluttered shut, intense memories flooding his senses. He could hear the tools of the miners as they worked, their voices lifted in resonant song. He could see the bustling streets and flickering golden light thrown from thousands of torches; children running and laughing; old ones haggling and shouting to be heard in the Market District; fabrics, spices, oils and
a wealth of other goods imported from all over the world decorating shop fronts and vendor's stalls; and the grandeur of the Gallery of the Kings, the throne room, and the Great Forges. He could see his family and friends happy, alive and well in the golden light of his memories. But he could also see the dragon. Images and the horrendous sounds from that fateful day invaded Thorin's mind like a dagger, slashing through the bright memories as the dragon had slaughtered his way through Erebor itself.

Thorin jerked back from the stone as if burned. Behind him, he could hear Glóin reciting something. Glancing back and up, he saw an engraving. An image of a stone emitting rays of light above Erebor's throne decorated the stone above the door, and the lines Glóin read were inscribed in dwarven runes above:

> Herein lies the Seventh Kingdom of Durin's folk.  
> May the Heart of the Mountain unite all Dwarves in defense of this Home.

Thorin's breath hitched, and Bilbo pointed to the carved stone above the throne.

"And what's that?" the hobbit asked.

"The Arkenstone," Thorin had replied.

Now Bilbo was somewhere inside Erebor, searching for a single jewel among the horded treasures of Thrór. It would be easier to find a needle in a haystack, Thorin knew, and it wouldn't surprise anyone if the hobbit didn't recover it. But Bilbo had a strange run of good luck about him, so he steeled himself, fixing a determined expression on his face. With a curt nod to his companions, he disappeared down the secret passage, and the waiting began.

Thorin folded his arms and bowed his head, resisting the overwhelming urge to sprint down into the halls of his youth. He ached to set foot on that familiar ground once more, all the while understanding that it wouldn't be the same. There was no warmth anymore. No life. He would hear no laughter and find no friends. Most of the upper halls had been destroyed by Smaug, he was sure. The treasure room itself was in absolute chaos. It was the last thing he'd seen before fleeing the mountain with his brother in tow and their little sister caught up in his arms.

He swallowed against the tightness in his throat over the memory of thick smoke and the reek of burnt flesh. He paced back to the door and hovered just inside, desperate to go inside yet just as eager to not. Thorin growled fiercely. Coward, he accused himself. After several more minutes of internally arguing the point one way and then the other, a thunderous crash shook the rock beneath his boots and echoed up the secret passage. Without another thought, Thorin was sprinting down, following his feet into Mahal knew what.

Kíli tripped on his skirt for the twelfth time. "Curse this dress! How do ladies even manage it without going crazy?"

"Well, they get used to it over time, I imagine," Fíli replied.

"Gather some of the fabric in your hand like this," Sigrid instructed. "That's how we manage it."

Fíli struggled to suppress a smirk, but he couldn't disguise the deepening of his dimples. All four of the dwarves had been dressed in various disguises, Kíli having been handed a skirt. The idea wasn't so terrible until he started tripping all over himself. Kíli pointed at his brother.

"Shut up."
"I didn't say anything!"

"Yeah, but you were thinking it, and I've got half a mind to toss you in the lake."

Tilda shushed Kíli with a finger pressed to her lips. "They'll hear you!" she hissed.

They all peeked at the jail from around the corner of their hiding spot. Three guards milled about in front of it, looking particularly bored with their lot, when up the planking sauntered Bain.

"Evening, Alan! Hal, John," Bain called, greeting each with a nod. The men stiffened as he approached, and the one in charge lifted a hand.

"Stop right there, Bain. I'm in no mood for your tricks this evening. The Master will throw me in your da's cell if he hears about one more escape."

"Have a heart, Alan!" Bain pleaded. "What are we going to do without our da?"

"With your talents, I'm sure you'll think of something. Now, don't you fix those puppy eyes on me, boy. That hasn't worked in years."

"Go on home, Bain," said another guard. "I've no wish to see the Master's ire fall on yer head. It's only a matter of time afore he finds out that yer the one who's been breakin' Bard out."

While Bain applied every verbal tactic he'd ever used, his sisters and the dwarves were watching the windows above. Bard's face appeared at the corner window, his expression difficult to read.

"There he is," Sigrid whispered.

"I mean it, Bain," Alan was saying. "Get out of here before Captain Braga comes 'round. Your sisters need you."

"Well, I tried," conceded the boy before he delivered a swift kick to Alan's shin. The man howled, and Bain danced out of reach as the other guards grabbed for him. He sprinted down the dock, and the three irate men gave chase. Tilda ran lightly after them, pausing at the corner and waving 'all clear'. Sigrid hurried in the opposite direction, taking up position on the far side of the jail. Only when she too waved that all was clear did Fíli and Kíli slip out of cover and through the door of the jail.

After a ten-count, Óin and Bofur knocked on the door. The older dwarf stepped quickly in while the younger remained as a rear guard outside, should one of the girls signal trouble. As Bain had specified earlier, a pair of guards sat at supper in a room just off the main hallway. A staircase to the floor above wound up at the end of the hall. Fíli peered around the doorframe at the men. Nodding to Kíli, he counted silently to three. Together they flew into the room, catching the guards by surprise. In seconds the men were unconscious, faces in their plates.

"I'll make sure they sleep soundly," Óin said. Fíli smirked as the old dwarf picked up a frying pan and swung it experimentally. He nodded, satisfied.

"It'll do."

Kíli slipped upstairs ahead of his brother and was immediately confronted by another guard. Unseen, Fíli hovered on the steps. Kíli's head was covered in a scarf, and he quickly raised the corner to hide his nose and mouth.
"That you, Tilda?" asked the guard when he noticed Kíli. "This is no place for children, girl."

Kíli raised his voice a couple octaves. "I want to see my da."

The guard's gaze softened a fraction. "A moment, then."

The second his back was turned, Kíli was on him, bearing him to the ground and knocking him out cold.

"Nice work, milady," Fíli congratulated. Kíli rolled his eyes.

"If you weren't recovering from a fever, I'd teach you a lesson."

Fíli chuckled.

"Hurry!" came the call from Bard's cell.

The brothers did just that. When they approached the cell, Bard was at the window, glancing anxiously left and right. Kíli took one look at the lock on the cell and guffawed. Fíli shook his head in disgust.

"That lock...isn't even w...worth picking!" Kíli managed between fits of laughter.

"It doesn't even deserve the name," Fíli groused.

"I don't know what the locks are like where you come from," Bard interjected, "but around here that is the strongest kind of lock we have."

Kíli was doubled over, gasping for air. He was too far gone to speak, so he pointed to the hinges and continued to fail miserably at calming himself. Fíli understood, though, and he smirked.

"What use is such a strong lock with hinges such as these?" he mused.

Bard blinked, glancing at the hinges as if for the first time. Kíli, finally in control of himself, stepped up to the cell door with his brother at his side. They gripped the lower crossbars and heaved upwards together, legs braced as they lifted. With a shriek of metal the door lifted free, and Bard walked out.

"I would never have thought of that," he admitted.

"Yeah, well," Kíli grunted, "it's a good thing you have us here, then, isn't it?"

The brothers eased the door down, returning it more or less to its former position.

"It is at that." Bard smiled.

They made their way downstairs with Kíli holding the skirt as Sigrid instructed and Fíli absolutely not grinning about it. Óin and Bofur fell in with them, and Bard's daughters raced to him once they were outside again. He dropped kisses on the crowns of their heads just before a thunderous tremor shook the town.

All eyes turned in the direction of the mountain, and screams lifted from different parts of town. Fear twisted in Fíli's gut.

"The dragon."
Bard looked at him, eyes haunted. He pointed at his daughters. "Get them out of here."

"What about everyone else?" Fíli asked as Kíli ripped away the skirt. He was going to have to run, and he certainly wasn't about to do it in that trip hazard.

"I'm going after Bain. I know where he'll be. There's a bell at the center of town. We'll get there as fast as we can and warn the townsfolk."

Tilda clung to Bard, and he held her tight. "It'll be alright, darlin'."

He kissed her cheek and turned to Sigrid. "Look after her," he said hurriedly, and she nodded, lips set in a firm line. He pressed a kiss to her forehead. Then he was tearing down the dock toward the center of town and calling over his shoulder, 'I'll meet you onshore!'"

Thorin was reckless once. In his youth, he had been much more like Fíli and Kíli than even he'd realized, but that part of him died long ago with Frerin. Or so he'd thought. It was waking up, that long forgotten piece of him, and Erebor had been the key. The sight of it, that tangible memory of the life he'd lived in its halls caused his younger self to stir within him, rising alongside the dragon himself. Although, now that he gave it some thought, the word 'reckless' might not have been the best one to describe what he was about to do. 'Stupid' was a good one. 'Crazy' was even more fitting. No, 'reckless' just didn't seem to do his actions justice this evening.

After tearing down the secret tunnel, he found Bilbo a bit winded but otherwise none the worse for wear, aside from the fact that the hobbit was being pursued by a rather disgruntled dragon.

"Never laugh at live dragons!" Bilbo cautioned when he spotted Thorin. Before the dwarf could even muster a response to that, the rest of the Company came barreling out of the tunnel behind him. Instinct took over as the dragon's chest glowed in preparation to incinerate them all, and they sprinted for their lives. Knowing the finer inner workings of Erebor as most of them did, they led the lizard in a terrifying rendition of hide-and-go-seek-tag which landed Thorin atop a fifty foot tall statue mold.

In his final years as King Under the Mountain, Thrór's greed grew so powerful, his arrogance over his wealth and position so great that he ordered the construction of yet another statue bearing his image - the one guarding the hidden door having already been completed. This time, however, the statue was to be made of solid gold - gold plating alone not being enough to sate his ego. Thrór made plans to construct the statue in a place of honor in the Gallery of the Kings, a great hall akin to a cathedral in its design and dedicated to the great kings of Erebor past, present and future. It was to command the attention of all who entered that hall, paying tribute to the 'greatest' king Erebor had known.

The responsibility of overseeing the project was given to Thorin, a great honor and opportunity for the young prince to prove himself. He'd spent the previous several years apprenticing in the Great Forges, and his knowledge of its inner workings served him well when designing the chutes required to guide and funnel the gold into the Gallery. A week or so more would have seen the statue complete if not for Smaug. The great city under the mountain was destroyed, her people slaughtered and driven out. Without the hands required to attend them, the fires in the Forges burned low, eventually growing cold. The molten gold for the statue cooled and solidified, forgotten in the heart of the mountain.

Now, in a daring and more than reckless scheme, Thorin reasoned that if they couldn't find a way to pierce the dragon's hide, they might be able to drown it. So they made for the Forges and
tricked Smaug into relighting them with his own flame. When the gold reached melting point, the dwarves released it from the giant crucibles, causing it to flow along carved channels in the floor and down a chute into the statue mold.

Thorin had never felt more impulsive in his life, and it didn't matter. He was reclaiming his home, and he never felt more alive. But the dragon was crazed and angry, a volatile combination. Bilbo ran through the western door of the Gallery just as Smaug plowed through the wall above him, scattering debris and tapestries across the once polished and gleaming floor. The Great Worm accosted the hobbit, and Thorin could do nothing but watch from his perch atop the statue's molding.

"You think you can deceive me, barrel rider? You have come from Lake-town!" Smaug paused, and his eyes blazed brighter in further revelation. "This is some sordid scheme hatched by those filthy dwarves and those miserable tub-toating Lakemen! Perhaps it is time I paid them a visit."

The lizard slithered toward the southern door of the Gallery, heading for the Front Gate. Thorin's heart seized as the last sentence hung in the air. Fíli and Kíli!

"Wait!"

Bilbo's voice was nearly swallowed in the vast open space of the Gallery. "You cannot go to Lake-town!"

Smaug froze. "You care about them," he surmized. "Good. Then you can watch them DIE!"

Thorin's rage and terror for his family and friends boiled over.

"HERE!" he roared, desperately trying to keep the dragon from leaving. "YOU WITLESS WORM!"

Well, that did it. Smaug turned, growling deep in his throat.

"You," the dragon said, and he sounded almost pleased.

Thorin glared at the beast. "I am taking back what you stole."

"You will take nothing from me, Dwarf," seethed Smaug as he slowly, arrogantly prowled toward the north end of the Gallery where Thorin stood.

"I laid low your warriors of old. I instilled terror in the hearts of Men. I am King Under the Mountain."

Thorin's anger blazed hotter than the dragon's breath. He wound the chain in his hand tighter, gripping it like iron. "This is not your kingdom. These are Dwarf lands. This is Dwarf gold. And we will have our revenge."

Then, for his people, for his Company, and for his family, he gave the order to the other dwarves below, hauling on the chain with every ounce of strength and rage he had. The others strained against their chains, dislodging the metal pegs holding the mold intact. As Thorin knew it would, the molding collapsed, revealing the 50 foot statue of Thrór.

It was brilliant, beautiful and very unstable. Smaug couldn't help himself. He leaned in, enchanted by the gold, and exhaled in awe. The heat of his breath was his own undoing. The gold hadn't had time to fully set, and the molten inside erupted outward, covering the dragon as it collapsed. Overwhelmed, Smaug fell back and was buried in return for his avarice. He disappeared
completely beneath the gold as it pooled in the center of the Gallery.

Thorin took one shuddering breath before the dragon erupted from the gold, roaring and furious.

"Revenge? Revenge?! I will show you revenge!"

Thorin was nearly crippled with fear as the golden dragon stampeded toward the Front Gate, demolishing the wall of debris blocking the entrance and taking flight. Thorin ran, knowing he could do nothing but not knowing what else to do, and he could hear the others in his wake. Exhausted, he stumbled to his knees outside the Front Gate, torn apart by his helplessness. He'd witnessed the destruction of Smaug before, but the dragon's pride had been wounded. His wrath was insatiable, and he would not stop, not until everything in Lake-town was reduced to ash.

A wretched, anguished cry erupted from Thorin as the first flames of Smaug's attack fell on the lake. "What have I done?!"

Several more thunderous quakes shook the town before the bell pealed high and clear over them all. The people shouted and screamed, hurrying to escape the town any way they could, be it by boat or the long bridge stretching to the shore. All was chaos, and the dwarves and Bard's daughters struggled through the panicked throng, trying desperately to reach Bard's house.

"It's closer to the edge of town," Sigrid had explained. "We'll have a better chance that way than trying to make it to Da's barge."

The others nodded grimly and followed without question. They'd made it to the house, grabbed Fíli's medicine and were piling into the boat moored at the back dock when the first attack hit. The liquid flame struck the far side of Lake-town first, streaking all the way across town with terrifying speed as the dragon passed. He was not but a shadow against the stars, and the intense heat followed by agonized screams were horrifying. Sigrid sat in the stern and steered with her paddle while the dwarves and Tilda filled the rest of the boat and paddled with whatever was available to them. Fíli crouched in the bow with Kíli, who was doing his best to keep an eye on the dragon, at his back.

Smaug made another pass, closer this time. Sigrid shouted a complex pattern of directions in attempt to avoid the destruction and the dragon's increasingly frequent attacks. People continued to pour into boats and the water alike, frantic to escape the flames and deteriorating buildings. The roar of the fire, the screams and the roaring dragon were deafening.

They only had a few more blocks to go before they were free of the town when Kíli hollered in triumph.

"He's hit!"

Fíli started and followed his brother's pointing finger. High above Lake-town, he spotted Smaug through the smoke and flying sparks, writhing, screeching and clawing at his chest as he tried to stay in the air. His wings failed him, and he plummetted towards the center of town. Fíli's attention was called abruptly back around as a shriek rent the air. A house ahead of them shifted on smoldering supports, sagging heavily over their intended path.

"Hurry!" Fíli urged the others, and they paddled faster with hands and oars. Their efforts were futile. Smaug's body crashed into the lake behind them, and the force of it rocked the rest of the town. The supports gave with a mighty crack, and the house splintered into the water.
"We're trapped!" yelled Bofur.

They were surrounded by flames on all sides, and Fíli cast about for another way.

"There!" Kíli shouted, and leapt out of the boat onto the burning dock to their right. A few feet down the wood had crumbled below the waterline. They would be able to paddle through that way, if not for the burning beams blocking the path. Before Fíli could say a word, Kíli bent and took hold of the bottommost beam. He heaved upwards, yelling. He created just enough space for the others to squeeze through.

"Go!" Kíli urged.

They hurried under. Once they were on the other side, Fíli beckoned to his brother.

"Come on!"

Kíli began to ease the beam back down, but the whole pile shifted dangerously.

"I can't!"

"You have to!"

"No, Fili!" cried Bofur. "Look!"

Fíli did, and his stomach dropped into his boots. The beams were barely keeping a precariously balanced wall from falling apart over their heads. If Kíli let go, they would all die. Fíli locked eyes with his little brother. Kíli's brow furrowed from strain, his arms shaking.

"Get them out," Kíli said through gritted teeth. The wall creaked dangerously.

Fíli's chest was going to implode. It was unthinkable. Unbearable. He couldn't leave his brother behind, but even worse was the thought that Kíli's sacrifice would be in vain if he stayed. Fíli could never forgive himself for what he was about to do.

He forced himself to turn, punishing the water with harsh strokes as he paddled them out of danger. Once they were safe, Kíli cried out and released the beams. The wall collapsed, taking the rest of the house and the dock with it.

Fíli screamed his brother's name. It was a heartrending, agonized sound. The two syllables had never tortured him more.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you for being so patient!
Beyond Sorrow

"Papa."

"Fíli."

Zefur smiled at his son's expression. *Question time.* Fíli took questions very seriously, and it was best to answer as honestly as possible. One of the lad's best qualities was knowing when an adult was lying to him. Understanding other children was more difficult, though. He was an old soul trapped in a young dwarf's skin. Zefur patted his knees and held his arms open. Fíli accepted the invitation, hopping up on his father's lap and settling against his chest. He held a few strands of twine in his hands, weaving them into a slim band.

"Who is that for, I wonder?" Zefur asked, though he knew full well.

"Kíli."

"Ah. I think he'll like it."

"Me too."

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes before Fíli spoke again.

"Papa."

"Mnhmm?"

Fíli's fingers stilled. "What is 'wreck lass'?"

Zefur nibbled on the inside of his cheek, considering.

"Is it a word?"

The boy nodded.

"Hmm...do you mean 'reckless'?"

Again, Fíli nodded. "Yeah, that. What is it?"

"Doing something and not caring about the consequences."

Fíli's mouth twisted. Usually the big 'c' word meant no dessert or going to bed without dinner.

"But Kíli's not that."

Zefur grinned a little, knowing that Kíli could be very reckless indeed. "Who said he was?"

"Ori's mum."

"Pfft!" Zefur struggled to calm himself. Fíli's bluntness certainly kept him on his toes. "You don't think he's just a little bit reckless?"

Fíli shook his head. "Kíli's just wild...like your animals, but he thinks real quick before he does things. It just doesn't always go like he plans."
Zefur smiled, proud of his little boy's insight. "You know something, laddie?"

"What?"

"I think you're right."

Fíli burrowed deeper in his father's arms and smiled into his broad chest.

"...Fíli?"

"Papa."

Zefur smiled at his son's perfect imitation of his own voice. "What exactly did Kíli do?" he asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

"Well, we were teaching Ori how to swim when Kíli wanted to see who could hold their breath the longest, and..."

Zefur couldn't help but chuckle over Fíli's opening sentence. He could already see where this story was headed.

Steam rolled across the surface of the water. Wavelets lapped the rocky shoreline. Songs of mourning lifted from the throats of the people of Lake-town.

Emptiness. Such emptiness as Fíli had never felt before was a yawning cavity in his chest. It was better than the guilt and the pain...wasn't it? No...the void inside him was too silent, too terrifying. He reached out for the pain, cradling it close as one would a child. It was tangible. And though it suffocated him, it grounded him, even if only for a few moments. His mind drifted. He was dazed...numb. The sun appeared at some point, as did a vial in his hand.

Fíli stared at it, seeing it but not seeing it. When was the last time he blinked? His eyes were sore...dry. And very tired. A hand tipped his head back, another guiding the forgotten vial to his lips. He swallowed automatically, unaware of his own actions.

Kíli.

Like lightning, the name sprang to his mind, striking his heart and making him flinch. Mum. What will I say to her? Do I have the courage? Too painful. The numbness returned, the cycle repeating itself again. Yet underneath all the pain and guilt glowed a small ember.

Hope.

Kíli could hold his breath for ages. At least, that's what he told himself to keep from giving in and blacking out, drowning in the depths below what remained of Lake-town. Fire and debris were everywhere. There was virtually nothing left of the settlement above, but the amount of wreckage littering the lake made it near impossible for Kíli to find a way out. His lungs screamed for relief.

Air! the blood in his head pounded relentlessly. Air, air, air!

