Of Adapting and Adopting

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Not Rated</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>The Hobbit - All Media Types, The Hobbit - J. R. R. Tolkien, The Hobbit (Jackson Movies)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
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Of Adapting and Adopting

by violentgril

Summary

Bilbo never got along with the other hobbits after his parents died, and is one of the rare hobbits to be completely disowned by his jealous kin. When he joins Thorin's Company on their mad quest, he finds himself welcoming the sense of inclusion that accompanies this band of dwarves (some more welcoming than others). What he doesn't expect is the ancient occurrence of Adapting to take effect - in which one cast out from their own race adapts to fit the race that has accepted them! Now, not only must Bilbo face up to orcs and dragons, he must also come to terms with his new family and learn what it means to be a dwarf, and a Durin no less.

Notes

So this is a story that came about when I was trying to make myself feel better about everything that happens at the end of The Hobbit. I'm generally all about Bagginshield but I'm also a huge sucker for fics about adoptions/families of choice and I love alllll the fluff and h/c, so there will be no pairings in this fic. I'll be following some movie canon, some book canon, and then no canon at all, as it fits into my story. Also, regarding some facts about dwarves, such as when they come of age, I am generally relying on fanon as it suits me. Any comments or feedback about that or anything else is very much appreciated.
• Inspired by Young and Sweet, Only 50 by Propriety is not a priority
The night after Bilbo Baggins saved the life of Thorin Oakenshield, King Under the Mountain, was much like any other. The dwarves and Bilbo gathered around the campfire and makeshift camp they had set up on the Carrock, eating rabbit stew cooked up by Bombur and relishing both the taste and the brief triumph of glory against the orcs, no matter how brief.

The difference in this night, however, lay in the fact that Bilbo finally felt, for once, a sense of belonging. He had found himself growing more and more fond of the group of dwarves as they traveled along, often sharing kind words with Balin, jokes with Bofur, and trading cooking tips with Bombur. But more than anyone, he felt himself growing ever more fond of the line of Durin. This barely made sense to Bilbo himself, for although Fili and Kili, rapscallions through and through, were easily lovable as all young lads are, Bilbo found most of his thoughts drawn to their reclusive leader.

And now, mere hours since Thorin’s abrupt shift in attitude towards him, Bilbo felt pride and warmth continually coursing through him. The hug that Thorin gave him when the eagles first set them down was not something he would ever forget. Indeed, he found himself wishing more than anything for Thorin to hug him again; he had scarcely ever felt more wanted, more comforted, than he had in Thorin’s embrace.

As the merry gathering of dwarves grew rowdier as the evening went on, Bilbo basked in the feeling of inclusion. All tension from earlier in the quest completely evaporated as even Thorin grinned and joined in their jests.

Gandalf sat back against the mountainside where they had made camp, puffing his pipe and examining the company. It seemed that the last stubborn dwarf had finally accepted Bilbo into the fold, as he had always hoped would happen. Thorin sat near the hobbit, chatting with Dwalin and smiling fondly as his nephews teased and taunted Bilbo with stories and jokes. Bilbo too looked to be enjoying himself far more than he had so far on the quest. The rest of the company chatted and teased each other, all enjoying their small respite.

A shout brought Gandalf’s attention back to Bilbo and the young dwarves sitting with him. Kili had leapt to his feet, a look of shock on his face, while Fili wrapped his arms around the bewildered hobbit. The rest of the company immediately fell silent.

“What seems to be the matter?” Gandalf said, rising and picking up his staff, which had been leaning against the mountain face.

Fili gripped Bilbo tighter, eliciting a squeak from the hobbit, but it was Kili who spoke first.

“He’s Adapting!” the young dwarf exclaimed. “Look at him! Uncle, look!”

The others all made noises of confusion and shock. Thorin rose quickly and knelt in front of Bilbo, gently prying him out of Fili’s grip.

“Do you see his hair, Uncle? It’s thicker, I know it is!” Kili insisted.

“And he understood me when I made a joke in Khuzdul!” Fili added. “And I didn’t explain, he just laughed!”

“He was complaining earlier about eating greens!”
“He said his feet were hurting and they kept getting cut, and that doesn’t happen to hobbits, their feet are too tough!”

“Uncle-“

“Can’t you tell-“

“Do you really think-“

“Enough!” Gandalf tapped his staff twice on the ground and all voices subsided immediately.

“Burglar,” Thorin said, his steady voice laced with urgency, a hand grasping Bilbo’s chin. “Bilbo. Look at me. Where are your parents? What of your family?”

“My family? Why?” Bilbo stared, eyes wide in confusion and not a small bit of fear. “What are you talking about? Why is everyone acting so strangely?”

“Your family, Bilbo. Answer me,” Thorin commanded.

Bilbo shook slightly in the king’s grasp, but didn’t dare disobey. “My parents are dead, if you must know. I’ve no siblings nor any close relations, although many in the Shire are still considered my kin.”

“But no one close to you?” Thorin pressed, his gaze fervent.

“But not really, not anymore,” Bilbo said, his confusion tinged with a hint of bitterness.

“See, he’s Adapting, like I said!” Kili pointed wildly, bouncing on his feet.

“Adapting? What’s that?” Bilbo asked, panicked.

“Hobbits rarely leave the Shire, and are even more rarely orphaned or left without kin. I daresay this is an entirely new concept to our poor burglar,” Gandalf said to the group at large. “Would you care to explain, Thorin?”

The king wiped a hand across his face and resumed his intent staring into Bilbo’s face, urging the hobbit to focus back on him.

“It’s like this,” he began, his voice wavering only slightly. “In every race, even yours, there lies an ability to Adapt when necessary. To change oneself when circumstances are dire enough, when one has nowhere else to turn to. A man who has been abandoned by his kin and found by elves would begin to take on elvish features – not so much in face, but in his own creation. An elf whose heart has been broken may forsake his long life and live as a man. An orphaned dwarf with no kin may also change himself for whatever race takes him in. This is not done consciously, or even purposefully. It is merely survival. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” Bilbo said slowly. “And you think the same is happening to me? I’m turning into a – a dwarf?”

“No, you’re Adapting,” Thorin stressed. “You’ll not change how you look, with the exception of small features to ensure your survival, but rather you’ll change what makes you a Halfling deep inside. Your lifespan will grow to match that of a dwarf. Your appetite, your sense of home, of kin. Your interests may change slightly too. Whatever must happen to ensure your survival with the race that has taken you in.”
“But…have you taken me in, then? I must say, I don’t remember renouncing my own race, nor do I
remember being accepted into yours!” Bilbo exclaimed, his voice slightly hysterical. “I was living
quite comfortably on my own, thank you very much!”

“My dear Bilbo,” Gandalf drew Bilbo’s attention away from Thorin. “I am so sorry to have put you
unwittingly into this position, but if you have started to Adapt, then truly you were not surviving so
well as you think. I had no idea you were so alone. I would guess that some of your kin have cast
you out, if it has escalated to this. You must listen to me when I tell you that you will be so much
better off with your new family."

“New family?!” Bilbo looked more confused than ever. He felt a rushing sensation inside his mind, a
great noise that seemed to eliminate all other sounds. It was hard to concentrate, to hear what the
dwarves around him seemed to be saying…he couldn’t tell if they were still talking to him…what in
the world could they possibly mean, a new family? Him, a dwarf? Preposterous…he was a hobbit,
through and through, and nothing could change that, this was utterly ridiculous…!

“Bilbo!” A deep voice called him back to the present. “Look at me, Bilbo!”

Bilbo acquiesced, his wide and stunned eyes turning once again to Thorin, who had grasped his chin
again and was forcing him to look into his earnest expression. It was strange, Bilbo had never seen
Thorin look so desperate, so open, not even when he was thanking Bilbo for fighting Azog. It
seemed that this strange new occurrence, of all things, was more important to the king. With some
degree of difficulty, Bilbo tried to focus on Thorin’s words.

“I accepted you, Bilbo,” Thorin was saying, very gravely. “After what you did for me standing up to
Azog. I did not know I was accepting you as family, but that changes nothing. I would be honored to
call you my kin. You can rest assured that you will be taken care of as one of our own.”

A cheer went up among the dwarrows, led by Fili and Kili. Bilbo smiled shakily in return, his head
still reeling from the conversation. He couldn’t seem to find the words to express what he was
feeling, and when he finally did they poured from his mouth in a rush that he couldn’t stop.

“It is true that my own kin have disowned me,” he began, unsteady and quiet. “Some of them dearly
wanted my property and disliked my parents, especially my mother, her being a Took and all.” He
paused and took a deep breath. “I…I had not been feeling well at all, these past few years, and I
didn’t know why. I’ve felt better every day out here with you all, on this quest, but I had no idea, no
idea whatsoever…I don’t want to impose, or force myself into your family, Thorin. I wish no
consternation or difficulties upon you because of this.”

“Nonsense! He already accepted you, cousin!” Kili cried, grabbing Bilbo’s hands in his own.

“Cousin?” asked Bilbo, his eyes wide.

“Aye, as I said, I would be honored to have you as my kin, Bilbo,” Thorin said warmly. “There is a
small matter, however. How old are you?”

“Why, fifty,” Bilbo answered.

“Fifty?!” shouted Fili.

“Oh, Mahal,” Dwalin muttered.

Ori looked about to cry. The rest of the company stared on in comical disbelief. Fili and Kili clutched
each other, and Thorin’s face turned briefly dark before he sighed and moved to sit beside Bilbo.
“What’s wrong? Fifty is a perfectly respectable age for a hobbit!” said Bilbo, rather affronted at their reaction. He had quite enough confusion for one day, and confound these dwarves if they couldn’t just say what they meant!

“Your lifespan will change to match our own, as I said before,” Thorin reminded. “But your age won’t change.”

“We live near 250 years, sometimes more!” Kili said.


“Seventy?!” Bilbo’s mouth dropped open.

Thorin stared at him solemnly. “There’s nothing for it. You are to be Adapted and adopted as my son.” He tugged Bilbo into his arms, cradling the small Halfling in his lap. His grip was tight, but not painful, and Bilbo soon found himself relaxing into the dwarf’s large, warm body. He was reminded of the hug Thorin gave him earlier that day, and couldn’t stop the small voice in his head that whispered, now you can have this all the time…

After much too short a time, Thorin released him, and Bilbo found he was sniffling slightly. He immediately tried to stifle it, to no avail.

“Aww!” Fili and Kili cried in tandem, wrapping themselves around their uncle and the hobbit. Bilbo liked their embrace no less than Thorin’s, and he felt a kinship he hadn’t experienced in years, not since he was but a child.

Once they released him, he looked around, surrounded by his new family, and all the dwarves of the Company that he had come to think as family. Nervously, he cleared his throat. “I do have a few questions, if I can.”

“Of course. We shall answer them as best we can, and what I might not know can fall to Balin or Gandalf,” Thorin said.

“All right, well, I guess what I want to know is, if I am not yet of age by dwarf consideration, will I become less…mature? By hobbit standards, I’m comfortably middle-aged,” Bilbo began.

“You won’t entirely revert to tweenhood, if that’s what worries you,” Gandalf replied. “But you will begin to act more or less like one younger than yourself. More reckless, for example. But I believe we have seen that already,” he finished, his eyes twinkling.