It was too much. Kíli clawed for the surface, breaking through with a gasp that choked him violently. He tried to stay afloat as he caught his breath, but he'd never really mastered the technique. The strong flap of wings overhead made him slip beneath the surface again in a panic.
Had Smaug survived somehow? Kíli had heard that the fire drakes were cunning. Perhaps his plummet to the lake had been a trick of some kind?

A gigantic shadow passed low over the surface above, and Kíli’s heart galloped. Smaug is looking for survivors. Just when he thought he was safe for a brief moment, huge talons snatched him up like a fish out of the lake, and he struggled uselessly in their grip. He looked up and was greeted not by the sight of a massive scaled underbelly but that of chocolate colored feathers instead. An eagle’s call split the air.

Thorin strides toward an ornate throne. A thick robe edged with dark fur drapes around his shoulders, and his step is confident and full of sacred purpose. Dwarves kneel on either side as he passes, dwarves who have come from all corners of the land. Balin stands before the throne, eyes shining with emotion, his smile bright as the sun. Thorin kneels before him, and Balin raises his hands above his head, a crown held aloft in his fingers. Ancient words flow from his mouth, echoing around the seemingly infinite throne room. When he is finished, he places the crown on Thorin's head and steps aside.

"Arise, Thorin, son of Thrain, son of Thrór, King Under the Mountain!"

Cheers erupt from all gathered, and the king stands, moving forward and up the steps to the throne, above which glitters the symbol of his authority: the Arkenstone, most precious of gems. He sits, and the chant is taken up.

"Hail, Thorin King! Hail, Thorin King! Hail, Thorin King!"

Thorin smiles, bowing his head deeply in gratitude to his people. Kíli stands at his right hand, shouting as loud and louder than the best of them. A circlet rests on his brow: the symbol of Erebor's Crown Prince. A great feast follows, and the dwarves celebrate with abandon. After much food and drink, Kíli excuses himself, and his mother kisses his cheek. She understands.

Kíli wanders down deeper and deeper into Erebor. He follows one of the few paths lit by torch light, and finally he arrives at a set of large double doors made of stone. Two guards stand to either side, but they do not ask his business. He comes here every day. Pressing a hand to one of the doors, it swings easily inward as if made of the lightest material. He steps forward, walking down a hallowed hall of sleeping heroes and ancestors.

His feet know the way.

At last, Kíli's footsteps cease to echo. Before him is a sarcophagus carved from the bones of the mountain itself. A statue of a dwarf lies above it, hands clasped over his chest as if in peaceful slumber. Every braid, every feature and every detail has been lovingly carved. The likeness is so flawless that the dwarf's lips curve in a soft smile, dimples deepening ever so slightly. But then, Kíli expected nothing less of Bifur's remarkable skill.

Kíli presses his forehead to the statue's a sad smile on his lips. He takes a deep breath, struggling to speak around the lump in his throat. So many times he's found himself here in the past several months since Erebor was won, yet every time is as difficult as the first.

"Hey, Fíli," he begins, and a tear spills over his carefully constructed wall of calm. "Sorry I kept you waiting, brother."
Fíli woke with a shuddering breath. *It should have been me.* His shoulders shook. His hands trembled. He must have passed out. With a little sleep, his vision was clearing some, the fog lifting slightly from his mind. He looked around for the others. Kíli - his mind still stumbled over the word, his heart still stuttered in pain - would not have wanted this for him. *What would he want?*

Fíli glanced at the charred remains of Lake-town. Smaug was dead. What had happened to Thorin and the rest of the Company? Were they alive? Had Smaug...? Fíli couldn't finish the thought. The very implication that he might have lost most of his family in one day was too much. Fíli had to reach the Mountain.

He rose on unsteady legs and moved to where Óin and Bofur stood. Bard and Bain were there with Sigrid and Tilda, and the family members were laughing and hugging each other with an enthusiasm which suggested that their reunion was quite a recent development. As Fíli approached, Bard explained the dragon's demise. Smaug's impenetrable hide was flawed. There was a chink on the left side of his jewel encrusted chest. Bard climbed to the top of the bell tower with Bain, and though it had seemed useless at the time, he'd retrieved his bow and quiver of black-shafted arrows. After several attempts, the bowman's arrow found its mark and the beast was slain.

Bard glanced at Fíli as he fell silent. Taking note of his shadow's absence, he asked, "...Kíli?"

Fíli's eyes hardened, and the others looked swiftly away.

"I'm sorry," Bard said softly. "I didn't realize."

The dwarves mutely acknowledged his apology.

"What will you do now?" the dragonslayer inquired.

Clearing his throat, Óin looked to Fíli. The younger dwarf glanced from him to Bofur and back again. They didn't say it out loud, but Fíli knew what they were thinking. If Thorin was gone, as the dragon's presence suggested, Fíli was now the leader of the remaining Company. He looked to the Mountain, expressionless.

"We're going to Erebor."

Bard nodded.

Fíli glanced again at the smoldering town and its shaken survivors. "If my uncle lives," he said in a tired voice, "then I have not the right to offer you the shelter in the Mountain. But make your way there with the rest of the refugees and seek the aid of the King...whomever he may be."

Fíli didn't want to think about the fact that that king may very well prove to be himself, but the reality of the situation was undeniable. Bard seemed to understand his somewhat vague statement.

"Aye. If fortune favors us after today, we will meet you there...and thank you. My children and I are in your debt."

Fíli accepted Bard's gratitude and shook the man's hand firmly. "Farewell."

Bofur, Óin and Fíli walked until mid-afternoon, and the lake was finally behind them when Fíli called for a rest. He sat with eyes wide open, terrified that he might doze off and suffer more nightmares. He didn't want to be brutally reminded over and over again of how he'd failed his family. Thorin told him once that a king is often forced to make impossible decisions in desperate situations. Fíli had hoped that those decisions would never involve his brother, but Elrond had been warning him all his life that they would. Still, that persistant flicker of hope stubbornly refused to
go out in his chest. He stared back at the lake, torn.

He couldn't handle not knowing for certain. He was making up his mind to go back when the
cry of an eagle pierced the sky. A dark brown shape shot towards them. Fili recognized Baranthor
instantly, and his heart stopped altogether when he heard a sound he thought he'd never hear again
in this life: Kili's infectious laughter.

Baranthor swept out of his dive. In the brief moment when he hovered just above the ground, he
released his dwarven cargo. Kili touched down in full sprint and careened to a stop just before he
was tackled by his brother. Fili clutched him to his chest. Kili was confused until he realised...

"You thought I was gone."

Kili hugged Fili fiercely. *Mahal*. The torment that Fili must have endured...the emptiness that
Kili knew he'd have felt himself had the situation been reversed. All those years of fearing the
worst and suffering from the nightmares only to believe that the unthinkable had actually
happened.

"I will *never* leave you behind again," Fili swore.

Kili smiled. Perhaps in another life, another time, he might have felt smothered by his brother's
protective nature. But not now. Unfortunately, Fili's euphoria was short lived, for Baranthor's
appearance was not simple coincidence.

"It is not my wish to interrupt such a reunion," the great eagle said. "But I bring grave knews.
The goblins of the Misty Mountains have been gathering their forces above ground. They're making
for the Lonely Mountain, and the pale orc leads them."

Fili's joy fled from the truth of Baranthor's words. "We have to warn Thorin!"
A heart cannot remain empty. In time, it fills and blazes with renewed passion. But passion for what, exactly? Does it burn for the very thing that created the vacuum to begin with? Or, perhaps, does it yearn for something new and altogether different? Often times, the answer depends heavily on circumstance.

Thorin mourned. He thought he had known grief before, but nothing compared to the torment he suffered upon losing his nephews. The dwarves returned to the mountain after the dragon fell, beginning to search for the Arkenstone because what else could they do? Though he knew it would take anywhere from several decades to centuries to complete, Balin lost himself in the facts and figures of inventorying the wealth of Erebor. Thorin sifted mindlessly through the treasure, wearily searching for one gem among millions. He did not hear the whispering at first.

It had been said that Thrór's greed drove him to madness, which was true, but the poison of dragon sickness began with an empty heart. Thorin's heart was naught but a void. The anguish and fear he suffered over the loss of his sistersons and dear friends ate away at him until there was almost nothing left, and as is the case concerning all voids, his heart did not stay empty. For time out of mind, Thorin sat alone atop a dune of gold and precious gems - one of thousands in the sparkling desert that was Erebor's treasure trove. The other members of the remaining Company halfheartedly carried on their search for the king's jewel while the king himself glowered at the vast wealth he purchased with the blood of his loved ones.

For how long he sat there none could later recall, and all Thorin remembered were the curious whispers. Words rose from the hoard, rushing in to fill the void. And Thorin let them. They dripped with poison and the greed of dragon sickness, but he welcomed them even so. He felt he deserved it, this descent into madness. All the years he spent fearing that he'd be as weak as his grandfather should he ever see the wealth of Erebor again...he never realized that he possessed the strength to resist it. But his heart, weakened by loss, failed him.

So the darkness crept in.

He could feel its cold fingers wrapping around his chest, consuming any warmth he had left. Lacking the will to fight, Thorin Oakenshield lost himself.

Seven sunups, Baranthor had said, until Bolg and the army of goblins reached the mountain, and that was the best case scenario. Fili's brows knitted together in a brooding frown. Seven days might seem like a lot of time now, but they still had to reach the mountain which was going to take another day at least at their current pace. He didn't know this territory. He had no idea how to defend it. All he had were Thorin's tales. If they could take refuge in the mountain and outlast a siege, it would be a miracle. For what hope did a handful of dwarves have against a crazed goblin army bent on revenge?
"Don't you find walking tiresome?"

Startled out of his thoughts, Fíli's head snapped up. "Sometimes," he admitted after a moment. Kíli chuckled on his other side. "But we are not all blessed with wings, my friend, just as you are not meant to live underground."

The eagle blinked. "What a horrible thought," he said under his breath, "being trapped underground."

Somehow, Fíli couldn't bring himself to wholly disagree. He'd spent years of his life below ground, of course. He was a dwarf, after all. The upper world, however, called to him in a way he couldn't put words to. He loved fresh air and sunshine. The forests were his stomping grounds, and every change of the seasons filled him with wonder and anticipation. Perhaps it was something he inherited from his father - that love of the open sky and stirring wind. Could he really spend the rest of his life inside an underground city? Thorin once said that in his youth he would spend several years at a time without setting foot outside the mountain. Not see the sun and blue sky for years at a time?

Fíli shuddered, pushing the thought away. He couldn't worry about that just now. Besides, if they didn't survive the week, he'd never have to worry about it at all.

If Fíli and Kíli had been the wind in the Company's sails, then Thorin was surely its anchor. But his guilt over the fate of his nephews was crushing him, grinding his goodness into ashes. His body remaining where his heart did not, they were ruled by a tyrant, though none speak such a thing aloud. Without him to ground them, the dwarves and Bilbo were cast adrift. He gave no orders outside the merciless search for the Arkenstone, save for one: none may enter the mountain.

Ori sat atop the ruined ramparts, arms wrapped tightly across his chest against the cold and the heartache. Eyes bright with unshed tears, the young scribe sniffed. He hadn't been able to mourn in front of the king. Weakness was one of the many things that triggered his rage. But now, alone and finally in a quiet spot in the sun for the first time since Durin's Day, Ori allowed himself to grieve. His eyes blurred as fat tears slid heavily down his cheeks and into the scruff of his beard, which explained why he didn't notice the giant eagle until it nearly landed on him.

"LOOK HERE, FÍLI! THERE'S A LITTLE BEARDLING ATOP THE WALL!"

Ori yelped in surprise and fell off his makeshift bench.

"ORI! Is that you?!" called a voice that Ori thought he'd never hear again. He got to his feet, ignoring the eagle that chortled at him from above and craned his neck over the wall. Below him stood four of the luckiest dwarves ever to walk Middle Earth.

Thorin ghosted between the rows of Balin's meticulous inventory efforts. His ringed fingers skimmed over the precious items. A smug smile creased his face, and blue eyes clouded to a stormy grey as obsession seeped through to every recess of his mind with the exception of one: that most secret place, that sacred haven, the core of his heart. There, behind doors locked and barred, his lost loved ones were entombed and forever preserved. He visited them there in moments when he was alone and the whispers weren't so loud. Those times dwindled into rarity as the sickness squeezed him tighter and the smiles of the lost began to bring more anguish than comfort. All the while the darkness was persistent, relentless in its gluttonous pursuit to claim every part of Thorin
Oakenshield.

He began seeing shadows of the dead. They shimmered just at the edge of his vision at first, shapeless and unnerving. Whenever he focused on them directly, they'd wink away only to reappear somewhere else.

*A trick of the light*, he muttered to himself. *Nothing more.*

And so he continued to believe until Frerin appeared. He stode over and behind one of the golden dunes, leaving Thorin blinking in disbelief. His younger brother wasn't the last to haunt him. Family members and friends came and went, most regarding him with frigid, accusing stares. Each was a person he felt he'd failed or wronged. It was driving him mad.

He took to throwing objects at them, each missile passing straight through its intended mark, causing the shade to disappear briefly. It gave Thorin an odd sense of comfort, knowing they weren't real, and after a time he began talking - more like yelling, really - at them. What the members of the remaining Company thought of this behavior, they never said, but the questioning looks were enough to make his blood boil.

With the exception of Dwalin, they avoided him whenever possible, which suited him just fine. Let them fear him. He wasn't worthy of adoration. His actions of late were proof enough of that. He should be feared. And if there were any who doubted that fact? Thorin smiled maniacally. *Well.* He would prove them wrong.

An almighty racket echoed in the halls nearby, snapping Thorin out of his thoughts.

"*What is it now?*" he snarled to himself.

"THEY'RE ALIVE!"
Dori and Nori looked up sharply at their little brother's call.

"'Ey?" said Nori. "What's 'e on about?"

Dori scrunched his face at him. "Maybe if you'd stop stuffing every coin and shiny piece of metal in your pockets, you could hear over the sound of your own movements!" he snapped.

"Peace, you two," Dwalin growled. "I've had more than enough of your squabblin' the past few days to last me a lifetime."

"Oh you have, have you?" Dori bristled.

"We all have!" Balin interrupted before things grew more heated than they already had. "A moment's quiet wouldn't kill either of you."

All the dwarves sat around a dusty table in the old treasury guard room. It was the first time they'd had a proper rest since Smaug left the mountain. Most of the time they were knee deep in treasure, by order of the king, and without any luck in the search for the Arkenstone, Thorin grew more and more withdrawn from them. At the moment he sat alone in the treasury, admiring his wealth and conversing with figments of his imagination.

Ori's shouts roused the dwarves from their stupor, and Bilbo stepped to the doorway.

"What is it then?" Glóin muttered. "What's so important?"

Before Bilbo could answer, Ori collided with him.

"THEY'RE ALIVE!" he managed as the living dwarves in question ran into the room behind him.

There were gasps and shouts, tears and laughter. Hands were shaken, ribs were crushed, hair was tousled and backs were clapped. Family and friends were reunited, and what a blissful moment it was.

"Where's Thorin? We have news!" Fíli yelled over it all. It was eerie and hair raising, the way everyone instantly sobered and averted their eyes. They shifted nervously, and Fíli and Kíli frowned. Kíli swallowed hard, his dark brows a heavy line over his eyes.

"He's not...?"

"No, no!" Ori said quickly and worried at his lip. "He lives, but..."

"But?" Fíli prompted.

It was Óin who realized first. "Mahal help us all. He has the sickness."

Balin nodded, eyes glistening. "Aye."

Thorin Oakenshield will face a foe he cannot defeat. Elrond's words rattled in Fíli's skull and sent his heart straight into his boots. Of course. Many were the tales of the madness that plagued the Line of Durin. When Fíli was a child, those same stories kept him awake long into the night. To think that such a thing could take his mother? Or his brother? Or worse, Thorin himself. Fíli sagged under the terrible reality he faced.

"Take us to him."
The steely words made every eye lift.

_Not a good idea_, Bifur signed. The others seemed to agree - all except Dwalin.

"This way," he said shortly.

"Brother," Balin warned, "he was not in a pleasant mood when last you spoke with him."

"It matters not. He must see them. Perhaps it will help."

The elder shook his head wearily and raised his hands in submission. "Very well, then. But I warn you lads to choose your words carefully. The dwarf out there is not the one you knew."

Fíli flew down the steps to the golden light below, the others tight on his heels. When he stopped abruptly, Kíli wasn't ready for it and bumped into his back, nearly toppling him.

"Fíli, what the...oh."

Many tales are told and sung of the vast wealth of Erebor, but _nothing_ could have prepared the brothers for the immeasurable hoard in the belly of the Lonely Mountain.

"Bless me," Bofur murmured reverently. "Never in all my years..."

And icy blade twisted in Fíli's chest. No wonder his great-grandfather fell prey to the sickness. It was more than any one creature had the right to own. His stomach churned in revulsion. Below them, Thorin stood in a valley of riches. A fine, fur trimmed robe was draped about his shoulders, and a crown of gold sat upon his brow. He looked the part of King Under the Mountain, but his eyes were distant and glazed...until he spotted his nephews. His eyes glittered strangely, and an unnerving half smile creased his face.

"Welcome, my sistersons," he said grandly. "Behold the treasure hoard of Thrór."

Thorin turned his back on them, gesturing to the impossible amount of treasure. Abruptly, he twisted, slinging a large uncut gem towards his nephews. Fíli caught it with a frown. _What was that about?_ When his attention returned to Thorin, his uncle's jaw was slack, eyes wide in shock.

"Alive?" Thorin said gruffly.

Fíli pursed his lips and nodded. For the first time in days, Thorin laughed. Full and hearty it was, and as soon as he closed the distance between them, he clutched his nephews to his chest. Fíli and Kíli would have been relieved if there had been any warmth in the embrace, but the contact was too brief. He'd barely touched them before he stepped away, turning once more to gaze in awe upon the gold. Fíli shared a glance with his brother before shooting a look behind him at the others. They shook their heads sorrowfully. Dwalin clenched his fists as a muscle in his jaw ticked. From all the stories he'd heard about his great-grandfather, Fíli knew it would only get worse.

"Uncle," he murmured. Thorin didn't even look at him.

"Hm?"

"We bring news. Baranthor came to warn us...Bolg is coming."

Thorin chuckled darkly. "And why should that worry me? Your pet came a long way for nothing."
Fíli flinched. The blow couldn't have stung more if Thorin had thrown a punch. "Thorin," he pressed, overlooking his uncle's slur for the moment, "it's not just the orc. The goblins of the Misty Mountains are with him. They'll be here in a matter of days."

"It matters not," Thorin replied. "Here we can outlast any seige. The mountain is impenetrable."

"That didn't stop a dragon," Fili countered. Thorin rounded on him, eyes wild.

"ENOUGH! Do not question me again," he snarled. Fíli ground his teeth together as his uncle stared him down. A smile appeared on Thorin's face. The change was so sudden that Fili wondered if the outburst had been imagined.

"Now, then!" Thorin addressed the Company as a whole. "Let's see about fixing that little hole in the front gate, shall we? We don't want any vermin scuttling in uninvited."
Gathering Clouds

The steady beat of Baranthor's wings faltered. He was exhausted, but he had to keep going. Fíli needed help.

Three days previous, the young eagle volunteered as a scout, following the orcs and goblins scrambling out of the mountains like so many ants as they made for the northern edge of Mirkwood Forest. Never before had the goblins appeared on the surface in such force. This and the fact that they were soon joined by orcs and more goblins from the south was a cause of extreme concern for the Great Eagles. Several scouts were dispatched in hope to discover the end goal and make trouble for the horrid creatures whenever possible. It was to Baranthor's great surprise that his father and Gwaihir allowed him to fly as a scout, given that he was still a fledgling in the eyes of many. Determined to prove himself, he took to the air with a strong sense of purpose.

The goblins and orcs traveled for days without resting, and it filled Baranthor with unease when they reached the northern fringe of Mirkwood. Swinging east, they continued to march ceaselessly and without wavering. It soon became clear what their destination must be, for these were the same goblins whose leader had been slain by the grey wizard. Revenge drove the creatures of the dark, and Baranthor feared for his friend. Turning southeast, he made for the floating village of men, hoping to find Fíli and warn him in time.

Had he given thought to the fire drake? Of course he had. It was forbidden for any of his kind to trespass in those lands, lest the dragon move west and wreak havoc in their own territory. Was he afraid? ...

...perhaps a little, he admitted to himself. But eagles are fierce and loyal, so his fear stood not in the way of his desperate need to reach his beardling friend.

Whilst over the canopy of Mirkwood one night, Baranthor spotted a growing red light in the distance. He knew it must be the dragon, and in truth he'd rather hoped that the monster would still be fast asleep in the mountain. Taking hold of his courage nonetheless, Baranthor continued to fly towards the light. Imagine his astonishment, if you will, arriving only to find a ruined town and the corpse of that most terrible of dragons at its center. No sign of life could be seen in the town, and aside from the chaotic scene of refugees onshore, there were no beardlings to be found.