Bilbo ducked his head, his mind immediately conjuring up images of talking back to trolls, running from orcs, throwing himself in front of Thorin’s body in a meager attempt to protect him...

Kili grabbed Bilbo by the shoulders and slid himself close, so that Bilbo was wedged between Thorin and the younger dwarf. “I’m not the youngest anymore!” He said excitedly. “I’m 77 and Fee is 82! We’re both of age and you’re not, little cousin!”

“I’m not little!” Bilbo said so indignantly that the other dwarrows laughed.

“Sure you’re not, my son,” Thorin patted him on the head.

Bilbo looked up at him and suddenly felt somber. “You truly mean for me to be your son?”

“Of course,” Thorin nodded, peering down at him. “I accepted you, and as you are not of age, you need a guardian, Bilbo, son of Thorin, son of Thrain.”
“I have a father again?” Bilbo’s lip quivered, much to his dismay.

“Oh, laddie,” Balin sighed sadly.

“The poor thing!” Dori cried, clutching his brothers.

“Yes, and I have a son at last,” Thorin said. Bilbo wrapped his arms around Thorin who responded in kind, and the others sighed to see their embrace.

At long last, Bilbo pulled away, his eyes red. His back straightened and he quickly looked to Thorin. “But, I don’t have to ever be king, right? You wouldn’t take that away from Fili!”

“Do not worry, little one. Fili is next in line as king, and then Kili,” Thorin reassured him. “I have made them my heirs and nothing can change that. Adaptings don’t count for royal succession anyway, or else many would try to force such an occurrence. But if something were to happen to me before you come of age, Fili will step in as your guardian and my heir.” Thorin looked over to his nephew, who sat immediately to Kili’s right. “Do you understand and accept this responsibility, Fili?”

“Of course!” Fili nodded eagerly.

“We’ll take good care of our baby cousin, Uncle,” Kili agreed, grasping Bilbo’s face in his hands. “Isn’t that right, little Bili?”

“Bili?” Bilbo asked dazedly.

“Oh yes,” Kili said with mock seriousness. “Bilbo isn’t a proper dwarf name, but Bili is, and it sounds like ours!”

“Do you like it?” Fili asked hopefully.

Bilbo’s face broke into a grin. “I really do.”

Another cheer went up around the camp, and Bilbo blushed contentedly.

“All right, it’s grown quite late,” Thorin said, ushering in silence to the camp. “I believe it’s time for young dwarrows to sleep. We march early tomorrow.”

“Yes, uncle!” chorused Fili and Kili.

“Yes, father,” Bilbo said shyly. It sounded strange on his tongue, and for a brief moment he thought back to his real father, his first father, now only a portrait above his mantel in his home long deserted. A sense of guilt ran through him but evaporated as quickly as it had come. His real father, Bungo, would never hold such happiness against his son, would he? And besides, Bungo was long buried, was spending the rest of his days in Yavanna’s garden with his mother, and hadn’t both of them wished him all the happiness in the world before they passed on? No, he didn’t need to feel guilty. This was a good thing. And he couldn’t deny the yearning in his heart for family, a feeling he hadn’t fully acknowledged in many years, not since his parents passed and he drifted apart from his neighbors in his grief.

Well, if it was one thing his mixed heritage had given him, it was a sense of confidence in his own instincts. He felt his mother, bless her soul, would approve.

Thorin smiled down at him and gave him one last squeeze. “Sleep near your cousins tonight, I’ll be over after I finish first watch.”
Bilbo nodded and turned to catch up to Fili and Kili, who were already dragging his bedroll over to theirs and fussing over who got to sleep closest to the dying fire.

Bilbo settled into his blanket directly between the warm bodies of his new cousins. Fili, having one the brief argument with his brother, lay down to Bilbo’s right and flung an arm over Bilbo’s stomach. “Good night, cousin!” Fili smiled.

“Good night, cousin,” Bilbo said.

Kili plopped down on Bilbo’s other side and snuggled up close to him, placing his own arm over the smaller creature. “Good night, Bili!”

“Good night, Kili,” Bilbo said with a yawn.

As he drifted off to sleep, he felt warmer than he had in years, both inside and out.
Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Thorin thinks about the changes in his life and the Company finds themselves on the run again.

Chapter Notes

Hello! Thank you all SO, SO much for the great responses! I love all your comments and kudos, and check them very often. This chapter is a bit shorter than the last, but I’ll admit some of it is just transition until we can get to the FUN stuff. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The other dwarrows settled into their bedrolls as well, some still muttering and gossiping amongst themselves. Ever the mother hen, Dori kept shooting soft glances over at the small pile made up of Fili, Kili, and, now, Bili. Thorin called to Bofur to take second watch and Gloin to take third, and for once all agreed without complaining.

Thorin gave one last look at his family before settling down on the edge of the light cast by the fire, staring out into the darkness surrounding the camp. Gandalf approached and placed a hand on his shoulder. “You have done a great thing today, Thorin Oakenshield. I am quite certain you won’t regret it.”

Gandalf squeezed his shoulder once and then walked several paces into the darkness, puffing quietly on his pipe. Soon, a shuffling sound from behind alerted Thorin to the arrival of Balin, who sat down next to him with a muffled groan.

“I daresay this is one of the strangest turn of events that we have ever encountered, old friend,” Balin said, glancing at Thorin with a small smile.

Thorin smiled as well. “But truly one of the most welcome. I know I doubted him from the beginning, but my feelings towards him have been changing for a while, and now I understand that the Adapting was making a place for him in my heart.”

“Aye, I think young Bili isn’t the only one who needed a bit of saving. I’ve seen how you are with him. Even when others thought you gruff, you were merely worried for him, weren’t you?” Balin asked.

“And even I didn’t fully realize how much. But now I understand,” Thorin agreed.

He looked off into the darkness, contemplating the day’s events. After a few silent moments he turned back to the older dwarf, his demeanor grave. “This quest is no place for an underage dwarf, Balin. It’s bad enough I allowed Fili and Kili along, and Dis barely accepted that. How am I to look after a fifty-year-old? What if he gets hurt?”
The sudden panic in his eyes was desperate and raw. Balin immediately placed a calming hand on his shoulder. “You don’t have to do this alone, you know,” Balin said. “The rest of us will help you. We’re all partial to the lad, and we all know the pressures of raising a dwarfling, even those of us without children.”

Thorin returned the smile, the panicking receding as quickly as it came. “I don’t know what I’d do without you, old friend.”

They sat in companionable silence for a few minutes longer. When no more of Thorin’s fears became apparent, Balin stood and stretched his limbs before retiring to his bedroll next to Dwalin.

About an hour into Thorin’s watch, Gandalf returned from his distant spot and took a seat next to the king. Thorin kept his stoic and watchful gaze turned toward the dark shadows, and Gandalf spared a glance at each dwarf in turn, idly noting the way they all curled up in familial groups. Fili and Kili were no longer lying next to their new cousin, but more on top of him, all three curled around each other in a content pile of limbs and hair. It warmed Gandalf’s heart.

Finally, Thorin broke the silence. “I would accuse you of grand schemes if I wasn’t so grateful for how this turned out, wizard.”

“Even I can’t be credited for this,” Gandalf shook his head. “I’ll confess I was hoping to do some good for Belladonna Took’s son, but I had no idea he was in such poor condition. I’m thrilled and grateful just as you are. I believe this is just what both of you need.” He looked at Thorin, eyebrows raised and tone serious. “You’ve always felt the weight of your responsibilities, Thorin, and so far you have gained nothing in return. Taking care of your own son will provide more responsibility than you’ve ever shouldered, but I think he will also bring you untold happiness.”

“Aye. He is worth it,” Thorin agreed, with stout resolve.

The rest of Thorin’s watch continued uneventfully, with Gandalf eventually retiring to sleep as well. When Thorin went to lay down, he spread his bedroll out next to the pile of young dwarrows, and smiled when he saw Bilbo’s face turned towards his. Thorin lay on his side, watching Bilbo breathe until he too fell asleep.

When Bilbo woke up the next morning, it was to Thorin shaking him gently, a fond smile on his usually stern face. Bilbo noted that Kili had rolled over him in the night and was lying mostly on top of Fili. Bilbo untangled himself with Thorin’s help and stood up.

“I thought you might like some breakfast before the other young ones destroy it all,” Thorin said quietly, leading Bilbo to the fire where a sleepy Bombur was just finishing up a fry-up, a rare treat of a hare caught the evening before by Bifur as they had made camp. The rest, of course, was the usual grits and berries, but if he got to share breakfast with Thorin, Bilbo found he didn’t mind at all.

Soon, everyone was up and packing, and Thorin sent Dwalin out to scout ahead. The warrior returned soon, a darkened look on his face.

“Orcs are coming. I can see them far off. We have time, but we must leave soon,” Dwalin reported, grabbing up what was left of his gear.

Not all of their packs had survived the journey to Goblin Town, and Bilbo found himself with little to carry. He offered to help various other dwarves, but each one declined. He wasn’t sure if he felt useless or relieved, perhaps a bit of both, and was rather frustrated by the time everyone was ready to
“Bili, come here!” Thorin called.

Bilbo trotted over. “I don’t have a pack left, just my little sword.” And his ring, but he wasn’t quite sure if he should bring that up yet. “Isn’t there anything I could carry?”

Thorin smiled. “I think we have it handled, little one. But I want you to remain up here with me. We’ll be moving quickly and I want to keep an eye on you.”

“Yes, father,” Bilbo said, blushing when Thorin smiled down at him.

“Thorin, we must go,” Dwalin growled, looking out into the distance.

Thorin nodded and lead the Company away. They moved quickly, and all too soon Bilbo felt himself gasping for breath. He pressed on, doing his best to stay up with Thorin. Each time he fell back, a different dwarf would grip him by the shoulders and propel him forward until he was on Thorin’s heels again.

That cold sense of fear that Bilbo had become intimately familiar with was creeping up through his stomach and into his heart, although his head was ruled by adrenaline. He knew they had plenty of ground between them and the Orcs, but he kept imagining Azog catching up to them and shivered at the thought.

Eventually, they came to a halt, Bilbo depositing himself immediately on the ground and breathing heavily. Thorin offered him his waterskin, and Bilbo drank deeply.

Thorin stared at him, concern marring his features. He turned to the others. “I’m not sure we can keep up this pace.”

“I know of somebody who might harbor us,” Gandalf said. “A very great person. You must all be very polite when I introduce you. I shall introduce you slowly, two by two, I think; and you must be careful not to annoy him, or heaven knows what will happen. He can be appalling when he is angry, though he is kind enough if humored. Still I warn you he gets angry easily.”

Thorin looked suspiciously at the wizard. “Are you certain this is wise? Couldn’t you find someone more easy-tempered?”

“No I could not!” Gandalf said, rather crossly. “His name is Beorn, and he is a skin-changer. He will provide adequate protection from the Orcs that pursue us. With the right persuasion, he may even provide us with more supplies.”

Gandalf spared a small wink towards Bilbo, who was left to wonder what sort of persuasion the wizard had in mind.

Distantly, they heard the howling of a warg. Unthinkingly, Bilbo stepped closer to Thorin and clutched his arm. Thorin looked down at Bilbo with a worried glance and seemed to come to a decision.

“Fine. We shall go there immediately. I trust, Gandalf, that you would not lead us into more peril,” he said warningly.

“Indeed I would not, Thorin Oakenshield. Now, it is just this way, and mind that you leave no stragglers, now.” Gandalf set off, leaving the others to shrug and follow.
Thorin pulled Bilbo’s hands off his arm and instead placed his own larger hand into Bilbo’s grip.
“There is nothing to fear. Simply stay by my side.”

Bilbo glanced down at the hand covering his own, and up to Thorin, who smiled back at him reassuringly. He found himself very much reassured indeed, and if he walked even closer to Thorin, well, no one was about to say a word.

Chapter End Notes

Internet cookies to anyone who noticed the dialogue I shamelessly lifted from the book ;D Beorn next chapter, and some canon divergence, I think! I'll try to update very soon, hopefully by Monday. Thank you all so much for reading!
Chapter Three

Chapter Summary

Beorn's house, wherein Bili is frightened, content, frightened again, angry, annoyed, and then angry again. Day 2 of this Adapting and Thorin's patience is already being tried.

Chapter Notes

So sorry, this is a few hours later than I meant for it to be! May I apologize to you with a long chapter? :D Literally drowning in fluff over here, please send help (or don't)!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The halls of Beorn were nothing like Bilbo had ever seen before.

Bilbo’s sharp eyes spotted the long, thatched buildings a good while earlier, but it became quickly apparent that they were all much farther away – and much larger – than he had anticipated. Thorin kept his hand wrapped around Bilbo’s the entire walk, something Bilbo was entirely grateful for.

“What sort of person lives in such buildings, Gandalf?” Bilbo wondered aloud, as the buildings kept getting closer and bigger. “Is he very large?”

Gandalf chuckled. “I daresay, Bili. For he is not a man at all, but a skin-changer. That is to say, sometimes he is a huge black bear, and sometimes he is a great strong black-haired man. I would not make any mention of hunting, or skinning, or anything of the sort while you are in his house, for he is very protective of his animals.”

Bilbo’s eyes widened and his head whipped around, looking to see if Thorin had heard. Thorin had, and upon witnessing the frightened look on his young Bili’s face, he leveled a glare at Gandalf.

“That’s quite enough from the wizard, I think.”

Gandalf took the hint, and they walked in silence until the Company arrived at a great fence with a wooden gate.

“Bili and I shall go first,” Gandalf declared. “The rest of you shall follow in groups of two, at five minute intervals, but only after you hear my whistle.”

Thorin’s grip on Bilbo immediately tightened. “Bili and I go together.”

“If you must,” Gandalf sighed, although his face betrayed a lack of surprise.

The other dwarves grumbled, but obliged Gandalf and waited at the fence while their wizard, their leader, and their leader’s son made their way up the path.

When they reached the courtyard, the largest man Bilbo had ever laid eyes on emerged from around the wooden house. He looked them up and down, leaning on his large axe.
“Well, you don’t look all that dangerous! Who do we have here?” the man said, his deep voice booming.

“I am Gandalf, and I am a wizard, although you may not have heard of me. I have heard of you, from my cousin Radagast, who lives near the southern borders of Mirkwood.”

“Yes, I know him. Not a bad fellow, as wizards go. And who else have we here?” Beorn looked down, gaze roving over Thorin and settling on Bilbo. His face brightened immediately. “That one’s a dwarf, I know when I see one, but it seems you’ve also brought me a little bunny!” Bilbo squeaked and ducked behind Thorin, who spread his feet and crossed his arms. “I am Thorin Oakenshield, at your service.”

Beorn waved his arm. “Yes, yes, but what is your purpose here?”

Gandalf smiled, and Bilbo got the idea that things were progressing just as he had planned. The wizard began to weave the tale of their adventure so far, and Bilbo too found himself listening with interest. He didn’t dare emerge from behind Thorin’s back, finding Thorin’s larger body to be a comforting barrier between himself and the beast of a man before them. Slowly, the other dwarves joined them, and eventually Gandalf revealed the whole story up to that point. Bilbo noticed he deliberately left out the exact nature of the quest, among other small, yet significant details.

Finally, Beorn welcomed them into his hall, declaring that they deserved a meal for their story, true or not. He stood aside and let them all pass, but when Bilbo neared him, the great man scooped up the small creature and held him aloft.

“But Gandalf, you never told me about Little Bunny here!” Beorn said, shaking Bilbo slightly as he examined the poor creature.

“P-p-put me down, please, sir!” Bilbo protested, his voice merely a frightened whisper. He felt dizzy at being held at such a height, and feared he may be dropped, or worse, squeezed too hard by the skin-changer’s grip.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF HIM!” Thorin roared, reaching for the sword at his hip.

“Thorin!” Gandalf said sharply. He stepped between the dwarf and Beorn. “I beg your pardon, Beorn, it is only that the situation is so delicate that I ask you forgive such words. If you would be so kind, please place young Master Bili back on the ground, and I will gladly explain to you how a Hobbit came to be the Adapted son of a dwarf.”

“Adapted, you say?” Beorn said, eyebrows raised. “That is an interesting tale indeed, and one I’d like to hear. No offense intended, Little Bunny! I’ll return you to your dwarf, not to fear.”

He placed Bilbo back on his feet, more suddenly than Bilbo was prepared for. Bilbo stumbled, reaching out blindly and catching on to Thorin, who had rushed to his side immediately. Thorin wrapped an arm around his shoulders and pulled him close to his side, warily watching the skin-changer. Gandalf gave him an expectant look, and Thorin ushered Bilbo inside to where the other dwarves had already gone.

Beorn and Gandalf followed last, and all settled at the great table laden with food and drink. The dwarves lay into the meal heartily, and Bilbo too found he couldn’t resist a hot, freshly prepared meal, despite still feeling rather shaken up. Thorin sat close to him, and all the dwarves sent concerned glances at the pair.

“Now Gandalf, it seems you owe me another explanation,” Beorn said kindly, yet impatiently.
“Have you ever seen an Adapted for yourself, might I ask?” Gandalf began. “For I may not know where to begin this tale, depending on if you are familiar with the process or not.”

“My dear wizard, I have been around for many a decade longer than most sitting at this table, and certainly far longer than Little Bunny over there,” Beorn said with a grin.

“Of course, of course,” said Gandalf. “Then you understand that this was not planned, nor induced in any way. You see, Bili here was known as recently as a day ago as Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, a hobbit of good standing and unimpeachable reputation. He was hired on my suggestion as the fourteenth member of this Company, and the brave young one agreed to go on such an adventure with us, unlike anything he had ever taken on before. But the poor thing had no family of his own, no one to watch over him, and did not know the signs of his fading, for hobbits rarely are without kin and rarely leave the Shire, and thus are completely unfamiliar with the occurrence of Adapting.”

Beorn nodded along. “So he came with you all and was accepted as a dwarf! What, that’s not so strange at all!”

“Oh, but there’s more to it than that,” Gandalf continued, taking advantage of their host’s enraptured attention. “You see, hobbits live much shorter a time than dwarves, almost as short as men. And Bili – I call him Bili, you see, for Bilbo is no dwarf name at all – is of an age that is respectable to hobbits, but underage for a dwarf!”

The impact of the revelation was far greater on Beorn than it had been on Bilbo the first time he heard it. The skin-changer’s expression became grave, and he turned to Thorin and Bilbo and bowed his head.

“I forgive your words, master dwarf, and beg pardon of your young one for any fright he may have felt. Many changes are happening to you, young dwarfling, and I’m sure they’re already frightening enough,” Beorn said.

Thorin looked to Bilbo, who smiled weakly, and then nodded solemnly. “Consider it forgotten, Master Beorn.”

Beorn canted his head one last time and sat back, surveying the table. All the dwarves had slowed in their eating as they listened to the conversation, but now that it was finished they resumed with vigor.

After supper, Beorn left and slammed the door behind him, which alarmed Bilbo but Gandalf smiled reassuringly. “We may rest here tonight. I’m certain our host will speak to us on the morrow.”

The dwarves took the lack of a host as an excuse to loudly recount bawdy jokes and songs, and recite tales of gold and gems as only dwarfs can spin. Bilbo was amused and interested, listening quietly to the chatter and talk. He leaned against Thorin’s side, and between the heat of the hearth and the warmth of the dwarf, he began to nod off.

The next thing he knew, hands were lifting him up. For a brief moment he feared Beorn had returned, but through bleary eyes he recognized Thorin.

“I think I’ve had enough of being carried for one day,” Bilbo said sleepily.

“You’ll have to suffer this just a moment longer,” Thorin smiled, carrying his burden through a doorway and into a darkened living room. He soon set Bilbo gently down on a bedroll tucked in the corner of the room. He fell back asleep quickly, barely noticing the dwarf pulling a blanket over him and tucking it under his chin.
Bilbo awoke in the dead of night to strange sounds of scuffling and growling. He looked around, near blinded by the darkness, and realized the sounds must be coming from outside. He wondered what it was, and whether it could be Beorn in enchanted shape, and if he would come in as a bear and kill them. He dived under the blankets and hid his head, but found he could not sleep for his fears. He worked up the courage to peek back out, and squinting he made out a body lying on either side of him.

He crawled very quietly and very slowly to the one on his right, and leaned in very close. It was Kili, sprawled out and smelling as though he had drunk twice his body weight in mead. Wrinkling his nose, Bilbo crept away and over to the body on his left. He realized immediately it was Thorin, and wasted no time curling up under his father’s chin. Thorin grunted in his sleep, and wrapped an arm around Bilbo, tugging him flush against his body. Sufficiently comforted, and feeling very safe from any passing bears, skin-changing or not, he fell asleep.

The next morning, all the dwarves rose quickly to the smell of a warm breakfast laid out on the table by the various intelligent animals in Beorn’s residence. Thorin woke first, and noticing Bili pressed closed to his side, smiled and ran a hand through his son’s hair. With a slight frown, he repeated the action, rubbing a few strands between his fingers. It seemed that the brown locks had indeed started to thicken, as Kili had originally claimed they were. Thorin could only surmise that the dwarves were far hardier and used to colder climates than hobbits, and so Bili would need such protection against the elements. And, once thicker, it would also lend itself much better to the braids that Thorin would eventually put in Bili’s hair, once the lad was more comfortable with what was happening to him.

Bili awoke at the touch of Thorin’s hands, and smiled sleepily up at him.

“Good morning,” Thorin said. “I believe breakfast is ready.”

Bilbo hopped up immediately, eyes brightening. Thorin laughed and followed him to the table. They were the last to arrive, but there was still plenty of food left to go around.

After breakfast, it was obvious there were still no signs of their host, and Gandalf disappeared as well before he could be questioned. The dwarves set about exploring and searching for both the wizard and the host.

Or most did. Fili and Kili could be seen through the front window wrestling in the dirt. Ori was writing in his book on a bench out back, Dori fussing over his dirty braids. And Thorin waved Oin over before the elderly healer could wander off.

“If you would be so kind, Oin,” Thorin said, gesturing to Bilbo, who was finishing his bread.

“Aye, it’s past time, I agree,” Oin said, sitting on Bilbo’s other side and opening his large pack, which had luckily been one of the few not lost in Goblin Town.