He considered calling for his friend, but he remembered the way men feared his kind and was careful to keep hidden in the low clouds above. He made another pass over the town, hoping against hope, when he spotted Laughing Kíli. The beardling broke the surface of the lake with an explosion of water, and Baranthor dove down, snatching him from the water like a fish.

Not long after that, Laughing Kíli was reunited with his brother, but though Baranthor wished they could stay in that happy moment forever, he knew that his news was far too important to wait. The goblin army was coming, and Fíli wasn't safe.

Though it was a relief indeed to arrive at the mountain and find that the other beardlings remained alive and well, Baranthor had no time to stay with his friend, much as he wanted to. A brief goodbye was all he could manage before erupting into the heavens once more. He had to get back to the Great Shelf as fast as he was able, even if it made his heart burst with effort. Fíli and his family could not repel a force as large as the goblins and orcs that marched ever closer. They would be overwhelmed without aid, which is exactly what Baranthor intended to find.
Bard led the refugees through Dale's western gate. It was eerily silent, the air oppressively still. The Master of Lake-town hovered uncomfortably near the dragonslayer, determined to remind Bard and everyone else who was really in charge, in spite of the fact - and ultimately because of it - that Bard was the one the people looked to. The former bargeman had had just about enough of the greasy politician, so when the Master shoved little Tilda out of the way in his haste to get in front of Bard now that they'd nearly reached the Lonely Mountain, the girl's father snapped.

The Master dissolved into a sniveling mess when he found himself gripped by the collar and Bard's nose only an inch from his own.


The Master held his hands up, babbling apologies and empty promises. Bard sneered and released the odious man.

"Stop making such a spectacle of yourself," Bard said. "You don't have it any worse than everyone else."

"Truer words were never spoken, sire," piped Alfrid. Bard glared at the little weasel and pointed towards him.

"And as for you, you parasite-"

Alfrid flinched back, eyes nearly popping out of his head.

"If you think you can cozy up to me after everything you've done to these people and my family, you'd better think again. I'll thank you not to come near me, and if you even consider harming my children, death will be too good for you."

Alfrid gaped like a fish. Bard walked away, scooping up Tilda in his arms and stepping over the Master where he cowered on the broken cobbles of Dale's main road.

"Da!"

Bard looked ahead to where Bain pointed at the Mountain. The braziers on either side of the Front Gate were blazing, but between the twin flames a giant barricade had been recently constructed.

"Fíli told us to come. Why would they build a big wall?" Tilda asked softly.

Bard gritted his teeth. "Because we're not welcome."

It didn't take long for Fíli and Kíli to hate Erebor. It was dark and full of nothing but gold, dust and the stench of decay...and dragon. Ugh. Exceedingly unpleasant. This place was nothing like Thorin's tales, though, in his defense, his memories were of much happier times. And as it is with all pleasant memories, the teller of the tale has a tendency to romanticize the past.

It only took half a day to build a barricade out of the rubble littering the Front Gate. Once that was done, Thorin's next order was not one of preparation for the imminent attack as Fíli had supposed it might be. No, his following command was to return to the treasury.

"The Arkenstone must be found!" he insisted.
The others sighed and trudged back into the darkness. Bilbo was assigned the first watch atop the barricade, and the dwarves cast wistful glances his way, their eyes admitting that each would rather be in his place instead of going back to the fruitless search.

Balin returned to the only organized island in the midst of the clutter where stacks of various items grew. Thorin oversaw his book keeping, making sure that every figure was correct, and Fíli watched the old dwarf's back bow under the weight of his uncle's lack of trust. Kíli noted the slight shake of Fíli's head and tried to keep a grimace off his own face. Never before had Thorin questioned Balin's abilities. It made him ill.

Over the next two days, Thorin would show Fíli and Kíli around when he remembered to. They glimpsed the decimated forges where the Company had battled the dragon. They saw Thrór's living quarters which were so full of gold it was worse than being in the treasure halls. Their uncle gave them new garments - only the best as befitted princes of Erebor, he'd said. The clothes smelted musty and felt stiff, having gone too long without being worn. But Thorin's nephews accepted them without comment or complaint, simply nodding in forced gratitude.

Most recently, Thorin took them to see the Gallery of the Kings. He explained about the fifty foot gold statue of his grandfather and how he lamented that it had been destroyed in a wasted effort to defeat Smaug.

"Once the forges are restored, we'll create another statue," Thorin mused. Fíli and Kíli shared a glance before their eyes darted back to their uncle. His own eyes were fixed on his reflection in the golden floor, all that remained of the enormous statue. "Come," he said abruptly. "I have one more thing to show you."

They followed him back to the treasury, and he did not stop until he reached Balin's quiet corner. A gilded box rested at the old one's elbow, and it was this that Thorin reached for. The look on his face as he turned was anything but kind.

"Behold the true reason Thranduil bears us ill will," Thorin smirked. He flicked open the lid, and Fíli and Kíli gaped at the contents. Precious stones which shone like stars filled the box nearly to the brim. Nestled among them were pieces of jewelry, the finest craftsmanship the brothers had ever laid eyes on.

"What are these to the elf king?" Kíli asked.

"They were a gift of peace from the Greenwood elves to the dwarves of Erebor, long ago," Thorin murmured. "In the final years before the dragon drove us out, Thranduil demanded they be returned."

"But he never mentioned them-" Fíli began.

"And you would believe that trecherous snake over your own kin?" Thorin demanded.

"That's not what I said."

Thorin's eyes narrowed. Snapping the lid shut, he shoved the box back into Balin's hands and stormed off. Fíli grunted in frustration. Kíli took a step in Thorin's direction, but his brother's hand like a vice on his arm prevented him from doing or saying anything he would later regret.

"I'm sorry, lads," Balin said gruffly.

"It's not your fault, Balin," Fíli sighed.
"Perhaps not entirely, but all along I was afraid he would succumb to it. I should have listened to my doubts and done something...anything." Balin buried his face in his hands.

Fíli stepped closer, laying an arm across the shoulders of the dwarf he'd always thought of as a grandfather. "There was nothing anyone could have done."

"You musn't blame yourself," Kíli added.

Balin sniffed and chuckled halfheartedly. "And when did you two become so wise?"

The brothers exchanged sad smiles.

"Is there any cure?" Kíli asked, though his voice lacked hope.

"I don't know," Balin admitted. "I've never seen or heard of anyone shaking free of it before."

"Unheard of doesn't mean impossible," Fíli said, half to himself. And lately, they'd been making a habit of overcoming the impossible.

The unmistakable sound of a horn reached their ears. Fíli's stomach automatically knotted. If it meant the army was here, then the dwarves were out of luck. They weren't ready. The most Thorin had done to 'prepare' for the goblins arrival was to send out a raven to Mahal knew where. Dozens of ravens had returned to the mountain after Smaug's demise, and their leader - an ancient, white feathered creature - pledged his fealty and that of his kin to the King Under the Mountain. Thorin refused to talk about why and where he sent the raven, and Fíli gave up asking after he was given a baleful glare and a stern reprimand. As yet they'd neither seen nor heard of the messenger since he left, so it was with no small amount of relief that they heard Bard's voice calling up to Bilbo when they reached the front gate.

Thorin climbed the barricade and stepped to the edge, the king's crown on his brow and a grimace on his face. Only then did Fíli realize that in his uncle's current mood, hospitality was the last thing he would grant outsiders. He took a deep breath and took his place at Thorin's side, knowing his duty. His uncle nodded approval and indicated that he speak.

Fíli sighed. "Greetings, Bard of Lake-town."

"Afternoon," Bard responded edgily. His eyes didn't leave Thorin's face, and it was clear that he saw the scorn engraved upon it. "The refugees of Lake-town have come to seek aid from the King Under the Mountain."

There was a tense pause, and in it Bard's eyes ticked to Fíli who could have thrown himself off the rampart in shame. He invited them here, and that good intention may very well be about to cost the people of the lake their lives. Mahal, he was going to be ill. Beside him, Thorin snorted in disdain.

"And why should I give it? You had your choice of anywhere in the world to go. You might have fared better if you sought out the wood elf," the king said scornfully.

Bard's eyes widened. "Surely you, of all people, understand the plight of my townsfolk! And I aided you to my own peril and that of my children only to be thanked in this manner?!"

"You think I owe you something, dragonslayer?" Thorin's voice was dangerous, his pupils glittering through the narrow slits of his eyelids. "Why did you really come here? Do you think you have some claim on the wealth of Erebor because you brought down the worm? I would strongly advise against such thinking. This isn't some sordid version of 'finders-keepers', son of
"This is dwarf gold, and you will never see so much as a single coin, that I promise you! Now, be gone."

"To where?!" Bard demanded as Thorin disappeared behind the wall. "Have you so little honor that you would turn us away in our time of need?"

But there was no answer, for Thorin had gone back into the mountain. The other dwarves slowly followed, leaving only Fíli, Kíli and Bilbo on the barricade. Bard fixed icy eyes on Fíli.

"I'm so sorry," the blonde apologized. "He is not himself."

Bard wearily rubbed a hand across his face. "Where can we go now? The people are hungry, and I have no food to give. They are freezing, and I have no way to warm them. I can't watch while my children wither away."

The torment in Fíli's heart choked him. "There's worse news, Bard. Goblins - perhaps thousands of them - are on their way here to the mountain."

Bard reacted as if he'd been punched in the gut. "This is madness!"

Fíli couldn't disagree. "I will try to change Thorin's mind so that your people can take shelter inside Erebor. In the meantime, if I am unsuccessful, you must find the most defensible position in Dale and fortify it as best you can. Find somewhere to hide the children. Goblins are merciless creatures, and they will not hesitate to kill every single one of you."

"We will do what we can," Bard said soberly. Then he turned and ran back to Dale. Fíli didn't blame him. There was no time to spare.

Kíli found himself winded as he struggled to keep pace with his older brother, and he hadn't had that particular problem since his final growth spurt decades prior.

"So," he queried breathlessly, "what's the plan?"

"I don't have one."

Kíli tripped over his own feet. "But you always have a plan!"

"Would it do any good if I did?" Fíli wondered. "Because I don't think so. I have no idea who this Thorin is. Any tact I might have had is useless against him."

"What will you do, then?" Kíli asked, regarding his brother with dark eyes.

Fíli managed an impish grin. "I thought I'd try your usual approach to life."

"Wing it?" Kíli said incredulously. Fíli nodded, dimples deepening slightly.

"Wing it."

Kíli whistled through his teeth. "Good luck."

Fíli inhaled deeply and strove to calm himself. "Thanks. But don't wander off, just in case."

"As if I would, but do you really think he'd attack you?"
Fíli's heart cracked over the stricken expression on his younger brother's face. Thorin had always been more of a father figure to Kíli, a consequence of losing his real father so early in life. Kíli didn't remember Zefur as well as Fíli did, and though all of their uncles and cousins stepped in where they could to fill the void left behind, Thorin ever remained foremost in Kíli's affections. Fíli gently squeezed Kíli's shoulder.

"We must be wary, brother. In his fractured state, we must assume nothing about how he may react. Just...keep on your toes, alright?"

"Yeah. What will we do if he refuses?"

"We'll think of another way to help them."

Snowflakes fluttered down in ones and twos, the promise of an early winter. Beneath them, Thranduil stood tall in his stirrups as his army crested the rise above Dale. In the distance, the braziers of Erebor shone in the waning twilight, and smaller fires flickered in the once empty streets of Dale. The elf King lifted one elegant brow as he sat down on his elk's back. So the dwarves had survived after all.

*How intriguing.*
In Thrór's opulent living quarters, Fíli and Thorin clashed.

"You want me to what?"

Fíli was glad Thorin couldn't see the way his heart crowded into his throat. Never before had he overstepped his bounds with his uncle, but this was more important than Thorin's pride.

"Grant them sanctuary."

"And why in Durin's name would I do that?"

"Because they're helpless! And they're no different than you were all those years ag-

"DO NOT SPEAK TO ME OF THAT DAY!" Thorin rounded on him. "You know nothing. They know nothing. Men would be welcomed by that forest vermin where we weren't even allowed a brief respite, yet they came here. Why? Do you not see that they have ulterior motive?"

"THEY CAME BECAUSE I TOLD THEM TO!" Fíli yelled.

Thorin's eyes flew wide. He stared his heir down, breathing hard. Fíli never dared raise his voice to Thorin before, and they both knew it. Kíli stood on the balls of his feet, ready to get between them should the situation escalate any further.

"You foolish boy."

Kíli inhaled sharply, and Fíli flinched, stung. If they needed more proof that their uncle was gone, they had it now. All the training, all the responsibility, the tests, the years of one-on-one lessons...
and Thorin's respect collapsed over Fíli's head in one blow. He worked desperately to control his emotions, but a muscle in his jaw began to tick.

"It was an effort of diplomacy, Uncle. Our actions brought the dragon's wrath down on them. Have you no remorse for what you've caused? You are responsible for them!"

"I am no such thing! You are ignorant in this matter, and I will hear no more of it."

Fíli scowled and headed for the door, Kíli close behind.

"Fíli."

The elder nephew froze, but he did not turn back.

"One day you will be king, and you will understand."

Fíli shuddered and escaped through the door.

Bard gaped as Mirkwood elves poured into Dale, handing out food, blankets and warm clothing. Thranduil stood beside him, watching the faces of the townspeople.

"Thank you, your majesty," Bard said. "You've shown us compassion in a difficult time."

Thranduil smiled. "It is the least I could do after the great service you've performed for all folk in this corner of the world."

"Ah," was all bard could say. He shifted uncomfortably, knowing that he'd been insanely lucky to bring down Smaug. But he couldn't help wondering if Thranduil would have been as quick to help the refugees if the dragon still lived.

"In truth, I'm relieved you've come," Bard ventured after a time. "I have no means to defend my people, and the dwarves say that an army of goblins is coming here."

"And you believed them?" Thranduil chuckled with a hint of scorn.

"Not all dwarves are liars," Bard bristled. "There happen to be several in that mountain whom I trust."

"Yet they deny you admittance. Do you not think that suspicious?"

Bard sighed. "Fíli is trying to reason with the king."

Thranduil's brows lifted on hearing the blonde dwarf's name, though he did not comment on it. Instead, he murmured, "A wasted effort. If Oakenshield is anything like his grandfather, his pride and stubborn nature are equaled only by his love of treasure."

Bard thought about his last encounter with Thorin and sighed. "You may be right about that, but we cannot abandon them to the goblins."

Just outside the hidden door, Fíli sat alone. Hundreds of thoughts filled his mind to bursting, and just as many emotions threatened to make his chest explode. The quest was over. They'd succeeded in reclaiming their homeland, and Fíli's family lived...if anyone could call Thorin's
condition living. So then, had he changed fate? After all, death was still a terrible possibility, given the approaching army. How could thirteen dwarves and a hobbit survive against such odds? And what of the people of Lake-town? The answers were too awful to contemplate.

Had Fíli altered fate even the slightest bit, or had he doomed them all to something worse? He pressed his palms to the sides of his head, willing the pounding to stop. He hadn't suffered from any nightmares since Durin's Day, and that bothered him. After a few moments he reached into his pocket, retrieving the final vial of medicine. He stared at it, wondering if not taking it would make much of a difference at all. He felt much better than he had only a week previous which was good, but he couldn't help feeling that it mattered very little.

Pulling the stopper free, he considered pouring the contents on the ground. He'd never been the rebellious sort - that was Kíli's forte - but something stirred in him. Perhaps it slumbered under the surface his whole life, waiting for the spark that would set it aflame. No, Fíli hadn't been a rebel, but he was willing to do anything for the sake of his family...even if that meant risking his own existence. Having made up his mind, he stood abruptly and downed the contents of the vial in one swallow.

"Fíli? You out there?" Kíli called from the tunnel.

"Yeah, Kíli."

"Dwalin says Thorin wants us at the gate. Thranduil's here-"

Fíli's brows pinched together as he shot a look at his brother.

"-and so is his army."

"We come in peace," Thranduil said grandly. Bard was beside him, looking decidedly uneasy. "We wish to treat with the King Under the Mountain."

"Is that so?" The look Thorin gave the elf was akin to the way one might gaze at a silly child.

"Yes. The dragonslayer tells me that an army of goblins is approaching. I offer you my help."

"And I'm to believe that you are sincere?" Thorin sneered.

"I give you my word, one king to another."

"Indeed? How magnanimous of you. Tell me: what good was your word when my people were driven out? Where was this generosity when you imprisoned my kin? I would not trust you to honor your word should the end of all days be upon us! YOU LACK ALL HONOR!"

If at all possible, Thranduil appeared quite ruffled by such an accusation, but Thorin wasn't finished.

"I know why you've come. You sought to plunder our wealth and take something that no longer belongs to you. Well. Rest assured that you will never set foot inside this mountain."

The elven king forced a smile as he turned to leave, and while Fíli wasn't entirely sorry to see him go, he considered that having his help when fighting the goblins wouldn't be all that unbearable.
But there was nothing to be done. The Company retreated from the wall and set to the task of inspecting and preparing their weapons and armor for war. While Thorin continued to remain untouched by the impending attack, the other dwarves endeavored to ready themselves as best they could, choosing what suited each of them best. In the middle of it all, a shirt of mithril links was uncovered - a most rare and splendid treasure, for it protected the wearer from even the most devastating of physical attacks.

There was an intense debate on who should wear it, and before they had a chance to vote on the matter, a voice from the doorway murmured, "Give it to the hobbit."

All eyes landed on Thorin. He seemed remarkably sane, a significant deviation from his behavior of late, and it made everyone doubly uneasy.

"Uncle?" Fíli asked.

"Give it to Bilbo," Thorin repeated before walking away.

All watched in silence as he left, wondering if they'd just experienced the calm before the storm.

Bilbo climbed the barricade and relieved Glóin. He sat quietly for a while, thinking about many things as he stared at Dale, the most recent thing of note being the gift of the mithril shirt. Surely such a highly resistant piece of armor should have gone to Thorin himself or one of his heirs?

"You're wondering why I thought you should have the shirt."

Bilbo yelped in a rather undignified manner and clutched at his chest. He wished Thorin would stop creeping about like a wraith. It was most unnerving.

"Truth be told, yes," the poor hobbit managed.

"Consider it a sign of trust."

A curious statement, given the dwarf's fits of the exact opposite lately. Thorin sat beside the hobbit and lowered his voice, casting paranoid glances over his shoulder.

"There is a traitor among us," the king said, and Bilbo shifted uneasily.

"Oh?" was all he could think of to say.

"I know this is a heavy burden to place on you, but I must know who the snake is. They all trust you, Master Hobbit, and they speak freely in your presence. You will be my eyes and ears."

Bilbo cleared his throat. "What is it this traitor has done?"

"It's the Arkenstone. We should have found it by now, yet there is no sign of it. Someone has taken it for himself."

Bilbo gaped.

"Will you do this for me?" Thorin prompted.

Poor Bilbo could only nod. Thorin smiled grimly.

"Good," he said as he descended the barricade. "And remember, Bilbo - don't trust anyone."
Dwalin knew Dís' sons better than most. That being said, he spotted the storm brewing under Fíli's skin long before the young prince even realized it himself. He watched him without seeming to pay much attention, and what he saw encouraged him greatly. There was hope for Thorin yet. There was hope for them all, and the lads were the key.

So Dwalin did something he'd never been particularly good at - he waited to see what would happen. Fíli had always been a smart lad. After all, who better to remind Thorin of who he was than the one person most like him?

Golden light casts dappled shadows across a carved stone circle that Fíli recognizes all too well. Strangely, despite his misgivings on finding himself there in previous dreams, he's comforted. He inhales deeply, closing his eyes.

"Fíli! Thank Mahal!"

"I told you he was alright."

The blonde's eyes fly open. What he sees is the most unexpected sight. Dís is flying towards him, Elrond in tow.

"Mum?! What are you doing in Rivendell?"

She grabs him in a fierce hug, crushing him. "You scared me half to death! I didn't know what happened, and I was so worried..."

Dís continues on in a running explanation while Fíli blinks, confused for only a moment before remembering what happened the last time he visited her in his dreams.

"Oh, Mum, I'm sorry!"

She pulls back, taking his face between her hands and studying him. Her eyes soften before taking on a hard light.

"He is not alright," she throws at Elrond.

Fíli knows he looks drawn and exhausted, but it's so good to see her that he can't help a small smile.

"What's happened love? Is Kíli alright?"

Fíli nods, but his face crumbles. "Thorin-" is all he manages, voice breaking.

Dís' chin lifts. Her brow furrows. Suddenly she looks so tired, and Fíli can see that she knows.

"Oh, my brother."

She's quiet a moment, and her eyes are distant. Fíli doesn't want to burden his mother with more bad news, but she needs to be told.