“Time for what?” Bilbo said through a mouthful of bread and honey.

“If I’m to be your healer as well, I’ll need a better understanding of your hobbit-nature,” Oin said, tugging gruffly at Bilbo’s head so as to properly peer into his eyes. “I’ll need what we call a baseline, so’s better to know when you’re sick and when you’re not, and I don’t know much about hobbits or dwarves adapted from hobbits, seeing as there’s never been one.”

Bilbo struggled briefly in Oin’s grasp, but the elderly dwarf was far stronger than he looked and
continued his examination, looking in Bilbo’s ears and feeling the glands in his neck. Bilbo cast a
pleading look at Thorin, who shook his head obstinately.

“Listen to Oin, Bili,” Thorin reprimanded when Bilbo tried to pull away from the healer’s cold
hands.

“But I don’t want to do this,” Bili protested.

“You’ll be thanking me when you’re sick or injured and want me to take care of ya,” Oin growled,
wrapping his fingers around Bilbo’s wrist and feeling his pulse.

“Father,” Bili whined, looking at Thorin with the widest eyes he could muster, and then frowning
when Thorin only laughed.

“I helped raise Kili. You’ve no tricks useful against me,” said Thorin.

Bili slumped his shoulders, his face morphing into a pout. He sat quietly as Oin went through his
exam, ending it by grabbing Bilbo’s ankles and examining the bottom of his feet. Bilbo squawked
and tried to pull away, but was cowed by glares from both dwarves.

“Perhaps we ought to look into shoes for you,” Oin muttered, looking for infected cuts or sores.
“Those don’t feel near so tough as you always claimed.”

Bilbo sat up straight and yanked his feet away. “I’ll have you know that is a terrible thing to say to a
hobbit! A grave insult, indeed!”

“That doesn’t change what’s happening,” Oin crossed his arms. “You’re not a hobbit anymore, and
your feet are growing soft.”

“No they aren’t!” Bilbo shouted at him.

“Bili!” Thorin’s voice was stern, and Bilbo immediately backed down. “Apologize. Oin is simply
trying to help.”

“But he insulted my feet!” Bilbo said hotly, feeling rather brave for continuing to defend himself.

“Be that as it may, he speaks the truth, and you owe him your gratitude,” Thorin rebuked. “Now
apologize.”

Bili gave a frustrated huff and scowled at Thorin, whose expression remained stoic. He turned to
Oin, who was watching the exchange with a look of great amusement.

“I’m sorry,” Bili said, begrudgingly.

“For?” Thorin prompted, heedless of the dirty look Bili gave him.

“I’m sorry for being rude to you because you were just trying to help,” Bili muttered with great
reluctance.

“Apology accepted,” Oin said easily. “I’ll speak with my brother about pulling together something
for your feet.”

Bili glared hatefully at Oin as he walked away, but Oin seemed not to notice.

Thorin, however, did. But before he could get another reprimand, Bilbo leapt off the bench.
“I’m going to go see Fili and Kili!” He said quickly, making a break for the front door.

“We’re discussing this later!” Thorin called warningly after him.

Bilbo bolted outside, and was happy to see the young dwarfs still there. Together the three of them tromped around the yard for a good few hours, examining all manner of large furniture and tools far too big for them to use. Bilbo enjoyed himself quite a bit, the incident with Oin put completely from his mind.

“Ouch!” he cried suddenly, a sharp pain coursing through his bare foot.

“What is it?” Fili demanded, smile slipping off his face.

“Are you hurt?” Kili asked at the same time.

Together the brothers grabbed Bilbo by the arms and lifted him up, carrying him over to a nearby tuft of grass. They set him down on the ground, noticing immediately a small amount of blood where a long but shallow cut ran along the arch of his left foot. It looked to be from the sharp, needle-like plants that seemed to grow wild throughout the area.

“It’s not very deep, Bili, don’t cry now!” Kili reassured him.

“I’m not crying!” Bilbo said, affronted.

“Don’t you worry little cousin, I’ll get Thorin!” Fili jumped to his feet and ran off.

“No! Don’t!” Bilbo shouted after him, but Fili ignored his calls.

Thorin and Fili arrived back quickly, the look of panic on Thorin’s face intensifying when he saw the slight trickle of blood smeared across Bilbo’s foot.

He bent down to inspect it. “It doesn’t look to be serious,” he said. “But Oin should wrap it anyway.”

“I’m sure it doesn’t need –” Bilbo started, but a look from all three cut him off.

“Oin will wrap it, and then we will have a talk about the importance of shoes and watching where one steps,” Thorin spoke over him.

Bilbo scowled but allowed himself to be carried back inside, his patience barely winning out over his annoyance at proving Thorin and Oin right about his feet growing soft. Perhaps dwarves all wore shoes because their feet were soft and weak, but Bilbo couldn’t possibly imagine how that would benefit him and ensure his survival! Didn’t this Adapting thing only change the necessary things about him? Surely his feet were fine as they were!

But it was becoming increasingly clear that he had absolutely no say in the matter, at least regarding the physical changes he was going through. But he did feel slightly embarrassed by his behavior with Oin, who couldn’t possibly have known how offensive he was being. Still, Bilbo had been very upset, and he wasn’t completely sure why he had given in to those feelings so easily. He was rather worried over how easily his temper had ruled him, and how that rational voice in the back of his mind seemed to disappear entirely whenever great emotion gripped him. He understood this to be a potential effect of the Adapting as well, but he liked it no more than the softening of his feet.

Oin wrapped his foot tightly, tsking the entire time, and Gloin promised to make some temporary shoes for Bilbo to wear by the time they left Beorn’s. Eventually Gandalf returned as well, and sat by
the front door, smoking his pipe.

Bilbo, who sat near and had been warned off walking much, though this a good opportunity to smoke as well. After making sure the coast was clear (Fili and Kili had returned to their games, and Thorin was deeply involved in conversation with Balin), he retrieved his pipe from his coat pocket and sat next to Gandalf. He enjoyed only a brief few minutes of silence.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Thorin’s voice carried from across the room.

Bilbo had hardly looked up before Thorin had come to stand before him. Thorin plucked the pipe from Bilbo’s hand and poured the pipeweed into the dirt.

“What do you think YOU’RE doing?!” Bilbo yelled back, appalled. They didn’t have much of the pipeweed left, and here Thorin was wasting it!

“Young dwarves do not smoke, it is an old man’s habit, and an unhealthy one at that,” Thorin lectured. “You’re not to do it anymore.”

“What! Why! You can’t do that!” Bili shouted, his anger consuming him for the second time that day. But truly, it wasn’t fair, and Thorin must be told so!

“I can, and I am,” Thorin said calmly. “Now, are you going to talk to me, or are you going to yell? Because I will help you understand if you find this unfair, but I will not change my mind.”

And that was when Bili let loose a word he had only heard from Dwalin’s mouth. He didn’t quite know what it meant, but instinctively he understood how to pronounce the Khuzdul, and knew it to be something he shouldn’t say. But, in that moment, he could not help himself, it seemed, and so he said it with such fervor that Thorin’s face turned pale and those within hearing distance stopped what they were doing to stare.

Immediately, Bili regretted it.

“I’m sorry!” he said, clapping a hand over his mouth.

Thorin just stared for a moment longer, and then set his mouth in a grimace. “Come along, then.”

Bili’s eyes widened. “Come along where?

“Do you really want to test me right now, Bili?” Thorin said, the quiet tone of his voice doing nothing to assuage Bili’s fear.

Bili shook his head slightly, and then, slowly, stood up from his place next to Gandalf, who had taken to looking anywhere but at the pair.

Thorin led Bili into the living room and the bedrolls. One look at the duo had Ori and Dori making their excuses and nearly running from the room.

Bili seemed to be vibrating under his skin. He felt cold, and angry, and so very ashamed. Why had he said such a thing? Surely not just to make Thorin angry? That wasn’t very smart of him at all, and he was a very smart person, thank you very much! What was his father going to do? Was he going to be punished? He couldn’t possibly be punished, he was far too old to be punished!

Suddenly, Bili was scared.

Thorin watched the young dwarf for a moment. There would be no talking to Bili right now, not
with him clearly fighting through his emotions. Thorin saw them all clearly in Bili’s face, for the lad made no concerted effort to hide them. And it was obvious that Bili feared punishment, for any young one would, but it would also serve to make him feel as though his anger was justified.

So there was only one thing for it.


Bili looked at him and then where he was pointing. “You want me to…go to bed?”

Thorin nodded gravely. “I think you need a break, Bili. Lie down and rest. When you wake, we will talk.”

“Are you putting me on a time-out?!” Bili nearly stuttered in disbelief.

“If that’s what you wish to call it.”

“But you can’t!”

“Again with telling me what I can and can’t do?” Thorin raised his eyebrows, and immediately Bili caved.

With a grumble, Bili lay down on his bedroll and rolled on his side, facing away from his father. Thorin rolled his eyes and pulled the blanket over his son, much as he had done the night before.

Mahal save him from the fits of dwarflings!

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter will be dealing with the repercussions of Bili's little meltdown, and then Mirkwood, yayyy. Really hope everyone likes it! I LOVE all your comments and kudos, it truly makes my day to come and see them all! Please enjoy the fluff (this chapter sort of grew out of hand as I was writing it), and if you have any questions/comments/things you'd like to see, please let me know in the comments and I'll respond!
Chapter Four

Thorin knew he couldn’t leave Bili by himself for long – look at all the trouble he managed to get into while under supervision – but he wanted to give the young dwarfling time to think on his actions and calm down.

He would admit only begrudgingly to desiring the same thing for himself.

And so, he sought advice from his fellow dwarves. Most had returned to Beorn’s home to spend the rest of the evening eating and resting, and it was a simple matter to catch Balin’s eye. The older dwarf followed him over to a corner of the large dining room, secluded but still close enough to hear if any tiny dwarflings were to shout out from the adjacent room.

“Gloin has been busy crafting shoes for Bili, or so I’ve heard,” Balin said as they sat side by side on a long bench.

Thorin nodded. “Bili cut his foot today. And was quite angry at both Oin and I for speaking of his softening feet. And then he proceeded to talk to me as though he is in charge, as though he gets to say yea or nay to my decisions. It was quite frustrating for both of us, I think. And then he proceeded to curse at me, with fouler language than he should even know, and he tried to smoke with the blasted wizard! Smoke, Balin, if you’ll believe it!”

Balin, to his surprise, did not seem quite as affronted. Indeed, there was a look of mirth about him, and a smile on his lips.

“Are you truly surprised?” he asked, shaking his head. “Bilbo has always been quite spirited.”

“Bilbo, yes, but he’s not Bilbo anymore. He’s Bili now, my Bili,” Thorin said. “I do not take my responsibilities lightly, old friend. You know this.”

“But does Bili?” Balin questioned. “You can’t deny your tendency to be gruff with those around you, Thorin. It may seem to him unfair, or even cruel, of you to suddenly assert yourself over him. You must remember how new all this is to him. Of course he’s going to lash out at you, he doesn’t
understand what’s happening to him, or that he needs you.”

Thorin was quiet. He rested his elbows on his knees, shoulders hunched, dark hair obscuring his face. He sat and stared at his clasped hands for long moments. Balin allowed him all the time he needed.

Finally, Thorin sighed and sat up straight. “I need to speak with Gloin. And perhaps Bombur.”

Balin raised an eyebrow.

“Both have dwarflings of their own,” Thorin explained. “And I’d like to see how those shoes are coming along.”

Balin nodded. “I’ll fetch them for you, don’t fret.”

“Oh, and Dwalin too, if you don’t mind,” Thorin said with a scowl. “We need to have words about his language.”

Bili pulled the blanket over his head and stubbornly refused to close his eyes. How could Thorin have been so mean? It wasn’t like he really did anything wrong! Okay, he could admit that he shouldn’t have said that word (whatever it meant), because clearly it was a curse of some sort and he knew better than that. He was just so angry that he couldn’t help it at the time, it just slipped out when Thorin hadn’t acknowledged his feelings! Why couldn’t Thorin understand that he was just so mad? Everyone had been so mean to him today, it seemed!

He sat there stewing in his own temper for a few minutes longer. It just wasn’t fair that he had to sit in here by himself, like a naughty little fauntling, when he hadn’t even really done anything wrong!

It suddenly occurred to Bili that he could just…get up. He didn’t have to sit here and do what Thorin said. He could throw the blanket off and leave the room, he didn’t have to wait for Thorin to come back and allow him up. He wasn’t a child! He wasn’t supposed to get in trouble and get punishments, that was for little kids!

Which is exactly what he wasn’t. Right? Right. But Bili had to pause and think about that for a second, because suddenly he doubted his own logic. He wasn’t a fauntling. He remembered being a fauntling, and he remembered the grand party when he turned 33, and he remembered his parents dying and he remembered living on his own in Bag End and doing all sorts of adult-like things. So he wasn’t a fauntling, to be scolded and lectured.

But he didn’t feel much like an adult, either. He sucked in a damp, hot breath, the darkness granted by the blanket a blessing in this moment, and he tried to reject the hot prickle of tears. He wasn’t even sure where they came from, or what he was truly feeling at the moment. It seemed a little bit like shame at his behavior, but that wasn’t entirely it. He also felt frustrated, and there was this deep anxiety welling up within him. It had to be more than just what happened that day, because it couldn’t have been that big of a deal. Sure, he got in trouble, and punished, but Thorin was definitely going to come back any minute now and forgive him.

So why did he feel so wrong?

Well, for one thing, Bili was still very upset about the bandage wrapped around his foot. It made him want to start crying all over again to think about what the hobbits back home would say if they could see his feet now. But it wasn’t really Oin or Thorin’s fault either, Bili knew. It was just the Adapting changing him to be like a dwarf. But – and he thought maybe this was childish of him to think – that
wasn’t very fair of nature to do to him, was it? Why did it have to be his feet, of all things?

No, Bili did not feel like an adult. Nor did he feel like a fauntling.

But maybe that was because he wasn’t either of those things. Adults, both hobbit and dwarf, didn’t have temper tantrums, but they also didn’t get adopted, either. And Bili had been okay with that – happy, excited, ecstatic with that, even. He got a new father, and new cousins, and he didn’t have to be alone anymore!

Fauntlings were little hobbits. And it made sense that he didn’t feel like a fauntling either, because he wasn’t one. He was a dwarfling.

All of a sudden, the air around his face felt hot and constricting. He whipped the blanket off his head and breathed deeply the cool air around him. His cheeks felt hot and his lungs gasped for air. Bili steadied his breathing slowly, unheeding of the silent tears that leaked from his eyes as he tried to steady himself

He was a dwarfling, of course. Or he was becoming one. The answer seemed so simple now and he couldn’t figure out why it didn’t occur to him before. He kept getting so angry and overwhelmed and lost in emotions that he hadn’t felt in a long, long time, and whenever they swept over him, it was like he completely gave up all rational thought. And wasn’t that just like a dwarfling, or what he imagined a dwarfling to be like? The dwarves he knew (albeit that number was limited to 13) were all obstinate, and stubborn, and quick to anger. It followed that dwarflings would be the same, except without any way to control those feelings.

And he hadn’t gotten to ask Thorin much more about what Adapting would mean, but from what he understood so far, he would slowly become more and more like a 50 year old dwarf, which was still a kid. A dwarfling.

He breathed in and out, much more steadily now. It made a lot of sense, and even the anxiety seemed to be lessening.

Bili lay there for a few minutes longer, listening to the ambient sounds of dwarves laughing and talking one room over. He still felt very frustrated. And the idea that he would turn more and more into the dwarfling who said naughty words and yelled at Oin and got put in a time out for misbehaving terrified him. Gandalf had said he wouldn’t resort entirely to tweenhood, and Bili felt Gandalf was right.

He wasn’t turning back into a tween. No, he was becoming something new altogether, something he had never experienced before, and he bet even Gandalf didn’t see it coming.

And he was scared.

Bombur and Gloin had no shortage of advice for Thorin. They both had experience raising dwarflings, and Gloin’s own Gimli was a mere ten years older than Bili, so Gloin remembered this stage very well. Bombur’s children were younger, but his parenting skills no less developed. Thorin left his conversation with them feeling a sense of purpose and confidence, as though he had an idea of how to handle Bili.

Unfortunately, that meant talking to him. Thorin wasn’t necessarily the best at talking, and he knew it. But it was unavoidable, and he did want to do right by his son, which meant reasoning him through his decisions that day and explaining to him what he had done wrong. Thorin also suspected
it would lead to a conversation about dwarflings and how Bili was expected to behave now, which was probably overdue anyway.

But before he headed back in to see his son, he needed to speak to Dwalin.

The warrior dropped gracelessly on the bench that Gloin and Bombur had recently vacated, and folded his arms, waiting for Thorin to speak.

“I’m certain you’ve heard tell of what’s happened today,” Thorin said by way of a greeting.

“Aye, I have,” Dwalin nodded, smirking. “Seems your little one’s got a mouth on him.”

“That’s exactly what I’d like to talk to you about,” Thorin said sternly and leveling a glare at his friend. “He learned the curse he said today from listening to you.”

“Oh come on now, how can you know that? It could have been any one of ‘em, out on the road! It could have been the lads!” Dwalin protested.

“Aye, it could have, but we both know it wasn’t,” Thorin shook his head. “I don’t ask you to change your ways, nor should you be expected to. I simply ask you watch your language when Bili is around. I know we didn’t expect a youngling on this trip, but nevertheless we have one.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dwalin waved a hand dismissively. “You know I will. I like the lad too, as you well know.”

“Many thanks, my friend,” Thorin smiled and slapped Dwalin on the back. “I must attend to him now.”

Bili was utterly bored by the time he heard footsteps behind him. He didn’t feel nearly so angry anymore, in fact mostly he felt bad for his behavior, but he still refused to roll over and face Thorin.

He wasn’t given many options, however, when Thorin stepped neatly around him and came to sit on the floor, his back to the wall and his legs crossed.

Bili pushed himself up and looked at Thorin, who was watching him patiently. “I’m sorry.”

Thorin held up a hand. “I appreciate your apology, but I would like you to hold onto it until we are through, so that I know you truly understand what you’re apologizing for.” Then he smiled gently. “Do you feel well enough now to speak calmly with me about today?”

Bili sniffled slightly and nodded. “I’m turning into a dwarfling, aren’t I? And Gandalf said I wouldn’t become a tween again, and I’m not, I’m turning into something I’ve never been before and I’m going to become a kid dwarf, huh?”

“You’re right,” Thorin nodded. He patted the ground next to him and Bili crawled over to it, sitting down close to his father. Thorin put a comforting arm around his shoulders.

“None of us have experience with a hobbit Adapting into a dwarf, but it’s becoming clear to me now that I should have expected no less. Despite your born race, Halfling, you rarely do things by half.”

Bili giggled. “I guess.”

“I know,” Thorin said, giving him a squeeze.
Bili looked up at him, his expression serious. “I don’t feel like an adult anymore, and I don’t feel like I did when I was a fauntling. It’s scary and I don’t know how to stop it when I get really angry and upset.”

“Oh, Bili,” Thorin’s expression softened, his grip firm on the little creature. “It’s okay to be scared. We’re all going to help you get used to your new life. Am I right in that sometimes you feel like your old self, and sometimes you feel much different? Like when you’re angry?”

Bili nodded. “It keeps bouncing around and I can’t control it and I don’t like it.”

“Those feelings will even out, my little one,” Thorin assured him. “It happens with all Adapteds. Dwarves feel very strongly, our emotions run deep and we are very sure of them. Most races are gentler, and have an easier time controlling such extreme emotions. You’re just starting to experience them. Give it some time.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Bili said, looking down at his hands. “But what do I do when I just get so angry, like today? Because I was so mad, Father, and I didn’t really mean that curse, I know it wasn’t good to say it, but I was just so mad and I couldn’t stop being mad!”

“I know. And I will help you, of course,” Thorin said simply. “And so will your cousins and Balin and everyone else here. You can come to any one of us if you’re feeling upset or angry or sad and we’ll help you.”

“I’ll try,” Bili said, his tone tinge with doubt at his ability.

“That’s all I ask,” said Thorin kindly. “We must discuss your behavior today, however. It wasn’t acceptable and you need to understand why.”

Bili nodded, biting his lip.

“First, you were rude to Oin. You must be respectful to those around you, Bili, especially when they are trying to help you,” Thorin scolded lightly.

“But he insulted my feet!” Bili said indignantly.

“He said the truth,” Thorin corrected. “I understand that your hobbit feet were tough and it is an insult to hobbits to say anything negative about them, but you are changing. They are changing. And you know that Oin wasn’t being mean-spirited towards you, he is simply straightforward, and as an elderly dwarf he is unlikely to change his ways.”

“I know,” Bili frowned. “But it hurt my feelings. And everyone used to be so mean to me back in the Shire… I don’t know, it just made me upset!”

Thorin pulled him close and rubbed his hand rhythmically across Bili’s back. “I’m sorry to hear about your old kin and their abuse. Perhaps I was a little hasty in scolding you for that today. In the future I’ll try to take into consideration your hobbit past when you’re upset about something. I apologize.”

“It’s okay.” Bili leaned into Thorin’s touch, quietly resting his head against Thorin.

“However, there are still a few other things that went wrong today. For example, your carelessness outside,” Thorin continued patiently.

“I was just playing around with Fili and Kili!” Bili exclaimed, looking up at him. “We weren’t doing anything wrong.”
“Of course you’re allowed to play with your cousins. But what you and they must keep in mind is that they are older, and very sure of themselves. You are Adapting and still learning, and you need to be careful.” Thorin sighed. “I just don’t want to see you hurt, Bili.”

“I know,” Bili replied, suddenly feeling guilty. “I’ll try to pay more attention.”

“Good. And Gloin made you some shoes that will do until we can have some proper ones crafted for you. I know the idea is foreign to you, but you must wear them or else you will get hurt again,” Thorin said. “Do you understand?”

“Yes, Father,” Bili moaned, resting his forehead against the side of Thorin’s chest. “I don’t wanna but I will.” He didn’t mention that the cut on his foot still stung, despite the wrappings, and walking around barefoot on it was sounding increasingly unpleasant.