"There's more, I'm afraid. Much more."

He explains everything from his time in the Woodland Realm to the goblins and Thorin...
widening the rift between himself and Thranduil.

"What will you do?" she asks.

"Nothing sensible," he responds. She smiles a little at that. "But, regardless of all that's happened between Thranduil and our people, we need his help."

Elrond speaks up for the first time since the dream started. "A truce?"

Fíli nods. "You know him, Lord Elrond. Is it possible now? Even after what's happened?"

The elf hums thoughtfully. "If you had something he wanted...yes, I believe so."

Fíli's eyes light up. He takes a deep breath and chuckles nervously. "Thorin's not going to like this."

Dís places her hands on his shoulders. "Thorin is compromised, love. You must do what is right. Be strong."

Fíli nods gravely, and his mother's eyes glisten.

"I'm so proud of you," she says.

Fíli opened his eyes and threw back his blanket, jumping to his feet. Time was of the essence. He had a plan at last.
Heart of the Mountain

Chapter Notes

Thank you, thank you, thank you for your patience! I love you all!

"Alright, m' wee gems. Off to bed."

"Aw, Mum!"

The chorus of objections was by no means unexpected, but Dís smiled and shook her head. "You know the rules, lads."

Kíli offered the most convincing puppy eyes he could muster, and Fíli folded his hands together under his chin.

"Please!" he begged. "Just one more story!"

Zefur hid his smile behind his mug, and Dís sighed good naturedly. "Oh, could those eyes get any bigger?" she exclaimed. "Very well, my darlings. One more."

The boys cheered, turning eagerly back to their Uncle Thorin, hungry for another tale of the lost kingdom of Erebor.

"What story would you like me to tell?"

"Ourstone!" Kíli chirped.

"The Arkenstone!" Fíli said, agreeing and translating for his brother. Not that Thorin would have needed it - the boys always asked to hear about the Arkenstone when he came to visit.

"Alright," Thorin chuckled. "Let me see...how does that one begin, I wonder?"

"Long ago, in the days of our fathers, Thráin the first, son of Náin, son of Durin the Deathless, came to Erebor and became King Under the Mountain!" Fíli recited instantly. "There he found the great jewel, the Arkenstone, Heart of the Mountain."

Zefur grinned, dimples deepening. "You think he's heard this one before?" he whispered to his wife.

"Hush, you," she whispered back, giving his beard a light tug.

"Ah, of course!" Thorin was saying to Fíli. "How could I have forgotten? Now, then: Thráin I took the stone, declaring it the symbol of the King. Many generations passed before the King Under the Mountain wore crowns as the rulers of other races do, but the stone remained forever the symbol of his power. When Smaug drove the dwarves into exile the Arkenstone was lost, buried beneath the feet of the fire breathing dragon. There it rests, waiting for the rightful king to return, slay the usurper, and reclaim our homeland."

Kíli clapped and cheered, recognizing the story's end. Fíli's chin was in his hands, eyes shining
and rapt. "Wow!"

Dís smiled fondly. Zefur yawned dramatically, and little Kíli's mouth popped open, the yawn having been successfully passed. Fíli's eyelids seemed to realize the time and drooped heavily. The little ones were gently plucked from the rug before the hearth, tucked into bed and given kisses and hugs each. Another five minutes saw the three grown ups sitting at the table, with fresh mugs of coffee divvied out.

"What news, Thorin?" Dís asked, slipping her arm through the crook of her husband's. Her brother shook his head.

"The other lords have refused us again. The more time passes, the more discouraged I become. We lost too many of our kin in the battle for Moria. The other kingdoms are not so eager to send their young folk on a 'fool's errand'."

Zefur took a slow sip of coffee. "Give them time, Thorin. Sometimes, for reasons beyond our ken, fate takes the long way 'round."

"No shortcuts," Dís mused. Thorin sighed, running a hand down his face.

"Perhaps we will have to write our own destiny, then."

Zefur smiled. "Sounds like a plan. When that day comes, my brothers and I are with you. Even if there's only handful of us armed with pickaxes-"

"Och!" Dís exclaimed reproachfully. "I should think we'll be better armed than that."

Zefur laughed. "Indeed we shall, my love! We will help you take back your homeland, Thorin King."

Thorin smiled, warmed to his very core. "Thank you, my brother."
Bilbo shifted uneasily. Fíli was stoic and confident beside him, a true prince among dwarves. A chill wind sneaked beneath Bilbo's collar and swept down his spine, raising goosebumps behind. He shifted again, breathing heavily into his cupped hands and rubbing them vigorously together.

"It's cold," he murmured and winced at how obvious that statement sounded. Fíli nodded mute acknowledgement, shucking the heavy fur collared cloak he wore and holding it out.

"Oh, but-" the hobbit protested. "You need it, don't you?"

Fíli smiled and pressed the fabric firmly into Bilbo's hands. "Take it, my friend," he insisted. "Truth be told, it's stifling me."

Bilbo gratefully accepted the gesture. It seemed hours that they'd been waiting in Dale's main square, and as the night wore on the frigid air seeped into Bilbo's bones. "How much longer do you think he'll make us wait?"

Fíli pressed his lips together and shrugged. As if summoned by the hobbit's query, the captain of Thranduil's guard appeared and gestured to the canopy on the opposite side of the square.

"His Majesty has agreed to speak with you."

Fíli strode forward, Bilbo trudging stiffly in his wake. When the thick fabric of the canopy was held aside, warmth spilled out and beckoned the two with open arms. While Bilbo stepped eagerly inside, Fíli hesitated briefly before setting his teeth and committing to his plan.
"Welcome, Prince of Erebor," Thranduil said coolly. The elven king sat on a simple chair, but the way he reclined in it made Fíli believe it might have been a throne. A table was set before him, upon it the remains of a light supper and a collection of maps and missives.

"You are acquainted with Bard of Lake-town, I believe."

Fíli nodded and inclined his head to where Bard stood at the opposite end of the table, arms folded loosely across his chest. Thranduil's eyes found Bilbo, who looked for all the world like he'd rather disappear.

"And who is this?"

"B-Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, sire," the hobbit stammered.

"A halfling. My jailer seems to be missing a set of keys," the king said offhandedly. "You would not happen to know anything about that, would you...Master Tum?"

Bilbo flinched as the pseudonym he'd given Fallaner left Thranduil's lips. Had they been
overheard that day in Falloner's laboratory, or had Falloner told?

"Yes," Bilbo said after a moment. *No point denying it now.* "Sorry about that."

"Mm," Thranduil hummed, not thoroughly convinced. He turned his attention back to Fíli. "Now, then. What is it you have come to say, Prince?"

"I wish to make peace with you," Fíli stated.

"A truce?" Thranduil scoffed. "Your king made it very clear that there will be no such thing. And after the way he insulted me, I am inclined to agree with him. Besides, only Oakenshield has the authority to treat with me, so I am afraid your efforts have been wasted."

"I think not," Fíli replied boldly, "or you would not have agreed to meet with me at all."

Thranduil's brows lifted, and Bard hid a smile behind his hand.

"You intrigue me, son of Durin, that much is true. But mere interest is not enough. The fact remains that you have not the power to secure a truce."

"Begging your pardon, Your Majesty," Fíli said as he pulled a leather wrapped parcel from his pocket and laid it reverently on the table before Thranduil. "But I do."

The elf frowned, a deep furrow marring the smooth skin of his forehead. He gingerly lifted a corner, revealing a large white stone that glowed with an inner light all its own.

"What *is* that?" Bard asked.

"The Heart of the Mountain," Thranduil breathed, awestruck.

Bilbo gaped at the stone before glancing at Fíli. How long had the young dwarf been in possession of the Arkenstone?

"Very well, Your Highness," said Thranduil, leaning back and steepling his fingers beneath his chin. "I am listening."

* * *

*A few hours prior...*

Fíli stepped as gingerly as possible with little success. The gold coins at his feet skittered away at the barest touch of his boot. He cringed inwardly as Balin lifted his head, turning bleary eyes on him.

"Ah, Fíli!" The old scholar exclaimed and sniffed, roughly dashing away the evidence of any tears. "I didn't hear you enter."

Balin sat beside the inventoried items, a ledger in his lap and drying quill keeping his place between brittle pages. Fíli worked to keep his expression neutral.
"Still working, Balin? You should get some rest."

"It's not keeping these books that chases away sleep, lad."

Fíli nodded in understanding, his eyes straying to the box containing the elven jewels. "Thorin's growing worse."

"Aye," Balin sighed. "It's a tragedy that it ended this way. Of all the foes he has faced, it seems Thorin has always been his own worst enemy."

Fíli's attention snapped back to Balin as Elrond's words shouted in his mind: A FOE HE CANNOT DEFEAT ON HIS OWN.

"It is the strangest thing," the old dwarf continued. "He didn't seem affected by the gold at first. I thought the sickness might pass him by, but it was not to be."

Fíli edged towards the box. "When did he start to succumb?"

"I didn't see any symptoms until after Smaug attacked Lake-town. So strange..."

Fíli was quickly coming to a realization, and hope followed right behind. If Thorin's belief that his nephews had died triggered the sickness, then perhaps an equally traumatic situation would bring him back. It was a desperate addition to Fíli's plan, but if it worked the end would more than justify the means...he hoped.

Balin stared at the ledger in his lap, and Fíli took advantage of his inattention, slipping the jewels out of the box and into his pocket in one fluid movement. He didn't spend the first twenty-five years of his life around Ori's quick fingered older brother and not learn a thing or two.

The night air was crisp, stealing away the breath of any who dared venture out. Dwalin stood watch at the gate, his axes Grasper and Keeper in hand, and Fíli cursed under his breath. The older warrior's perceptiveness knew no bounds, and Fíli cursed under his breath. The older warrior's perceptiveness knew no bounds, and Fíli only hoped that anything he said or did in the coming minutes wouldn't seem suspicious. Relax, he told himself. More often than not, the harder one tries to appear inconspicuous, the more mistakes one is likely to make. And of course, Fíli learned that lesson from Dwalin himself.

"Evening, Fíli."

Deep breath. "Dwalin."

"I hope you've come to relieve me. It's bloody cold out here."

Fíli chuckled. "Indeed, I have!"

"And not a moment too soon. Is there any food?"

Fíli scrunched his nose at that. "If you can call it that."

"Ach, well. Beggars can't be choosers, then."

Fíli was quiet, staring at the lights in Dale. "Is that what we are, Dwalin? We have our kingdom, yet we're worse off than when we left home."

Dwalin eyed him, lifting a brow. "We're in a poor state, that's certain. But we've no time to be
worrying about that just now. We'll see just where we stand at the end of all this."

Fíli swallowed hard. "Do you regret it?" he asked, struggling to keep his voice even. "Coming back?"

It wasn't the question Fíli wanted to ask, but the way Dwalin studied him...he knew that. "No," the older dwarf replied thoughtfully. "Never. I'd do it all over again if he asked."

"Even though-"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Dwalin sighed, a sad smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. "For the same reason you would, lad. Loyalty, honor...a willing heart. My friend never demanded these of me. He simply asked. How could I - how could any of us - do any less?"

Fíli thought back to the day when Thorin visited over a year before, bearing news that the quest was finally at hand. He knew he would follow Thorin before he even asked - not because he'd known all his life that such a day would come. He didn't agree because he felt he had no choice, that he couldn't avoid his destiny. He'd known for years what lay at the end of that road. He could have said no, could have run away, taking his brother with him. No, it wasn't about duty. He didn't have to go, and Thorin wouldn't have made him. He'd always had a choice. Why then, did he choose to go? Dwalin's words settled in his mind like a foundation.

*Loyalty.*

*Honor.*

*A willing heart* - this especially.

Fíli loved Thorin. He admired him, learned from him, followed him *willingly*. He aspired to be like Uncle Thorin. Uncle Thorin who cared about his people. Uncle Thorin who asked after the baker's wife and children after a terrible sickness swept through their town. Uncle Thorin who never tried to take Zefur's place, never tried to assume the role of father. Uncle Thorin who guided. Uncle Thorin who laughed. Uncle Thorin who loved. Uncle Thorin who, hopefully, still existed beneath the wild light in King Thorin's eyes.

Dwalin laid a hand on Fíli's shoulder, bringing him back to the present. "He's not himself now. But I *cannot* believe that he's lost."

"Neither can I," Fíli said with determination.

Dwalin turned to leave, but as he reached the top step of the barricade, he paused and gave Fíli a long, hard look. "Tread carefully."

Fíli blinked, stunned, but Dwalin didn't elaborate. Without another word or backward glance, he disappeared down in to the darkness of Erebor, leaving Fíli with his thoughts.

Kíli followed Fíli, much as he had for the better part of his life. This time, however, it was at a distance. His heart was burdened by the object in his coat pocket, and the secret of it had been preying on his mind for days. He followed his brother, saw him lift the jewels from under Balin's
nose and stood in the shadows below the barricade while Fíli took over the watch. Kíli waited, hardly daring to breathe until Dwalin's footsteps faded to silence. Even then, he hesitated a few moments more before climbing up to speak with his brother. He cursed himself for his cowardice. Ever the reckless one, he rarely had time to think before acting, but he'd had plenty of time to think about this.

And he was scared as hell.

Cursing under his breath, Kíli forced himself to take first one step, then another. His stomach churned, and he worried he might become ill before he even reached the top of the wall. But soon he was there, and the sight of Fíli with one leg thrown over the rampart was enough of a jolt to shake him out of his sorry state. He was still terrified, but now it fueled him instead of freezing him up.

"What are you doing?" he asked as Fíli leaned further over the wall, gazing into the darkness below. His brother jumped, looking decidedly caught in whatever he was up to.

"I -"

"You're going to talk to him aren't you? To Thranduil?" Kíli hissed, worried that someone - anyone - would hear.

Fíli turned, sliding quickly off the rampart to face his younger brother. "Kíli, I have to try something!"

"I'm not mad that you're going," Kíli interrupted him with a rough shove, "I'm mad that you didn't tell me!"

Fíli sighed heavily, taking the shove without retaliation. "I know you're upset -"

"You think?!"

"BUT," Fíli continued in exasperation, "I wanted you to have deniability."

"...what?"

"Look," Fíli said, gripping Kíli's shoulders, "there's every chance that this won't work, but that's not what I'm worried about. When Thorin finds out, and he will find out, I didn't want you to end up in the crossfire."

Kíli frowned heavily. "Fíli, you can't honestly believe that he'd harm us."

"I can," Fíli said, sounding like the words were killing him. "Mahal, Kíli, I do. And after everything we've gone through - everything we've endured - I..."

"Fíli-"

"I CAN'T LET HIM HURT YOU!" Fíli exploded. "I won't. Whether the Thorin we knew can still be saved or not, the Thorin we're facing now is unpredictable and dangerous. I can't let him. For you, for Mum, myself, and especially HIM, I can't let him hurt you."

Kíli swallowed several times, blinking furiously as he fought the stinging that heralded tears. Fíli deflated, turning back to the rampart and leaning heavily on it.

"I have a plan, Kíli...but you can't come with me. Not this time."
His shoulders hunched, no doubt preparing for Kíli to protest, but Kíli knew his brother was right. "Well, then," he said gruffly. "You'll be needing this."

Confused, Fíli turned as Kíli pulled the object from his pocket. He'd wrapped it in soft leather when he found it, and Fíli accepted it with trembling hands.

"Is this what I think it is?"

Kíli's voice shook. "Yeah."

Fíli didn't even look at it. He didn't dare. "Mahal, Kíli. How?!"

Kíli scratched the back of his neck. "The second day after we arrived. I don't know how, but it was more like it found me. It...whispered to me. Ach, that sounds ridiculous."

Fíli shook his head, gripping his brother in a fierce hug. "No, little brother. It doesn't."

Kíli choked out something that was half relieved chuckle and half sob as he pushed Fíli away. "Go," he said. "I'll keep watch."

Shoving the precious object into his pocket, Fíli flung his leg over the wall once more. "Be careful, Kíli."

"You too."

"What are you going to do now, Bilbo Baggins?" the hobbit muttered to himself as he picked his way through the snow. He wasn't running away, really. He just...needed some time to think properly. The heavy atmosphere in Erebor was so thick one could slice it with a butter knife, and Bilbo wanted some fresh air. Now that he was out, though...ought he go back?

Not one dwarf made any mention whatsoever of having found the Arkenstone, let alone keeping it for himself. And Thorin was wrong, anyway. His Company loved him, and if he could see through the gold that blinded him, he'd know they wouldn't keep something he valued so highly from him. Surely if it was found they'd hand it over immediately - if only to get some proper rest. The only respite they'd had in the last day or so came from the preparations for battle. If Thorin had his way though, they'd probably still be knee deep in gold, searching for something that clearly didn't want to be found.

Bilbo sighed, gazing longingly at the warm lights in Dale. They probably had fresh food up there. His stomach growled. Oh, curse it all! He wasn't going to defect to the elves, not for all the food in the world. But to go back and face Thorin without any news...the king was growing impatient, his mood darkening every time Bilbo returned empty handed. And the hobbit was tired of spying. These were his friends, all of them, and he loathed himself for being false faced. Perhaps it would be better if he left.

But the goblins...he couldn't abandon them all. Not now. Taking a deep breath, he checked to make sure his magic ring was still in place. It wouldn't do for anyone to catch sight of him sneaking back in. They might suspect he was up to no good, which of course he wasn't. Why did it have to be so dark? The clouds kept the stars from lighting Bilbo's way, and he regretted having wandered so far from the gate. He stubbed his poor toes more than once, and the final time was more than he could bear. He whined pitifully, rubbing his injured toes and cursing his ill luck.

"Who's there?"
Bilbo froze, heart in his mouth. Barely, he could see a shadow of a figure silhouetted against the snow.

"Make yourself known."

Bilbo sighed in relief, recognizing the voice. He slipped his ring off. "It's only me, Fili."

"Bilbo!" Fili scolded. "I do wish you'd cease leaping out of shadows like that. What on earth are you doing out here?"

"I needed some fresh air." Bilbo's relief ebbed a little as a thought struck him. "What are you doing out here?"

Fili could have kicked himself because instead of offering a perfectly reasonable explanation, he stood still as stone, mouth firmly closed. What should he do? He could send Bilbo back, but if the hobbit mentioned seeing him? He could take him with, but how would Bilbo react to his plan? He'd become as loyal to Thorin as the rest of the Company, and he may be greatly opposed to Fili's intentions.

As he debated, Bilbo put together the pieces. "Oh, you're-"

"And if I am?" Fili said edgily. His heart ached. If Bilbo tried to stop him...

"Then you're brilliant."

Fili blinked and said something very intelligent along the lines of, "Huh?"

"I'm serious!" said the hobbit. "It's about bloody time someone did something!"

A laugh bordering on hysteria fell from Fili's lips. "Then I'd better get going. You should get back before someone notices you're missing."

Bilbo was quiet a moment as he glanced back at Erebor. He shook his head. "I'd rather come with you, if I may."

"Bilbo-"

"Please," Bilbo said.

Perhaps it was because he was nervous - though maybe he simply didn't want to be alone - but whatever the reason, Fili agreed.

"Stay close."

"Nervous?"

Fili, all of seventeen years old, glanced quickly at his smiling uncle and swallowed hard, wiping
sweaty palms on his jerkin. He nodded shortly.

"A bit."

"Only a bit?" Thorin asked, amused.

"Well...a lot."

Thorin squeezed Fíli's shoulder. "Political functions can be pretty scary," he admitted.

"It's not the politics. It's...well. Public speaking unnerves me in the worst way."

Thorin nodded thoughtfully. "Speeches weren't easy for me either."

Fíli gaped. "No way."

His uncle chuckled. "It's true! I would often get so anxious I'd nearly pass out. One time I did - Durin's beard! Dwalin never let me hear the end of it."

"But you never look nervous!"

"It took some practice, but I grew used to it over time. And I had this -"

Thorin pulled a small stone from his pocket, worn smooth from years of handling. "Whenever I would begin feeling even the least bit nervous, I'd hold it in my hand. It grounded me, giving me something to focus on other than my anxiety. Here," he said, dropping it on Fíli's palm and closing his fingers around it. "You take it."

Fíli rolled the stone between his fingers, noting the smooth surface. It had some weight to it and fit perfectly in the center of his palm. "Thank you!"

Thorin watched the tension melt from Fíli's shoulders, replaced with confidence. He smiled.

"You're welcome."

"My terms are these," Fíli stated. "Set aside your grievances with us for the present. We are facing a threat greater than that of petty insults and grudges over events long past. We must unite. I wish to make amends as best I can, for when that army arrives, it cannot be Erebor that we fight for. We must fight for each other. Think you that these vermin will be satisfied when they've taken the mountain and killed Thorin's Company? You know they will not stop there. They will kill everyone and everything unless we defeat them first, and we cannot do that if we don't stand together."