Thorin chuckled, never ceasing his hand’s movement across Bili’s much smaller back. “Thank you. Now, I know you also enjoyed your smoking as much as you did running around barefoot, but I’m afraid it’s something I’m going to stand firm on.”

“But do I really have to stop entirely?” Bili whined, looking up at his father with wide, pleading eyes.

“Yes, you do,” Thorin said solemnly. “I’m sorry if this upsets you, but this is about your health. And if it relates to your health, I won’t back down. It’s best you accept that now.”

Bili huffed, but nodded. Thorin felt sure this was a lesson he would be repeating before their journey ended.

“And I also know you know better than to shout curses, especially ones you don’t understand,” Thorin said. He hooked a finger under Bili’s chin and brought his eyes up to meet Thorin’s. “No more Khuzdul unless it is something you are properly taught. Are we clear?”

Bili’s head bounced rapidly. “I promise. And I’m really sorry for everything. I know I was acting like a stupid kid today and I’m sorry.”

Thorin’s face turned briefly dark. He held Bili’s chin firm in his grasp. “That is not what I meant for you to take out of this conversation, Bili. You are not in trouble for acting like a child, because that is exactly what you’re becoming. It is expected, even if the wizard didn’t see it. And you are never, ever to say you are stupid. Because you are very intelligent, and I will not listen to you put yourself down. You are not stupid. You are very intelligent. You will not put yourself down, because it’s not true. Repeat that, please.”

“I’m not stupid. I’m very intelligent, and I won’t put myself down, because it’s not true,” Bili repeated dutifully. It surprised him, that Thorin had gotten so worked up over a simple statement, but it also made him feel warm. “I still feel embarrassed about today, though.”

“Well, we can’t have that,” Thorin said thoughtfully. “And it’s given me the perfect idea for your punishment.”

“Punishment?!?” Bili’s mouth dropped open. “But you already punished me!”

Thorin raised an eyebrow. “I did?”

“Yes, you did! With the time out!”

“That wasn’t a punishment,” Thorin shook his head, brow creased. “That was to give you time to
“But I said I was sorry! Please, I don’t want a punishment!” Bili cried desperately.

“Hush, little one,” Thorin soothed. “There’s no need to be afraid. I won’t ever hurt you. I don’t know how punishments are done among hobbits, but we dwarves know that there is no one perfect punishment for every dwarfling transgression.”

“Hobbits usually just spank their fauntlings,” Bili said quietly, voice shaking.

“I see,” said the king. “Well, you need not fear that. I would not resort to such punishment unless you truly did something to deserve it. Something very purposefully naughty, and most likely dangerous. I don’t think anything that happened today counts, do you?”

Bili shook his head in rapid agreement.

“However, a punishment will help you to stop feeling embarrassed, when chosen aptly. You have already apologized and been forgiven, so there is no need to be overly harsh,” Thorin explained. “In this case, you feel embarrassed, and so your punishment must help you get over your embarrassment, and, once completed, you’ll feel better for not having any more doubts about your misbehavior.”

“So what is it, then?” Bili hardly dared ask, but he desperately wanted to hear it and get it over with.

“For the curse and the harsh words spoken to me and Oin, you will be going to bed early tonight,” said Thorin sternly.

Bili nodded, surprised. It was much fairer than he was expecting, so he didn’t feel too glum, although it would be hard to sleep when Fili and Kili were still up and playing around.

“But that will not help you resolve your embarrassment for acting like a dwarfling,” Thorin continued. “And so the rest of your punishment is this: I order you to approach each dwarf in turn, find out what their favorite game was when they were dwarflings, and ask them to teach it to you.”

“You want me to learn dwarfling games? As a punishment?” Bili blinked, completely thrown by Thorin’s words.

Thorin’s expression was very solemn. “I do indeed. It’s very important for young dwarflings to play. In fact, we should start your punishment now. You have a dwarf sitting right here, is there something you’d like to ask of me?”

“What…what was your favorite game to play when you were little?” Bili asked hesitantly.

“Oh, now, that’s an excellent question,” Thorin smiled. “I remember I used to love to play King of the Mountain with my brother and sister. We would run around Erebor and each try to climb the highest thing we could find, knocking each other off when we could.”

Bili laughed, loud and long. “That’s so dangerous!”

“I know,” Thorin said, laughing as well. “My parents hated when we played it. But that didn’t stop us, not until one day, Dis knocked Frerin over a little too roughly, and he broke his arm.”

“He broke his arm?” Bili’s eyes were wide.

Thorin nodded. “Aye, we were in trouble for weeks after that.”

“But why did you tell me about that game, if it’s so dangerous?” Bili squinted at his father in
confusion.

“There are no rocks or mountains about for you to fall off of here,” Thorin reminded. “But when we reach Erebor and our home is reclaimed, I promise to teach you to play. Gently.”

“I’d love that,” Bili said softly.

“Me too, little one.”

The pair was quiet for a little while, both enjoying the contact.

“Now, how about you learn some Khuzdul that you are allowed to say?” Thorin said, breaking the silence and grinning at Bili’s excited nod. “Repeat after me: adad.”

“Adad,” Bili mimicked.

“Good. That means father,” Thorin smiled. “You may call me adad from now on.”

“Yes adad,” Bili beamed.

“And Fili and Kili are your cousins, or your iraknadads.”

“Iaraknadad,” Bili copied, stumbling a little over this one.

“That’s very good. How about we go get some of the food that the others are undoubtedly devouring and you can ask them to teach you some other words?” Thorin ruffled his son’s hair.

“Yes please!”

“Very good. Up you go!” Thorin stood and pulled Bili up with him. Instinctively, Thorin bent down and placed a kiss on the top of Bili’s head. Bili turned bright red, but couldn’t stop the smile spreading across his face.

With Thorin’s arm around his son, they headed back to the rest of the group.

Chapter End Notes

What did you think? I hope everyone enjoyed it, I know I loved writing it. I spent a lot of time the other day plotting out the outline for the rest of the story. At this point I'm going to say it'll be 15 chapters, but that could change, depending on how wordy I get (really, really wordy, most likely). But that's my rough guess. Again, I've got a lot of the ending written out, it's just the stuff in the middle that I have to work on :)

And many thanks to The Dwarrow Scholar's English/Neo Khuzdul dictionary, which I'm certain I'll be referring to heavily in the future.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter Five

Chapter Summary

Mirkwood is a daunting prospect, and Bili isn't happy about it at all.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone, thank you SO much for your comments and kudos! They mean the world to me! Sorry this chapter is a bit later and a bit shorter than I intended, but trying to get out of Beorn's was a bit cumbersome for me and Mirkwood grew into a giant, so I split it up into two chapters. The FUN parts of Mirkwood will be next chapter, I promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next morning, the dwarves bustled about, packing for the journey into Mirkwood. Beorn had returned the night before and proclaimed that he believed their story, and spent the rest of the evening entertaining the younger dwarves and Bili with stories of his animals and his own hunts for goblins and orcs. He still loudly and happily referred to the little dwarfling as “Little Bunny,” but respected his space (and Thorin’s glares) and did not try to touch him or pick him up again.

Thorin followed through with his punishment and made Bili go to bed long before the others, but Bili felt so exhausted by the journey so far and emotionally drained from the last few days that he acquiesced easily.

And now, in the early light of day, Bili sat on the front porch and watched the dwarves run around, packing and arguing and planning. He had tried to help, at first, but a pointed look from Thorin had Oin proclaiming loudly that Bili should rest his foot as long as possible.

“It’s barely even scratched,” Bili scowled as he took a seat on the long bench, insistent on at least being near everyone else.

“I don’t know what you’re upset about,” Fili grumbled as he walked past, hauling bag upon bag of nuts and flour, earthenware pots of honey, twice-baked cakes, and sealed jars of dried fruits out to where Bombur was directing the allocation of weight in each pack.

“Yeah, I wish I didn’t have to do anything!” Kili moaned as he trotted after his brother.

After that, Bili sat a little more smug in his seat.

They ate one last meal with the skin-changer before heading off. Bili was feeling a little more confident in himself and the changes he was going through since they had arrived at Beorn’s, but he was rather anxious for setting out on the road again. The forest of Mirkwood sounded dark and scary and he couldn’t shake a sense of foreboding.
Beorn provided them with ponies (and a horse for Gandalf), all of which were laden with their bags. He gave them directions and bade them farewell, with the warning to send the ponies back as soon as they reached the edge of the forest. Bili approached the ponies hesitantly, but they were friendly enough and Thorin helped him mount one.

“We’ll be moving swiftly, so ride near the front and don’t stray,” Thorin lectured. “The ponies are smart and will do the work. Simply hold on.”

“I wish you all speed, and my house is open to you, if ever you come back this way again,” Beorn called, standing before them all with his large arms crossed. “Be off now as quick as you may!”

At first, the ride seemed almost pleasant. The pace was quick, but Bili found himself enjoying the wind in his face and the bright sunny day. They rode for the rest of the day before setting up camp just off the path.

Distantly, wolf cries were heard in the distance, and Bili felt uneasy. The rest of the Company seemed to tense up as well, and even Fili and Kili were rather quiet.

Thorin took first watch, and Bili found himself sitting around the fire next to Bofur. The cheery dwarf cast a smile at him and scooted closer.

“How’re you holding up, lad?” Bofur asked.

Bili shrugged. “All right, I guess.”

“It’s all right if you’re not, you know,” Bofur continued. “Bifur still has some tough days too, and he’s had years to get used to the changes his accident brought ‘em. You’re still going through a lot, and we all understand, lad. I promise.”

Bili looked at him and bit his lip. “Can I ask you something?”

“O’course, lad! Ask away!”

“Is it…is it just the Adapting that makes everyone act different around me?” Bili asked slowly. “Because, I mean, you were nice to me before, and so were Fili and Kili, and I guess no one ‘sides Thorin was mean, but I didn’t really fit in before, and I thought they might be mad, I did try to leave before Goblin Town and I haven’t really talked to the others since before Beorn’s…”

He trailed off when he saw Bofur shaking his head wildly, the tails of his hat whipping about.

“You’ve got it all wrong, Bili!” he exclaimed. “No one’s mad at ye, no one at all! And of course you fit in. I tried to tell you, didn’t I? Most of us have never spent time with a hobbit before, and I won’t lie to ye, the Adapting may change how some of us will treat ye, seein’ as you’re a lot younger now. But everyone was bound to act different anyway, after you saved Thorin!”

“Well, I guess that makes sense,” Bili said, still chewing on his lip. “Everything’s just strange now, is all. I mean, stranger than it was before, which was still pretty strange.”

Bofur chuckled. “Aye, I know what ye mean. But you’re a dwarfling now, and no one’s got a right to treat you bad. Me, Bombur, an’ Bifur, we know a thing or two about bein’ treated different, so if you need anyone to talk to or anything, you can come to us.”

“That’s really nice of you, Bofur, thank you,” Bili said with a smile. He cast a side look across the fire to where Bifur was sitting and signing in Iglishmek with Bombur. Bili had always been a little frightened of the grizzled, silent dwarf, and his feelings hadn’t changed on the matter since his
Adapting.

Bofur caught his look and rested a hand on Bili’s shoulder. “I know he looks intimidating, but Bifur’s not really. Mind you give him a chance sometime now, lad.”