"Moving words, but that is easier said than done, Prince," Thranduil said. "More bad blood runs between our peoples than you will ever know. How do you expect to make amends for deeds you do not even know exist?"

Fíli slipped a hand inside his coat, retrieving the jewels. "By taking one step at a time...starting with these."

Gently, he laid the sparkling gems on the table, watching Thranduil's face. The elf's jaw went
slack, and he reached for the jewels with trembling hands.

"Nín meleth."

His voice hoarse, eyes haunted, Thranduil delicately brushed a finger tip over the gems of starlight. "You have my undivided attention."

Fíli nodded and turned to Bard. "Your people lost everything because of us. Each member of Thorin's Company was to be compensated one fourteenth of the treasure of Erebor should it be reclaimed, and I offer my share to the people of the Lake. Those are my terms."

Bard gaped at him. Though he had no idea exactly how much one fourteenth of the treasure would amount to, he'd heard enough tales about the dwarves' immeasurable wealth to know that it had to be far more than his people would need to rebuild and start again. All were silent for several moments until Fíli cleared his throat.

"What say you?"

Bard glanced at Thranduil who had regained some of his composure.

"I agree to your terms," the king said.

"We have an accord," agreed Bard.

Fíli followed the tortured howls, his thoughts most unforgiving. When he got his hands on whatever arsehole was causing that wolf's pain...

Rounding the corner of a decrepit tavern, he saw them. Five dwarven boys only a little older than himself stood in a circle around a wolf trapped in a snare.

The poor creature's hind leg was caught fast in the trap, and the horrid boys were stabbing at it with sticks, scaring it into snapping at them while they laughed.

"Hey!" Fíli yelled, finding his voice.

The boys either didn't hear him, or they pretended not to. He bristled, his fury over the mistreatment of the wolf boiling the blood in his veins.

"HEY!"

They started, hunching their shoulders and looking like the guilty prats they were. But once they saw it was only a kid and not an adult come to punish them, they snorted derisively.

"Get lost, squirt!" they jeered before turning back to their sickening sport.

Fíli clenched his jaw and slipped his hand into his boot, grasping his knife and pulling it free. The wolf was growing still, resigned to his fate. He turned sad eyes on Fíli, and the young dwarf growled in outrage. A few minutes more and the bullies would grow tired of their game and kill the creature. Fíli wasn't about to let that happen.

The knife flew from his hand, end over end, sticking into the ground where snare met earth and
cutting the rope. The wolf bolted the instant it was free, lunging into the trees and disappearing into the underbrush. The boys turned, fixing menacing glares on the one responsible for ruining their fun.

Fíli allowed himself a satisfied smirk just before the first set of knuckles connected with his nose.

Thorin shouldered his way through the crowded streets, searching for the glint of golden curls. His fourteen year old nephew disappeared some minutes ago. He'd thought little of it at first - this was one of many towns where they'd paused in their journey to trade their wares, and perhaps something caught Fíli's eye. It would be a marked improvement of his behavior of late.

In the many months since Zefur's passing, Fíli grew distant and hollow. He appeared numb, unaware of the people and events around him. Dís hoped this trip with Thorin would help bring Fíli out of his shell, but...so far there had been little change. Thorin didn't know what to do. He'd experienced loss himself, but he knew next to nothing about teenagers. He didn't understand why Dís thought this was a good idea. Fíli merely picked at his food over the past week, and if anything, he only seemed to be growing worse.

Thorin sighed. Perhaps it's time to head home.

Several young dwarves - all roughly Fíli's age - ran past him. They seemed agitated, and without giving it much thought, he caught the last by the arm.

"What's happened?"

The boy struggled to jerk his arm free, his face full of guilt. "Nothing. Lemme go!"

Thorin gritted his teeth and tightened his grip. The boy whimpered, and Thorin noticed blood on the boy's knuckles. He knew the signs of a fist fight when he saw one, and his stomach tied itself in knots as he realized that the boy's knuckles bore no cuts. The blood wasn't his.

"I'll not ask you again," Thorin said severely.

"Just a little row," the boy whined pathetically. "We just wanted to have a bit o' fun. Would have done, too, if Goldie hadn't stuck his nose where it don't belong."

Thorin's eyes blazed and his nostrils flared, the tip of his nose forming a sharp point in his anger. "WHERE?"

The young dwarf paled, realizing his mistake. "Behind the old tavern! Please, lemme go!"

Thorin sneered in disgust and released the bully. "I suggest you run."

The boy didn't need to be told twice. He disappeared into the crowd, and Thorin expected that he'd never see him again. Not that the thought caused him any grief. He reached the tavern as quickly as the tide of the crowd allowed and stopped as soon as he caught sight of Fíli's unruly mane. His nephew sat on the grass, legs crossed and toying with his throwing knife - a recent gift from his mother.

Thorin exhaled, realizing that he'd been holding his breath ever since he released the bully in the crowd. "Fíli?"

The boy didn't move. Thorin dropped to the grass beside him, and they said nothing for some
time. Fíli twirled his knife. Thorin pulled out his pipe and packed it with fresh tobacco, buying himself time while he thought of something to say. Fíli's hair hung in his face, making it hard to tell what was going on in his mind. Thorin lit his pipe, still unsure of what to say.

He'd never thought to have children, and the young generations baffled him. Of course he'd spent time with his nephews when they were little, but it's one thing to be an uncle and quite another to stand in for a father. He didn't know the first thing about comforting. The only way he'd ever handled loss was to bottle it up or drink it way, and he was damn sure he didn't want Fíli doing that.

"Did you win?" Thorin asked, finally settling on a question. It seemed a safe enough place to start.

Fíli sniffed turned his head away a little. "Some boys were torturing a wolf."

"What?" Thorin said incredulously. He hadn't expected that. Fíli pointed to a length of rope with a cut end.

"They trapped it and stabbed it with sticks because they thought it was funny." Fíli's voice trembled.

"They're not the first boys to do such a thing."

Thorin was simply making an observation, but the way Fíli looked up sharply suggested that it sounded like a justification.

"And that makes it right?!" Fíli demanded.

The boy's face was fully visible now, and it was a sorry sight. Cuts marred the skin in multiple places, and angry bruises were forming under his left eye and along his jaw. Fíli realized Thorin was staring, and he looked away.

"I'm fine," he muttered. "I held my own."

Thorin smiled, warmth spreading through his chest. "I'm sure you did. And I'm proud of you."

A deep frown creased Fíli's forehead, tears glittering unshed in his eyes. "I nearly got my arse handed to me," he admitted. "What's to be proud about?"

Thorin noted Fíli's coarse language with a raised brow, but he let it slide.

"Torturing animals is one of the worst kinds of cruelty. You stood for what was right, in spite of the odds stacked against you. Five to one isn't exactly fair, you know."

Fíli snorted. "Trust me, I noticed."

Something tugged at the corner of Fíli's mouth, and the barest hint of a dimple formed in his cheek. Thorin sighed inwardly. It might not have been a full smile, but it was more emotion than the boy had shown in months. Thorin smiled himself, glancing at the tree line.

"Look there," he said softly.

Fíli's gaze followed his uncle's pointing finger. Just inside the trees stood the wolf, his golden eyes locked on Fíli. They stared at each other for a moment, unspoken gratitude given from both sides.
"You're a lot like your father," Thorin murmured.

His nephew's face turned red in an effort to hold back the tears.

"It's okay to cry, Fíli. There's no shame in it."

Fíli's face crumpled and dropped into his hands, shoulders shaking. Thorin lifted a hand, gently placing it between Fíli's shoulder blades. "I miss him too."

The boy leaned into Thorin's side, and they remained there until Fíli had no tears left to cry. It was what he needed, and Thorin realized that in his own way, he'd need it too.

Roäc sees many things. Other creatures would too, if they had wings as he does. Many years have passed since the time of the great Kings Under the Mountain. Many years.

Now Smaug the Golden is dead.

Thorin, yes. Roäc remembers Thorin. Aged Roäc may be, but a raven never forgets. Thorin it is, yet his eyes are Thrór's. Poor, unfortunate Thorin. He is one of many who fall prey to the sickness. Yes, poor Thorin.

Roäc sends scouts as Thorin requests... Thorin commands. They fly east. They return too soon. Goblins. Too many goblins. The Mountain will be lost again.

'A messenger,' Thorin says. 'Send a messenger.'

To the west, my brothers, my sons. To Ironfoot. Bring Dain. Bring the Dwarves. Thorin calls for aid.

* * *

"Fíli, wait a moment."

Fíli turned, a question in his eyes. Bilbo swallowed.

"There's something I have to tell you..."

"Yes?"

Fíli could feel the tension building in his chest. The truce he'd formed was a precarious one, and he was eager to return to the mountain and turn his attention to the final part of his plan - the part no one knew of but himself.

Again, Bilbo hesitated.

"Bilbo."
"He knows!" Bilbo blurted.

The blood fled from Fíli's face. "Who knows?" he asked, though he knew.

"Thorin, he...he knows someone found the Arkenstone. He wanted me to spy on everyone, find out who had it. That's why he gave me the mithril shirt - a bribe, I suppose. Though if he was himself he'd know that a priceless bit of armor wouldn't make me turn on my friends. I'm not a sneak!" Bilbo shouted, his words tripping over each other in their haste to leave his mouth. "He knows that, or he did. I'm not even a very good burglar, for crying out-"

"Stop."

Fíli gripped the hobbit's shoulders, his voice sharper than one of his blades.

"Turn around. Go back. You're staying here."

"What?"

"I'll not risk you further, Bilbo. You've already done so much for us, and I don't know what Thorin might do when I..."

He trailed off, not wanting to voice his plan aloud. Bilbo frowned.

"Fíli, what are you planning?"

Fíli chuckled, the sound dancing on the edge of hysteria. "Something crazy. But you need to be here, out of harm's way. We might not be able to protect you when Thorin's like this. If he suspects that you've betrayed him..."

"You're afraid he might kill me," Bilbo said as he realized where Fíli's thoughts were headed. "You think he's that mad?"

"I hope not, Bilbo. But I'm not willing to find out at your expense. Now go back, and tell Thranduil and Bard to wait until they've heard from me."

The hobbit nodded slowly. "Good luck, Fíli."

"Thank you, Bilbo."

Air steamed and rolled away from Fíli's mouth as he panted, his feet pounding the snow as he sprinted back to the mountain. Was running the whole way a good idea? Probably not, and he'd most likely regret it later. But he'd regret walking to save his breath far more if the goblins arrived before he could bring Thorin back.

When he was within earshot of the gate, he cupped his hands to his mouth, hooting once like a pygmy owl. A few moments passed in silence. Fíli shoved his growing apprehension aside and hooted again. Nothing.

*Kíli, where are you?*

Just as he'd made up his mind to call once more, the answering call floated back town to him. He sighed, found sturdy handholds and free climbed back up the wall. Reaching the top and hopping over the edge, the hair on the nape of his neck stood on end. Kíli was nowhere in sight. Fíli inhaled shakily.

"Evening, Nephew."
Thorin emerged from the shadows, the darkness hanging onto his gaunt features with greedy hands. "I think it's about time we discussed your future."

Fíli's brows pinched together. *What?* Before he could react, Thorin was on him, wrestling his arm behind his back in a steely grip.

"Let's take this inside, shall we?"
Treason

Chapter Notes

No illustrations just yet! My brain and hands aren't cooperating with each other at the moment, but as soon as they become allies again, I'll illustrate one or two things for this chapter. Thanks for your patience! Enjoy!

Thorin dragged Fíli through Erebor. The king spoke no word, and Fíli didn't even try to struggle. Truth be told, he suspected things were going as he planned, just not in the order that he planned them.

"Where are we going?" Fíli grunted.

Thorin ignored him.

At some point Fíli recognized his surroundings, and it wasn't long after that Thorin marched him through the shattered southern entrance to the Gallery of the Kings. The golden floor gleamed in the torchlight, and the Company stood in the middle of it. Most of them appeared unsure of what was happening, and only Dwalin and Balin seemed privy to Thorin's intentions. Balin's eyes were rimmed with red and glistening with tears, his face drawn and tired. Dwalin was grim, only his eyes giving any inclination to the turmoil under the surface.

When Fíli spotted his brother, his eyes closed briefly in relief. So Kíli was alright - for now, at least. But things were about to escalate, and everyone sensed it. The atmosphere was tense already, only growing more so as Thorin hauled Fíli to the center of the Company and drove him to his knees. The dwarves cast nervous glances at Fíli and each other, apprehension growing. Kíli took an involuntary step forward, suspecting what was to come, but a slight shake of Fíli's head froze him in place.

Deniability.

Kíli gritted his teeth, recalling his brother's words on the barricade. Dwalin gripped his elbow and pulled him back a pace.

"Don't do anything stupid," he hissed in Kíli's ear. Kíli's jaw ticked furiously as he tried to do as he was told.

Unpredictable, Fíli had said. Kíli despaired over the truth of his brother's words.

Thorin stalked around Fíli like a wild cat, his face calm while a fire raged in his eyes. The Company grew still, barely daring to breathe. What was Thorin up to now?

Finally, he halted in front of Fíli, arms crossed over his chest.

"Fíli Sisterson," he intoned, "I accuse you of theft and treason."

The dwarves gasped and protested, but Thorin glared them into silence. He turned back to Fíli. "How do you plead?"
Fíli's nostrils flared in indignation. "Not guilty," he ground out.

"Indeed?" Thorin spun, snatching something from Balin's hands. "Then how do you explain this?"

Thorin held out an intricately carved box. The lid was open and thrown back, the inside void of its precious keepsake. "Where are the jewels, Fíli?!"

Fíli steeled himself and stared calmly at Thorin. "You know where they are."

His uncle took a step back, tossing the box to Balin without looking. "Then you admit to your crime? How could you betray your KING?!"

"I did not betray you! I'm trying to SAVE you!" Fíli yelled indignantly.

"You would make peace with our enemy, yet you say that is not treason?" Thorin spat. "You do not have the right to-"

Thorin faltered, his face growing ashen. The elf king would not treat with anyone with less authority than himself, and the only way Fíli would have such authority while Thorin lived was if...

Fíli watched as Thorin put the pieces together, and in spite of his planning, he still wasn't ready for Thorin's reaction.

"You-"

The king's voice broke, his shoulders deflated. His face reflected his shattered heart.

"All this time...I thought it was the hobbit. I imagined he'd taken it, hidden it away from me like the burglar he is. I never believed that my own blood would..."

Thorin trailed off, covering his face with his hand. Kíli opened his mouth to contest his accusations, but Dwalin tightened his hold and shook his head. Whatever Fíli was trying to do, he wasn't finished yet.

Thorin grew frighteningly still and narrowed his eyes at Fíli.

"You want it for yourself," he whispered hoarsely, his voice barely audible.

"What?" Fíli asked.

"THE STONE!" Thorin howled, grabbing fistfuls of Fíli's shirt. "WHERE IS IT?!"

Fíli gripped the king's forearms. "I don't have it anymore!"

Thorin released him only to rip the crown off his head and thrust it under Fíli's nose. "Is this what you want?" he asked, voice shaking with rage.

Fíli stared at him, his face a mask of pain. After a couple heartbeats of silence, Thorin snapped.

"IS IT?!" he roared. In his fury, he struck Fíli, not realizing that his hand still clutched the crown. The force of the blow knocked Fíli to the floor, and the Company as a whole cried out and took a step forward.

"YOU'RE MAD!" Kíli raged and wrestled his arm out of Dwalin's grasp to help his brother.
"Kíli, stop!" Fíli begged. All eyes were glued to him as he pushed himself up to his knees, blood dripping from cuts across his nose and above his eye.

Thorin's gaze ticked back and forth between the brothers, absolutely seething. "And you knew."

"No!" Fíli protested, but Thorin wasn't listening.

He grabbed Kíli and shoved him at Dwalin. "I deal with you shortly. RESTRAIN HIM!"

Dwalin wrapped his arms around Kíli as he fought to free himself. "YOU'RE ALL MAD! SOMEBODY DO SOMETHING!"

Thorin advanced on Fíli. "Fíli, son of Zefur, I hereby disown you and your brother. I find you guilty of plotting against your king."

Fíli looked at his brother. He looked at his uncles. He looked at them all, begging them with his eyes not to do anything. He was close, so close! They were angry, he knew they were, but he just needed a little more time!

"You know what the sentence is for traitors," Thorin said. Fíli lifted his chin.

"I do."

Thorin unsheathed Orcrist, and for a brief moment, indecision flickered behind his eyes. Then the fury was back.

Fíli gritted his teeth and committed himself. He glanced at Kíli once more before looking to Dwalin with determined eyes.

"Don't let him watch."

"NO!" Kíli screamed as Dwalin squeezed him against his chest and turned his back.

The other dwarves surged forward but Thorin swept Orcrist in a wide arc. "STAY BACK!"

"Thorin, don't do this!" Bofur begged.

"Stay out of this, miner!"

Bofur flinched. "If you kill your sister's son, she will never forgive you."

"And neither will we," Bombur rumbled.

"I WILL HEAR NO MORE!"

He turned, gripping Fíli’s shoulder in one hand and pressing Orcrist to his chest with the other. "You turned them all against me," he accused.

"No, Uncle. You did that yourself."

Thorin blinked. Emotions chased themselves across his face as he fought an inner war until the only expression left was horror. Orcrist slipped from his hand, clattering against the golden floor. He stumbled back, staring at his shaking hands, shocked to realize that they belonged to him and not someone else.

"Everyone get out," he rasped.
"Uncle?" Fíli asked. Thorin cringed away from him, eyes locked on the bright drops of blood that speckled the golden floor. *Fíli's blood.*

"GET OUT!"

---

Thorin hiked his pack securely onto his shoulder.

"Come on, Fíli!" he huffed. "We have a lot more ground to cover."

Instead of the reassuring crunch of feet on fallen leaves, Thorin heard nothing.

"Fíli?"

Silence met his ears. Thorin sighed. The boy had been mute all afternoon, and Thorin pressed his lips together as he considered the cause. Taking one last look at the sun's position, he decided that perhaps stopping for the night wouldn't be such a bad thing.

A hundred paces back down the track, he found a trail of small soled boots heading into the trees. Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose and cursed himself for a fool. He didn't blame Fíli for this behavior. Had he given thought to the boy's age and his sheltered upbringing thus far, he might have acted differently this morning. He certainly would have chosen his words much more carefully. *Durin's beard!* He'd take the whole day back if he could.

A few more paces and the trickling of water reached Thorin's ears. At the same moment, Fíli's boot prints altered course, drifting toward the water. A small smile crept across Thorin's face. Naive the boy might be, but he was smart, already knowing more about nature and her ways than Thorin had managed to learn in thrice as many years. Zefur was a good teacher.

*Splash!*

Thorin paused, listening carefully.

*Sk-sk-splash!*

He took a deep breath and strode out of the foliage. Fíli's pack and jerkin were cast aside on a creek bank, and the lad himself was skipping stones downstream. Thorin dropped his gear next to his nephew's and whistled in appreciation.

"Looks like you found us a fine camping spot," Thorin commented.

The eleven year old said nothing. Another stone skipped across the water. Thorin scanned the rocky bank and chose a stone for himself.

"About this morning," he began as he cast the stone. Two skips. He was getting rusty.

"I don't want to talk about it," Fíli grunted as he chucked his last stone at the water. *Ker-PLUNK!*

The boy stomped away and plopped on a fallen tree, drawing his knees to his chest. Thorin regarded him, a knife twisting torturously in his chest. Finally he nodded and began setting up camp. Maybe it was best not to push the boy. He probably just needed a little more time.
Soon a fire was blazing, and Thorin prepared a thick stew. The silence was tense and uncomfortable, and any attempt at engaging Fíli fell flat. It wasn't until Thorin handed the boy his food that Fíli acknowledged him at all. Unfortunately, that's also when the whole day came to a head.

Fíli accepted the bowl, but when Thorin's fingers happened to graze his own he flinched so hard he dropped it, scattering the contents across the ground.

"Sorry," he muttered quickly, ducking his head and cowering away from his uncle.

Thorin felt that knife twist just a little deeper. "It's alright, Fíli," he said, reaching out a hand to reassure the lad. "No harm done."

Fíli flinched away from his hand, a barely audible whimper escaping his lips. Thorin dropped his hand. "Fíli, I'm not going to hurt you."

The boy cautiously lifted his eyes, and it nearly killed Thorin to see fear in them. He thought back to that morning, replaying it for the thousandth time in his mind.

They'd been on the road for three days without incident, but highwaymen and bandits were always a possible threat. Unfortunately for them, they saw Fíli and believed uncle and nephew to be easy prey. They didn't consider the way Thorin's sword was strapped to his back to allow a fluid draw. The didn't consider his confident stride or the way his eyes were constantly moving, taking in every detail of the surrounding area. They didn't consider that he'd defend Fíli like a bear would her cub. They were incompetent, else they would have recognized all the signs of a seasoned warrior.

Three men attacked in an explosion of leaves and foliage, but Thorin was ready for them. He saw all the signs and knew they were there. He dispatched the first in short order, allowing the other two to escape with their tails between their legs. But Fíli...Mahal. Fíli's face was a mask of horror, his eyes glued to the blood and the sightless eyes of the dead man. Thorin spoke sharply to him, perhaps more sharply than he should have, but his intent was to snap Fíli out of his increasing state of panic and shock.

Thorin had believed that Fíli's quietness over the following hours had been caused by the attack itself. Now he realized that Fíli hadn't been afraid of the bandits. He was afraid of Thorin himself. Never before had his nephews witnessed that side of him. He was foolish to hope that they never would have to.

"Fíli, I would not have killed him if I didn't have to," Thorin explained. "I couldn't let him hurt you."

Fíli lowered his eyes again, and Thorin wanted to rage and curse the hand that fate had dealt him. He sighed heavily, murmuring, "I'm sorry that I frightened you."

A small hand found its way into Thorin's own. His eyes met Fíli's, and hope kindled inside him.

"I forgive you."

Thorin blinked rapidly against the sudden stinging in his eyes and coughed around the lump that had formed in his throat. So simple, those three words, yet they were the greatest of gifts.

"Thank you, Fíli."

Fíli smiled. "May I have some stew?"
Thorin chuckled. "You may, indeed."

"What do we do now?" Bofur asked.

The dwarves, having fled the Gallery of the Kings, found themselves at the front gate. Fíli sat with his hands and chin propped up on the hilt of his sword and gazed steadily into the depths of Erebor.

"Wait."

"What if this plan of yours didn't work?" Dori wondered. "What if he's only growing worse while we sit here?"

"We'll just have to take that chance," Kíli said firmly as he dropped down beside his brother.

Dwalin bowed his head to his chest and nudged Fíli's boot with his own. "Don't you ever scare me like that again."

"Seriously," Kíli agreed. "I thought I was going to have a heart attack."

Fíli smiled halfheartedly. "If I had told you everything, would you have let me go through with it?"

Kíli chewed on his lip before grudgingly admitting that he would have done the same thing in Fíli's place.

After a few more moments of silence, Kíli spoke up again. "How long do you think we'll have to wait?"

"I don't kn-"

Fíli was interrupted by the high, clear blast of an elven horn.

"The goblins!" Ori shouted from the top of the wall. "They're here!"
"Stand ready, men!" Bard barked as he ran through the streets and headed for Thranduil's command tent. A cacophony of clanking armor and marching feet echoed up and over the walls of Dale. Thousands of torches flowed like a wave in the darkness of the valley below, and not for the first time Bard wished he possessed the keen eyesight of the elves. The starless night was blacker than ever now in the hours just before dawn, and the dragonslayer cursed. Fighting goblins in the dark was not preferable.

"Oh, there's no need for that," the elf murmured whilst strapping on his sword belt as Bard barreled into the tent.

"Are we not under attack?"

"It is a distinct possibility, though the goblins have yet to show themselves."

Bard huffed in exasperation. "Then why the warning blast?"

"Something worse is coming," Thranduil replied bitterly.

"Worse than goblins? What's out there?" Bard asked edgily.

Thranduil's lip curled in disgust. "More dwarves."

Bilbo nervously cleared his throat. "They can't be worse, surely!"

The sound of the approaching army ceased, and in the silence came a voice.

"RIGHT THEN, YOU TWITTERPATED FOREST SPRITES!"

Bilbo cringed as Thranduil raised a brow.

"You think not?"

Thorin stalked. He prowled. Shaking fists ground into his temples. The voices. He must silence them.

Too loud...stop. Unbearable!

Can't think. Can't breathe.

"FAILURE!" the voices screamed. "COWARD!"

They were right. Weren't they?
"KILL THE TRAITOR!"

"No..."

"Treason," they hiss.

Had it been? Thorin was no longer certain of that.

Images...memories.

Fíli taking a beating to save a wolf.

Fíli staring down a bear to protect his family.

Fíli diving into a swollen river to rescue a pack pony.

Fíli choosing to stay behind to give the Company its best chance.

Fíli, no more than a boy, finding the courage to forgive in spite of his fear.


"What have I done?!"

Thorin sank to his knees, the voices still screeching for dominance in his mind. His heart ached.

The crown of the king lay where it fell, bright lines of blood a stark contrast against the dull gleam of gold. All his life he feared the gold sickness, dreaded it, never believing he would escape it. His reflection stared back at him from the floor, and his eyes widened. A shadow of a dwarf met his gaze, sunken eyes gleaming beneath heavy brows.

"You are the demon I fear."

With a rush of breathtaking clarity, Thorin rocked back on his heels. It had never been the sickness after all. It was his own weakness and that of his forefathers that haunted him. Ever he had feared the terrifying certainty that he would be the next to fall, and there was nothing he could do to stop it. But...even after everything that Thorin said and did and regardless of all he might have done, Fíli believed in him.

Tears ran freely down his cheeks. When all hope seemed lost and at the risk of his own life, Fíli did as he had always done. He put his family first.

When did the voices begin to fade? Though he could still hear them, the dull roar they created now was more bearable than the constant chaos.

"Don't give in!" they demanded. "Be strong!"

Thorin took one last look at the discarded crown before standing.

"I am."

Given the lack of proper light and the fact that Ori was quite high strung, his mistake was understandable. Dain's army was no more than a sea of bobbing flame as it flowed into the valley, halting before the Front Gate. Over the din of armor and metal shod feet thundered the chanting of hundreds of dwarven voices.
"Those aren't goblins!" Balin cried as the Company crowded the ramparts. "It's-

"DAIN!" roared Dwalin.

"Listen here, you simpering faeries! You don't belong here, so why don't you slink back to the forest where you belong!"

Thranduil rolled his eyes.

In short, a great many insults which would not be polite to record here were hurled before Dain issued his ultimatum. Either the pointy eared princess and his army took a hike, or Dain would give them a few good reasons to vacate Dale.

Bilbo observed the way Thranduil coolly weathered the insults and threats, unease churning in his stomach.

"What will you do?"

Thranduil turned icy eyes on the hobbit. "I have what I came for," he stated. "If the prince does not succeed in his plan, our agreement matters little. As you can see, peace is the last thing on Dain Ironfoot's mind."

"Maybe if you explained about the goblins-"

"He will not listen! There are many stubborn creatures in this world, but he puts them all to shame."

"But you cannot abandon the dwarves! If you turn your back on them now, then you truly have no honor!"

The elf drew himself up, back rigid.

"You presume much, halfling!"

Bilbo gulped.

"My lord," Bard beseeched. "In this I agree with Master Baggins. You must not renege on our deal."

Thranduil cut his eyes at the dragonslayer, his nostrils flaring. Pressing his lips together, he drew a deep breath.

"And what am I to do about that?!" he demanded, throwing out his hand to encompass Dain's army.

Again, the high clear note of the scout's horn pierced the air. Horrid cries and shrieks combined in a chaotic din, and the first rays of sunlight broke over the horizon, illuminating the landscape west of the Lonely Mountain. The earth writhed and teemed with glinting weapons and scurrying vermin.

"GOBLINS!"

"I suppose that solves your problem," Bilbo said grimly before turning smartly on his heel and sprinting away.
"Where are you going?!" Bard yelled.

Bilbo paused took a deep breath. "They are my friends," he replied. "I have to help them in whatever small way I can."

"You are mad!" Thranduil accused.

"That may very well be the case," Bilbo retorted, "but I've not spent the last several months with them only to cower behind your robes while they are in peril."

"The goblins will see you and kill you!" the elf insisted.

"Oh, I don't know. Your guards never did!"

And with that, the hobbit was gone.

The goblins attacked without preamble, and the dwarves locked shields to meet the onslaught. Heedless of the obvious danger, goblins dashed themselves against the wall of metal and pikes as water wears away at stone. At first the advance stalled, but sheer force of numbers began to overwhelm the dwarves and create weak points in the line.

"We have to help them!" Kíli exploded.

"I know, I know!" Fíli shot back.

"What can twelve hope to do against so many?" Dori shouted.

A series of horn blasts interrupted them, and as if a dam burst, elves and men poured out of Dale, flooding the valley.

"Bless me!" Bofur said in awe.

"I never thought I'd see the day," Balin breathed.

Elves and dwarves fought side by side, and it seemed the three armies were more than a match for the goblins until more horn blasts echoed above the valley. Legions of orcs astride wargs crested the eastern edge of the valley, and the allies found themselves trapped between hammer and anvil.

"Mahal save us all," Dwalin rasped.

The warg riders charged, screeching and yowling terrible battle cries. The allies met the attack as well as they were able, but many were caught by surprise. The screams of the wounded and dying punctuated the roar and crashing of weapons.

"This is unbearable!" Kíli fumed. "We have to do something!"

"And so we shall!"

The Company spun as Thorin leapt atop the barricade. Gone was the wild light in his eyes, and the tyrant was no more. Their Oakenshield was restored at last.

"Bombur, sound the charge on my signal! The rest of you, with me! It's about time this wall came down."
The situation was desperate on the battlefield. Fatigue ground away at every dwarf, elf and man, and the orcs and goblins just kept coming. Wave after wave slammed into the allies in the valley, and it was all they could do to keep the enemy from breaching Dale.

The ground trembled, and all eyes looked to the source. The wall barring the front gate shook and burst outward, scattering debris as a deep horn blast reverberated across the battlefield. Once, twice came the sound, and a great roar erupted from the dwarves as thirteen figures charged through the gaping hole in the front gate.

"TO THE KING!" ordered Dain.

"KHAZÂD AI-MÊNU!" bellowed Thorin, and the dwarves rallied behind him, punching through the sea of goblins.

Chaos.

Screams.

Every breath poisoned by the stench of blood.

Vision sharpened by each extra heartbeat.

Don't think.

React.

Civil combat? Forget it. No rules of engagement.

*Hack!*

*Block!*

*Attack!*

"LOCK SHIELDS!" Thorin roared. "NOTHING GETS THROUGH!"

Effective tactic, that. Would have been much more so if the goblins and orcs weren't so numerous. The shield wall bowed, dwarves falling left and right.

"HOLD THE LINE!"

"We're losing ground!" someone shouted.

Were they? Fíli couldn't tell. His world condensed to the shield inches from his nose and the sliver of open space just wide enough to accommodate his blade. His eyes burned. Strands of hair caught in the sweat coating his face. Kíli grunted beside him as they pushed back against the tide of goblins. Seconds and minutes stretched into ages. How long had they struggled to gain ground? Forever? For all their effort, it seemed they accomplished nothing at all. Every dead orc and goblin meant ten more scrambling to take its place.

Stalemate?

A raucous sound overtook that of the goblin's war cries, followed by shrieks of pain. Fíli peered through the gap between his shield and the next, his jaw dropping. Ravens descended on the
enemy in a black and blue cloud of feathers, swooping and pecking, clawing at eyes and any exposed flesh. Granted a brief respite, the allied armies rallied once more. Thorin stepped back from the line, finally able to study his surroundings. Dale was besieged by the enemy, but the Men of Lake-town and many elves defended its walls and gates. More elves fought in the valley alongside the dwarves, and Thranduil himself battled among them. Still Thorin's eyes searched until they settled on Ravenhill.

The site of the old watchtower was the most defensible position, with an advantageous view of the battlefield below. Instinct told him that Bolg must be up there. Any commander with sense would utilize such a position, and though orcs were vile they weren't all witless. This orc especially. Many years separated Thorin from the last time he traveled to Ravenhill, but his memory was long. He remembered a narrow track winding up the cliff under the watchtower's perch - one not easily spotted by those who did not know to look for it.

"DWALIN!" he bellowed. "FILI! KILI! TO ME!"

His kin backed away from the line, three dwarves from the Iron Hills taking their places in the shield wall. He pointed to Ravenhill and saw that Dwalin understood immediately.

"Come. Let's behead this accursed serpent."

The elements and lack of use long since ate away at the narrow track, making the climb more treacherous than Thorin recalled.

"Careful," he huffed and skirted a place where the path had almost entirely crumbled away. Fíli and Kíli edged along with Dwalin close behind.

"What if Bolg has a considerable force up here?" Kíli hissed as a rock skittered out from beneath his foot, clacking down the cliff face.

"Doubtful," Dwalin muttered. "It was a surprise attack with victory dependent on numbers. Most of the force was meant to hammer us in the valley and trap us there. I don't think he expected anyone to survive the initial advance."

"But he wouldn't be fool enough to be up here alone, would he?" Kíli asked.

"No," Thorin interrupted.

Fíli's insides churned and knotted together. He had a bad feeling about this. Suicide mission, his gut insisted.

"Uncle-"

"Fili?" Thorin paused. Fíli's voice must have given him away.

"What if it's a trap?" he asked, giving voice to his misgivings.

Thorin considered for a long moment, tipping his head back to glance up the cliff face. After everything that happened, he wasn't about to ignore Fíli's instincts. He was aware of the possible outcome of this plan. Of course he was. But how much more definite was the ill fate of every dwarf, man and elf in the valley and the streets of Dale if Thorin didn't try to take out Azog's spawn?
"Then we'll spring it," he said at last. "Carefully."

Dwalin grinned a predatory smile. "What are we waiting for?"

Silence.

Which was exceedingly eerie after the pandemonium of the battlefield. The dwarves crouched behind a pile of debris and rubble of a collapsed wall, taking stock of the tower. Fíli's heart was in his throat. He knew exactly where he was, and his nerves were on high alert. Ravenhill's watchtower stood against the gray sky exactly as it had in his dreams. A frozen river lay between him and its base, the decayed, crumbling remains of a bridge stretching halfway over the ice. He gripped Kíli's sleeve. It wasn't fear for himself that made his heart stutter in his chest. This place may be the site of his own demise, but that meant that Kíli would also perish.

"What is it?" Kíli whispered.

Fíli studied him. "Don't do anything rash, alright?"

Kíli frowned, brows folding heavily over his eyes. He nodded slowly. "Yeah."

"I don't see anything," Thorin said in a low voice. "Dwalin?"

"Nothing," the other confirmed. "I say we split up."

"No," Fíli interjected. "We really shouldn't."

Dwalin peered at him quizzically, and Thorin gave him a similar look.

"I agree," said Kíli. "We're stronger together."

"We can't go in there together," Dwalin muttered. "That'd be the end of it."

"What do you suggest, Fíli?" Thorin asked.

"Call him out."

Thorin's gaze swiveled between the tower and his nephew. "We need a more defensible position. If he has archers, stepping into the open will be the worst course."

"He won't use them, Thorin," Dwalin said thoughtfully.

"Why not?"

"It's personal. He's out for blood," murmured Kíli, piecing it together. "Your blood."

"And he'd not readily give up the chance to end you himself," Dwalin finished.

"We can hardly place our trust in his sense of fair play. He is an orc, you know," Thorin said with a hint of a smile.

"That's profiling," Kíli mumbled.

"What?" Thorin and Dwalin asked.
"Nothing."

Fíli rolled his eyes. "We have to try something," he said. "The rest of us can slip around to a better position and see just how large his force is - perhaps taking out a few while he's preoccupied."

"Which requires splitting up," Kíli pointed out.

"Sort of. It seems unavoidable at this point, but at least we won't be rushing in without having some idea of what we're up against."

"Alright," Thorin agreed. "But don't allow yourselves to be cornered. Pull back if there are too many."

"What about you?" Dwalin asked.

"Don't worry about me."

The two exchanged a look that said a thousand things. Thorin glanced at his nephews before standing, and Dwalin nodded to himself before leading the lads around to the right.

"BOLG!" Thorin thundered. "FACE ME, COWARD!"
Baranthor flew. By the Maker, his heart nearly burst. He rallied what help he could but didn't stick around to wait for the reinforcements to organize. He was out of time. Fíli needed him now. And in his heart, he feared that he might already be too late.

Nothing happened.

Well, that's not exactly true. If anything the silence intensified after Thorin's challenge, raising the hair on the dwarves' arms. Several heartbeats later, torchlight pushed back the darkness in the recesses of the tower. Screeching and hissing echoed through the ruins. Bolg prowled out of the tower, appearing on a ledge above them.

Fíli found the sight oddly comforting. At least one of his nightmares about today wouldn't be coming true. Thorin waited on the edge of the crumbling bridge, a statue in the midst of all the ice and debris of the watchtower. Bolg chuckled - if the harsh sound issuing from his throat could be called that.

"Come, spawn of Durin," grated the horrid beast. Fíli cringed over the Westron words as they clawed their way out of Bolg's mouth. Each syllable ground and crunched between his teeth like rocks being pulverized into dust. "My blade thirsts for your blood."

"That's disgusting," Kíli muttered.

"Keep moving," Dwalin hissed.

They circled around, the attention of Bolg and his minions focused on Thorin.

"Your blade will starve," Thorin replied calmly. Fíli could hear the smile in his voice and couldn't help the grin that tugged at the corner of his own mouth. Dwalin reached back, resting his fist against Fíli's chest.

Two flights of steps blocked their path. One marched up while the other curled down. A third path lead into the tower through a splintered archway. Dwalin's head tipped back as he craned to see where the flight up lead. The flight down disappeared from sight after only a few steps, and the path straight into the tower made an abrupt left turn only three feet in. Dwalin shot Fíli a look, expression grim. He brought his fists together and signed the motion again more vigorously. Fíli breathed heavily through his nose, but Kíli gripped his sleeve as the clang of metal on metal signaled the beginning of Thorin's duel. Dwalin pressed his lips together and signed the motion again more vigorously. Fíli breathed heavily through his nose, but Kíli gripped his sleeve as the clang of metal on metal signaled the beginning of Thorin's duel. Dwalin grabbed Fíli's chin, bringing his attention back.

No time, he signed.

Fíli gritted his teeth. Fine! he replied in frustration.

Dwalin pointed at Kíli and nodded toward the steps leading down. Kíli frowned and after a brief squeeze of Fíli's arm, slipped to the lower levels. Dwalin thumbed at his own chest and pointed at the cracked archway, leaving Fíli to the steps leading up. As he ducked inside, Fíli took a deep
breath, staring at the upper levels of the tower. It was Thorin's grunt of pain below that finally got him moving. He shoved his fear aside, allowing his mind to clear. If he didn't keep a level head, he was as good as dead anyway.

Dwalin never really liked the stealthy approach. He was more the 'charge in and bust heads' type. That didn't mean he wasn't capable of stealth, however. Orc number ten was already dead on the ground before the others on his level noticed something amiss. But when they did, all hell broke loose.

"That's right, you stinking vermin! Bring your pretty faces to my axes!"

Kíli crept through the eerily silence punctuated by Thorin and Bolg's duel. He met no one, heard no one. Eventually, he found himself at the ground level entrance to the tower, the oak door having decayed long ago. The doorway opened right onto the frozen river hugging the base of the watchtower, and not twenty feet away battled Thorin and Bolg. Kíli's uncle struggled, the exhaustion of the past week taking its toll. The pale orc hammered away at him relentlessly, driving Thorin to the ice over and over again. Somehow, Thorin would rise every time, though from whence he summoned the strength Kíli could not say. Regardless, Thorin was losing. And Bolg knew it.

Kíli prayed that his mother would forgive him and proceeded to do the most reckless thing he could think of. He charged.

Fíli scrambled across the upper floor of the tower, chasing his blade as it skittered away. Five orcs were a bit many to take on alone, but it's not like he meant to fight them all at once. His intention had been to take out one or two before being spotted. Unfortunately, as with most things in life, it didn't exactly go according to plan. The wind must have shifted or something because the blasted archers on the top floor knew he was coming. Having lost the element of surprise, he did his best with the hand he was dealt. Admittedly, that wasn't going so well just now. He briefly lamented the loss of his throwing knives before snatching up a discarded arrow shaft and plunging it into one archer's foot. The creature yowled. Fíli grabbed its ankles and yanked them out from under it, sending the orc toppling from the tower. Hearing the satisfying crunch as it hit the bottom, Fíli managed to get a hold of his sword and bring it up in time to block another attack. One of the archers gained some sense and stood back from the others, training his bow on Fíli who grunted and hauled another orc into the arrow's path. He squealed and fell dead, giving Fíli time to roll to his feet. He made quick work of the remaining orcs and stood for a moment, catching his breath. From his vantage point the whole world unfolded. He had full command of the battlefield, and he admitted that Bolg chose an excellent base. The view from above was even less encouraging than the one from the field itself, though a glimpse of an enormous bear tearing through the goblin ranks brought a smile to Fíli's face. He should have known that an army of goblins could not pass through Beorn's lands unnoticed. Movement on the cliff face below the tower sent Fíli sprinting for the stairs. Goblins. Dozens of them.