Bili ducked his head. “I will, I promise.”

“There’s a good lad.”

“Bofur? Can I ask you something else?”

“Sure can.”

“What was your favorite game to play as a dwarfling?”

Bofur cocked his head down at the dwarfling and grinned. “Well now, that’s an interesting question. I guess I’d have to say I loved playing fox and geese with my cousins! You ever played that?”

Bili shook his head. “Will you teach me?”

“O’ course! We need snow, though, so I’ll just have to tell ya about it now. Let’s see, you find a nice big patch of snow, we used to go just a ways outside on the slope of the Blue Mountains, and you stomp out some trails that all connect with each other…”

They continued to ride at a punishing pace for three more days, until finally they reached the edge of the vast and dark forest. Bili spent the nights around the fire talking mostly to Bofur until Thorin finished first watch, and then he’d sleep between Thorin and Fili and Kili.

It was afternoon on the third day when Gandalf bid them farewell.

“Cheer up, Thorin and Company! I told you I have some pressing business away south and would have to leave you at some point. We may meet again before all is over, in fact I will try my best to do so. Now, send your ponies back to Beorn and I’ll be off!” He said, much to Bili’s despair.

Bili dismounted his pony with difficulty and ran up to the wizard.

“Do you really have to leave?” he begged, eyes wide.

“Yes, I’m afraid I must,” Gandalf nodded solemnly. “But I leave you in the good hands of your father, Bili. Now, you look after all these dwarves for me, I’m certain they won’t make it without you!”

Bili smiled sadly and nodded. Gandalf bade a final farewell and was off without another word.

The forest was dark, even in the day, and the path narrow. They set out in single file, and Bili followed Thorin very closely, one had clutching Thorin’s pack at all times. Bili himself had a small pack as well, much more fitting to his size than the one he lost in the Misty Mountains. He kept his little sword at his belt and despite his distaste for them, quickly grew to be thankful for his makeshift leather shoes; the ground was littered with rotting leaves and what Bili suspected were spider webs.

The day dragged on and on, and when they finally rested for the night, all were feeling great unease. All sat huddled as closely together and as close to the fire as possible. Dwalin took first watch, and none envied him.
“Adad?”

Thorin looked down at Bili, who sat pressed against his side. “Yes, Bili?”

“I’m afraid,” Bili whispered. “It feels like there’s eyes watching us.”

Thorin looked around, but all he saw were trees and shadows. “I know it feels that way, little one. But we have a watch set and we are prepared for anything. Don’t worry yourself.”

Bili shrugged one shoulder and burrowed closer to his father. Thorin wrapped an arm around him and hugged him close.

“What don’t we talk, hm? Get our minds off the forest,” Thorin suggested. “Perhaps you could tell us about your life in the Shire.”

Bili stiffened immediately. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea, adad.”

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to,” Thorin said gently. “I simply want to get to know my son a little better. You are a dwarf now, to be sure, but that doesn’t mean your previous life as a Hobbit didn’t happen.”

“Well, I guess,” Bili said, sounding nervous. “I wasn’t a very good Hobbit, though.”

The dwarves, all of whom had been listening casually before, all turned their heads to Bili.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Thorin said, reaching up to pet Bili’s hair gently.

“No, it is,” Bili insisted. “It was okay until my…first mum and dad died. Then no one wanted much to do with me anymore.”

“What happened to them, Bili?” Kili burst out. Fili elbowed him sharply in the side.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Thorin said, reaching up to pet Bili’s hair gently.

“No, it is,” Bili insisted. “It was okay until my…first mum and dad died. Then no one wanted much to do with me anymore.”

“What happened to them, Bili?” Kili burst out. Fili elbowed him sharply in the side.

“Kee’s an idiot. You don’t have to tell us if it makes you upset,” Fili said, glaring at his brother.

Bili smiled, to his surprise. Usually even thinking about his first parents made him sad, but he found it didn’t hurt quite as much, when he looked at Fili and Kili. And Thorin’s touch felt so soothing, running through his hair like it was…

“It was the Fell Winter;” he blurt out. “I was 21, still a tween by Hobbit years. The winter was so bad, worst than it had ever been, and the Brandywine River froze over. There was nothing keeping out the wolves and orcs once that happened. And most Hobbits, they don’t know how to fight or anything. Some of the farmers had weapons for keeping stray wolves out of the crops, but nothing that really could help.”

He took a deep breath and let it out. The next part was the hardest.

“We were okay at first, we had lots of food, but soon it wasn’t safe to leave the smial at all, and we heard tell of lots of other Hobbits freezing to death, then starving, and then the wolves and orcs came,” he said steadily, staring into the fire. “They came through Buckland first, and eventually made their way to Hobbiton. Mum wanted us to hide in the cellar, said the Rangers would show up soon, but we heard screaming from the neighbors’ and Dad went out to help. He died that night, and mum and I hid. Gandalf and the Rangers came the next day, and they drove out the Orcs and brought food. Mum wasn’t the same after that. She lasted til I reached my majority, at 33, but only just. And then she faded and I…I was alone.”
Bili finally broke off, turning his face toward Thorin.

“I’m sorry for all you’ve been through,” Thorin whispered to him. “I promise to protect you for the rest of your life, little one. May you never see such hardship again.”

The others turned away, and gave the father and son a moment alone. Eventually, Bili felt himself drifting to sleep, his face still buried in Thorin’s shoulder and Thorin’s arms wrapped tight around him.

The next few days were terrible for everyone. Bili’s melancholy from the first night was compounded by the awful nature of the forest, and everyone was equal parts downtrodden and tense. It was pitch dark at night, and soon they found even campfires were unwise, for they attracted all manner of bugs and bats that seemed highly unnatural to the entire Company.

Bili would recall those long, cold nights as some of the worst on the journey. He spent most of it pressed tightly against Thorin, or sleeping between Fili and Kili if Thorin was on watch. The other dwarves were just as quiet and clearly unhappy with the situation.

Soon they began to realize their food stores were running out, and Bili found himself constantly hungry. He wasn’t sure if this was a result of the lack of food or if he still felt the need to eat as much as Hobbits did, which was far more than dwarves. He didn’t complain, though, for he knew no one had enough to eat, and they’d have to find or catch something soon.

They were also running low on water as well, and if it hadn’t been for Beorn’s warnings not to drink from the black river, they would have done so. Bili wasn’t sure how much longer they would last this way, and judging by the grim look Thorin seemed to constantly wear, he thought much the same.

It all seemed to be getting worse and worse, until one day they came to a part of the path where the black river blocked their path. They knew better than to try to swim through it, and after long minutes of searching for a way around, Kili shouted.

“I think there’s a boat across the river! It’s only about 12 yards!”

“I see it too!” Fili shouted in agreement. “Who’s got rope? I’ve got a hook here from my pack, I bet I can hook the boat and pull it over!”

“And if he can’t, I bet I can!” Kili said, shoving Fili aside.

“Boys,” barked Thorin. “Hush. Someone bring Fili rope. Dori is strongest, but Fili’s got the sharpest eyes.”

Kili looked put out, but stepped aside and let Fili try his hand at throwing the rope. After a few tries, the hook caught the lip of the boat, but the boat seemed to be tied. After a few tugs from Fili, Kili, Oin, and Gloin, the boat came loose, and all four fell to the ground.

Bili was watching, however, and grabbed the rope before the boat could float down the river.

“HELP ME!” he yelled, and Balin and Dwalin immediately grabbed the rope as well, and together they pulled the boat to their side.

“Good catch, lad,” Balin praised.
Dwalin ruffled his hair rather roughly as he walked past, and Bili was shocked at the show of affection, but couldn’t help the pleased grin that spread across his face.

“Bili, you’ll be first with me, as well as Fili and Balin. That’s all that will fit at one time,” Thorin ordered. “Kili, Oin, Gloin and Dori next, then Ori, Nori, Bifur and Bofur, and finally Dwalin and Bombur.”

“I’m always last and I don’t like it,” said Bombur. “It’s somebody else’s turn this time!”

“Maybe you shouldn’t be so fat,” Kili said, with mock innocence.

“Kili, don’t be rude,” Thorin said absentmindedly. “Let’s do this quickly.”

Bombur continued to grumble, but said no more. Thorin helped Bili into the boat first, and the first group crossed quickly.

The first three groups made it across with no incident, and it seemed that Dwalin and Bombur would make it as well, but just as Bombur was stepping out of the boat on the opposing bank, a deer charged into their midst.

Kili, who had knocked an arrow as soon as they crossed out of habit, immediately let it fly. The deer leapt through the air, and was pierced by the arrow. It landed on the other bank and immediately faltered, stumbling to the ground. All the dwarves cheered at the thought of venison.

All except Bili, who noticed that Bombur had been knocked off balance in his attempt to get out of the deer’s path.

“Bombur has fallen in! Bombur is drowning!”

He was already too far into the middle of the river to be reached by their hands, but Fili thought quickly and threw the rope and hook after him. Bombur managed to grab it, and they managed to pull him to shore.

He was drenched, and by the time they pulled him completely on the shore, he was fast asleep, and nothing could wake him.

Bili knelt by his side, shaking. Oin felt for Bombur’s pulse, and grunted as he stood. “He’s merely sleeping. No idea how long it’ll last.”

“What’re we going to do, adad?” Bili cried. “We can’t leave him!”

“Of course not, don’t fret,” Thorin said. “We’ll have to carry him.”

“Aw, really?” whined Kili. “He’s the biggest of all of us!”

“And you’ll be one of the first to help,” Thorin said strictly. “Bili, come. We’ll lead the way.”

Bili took Thorin’s hand, shooting a last worried glance behind them at the sleeping form of their companion.

“Do you think he’ll be all right?” Bili asked timidly. “Do you think…we’ll be all right?”

“I know we will,” Thorin said, squeezing Bili’s hand. “We must make it out of the forest sooner or later. Just hold my hand, little one.”
Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed! I definitely took some liberties with Bilbo's past/parents/etc, but what the hey (I do what I want, Thor!). And I used some book quotes and scenes, simply because I feel like their book personalities are closer to the characters I'm writing sometimes. Let me know if you have any questions, comments, or suggestions and I'll happily, joyfully, eagerly respond to you!
Chapter Six

Chapter Summary

Spiders and elves. Could this journey get any worse? Bili doesn't think so.

Chapter Notes

Holy canon divergence, Batman!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

They continued through the dark forest for weeks. It took nearly 15 days before Bombur awoke, confused and annoyed at being awoken at all. Apparently he had been having very pleasant dreams, and the others were very sore over having to carry him for so long.

During that time, they had trudged through the forest as steadily as the thick undergrowth and rough terrain allowed them. They still avoided starting a fire, but far from getting used to the darkness, Bili had grown to loathe and fear it.

He found himself feeling less and less ashamed of his intense feelings and slips of emotion during the past few weeks. Often as he marched next to Thorin, his father would take him by the hand and talk to him, trying to stave away the fear and worry and hatred that they both carried for the forest, and Bili found himself willingly answering all of Thorin’s questions about himself and his emotional state.

In fact, his father always seemed so pleased when Bili answered truthfully and at length that the young one looked forward to these talks, and whatever shame he had felt in the past about chattering too much about himself was long gone. Dwalin or Fili or Kili or Nori would often march in front of them, scouting and shouting out warnings of rough terrain so Thorin could pay less attention to the path and more to his Adapted son.