"THERE'S MORE COMING!"
Dwalin decapitated the last orc as Fíli’s warning reverberated off the walls.

"Damn."

Thorin slipped, his foot shooting out from beneath him. The air rushed from his lungs as his back connected with the ice. Bolg howled in victory, bringing his blade over head for the killing blow.

"RRAAAAAAAAAAAGH!"

A flying object of golden mail and dark hair connected with the giant Gundabad orc, bringing him crashing to the ice. He rolled, casting Kíli off his back with a snarl. Thorin fought to move, but the lack of air crippled him. His mouth opened and closed like a fish as Bolg hauled his nephew up by the hair. Kíli screamed, slashing wildly with his sword. The orc snorted derisively before hurling him across the ice.

"Kíli," Thorin rasped. Bolg glanced between uncle and nephew, realizing a connection. Sneering at Thorin, he turned to where Kíli landed in a heap, his intent clear.

"NO!" howled Thorin. Up. Running. He dropped to his knees, slashing across Bolg's calves as he slid between them. Driving Orcrist’s hilt into the ice and bringing himself to an abrupt halt, Thorin crawled to his feet as Bolg dropped to one knee, hissing in irritation.

"Kíli, get up!"

Fíli raced out of the tower, Dwalin on his heels. In front of them, Thorin stood over Kíli who lay sprawled on the ice. He moaned and gasped, clutching at his ribs. Fíli's heart pounded painfully.

"Kíli!"

"I'm fine!" his brother grunted and stood, hefting his sword as Bolg charged.

"Fíli, come on!" Dwalin said, gesturing to the first goblins breaching the cliff face. "They can handle it!"

Fíli grimaced and tore his eyes away, forcing himself to follow Dwalin. Not a moment too soon. Goblins swarmed up and over, screeching in delight when they spotted two dwarves running toward them. Fíli smiled grimly. They wouldn't be so happy in a few moments. These vermin had no idea who they were tangling with. Dwalin roared and decapitated two goblins in one sweeping movement, driving his shoulder into the abdomen of a third. Fíli slowed a several paces behind, putting himself in the path of any stragglers who managed to escape Dwalin's ax blades.

Thorin grunted as Bolg's blade slamming against his own sent shock waves of pain from hand to shoulder. The orc drove him to his knees. A disgusting leer twisted his features, making him more hideous, if that was even possible. Thorin gagged as Bolg's foul breath washed over him, clouding his vision. A cracking blow sent him crashing to the ice as the orc headbutted him. Dazed and unable to block the blow, Thorin's head lolled. Bolg's blade scythed down.
Sparks flew and the black metal glanced away from Thorin's chest.

*Kíli.*


Thorin launched to his feet, teetering on the thick surface of the river. He roared and leapt as Bolg raised his blade for the fatal blow, landing awkwardly on the monsters back and grappling for a hold. Bolg snarled in irritation. In surprise he released Kíli who crumpled, wheezing. Bolg struggled to snatch Thorin from his back, but the dwarf ducked his attempts and drove Orcrist deep into the orc's chest. Howling in rage, Bolg had enough presence of mind for one last dirty trick.

He fell forwards.

A guttural gasp ripped from Thorin's throat as the tip of Orcrist exited Bolg's back and embedded in Thorin's abdomen.

"Fili, watch your flank!"

The boy dove, using his momentum to drive his sword through the goblin's heart. After several minutes of savage combat, Dwalin and Fíli were surrounded by corpses.

"Well, now," Dwalin said heavily. "That wasn't so bad."

Fíli brushed at a cut across his cheek. His fingers were smeared with blood. Dwalin grasped his chin and turned his face to the side, inspecting the wound.

"Ach, you'll live."

"DWALIN!"

Kíli's tormented scream had them sprinting before they even knew what happened.

"Thorin," Dwalin whispered.

Thorin lay beside Bolg. Kíli knelt over him, hands pressed firmly to a seeping wound in Thorin's torso. Blood soaked everything - their clothes, the ice.

"It's not all his," Kíli murmured in agitation. He shook. Fíli dropped to his side while Dwalin examined Thorin's wound as best he could. A deep gash on Kíli's left thigh was the cause of most of the blood. Fíli immediately shed his mail, tearing strips from the tunic beneath. After firmly bandaging the wound, earning more than one hiss from his brother, he turned to Thorin.

"How is he?"

Dwalin's face seemed carved from stone. He shook his head slowly.

Something shifted in Fíli. All the fear and worry receded into some other place in his mind, and instinct took over. He adjusted his position, scooting closer to Thorin's chest. He put his ear to his uncle's mouth, but no breath warmed his skin. No sound. One glance at Dwalin told him there wasn't a pulse either.

"Oh no, you don't," he growled.
Folding his hands together, he leaned over Thorin and began pumping at the pace of his heart beat. After several seconds, he paused and Dwalin checked for any breath or pulse. A shake of the head, and Fíli was at it again.

"Keep applying pressure," he shot at Kíli. The next words out of his mouth were insults.

"Come on, you bastard. You led us all the way here. You beat the gold sickness. You beat it. You killed Bolg. You're not going to die now. Not after everything you've been through. You hear me? Don't you do it, Thorin!"

A cough, a shudder. Then, weakly, "Kindly stop beating on my chest."

Dwalin laughed and clapped Fíli on the shoulder. "Well done, lad!"

Kíli sighed shakily. "That was too close."

Fíli couldn't agree more. "Alright," he said smartly and stripped off more pieces of his tunic. Gently lifting Kíli's hands, he began packing the wound.

"We need to get out of here," Dwalin murmured. "That wound needs better attention than we can give it."

"We can't move him," Fíli said. "Not without making it worse."

"What do we do?" croaked Kíli, who by now was looking quite pale. Fíli inspected the bruises forming on his neck and winced in sympathy.

"I don't know."

Having reached his friends at the front only to find that Thorin and the others were making for Ravenhill, Bilbo's heart dropped to his curly-haired toes. He could already see hordes of goblins scaling the cliff and a group of orcs and wargs circling around the long way. To make matters worse, the situation on the battlefield was steadily growing worse. Elves, men and dwarfs fell left and right, and screams rose from Dale with thick columns of smoke.

He had to get to Ravenhill. Well, more importantly he had to get help to Ravenhill. A bellowing roar made his hair stand on end as a giant bear tore through the goblin ranks toward the dwarves. Dain's warriors cried out and leveled their pikes at it, but Thorin's company protested. Eventually, Dain called for his soldiers to stand down since the bear seemed to be more intent on helping them than hurting them.

"Never in all my years," he grumbled.

"Beorn!" cried Bilbo trying to flag the bear down. The skinchanger leveled one big eye on him, and he pointed frantically to Ravenhill. "Fíli and the others are up there! They need help!"

Beorn grunted and spun on his heel, barreling through the goblin ranks as he made a beeline for Ravenhill.

"FÍLI!"

Fíli's jaw dropped as Beorn charged through the debris of Ravenhill.
"Durin's beard," murmured Dwalin. "Someone's looking out for us today."

"The halfling said you were in trouble," grated Beorn.

"We were," Fíli said quickly, "and still are. Thorin's wounded, but we have no means to move him. He needs to see a physician."

Beorn ambled over and gingerly gathered him up. "I will take him to safety."

"Hurry, please," Fíli begged. "We'll be right behind you."

Thorin weakly reached out, his fingers ghosting over Fíli's cheek. "Be careful."

Fíli nodded. The bear turned, bounding away while managing not to jostle Thorin even a little.

"Let's get going," Dwalin urged. Kíli lurched to his feet, leaning heavily on his right leg.

"Can you walk?" Fíli asked.

Kíli gritted his teeth and nodded once. "I can manage."

A howl pierced the stillness of Ravenhill, rooting the dwarves in place.

"That's far too close," Dwalin said edgily.

"Let's get this over with," grunted Kíli.

Fíli sighed and spun his sword.

Stinking wargs. If Kíli never again saw another of those beasts, it'd be too soon. The attack was sudden and brutal, driving the dwarves apart instantly. Kíli wished he had his bow, but he admitted that it probably wouldn't have helped much. His reflexes already slowing from blood loss, he took several hits that should have been easily parried and missed more than one blow that ought to have hit its mark. He managed to bring one warg down out of sheer luck, really. Unfortunately, the killing blow left him open to a charging orc rider.

The warg dodged at the last moment, grazing Kíli's shoulder as the orc drove a foot into his chest, sending him sprawling down the river toward the cliff. He scrambled for purchase on the slick surface and found none. Desperate, he drove his sword into the ice, wrenching his shoulder and halting his careening progress toward a terrifying two hundred foot drop. His feet dangled over the edge.

"That was close."

Growling froze his blood. He struggled to stand, but his sword arm was useless. Probably dislocated, he thought deliriously. Somehow he got his feet under him, taking up his sword in his left hand. He wished he was ambidextrous like Fíli. Not that wishing does me any good now.

The warg rider smirked as his beast stalked closer, as if he had all the time in the world. Kíli clenched his teeth and sneered at the orc filth.

"COME ON, YOU BASTARD!"
Multiple things about his brother's challenge caught Fíli's attention immediately. First, the
distance his voice carried. Too far away. Second, pain scratched at his throat, making his voice
raw. Kíli could handle quite a bit of pain with no outward evidence of the fact. This was serious.
Third, his challenge didn't carry the tone of merely goading an enemy to attack. Kíli sounded
resigned, accepting of his fate. He was giving up.

"KÍLI!"

Sounds faded to the steady pound of blood in his ears.

Purple spots clouded his peripherals.

Unsure and uncaring of how he accomplished it, he broke free of the three warg riders
surrounding him. With a yell, he launched himself at the nearest warg's side and slew the rider,
casting him to the ground. The warg snarled and bucked, but Fíli drove his sword down into the
beasts skull and hauled the hilt sideways toward Kíli. The beast stumbled a few steps before
gaining speed, and Fíli howled fiercely. It had the desired effect.

The warg advancing on Kíli whirled, surprising its rider. Fíli freed his sword and catapulted
from his warg's back as it slammed face first into the ice, the momentum causing it to collide with
the other beast's legs. Fíli barreled into the orc as the wargs skidded over the cliff. A swift twist of
his blade and the orc was finished, eyes lolling back into its head. Fíli spat in disgust.

"HELP!"

Heart in his throat, Fíli realized that his brother was nowhere to be seen. He scrambled to the
edge of the cliff where Kíli stood only moments before. His brother clung to his sword, driven into
the ice like a pick a foot down the frozen waterfall.

"Take my hand!"

Kíli winced and groaned, "I can't!"

Reaching down, Fíli gripped his brother's wrist with both hands. "I've got you, Kíli. Let go of
the sword."

Kíli did so, and Fíli grunted at the extra weight. When did he get so heavy?

"You need to lay off seconds, brother."

"Ha," Kíli said mirthlessly. "Pull me up!"

Fíli's body scooted forward an inch. Kíli's weight was pulling him over. "You've got to give me
your other hand, Kíli."

Kíli tried, Mahal save him. His shoulder muscles screamed. Sweat drenched his brow. "It hurts
too much," he panted.

Fíli slipped further. "I know it does, Kíli. Hey! Look at me."

Kíli groggily complied.

"FÍLI, HURRY!" Dwalin bellowed somewhere above. Fíli shot a look over his shoulder and
paled. He looked back at Kíli, frantic. Then, for reasons unexplained, his face relaxed completely.
"Do you trust me, brother?"

Kíli swallowed. That didn't bode well. But of course he did.

"With my life," he rasped.

"Good," Fíli grunted. Then he let go.

Kíli's stomach crowded into his chest as he fell, his mind having no room for a single thing other than internal screaming. He fell several yards before a great shadow snatched him out of the air.

"We really must stop meeting this way, Friend Kíli!"

Fíli shoved himself back from the edge as the eagle soared up and over him.

"Get him to Oín!" he barked.

Baranthor screeched and tucked his wings, diving for the Mountain.

"I saved a few for you, Fíli!" shouted Dwalin.

"You shouldn't have," Fíli retorted. Dwalin laughed.

Luck has a terrible habit of running out. Fíli's body wound down, energy reserves spent after the recent surge of adrenaline. When fighting wargs, it is best to keep distance between them and oneself. The remaining orcs and wargs tightened the noose, cutting off any escape. Attacking at once, they made it exceedingly difficult to keep one's guard up. Consequently, a paw cuffed Fíli, raking claws across his face and leaving him dazed. Half rising, he barely made it to his knees before vertigo and gravity conspired against him. Dwalin's voice pounded in his skull.

"GET UP! FÍLI!"

_Which way is up?_

Blood ran in his left eye. The vision in his right doubled and tripled. A small part of his subconscious reminded him that being blind wasn't conducive to surviving a fight.

_Focus_, Dwalin reminded himself as an orc's blade whistled past his nose. Two wargs and three orcs left. The orcs he dispatched quickly, but while he dealt with the first warg, the second seized Fíli in its maw and shook him violently.

"DROP HIM!" Dwalin raged. The warg growled and locked its jaw, forcing a strangled whimper from its victim. Dwalin's vision blazed red, sending him into the depths of blind fury. When he returned to himself, he stood over a decapitated corpse. Silence settled heavily over Ravenhill, save for his own heavy panting and Fíli's ragged, whistling breaths.

The world turned upside down.

Dwalin dropped his weapons and vaulted the dead warg, sprinting to the spot Fíli fell. Too bright blood against a skin far more pale than it had any right to be, the boy was motionless aside from the erratic rise and fall of his chest. Dwalin reached for him, but his hands halted inches
away, unsure if he should touch. He didn't want to do more harm than had already been done, and he remembered belatedly that Fíli shed his armor to save Thorin.

"Damn you and your bleeding heart," Dwalin muttered brokenly. "So quick to help others that you pay no mind for yourself."

Fíli stirred, his right eye fluttering open. Dwalin cringed at the sight. Three deep gashes were responsible for the blood obscuring most of his face, the left eye failing to open as a result.

"Did we win?" Fíli croaked.

Dwalin choked something part sob, part chuckle. "Aye, that we did."

Eagle cries split the air above them as the great creatures soared over them and descended on the battle field below.

"Will you look at that," Dwalin said in awe. "Looks like the cavalry's here. Perhaps this day will turn out in our favor after all."

Racking coughs shook Fíli, and Dwalin scooted closer, drawing the boy's head in his lap. "Shh, now. Easy, lad."

Fíli inhaled shakily after the fit subsided. "They're...safe now."

Dwalin smiled, tears filling his eyes. "You made sure of that, didn't you?"
The boy sighed, his good eye drifting shut, body going still.

Dwalin's heart galloped erratically. "Fíli?"

No response.

"FÍLI!"

Fíli's eye flew open, brows drawing in confusion. "Dwalin?"

"Here, lad."

"Did we win?"

Dwalin's chin quivered. "Aye..."

Fíli smiled crookedly, his eye already rolling back.

"No! Don't you dare, Fíli."

Fíli's eye wandered, seeing nothing.

"You've come too far. You didn't give up on Thorin. So you damn well better not give up on yourself. Don't you see-"

Dwalin broke off, his voice catching. "You're just as important, you idjit! Stay, Fíli. Don't give up."

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so very much for your patience. I managed to finish this early, thanks to a sudden burst of inspiration. Another cliffhanger, but it couldn't be helped.
Zefur bolted upright, drenched in sweat. He struggled to calm his breathing, pressing shaking palms to his forehead. Dis shifted beside him.

"Alright, love?" she whispered, twining her fingers in his curls.

"I think...I just need to walk it off. Go back to sleep, darlin'," he murmured and pressed a kiss on her brow. As he climbed out of bed he plucked his sweater from the floor and pulled it over his head.

"You sure?"

"Aye, lass. No worries."

His stocking feet carried him to the kitchen where he restlessly dug through the cupboards, not looking for anything in particular until his fingers brushed a coveted treasure. A brick of chocolate. Traders from the southern reaches of Gondor rarely made their way so far north - especially these days. But last season a merchant stayed with Zefur and his family during her time in the Blue Mountains, and the chocolate brick was her gift of gratitude.
Without a second thought, Zefur filled the small kettle with milk and set it over the glowing embers in the fireplace. After stoking the coals, he set about shaving slivers of chocolate and dropping them into two mugs. Yes, two. For soon enough came the pad of little feet and a golden tangle of curls framing eyes puffy and red. Zefur spoke no words as his son climbed onto the bench next to him. Fíli hunched with his blanket pulled tight about his shoulders, waiting patiently. The kettle whistled softly, and Zefur removed it from the fireplace before the whistle grew to a full blown shriek. He poured half into Fíli’s mug and half into his own before arming himself and the boy with spoons.

Metal clinking on ceramic harmonized with the crackling fire, relaxing father and son. They sipped at their chocolate, taking comfort in each other's company. For the past four years this had been their ritual on the last night of summer. Each woke from the most unsettling dreams, but unlike Fíli who always dreamed the same thing, Zefur's nightmares evolved and worsened every year. The two exhaled together. Zefur reached over and rubbed soft circles over his son's back. Fíli sighed deeply, eyelids already drooping again.

"Thank you, Papa."

"You're welcome."

Zefur smiled, and Fíli snuggled into his side. Scooping him up and returning him to his bed, Zefur stayed as Fíli fell asleep. He ran his fingers through the boy's hair until his breathing grew deep and even. Dis found Zefur still there at dawn, arms curled protectively around his wee lad.

Ripping cloth.

Lowered voices.

The scuff of feet.

Coughing and groaning wounded.

Not a sound from Fíli. Sometimes his chest rose and fell. Other times - terrifying times - it didn't. Thorin clenched his fists and held his breath, biting down on his tongue. Willing his nephew to breathe.

"Don't take him yet," he begged hoarsely. "Not yet."

Then at last, Fíli would breathe.

Two weeks. Fourteen agonizing days since the battle. Thorin spent more than half of those days confined to a cot. The elf "physician" insisted that he needed to remain still, but Thorin told him in no uncertain terms that he could kiss his royal arse. What he needed was to be elsewhere. During Balin's visits at his bedside he learned of the battle's outcome. Although constantly assured that his nephews lived, after eleven days, three hours and thirteen minutes of bed rest, Thorin had enough. He forced himself to his feet in spite of Fallaner's insistence that he really should wait.

"Help me or stand aside, elf," he growled.

Fallaner sighed patiently and took Thorin's arm.

"This way, my lord."
Kíli dozed in the main hall with the rest of the wounded. His injuries no longer threatened his life, but he required heavy sedation to keep him still, lest he try to walk and tear the wound in his thigh open once more. Óin's meticulous stitching held the laceration neatly together, and the physician, knowing Kíli's willfulness, took precautions to prevent the tearing of his needlework. The lad lost enough blood already. He didn't need to lose more due to his own rash behavior. Thorin hissed and slumped onto a stool beside him, a hand pressed to his screaming torso.

"I'll leave you to it," Fallaner murmured. Óin shuffled over, and the elf nodded briefly to him before disappearing.

Kíli's eyes opened and focused on Thorin. A stupefied grin spread over his face before his eyes rolled back and the medicinal herbs claimed him once more. Thorin smiled back and brushed Kíli's hair from his forehead with trembling fingers. He pointed to Kíli's arm wrapped in a sling and shot a questioning look at Óin.

"Dislocated is all. Nothing broken."

"Good. Where's Fíli?"

Óin's brows pinched together, his eyes glistening. "You'd best follow me, laddie."

Thorin spent as much time as his body could handle with each of his nephews, though as the days wore on and still Fíli did not wake, he found himself straying from his bedside less and less often. Which is why - fourteen days, six hours and forty-seven minutes after the battle - Dwalin found Thorin slumped in the chair at Fíli's side, eyes wide and riveted on the boy's chest.

"Thorin..."

No response.

"Thorin," Dwalin said a bit louder, gripping his cousin's shoulder.

Thorin blinked, lifting bloodshot eyes. "What?"

"Kíli's asking for you."

Thorin glanced at Fíli, hesitating. "Will you...?"

"Aye, I'll stay with him."

A nod of thanks then Thorin grasped Dwalin's forearm, the latter helping the former to his feet. The distance to Kíli's cot was not great, but Thorin felt each step keenly from the pit of his stomach to his scalp. His wound ached terribly, pain pulsing along with his heart and jarring with every step. Kíli spotted him coming and raised his head. Thorin offered a tight smile.

"Alright?" Kíli asked.

"No," Thorin admitted and sank on the edge of his cot, "but it's not as bad as it was."

"And Fíli?"

Thorin sighed, "Resting."

Kíli frowned deeply, nostrils flaring and jaw muscles ticking. "Why does everyone keep saying that? Even Fallaner won't say more. Where is he? What aren't you telling me?"
Thorin pinched the bridge of his nose. "He's here, yet...he's not."

Kíli clenched his teeth tighter. "I don't understand."

"The elf's words, not mine. He lives, but he does not wake. Fallaner and Óin agree that they've done all they can. We must be patient."

"Take me to him."

"Kíli-"

"I NEED TO SEE HIM!"

Kíli's outburst cast silence over the hall, causing many heads to turn their way. Óin bustled over, laying aside his tray of medicines and supplies.

"What's this, now?"

Kíli said nothing, staring Thorin down. At last, the king sighed. "Óin, would you ask your assistants to move Kíli's cot into the other hall, please?"

"Thorin, I don't think..."

"Please."

The old one pressed his lips together, glancing from Kíli to Thorin. "Aye, I will."

"Thank you," Kíli exhaled.

Bandages swathed his brother's face and torso. Only Fíli's mouth and right eye were visible, the rest hidden in bloodied cloth, and his breath rattled low in his chest.

"Mahal," Kíli choked. "What happened?"

Dwalin glared at his fists as he recounted the skirmish following Kíli's rescue. When he finished, heavy silence settled over them all. Kíli roughly raked his knuckles across his eyes, dashing away the wetness blurring his vision.

"Is he going to die?" he asked flatly. No one answered, and Kíli searched unreadable expressions. "Is my brother going to die?"

"That," said Óin, "is up to him."

Kíli looked beseeching to Fallaner as the elf bent over Fíli, checking the bandages wrapped snugly around his torso.

"Is there nothing you can do?"

"I'm afraid that I've already done everything in my power, Kíli," Fallaner replied dolefully. "Master Óin speaks true. Your brother must find his own way back to us."

Cold, tangible dark.
It curls and drifts over Fíli's skin, guiding him forward. A million steps he trods and millions more before the deafening silence breaks. Two voices murmur somewhere in the inky blackness ahead, and his pace quickens. He wades through the dark, the voices growing clearer.

"You're sure?"

"Half a mo, Zefur, for Durin's sake! There are scores of names here, you know."

"Mind your tongue, Frerin. If Deathless hears you speaking that way-"

The second voice hums in irritation, "Yeah, yeah, I'll meet him in the sparring hall after dinner and settle it then."

"He'll hand you your arse, you idiot."

"Wouldn't be the first time." A pause, then, "Yes, I'm sure of it. He's not there. Honestly, Zefur."

All at once the dark rolls back like fog, depositing Fíli before a set of double doors so immense that they stretch forever upwards. One half of the monumental portal stands ajar, warm firelight filtering through the opening. Hundreds of thousands of voices clamor within, as jovial and rowdy as any dwarf could wish. Two blonde dwarves sit just outside, their hair flashing gold in the firelight. Both heads bow over a large tablet as they scan for the name Frerin insists isn't there. The dwarf on the left freezes as the other continues scanning.

His eyes lift slowly, still that sparkling blue, and his face is lined with laughter even without a smile creasing his face. He's not a day older than the last time Fíli saw him. The other dwarf notices his companion's change in mood and looks up.

"You're not on the list," Zefur whispers in awe.

Fíli blinks. "I'm not?"

"No, you're not," insists Frerin, whom Fíli realizes appears quite young and can't be more than fifty. "Not that it isn't wonderful to meet my own nephew, but you're early."

"Early?"

"Peace, Frerin," says Zefur. Frerin glances sidelong at him before turning back to Fíli.

"Right, sorry. Bit much, all this. I understand. So I'll shake your hand," which he does, "and we'll see you later, yeah?"

Fíli offers Frerin a bemused smile as the uncle he'd never met disappears through the open door. A roaring welcome issues from inside, and the festivities continue. Zefur and Fíli are alone now in the relative quiet outside, and all they can do is stare at each other.

"Will you look at you," Zefur chuckles at last, stepping forward to fold Fíli in a firm hug. "You did it."

"Da," Fíli sighs gustily. "Mahal, I've missed you."

"And I you, lad, but," here Zefur pulls back, holding Fíli at arm's length. "You mustn't linger."

"There's so much to tell you-"
"It's not your time, son. You have to return."

Fíli peers back at the darkness whence he came. It isn't inviting by any means, and he's so very
tired. "Can't I stay, Da?"

Zefur smiles sadly. "Oh, my son. I love you too much to keep you here. They need you, Fíli. My
brothers. Your mother and Kíli. Thorin. They're waiting for you, lad."

Fíli bows his head. "I don't know the way."

Zefur's eyes crinkle at the corners. "Come. I'll walk you home."

Fíli can't help it. He laughs.

"Now, then," says Zefur as he leads the way. "Tell me all about your adventures!"

"I thought you said he was getting better," Thorin growled.

"He is," Fallaner replied patiently.

"Then why doesn't he wake?"

Fallaner passed a hand over Fíli's face, eyelids fluttering shut. "Give him time."

"I wish you could have seen Mum's face!" Fíli gasps with laughter. "Kíli has never managed to
pull a plank as glorious as that since."

Zefur grins wistfully. "Is she happy?"

Fíli notes the bittersweet tone. He grins softly in return. "Aye. She talks about you often."

His father exhales slowly. "I miss her," he murmurs, eyes going hazy. "Though, I am more than
content to wait for her. I'd not wish death on her afore her time."

He trails off as a simple oaken door appears in the mist ahead, the runes of Fíli's name carved in
the wood.

"Well," Fíli says shakily, "I suppose this is me?"

"Aye, it is at that."

Fíli straightens, clearing his throat. "Good-bye, Da."

Zefur clears his own throat and pulls Fíli close. "No, son. Not good-bye."

The embrace is over before either is quite ready for it.

"Be seeing you, Da."

"Later rather than sooner, I hope," Zefur laughs as he fades into the misty darkness, back to the
other side.

"Aye," Fíli whispers into the silence. Pushing the door open, he steps into the light.
Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for your patience, kudos and kind words! The story's not quite finished yet. There's room for a little more.
Bilbo picked his way through rows of wounded. Though he spoke with Thorin once or thrice since the dwarf was well enough to hold a conversation, each time he lacked the courage to do what he must. He had to give Thorin the Arkenstone. It weighed heavily in his pocket, making him tremble and sweat whenever he thought of it. The stone belonged to the king, but still Bilbo hesitated. Surely possessing it would not affect Thorin now that he'd shaken free of his madness?

For days, the hobbit fought with himself over the matter. Fíli had believed in Thorin. Thorin came back. This was promising, yet what if Thorin was not completely free? After all, madness is not something instantly cured. Bilbo had a feeling that Thorin's path to recovery was lengthy indeed, which stayed his hand the first two times he tried to relinquish the stone. In the end, it was on behalf of Fíli that Bilbo gathered his courage and resolve. Weeks prior, before leaving Thranduil's camp, the dwarf prince instructed the hobbit to keep the stone hidden unless his plan succeeded. If Thorin was restored, Bilbo must return the symbol of power to the dwarves of Erebor.

And there, a few feet away hunched the restored Oakenshield, head in his hands as Fíli continued to sleep. Pull yourself together, Baggins. Bilbo nodded crisply and cleared his throat. Thorin raised his head, eyes softening.

"What can I do for you, Bilbo?"

"I would have a word with you, if I may."

Thorin's brows lifted, his hand sweeping a gesture of consent.

"I...he asked me to give you this," Bilbo said, nodding toward Fíli. He pulled the wrapped stone from his pocket, hand shaking as the weight shifted to Thorin's palm. Please don't let this have been a mistake, he thought desperately.

Thorin dared not breathe as he unwrapped what he knew in his heart to be the Arkenstone. His lips parted in awe, his eyes not quite believing in spite of themselves. More beautiful than he remembered, it glowed from within. A thousand colors exploded in prisms of light.

"Thorin?"

He blinked. Bilbo watched him fearfully, and Thorin's heart sank a little. Bilbo was right to worry what this stone might do to him, but Thorin glanced at his nephew, chest aching. To think what might have happened had he not come to his senses. He wrapped the stone back up and set it on the cot near Fíli's hand. Bilbo relaxed considerably, and Thorin offered him a warm smile.

"You have done us a great service, Bilbo. Many in fact, and I owe you an apology."

"I'm sorry?" Bilbo stammered, and Thorin leaned forward, his face serious.

"No, Bilbo. I'm sorry. I treated you as an outsider. I begrudged you your safe and comfortable life. I did not believe you had any place among us. In my madness, I believed you guilty of stealing
Bilbo seemed to shrink a little under each word. Thorin wasn't finished.

"But I was wrong."

Bilbo straightened in surprise.

Thorin smiled. "What a remarkable creature you are, Bilbo. For a hobbit who has never left the Shire, you proved to be one of the most valuable members of our Company, saved us on more than one occasion and had the courage to defy a mad king to help bring peace."

The hobbit huffed a sigh and shifted from foot to foot, not quite sure how to react.

"Think nothing of it," he stammered.

"I'll do no such thing," Thorin replied firmly. "Think you that such behavior has so little value? The amount of loyalty and honor you have demonstrated rivals that of any dwarf in the Company. You had many opportunities to turn around and go back to your life, and I'm ashamed to say I would not have been sorry to see you go. I never understood your love for the elves, and how many times could you have chosen that love over loyalty to us? Life among them surely would have been less difficult for you. You have shown me that hobbits are most hardy folk - something I never believed possible. You fought not for your share of the treasure. Instead, you selflessly helped take back a home that is not your own. And I think," Thorin's gaze drifted to Fíli's battered form as he finished, "that if more people valued home above gold, this world would be a merrier place."

Bilbo's nose twitched suspiciously, but if Thorin noticed, he had the grace to overlook it.

"No amount of wealth would be enough to repay the debt we owe you, Bilbo Baggins," Thorin continued. "But I offer you friendship and my everlasting gratitude."

The hobbit gaped as the dwarf king extended a hand. He took it, finding his voice again as they shook hands.

"I most heartily accept both."

Fíli later recalled waking repeatedly only to collapse back into sleep's embrace. Hovering faces appeared - each a welcome sight after the horror and uncertainty of battle. A voice hummed ballads and cheerful tunes alike, each song weaving into dreams unmarred by terror or death. Bits of food and medicine found their way between his cracked lips. Gentle hands changed the dressing on his wounds, and cool compresses brought relief to burning flesh. Ancient words filled his ears, some in the language of his fathers, others in a tongue he failed to recognize.

Heavy. Head thick with pain and exhaustion, limbs buzzing like nests of hornets. Unable to stir. How long? How many days had he slept away? Was it weeks?

No control...no command of his own body.

Open! he demanded of his eyes.

Wake! he begged his mind as hazy, pleasant dreams beckoned him back the furthest reaches of slumber.
"Peace," soothed a voice. Cool fingers pressed on his brow, chasing the fire from his blood. "I think we can agree you've slept long enough, Master Dwarf."

Gone. Whatever unbreachable wall bound him in slumber fell away, and at long last Fíli woke. His eyesight blurred, colors and shapes melting together and spinning away. He squinted, forcing his vision to focus. Torches burned low nearby. Fíli winced as stinging pain flared along the left side of his face. Groaning, he tried to lift a hand to his cheek and found it trapped beneath something heavy. Turning his head proved to be a terrible idea, but he spied a mess of dark hair.

"Kíli," he murmured in recognition.

"Fíli?" Thorin leaned into view from his other side, eyes red. "You gave us quite the scare."


Thorin noted the rawness and reached for a flask of water, holding it to Fíli's lips. "Drink."

The latter did so without complaint. After a few careful sips, Thorin eased the flask away and cleared his throat. Fíli searched his uncle's face. A storm gathered in his expression, building pressure behind his eyes and filling them with moisture. Thorin inhaled deeply and shook his head.

"I have made countless mistakes in my time. But none were so grave as my actions towards you."

"Uncle, you don't have to-"
Thorin held up a hand. Fíli closed his mouth.

"I do, Fíli, for both our sakes. No amount of words or deeds can eliminate or repair the damage I have caused..."

He trailed off, eloquence eluding him as guilt and grief squeezed his throat with steely hands. He attempted to clear it once. Twice. Fíli waited, a frown folding his brow. Recovering his voice, Thorin continued.

"I betrayed your trust, spurning your loyalty and morals, and I disregarded everything I taught you for the sake of something which proved to be as worthless as a broken promise. I do not deserve such compassion as you have shown me. I am not worthy of your loyalty nor that of our people."

Fíli held his breath as Thorin pulled a fist-sized pouch from the folds of his tunic and tipped the precious object inside onto his nephew's hand. The Arkenstone shone with the light of a thousand stars, its depths as mystifying and wonderous as the heavens themselves.

"You are the leader our kin deserve," Thorin said.

The bedridden prince stared at his uncle. Thorin's eyes bore none of the obsession which ruled him only a short time ago. He found only respect, love and understanding. Fíli smiled and pressed the stone back into Thorin's hands.

"Perhaps one day that will be true," he replied, "but I still have much to learn, Uncle. Today our people need Thorin Oakenshield."

Thorin bowed, pressing his forehead to Fíli's. "I do not deserve your forgiveness," he insisted.

"I don't think forgiveness is something to be earned," Fíli whispered, already worn out and drifting off. "It is a gift."

A hand smoothed the hair away from his forehead, and a hushed 'thank you' was the last he heard before falling asleep.

"Nearly there, my lady! Dale lies just ahead, and beyond her rises Erebor."

Dís froze, shading her eyes against a winter sun as she followed the line of Elrohir's pointing finger. After a lifetime of waiting, she stood parted from her homeland by naught but the crest of a hill. Her feet refused to carry her a step further, sending roots deep in the ground. Her heart quailed, terrified of what she would see.

Weeks earlier, word reached Rivendell of the great battle before the gates of Erebor. Unfortunately, the message failed to detail the news Dís desperately needed to hear. What of her family? Victory belonged to the dwarves, but the raven who delivered the message did so with great formality and could not answer her questions concerning her sons. Elrond understood her unease and arranged for an escort to accompany her to the mountain. The elf lord's twin sons volunteered to guide her, and she found it impossible to refuse.

The journey was remarkably uneventful and passed quickly. Rest and meals were few and farther between the nearer the mountain loomed, and the Company would later gape at Dís' account of having passed through Mirkwood in less than a fortnight. Perhaps Elrohir and Elladan's presence kept the darkness and disease of the forest at bay, though she could never say for certain.
Her thoughts were for her sons, leaving little to no room at all for the landscape around her until she stood at last on the hill overlooking Dale. Gathering courage and hiking her pack higher on her shoulder, Dís' feet finally carried her over the hill.

Kíli grimaced and rubbed the stiffness from his thigh. Gritting his teeth, he limped on. The front gate wasn't far from Óin's makeshift infirmary, but Kíli's leg pained him all the same. It didn't matter. He'd suffer the same and worse a thousand times over for his mother's sake. He spotted Elrond's sons first. They were hard to miss, to be honest, but he heard Dís before he saw her, her voice carrying over the other dwarves as she greeted relatives she hadn't seen in decades.

"Mum!"

She froze mid sentence, eyes locking with his. Kíli all but fell into her arms, breathing in the familiar smells caught in her curls. She sighed, holding him close and running a hand through his hair. Laughter caught in her throat, overwhelmed as she was.

"Welcome home," he murmured.

She exhaled shakily and shuddered as she contemplated how empty Erebor would be if the future Elrond had seen come to pass. Pushing the awful thought away, Dís took Kíli's hand in her own. He read the unspoken question in her eyes and turned on his heel, leading her by the hand to where his brother waited.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the four month delay! Trust me, it was completely unexpected. I honestly thought I would have had this story wrapped up before February, but my sister's wedding was this past weekend, and the preparations for that took precedent throughout the last few months, along with the time spent moving our belongings to my family's new house. There's one more chapter to go, but I want to thank you all right now for sticking with me. You're all wonderful, and I appreciate you so much. Thank you!
Two summers and as many journeys west later, Dís and her sons lead the last of their kin home. They made quite a sight - a considerably large caravan comprised of scores of families and their belongings stretching as far as the eye could see. Making camp each night may very well have been a nightmare if not for the unequivocal cooperation of the Blue Mountain Longbeards’ many clan leaders. Spirits remained high in spite of the long journey, and while the dwarves skirted the Shire, Dís assured her sons that their vast company could weather a few days just fine without them.

Bilbo being beyond pleased to see his friends, Fíli and Kíli found they did not regret leaving the Company for a short while. Their time in Bag End was merry, full of conversation regarding the progress of Erebor’s restoration and that of Dale, along with her relations with the former Lake-town folk and the elves of Mirkwood. Many amusing tales were shared with the hobbit concerning the members of Thorin's Company, and though not all tidings were happy, it was so very good to hear how everyone was getting on. The hobbit regaled the dwarves with the story of reclaiming his home upon his return from the Lonely Mountain - the citizens of Hobbiton and the West Farthing itself believing the good Mr. Baggins to have disappeared for good. Fíli and Kíli nearly split their sides with laughter over his descriptions of various relatives attempting to make off with his belongings in creative and ridiculous ways. Bilbo invited the lads to eat him out of house and home, but they turned him down with a laugh and said they were rounding out quite nicely as it was, thank you. Fíli and Kíli had their fiddles with them this time, and Bilbo was treated to wonderful music with the benefit of not one of his dishes soaring through the air. Parting was
bittersweet, as most partings tend to be, with invitations extended by both parties to visit soon.

Nearing Rivendell, the dwarves were invited to make camp just outside the valley where the elves aided nightly watches and provided what supplies they were able. Fíli and Kíli paid a much awaited visit to Elrond and his sons, much to the delight of young Estel. His expression dropped when he saw the white scars on Fíli's face and the clouded blue of his left eye, but Fíli smiled and assured the boy that the loss of an eye was but a small sacrifice for a greater good. Kíli's heart twisted, knowing everything his brother had suffered besides the loss of his eye. A small sacrifice indeed, considering what could have been.

Dís planned for the caravan to rest outside Rivendell for a week before making the trek over the Mountains. As the week drew to a close, Kíli grew more pensive. He took to wandering Rivendell alone, and Fíli couldn't help but feel that change hung in the air. The day before the dwarves broke camp, he found his brother strapping his pack to Daisy's saddle. Kíli froze, sensing he wasn't alone.

"Off scouting?" Fíli asked, though he knew he was wrong.

"Of sorts," Kíli murmured with a half smile.

Fíli peered at his brother, recalling Kíli's increasing restlessness over the past two years. He sighed.

"You're not going back, are you?"

"Nah," Kíli said, lopsided grin fading. "You knew the whole time, didn't you?"

Fíli shrugged. "Suspected, more like. You've been more broody than usual. You've been itching to get out of Erebor for months."

Kíli chuckled. "You know me too well."

"You're probably right," Fíli smiled.

"It's just that-"

Kíli sighed and rolled his eyes to the sky, searching for words to explain his feelings. "All our lives we've been focused on reclaiming Erebor. Now that we have, I feel...I dunno, I just feel-"

"Empty."

"Yeah. I mean, according to fate we were meant to die, but we didn't. My life is a blank slate now. I could go anywhere, do anything-"

"So do it," Fíli said. His heart was heavy, but he meant it. "Go have an adventure, Kíli. Explore. Be reckless. Make your own choices."

Kíli stared at him, clearly wrestling within himself. Fíli understood, at least in part. It was a big step, a huge change. His way of life would alter completely, but then it had already done that anyway. Though Kíli wanted to break free of the mold he'd been groomed for, going it alone would be hard. Fíli had always had his back and vice versa. To walk his own path without the peace of mind that someone was watching his back was a pretty scary notion.

"What about you?" Kíli finally asked.

"Me?" Fíli laughed. "I think I've had enough excitement to last a lifetime. I'll admit, Erebor
wasn't all we'd dreamed it would be, and I was disappointed at first. But...over the last couple years I've grown to appreciate her in ways I never thought I could. It's not just the city itself. It's the people. As more of our kin come to the mountain, she's becoming a thriving community and life has transformed her."

Kíli watched light grow in Fíli's eyes as he spoke, and he smiled. "You'll be a great leader, you know?"

Fíli's expression softened, and he picked at his nails. "I'll do my best."

Kíli clapped him on the shoulder. "That's all I'll take."

Fíli sobered, though his smile remained. "Good luck, little brother."

They clasped forearms before hugging fiercely. Kíli broke away, rubbing at his eyes as he swung into Daisy's saddle.

"Hey," Fíli said, gripping his brother's boot. "Don't be a stranger, yeah?"

"Promise," Kíli laughed and clicked sharply, encouraging Daisy to a brisk canter.

Fíli watched him ride away, the image burning into his mind. He grinned as Kíli crowed in excitement.

"Have fun," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for reading!
The past year and a half has been one wild ride, and I've made so many friends because of this story. It's been a blast, and I'm so grateful for you all. Thank you for the kudos and wonderful feedback both on tumblr and here. You're fantastic, and I love you.

And a great big thank you to hattedhedgehog (tumblr) for providing the inspiration of Fíli's scars with her stunning piece of artwork, "Golden Lion of Erebor". Thanks again for letting me borrow your idea!

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