“How’re you faring today, Bili?” Thorin asked on one such day as the young dwarfling sidled up next to him. Bili had long come to expect this question whenever he joined his adad.

“Okay, I guess. I’m hungry,” he said, knowing full well that everyone else was too.

Thorin took Bili’s hand in his larger one, like he often did as they walked. “Perhaps it is unwise to speak of food with our bellies so empty, but I would have you tell me your favorite foods, so that I may know what to have at our feast when we reclaim Erebor.”

Bili’s eyes lit up at the thought of a feast. “Oh, we absolutely must have a feast! We have feasts often in the Shire, you know, and they’re always such grand affairs. Of course, all meals are important, even though we have so many!”

“So many?” Thorin frowned down at him. “Do Hobbits not eat three meals a day, as the rest of Middle Earth does?”
“Three?!?” Bili cried. “Why, of course not! Hobbits eat seven, you know!”

Thorin stopped walking abruptly. Kneeling, he grabbed Bili by the shoulders and turned his son to face him. “Bili, I need you to answer me honestly. Have you been starving this whole time? Have we been starving you?”

Bili blinked, staring back at the blue eyes intently searching his face. “Well, I don’t think so. I was very hungry at first, but I would pick up nuts and berries and plants that one can eat from the side of the trail as we went along. I don’t feel as bad as that anymore, though. I figure it’s the Adapting changing me.”

“Perhaps,” Thorin muttered, brow furrowing. “Or perhaps not. OIN!”

The entire Company halted at Thorin’s shout. Oin, who hadn’t registered that it was his name Thorin called, was poked and prodded by his brother until he made his way up the line of dwarves to where Thorin and Bili were.

“Bili tells me Hobbits eat seven meals, not three,” Thorin explained, one hand gripping Bili’s shoulder tightly. “He was starving at the beginning of the journey –”

“I wasn’t!”

“– but now he feels less hungry. It is known that starvation affects the body in such a way,” Thorin’s said darkly, his voice low and serious. “Or perhaps his body is Adapting to our three meals a day. But I will not risk illness or worse.”

Oin’s face was grave as he turned to look at the young dwarfling. “Aye, neither would I. Come here, lad. I need to look at you.”

“I’m not starving, really,” he insisted, and would have kept talking if not for a silencing look from Thorin.

Quickly, and without regard for his protestations for modesty, Oin stripped Bili of his coat and shirt and began examining him. Thorin hovered, trying to make sense out of Oin’s mutterings, and worried aloud for his son.

Bili was thin, to be sure; far too thin for any dwarf, youngling or no. A little muscle had started to develop over the course of the journey, but it was more defining than strong, and Bili looked no stronger than he had before the Adapting. His soft stomach remained soft, although far smaller than that of the pudgy Hobbit who had ran out of his home to join a group of dwarves.

All-in-all, he looked exactly as Thorin thought he should, at this stage: small, soft, and completely adorable.

“If he was suffering the effects of starvation, it would be obvious,” Oin finally said, handing Bili’s clothes back to him. “And if he suffered it before, well, the Adapting took care of it. But to make sure all’s changing as it should, I’ll check him daily, and keep track of his meals, at least til Bombur wakes back up and can do it himself.”

Thorin nodded. “Thank you.”

“Told you I wasn’t starving,” Bili grumbled as the group started to walk again.

“And I told you when it comes to your health, I won’t take risks,” Thorin said, straightening Bili’s collar. “We’ll get you proper dwarven clothing as soon as we can, this is far too loose on you, and
“Adad?” Bili interrupted Thorin’s ramblings. “Can I ask you something?”

“Of course,” Thorin nodded.

“When we reclaim Erebor…when the dragon’s dead and everything’s over…what will I do?” asked the dwarfling in a small voice.

Thorin looked down at him sharply. “You’ll live in Erebor with me, Bili, haven’t I made that clear? It is to be your new home, with all of us, where you belong. You’ll be a dwarven prince, like Fili and Kili.”

“You’ve said that before, but,” Bili bit his lip, searching for words. “But what does that mean, exactly? I don’t know how to be a prince. Or even a dwarf…”

“Oh, little one, don’t you fret,” Thorin said, smiling again. He placed a large hand on Bili’s head and ruffled his thickening hair. “You’re already a fine dwarfling, and we’ll teach you all you need to know to be a prince. And you’re still a child, so no one will expect you to have difficult duties or do anything you don’t understand.”

“So you’ll teach me?” Bili asked hopefully.

“Aye, I will,” Thorin nodded. “And Balin will give you formal lessons as he did Fili and Kili. We’ll have Dwalin teach you to fight, and Ori can help you with reading and writing Khuzdul, and when my sister Dis arrives, she will want to spend all sorts of time with you. She always bemoans the growth of her own sons, I’m certain she will welcome a new dwarfling to smother.”

Bili couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face. He couldn’t think of anything that sounded better. Wrapping his hand around his father’s, he suddenly felt that maybe they could do this thing after all; maybe they could reclaim Thorin’s home – his home, he thought giddily – and maybe he could learn how to be a good dwarf, just like his adad.

Bili’s good cheer could only last so long in the depths of Mirkwood. All the dwarves had taken to grumbling aloud, about the lack of light, lack of a path, and the seemingly endless trees that stretched out all around them. Thorin immediately cast an intimidating glare at any who became too despondent within Bili’s earshot.

The forest grew ever darker, and short of sending someone to climb a tree (which Bili volunteered to do, but Thorin immediately vetoed) they had no way of finding their bearings. Still, they carried on.

Eventually, as Thorin knew it would, the evening came when their food supplies ran out. Thorin refused to let anyone leave the group to hunt, citing the dangers of splitting up. Instead, he called Balin to first watch, and waited until the rest of the Company and Bili fell asleep.

Carefully, he extricated himself from Bili’s grip, smiling softly as his son shifted to clutch the arm Kili had flung out in his sleep. He quietly made his way over to Balin, who stared at him with grim eyes.

“Don’t move on for two days,” Thorin instructed without preamble. “If, by then, I have not returned, I turn the Company over to you and Dwalin to lead as you see fit. I trust you’ll take care of my sisters sons, and…” he trailed off, coughing away the lump in his throat.
“We will watch over all of them, especially Bili,” Balin said gravely.

Thorin nodded and placed a hand on his friend’s shoulder. Balin returned the gesture.

“Return to us, my king,” Balin whispered.

“I…” Thorin stopped. With one last look at his sleeping son, he gave Balin a sharp nod and walked off into the darkness.

The next morning, Bili awoke with a gnawing ache in his belly, and a desolate feeling that it wasn’t merely a matter of hunger. Yawning, he opened his eyes and found that he was completely alone.

He leapt to his feet. All around him lay his companions’ packs and supplies, but none of his companions.

And no Thorin.

Bili’s breaths came shorter and faster, and distantly his brain was screaming at him not to panic, don’t panic, calm down, calm DOWN…

And that’s when he heard the clicking.

Slowly, with wide eyes and short breaths, he turned around, and laid eyes on the largest spider he had ever seen.

The giant spider was larger than he was, much, much larger, and was approaching him slowly, pincers clicking. Bili froze in fear, certain now that his friends and family were dead, and he was the only one left, and he would die too, horribly, just as they all had, and…

And he couldn’t just stand there!

He ripped his eyes away from the advancing spider and dashed over to the nearest pack. It was Fili’s, and beside it lay his sword, his tiny little sword, which he grabbed and whipped back around. He held the blade with two shaking hands directly in front of his body, between himself and the spider.

The spider let out a hiss, and with a strangled shout, Bili ran towards it, sword outstretched. He closed his eyes at the last second and threw all his strength behind the stab.

He expected to feel fangs, to feel a strong bite and pinch and then death, but instead he felt only wetness drenching his arms. He forced his eyes open slowly. He was elbow deep in the spider’s guts, his little sword plunged deep inside its body. The spider did not move, and Bili knew it to be dead.

It took a few great heaves of his small arms, but he managed to pull the sword from the spider’s body and tried to shake the guts and blood off his arms and sword as best as he could. Breathing heavily, and feeling very much on the verge of breaking down, he looked around the campsite and realized what he hadn’t before.

There were no spiders on the ground, and no dwarves, either. They were in the trees.

Bili turned his gaze upwards and saw, to his complete horror, many spiders spinning webs in the trees, and shaking webbed lumps dangling from the branches.

What was he to do? He had just killed a giant spider, and there was no way he could possibly kill all...
the rest! The others had yet to notice their dead brethren on the ground, but it would only be a matter of time before they did. And they had captured all the dwarves, even scary Dwalin and giant Bombur, and if they could do that they would absolutely murder Bili –!

He had to be smarter than that. They were just spiders, after all, probably no different than the tiny ones that lived in the Shire, right? He could be smarter than a spider! But how was he to get to them all?

It came to him in a single breath.

The ring.

It was simple, and his eyes widened as soon as he thought of it. The hand not clutching his sword trailed up to the pocket of his torn and dirty waistcoat, where the ring perpetually sat in his front pocket. He slipped it on his thumb – the only finger large enough to keep it on – and disappeared.

Now invisible, he felt slightly more confident. It would still be difficult, climbing the trees with a sword and avoiding all the spiders, not to mention somehow getting his friends out of the webs, but he had to do it, there was no alternative...

He set his shoulders back and made for the nearest tree. It was time to save his family.

Miles away, Thorin was near spitting angry.

He had successfully found the Elven stronghold, a place he had sworn never to go. He had begged entrance, humbled himself before an elf, something he had sworn never to do. And now he was speaking to King Thranduil of Mirkwood, someone he had sworn never to treat with.

And yet here he was, biting his tongue and pleading, and the elf king was smirking.

“What were you doing in the forest?” Thranduil demanded, sitting loftily against his throne.

Thorin swallowed heavily. “Merely passing through, and more recently, starving.”


“My companions and I meant not to disturb you,” Thorin said through gritted teeth. “But we lost the path. I have come to entreat you to help us.”

“Your companions?” Thranduil raised one thick eyebrow. “And where might your companions be, if not with you?”

“I left them to find help, for we were starving and lost,” Thorin said, biting back a growl. “We require your help, as much as it pains me to say so.”

“I never thought to see the day that Thorin Oakenshield begged for my assistance,” said the elvenking. “And as much as it pleases me, I fail to see why your company should matter to me.”

“Please,” Thorin said as politely as he could manage. “I left them all, and I beg that you help us. Just some food, or a map. The most basic necessities would do. And quickly, for I must return to them, as I gave them instructions to move on after 2 days of my absence.”

“Surely you’re aware of the dangers the forest holds for those who do not move swiftly,” Thranduil intoned, sounding slightly, ever so briefly, concerned.
“Nothing could be more dangerous than starvation,” Thorin sighed.

Thranduil shook his head slowly. “You are wrong, Thorin Oakenshield. There are worst things waiting in the forest for lost travelers. The giant spiders grow ever closer, and feast on all they can find.”

Thorin’s body went swiftly numb. Dread and fear coursed through him, and for a moment he could not speak. Thranduil saw something in his face that made him sit up straight, the alarm on his face apparent despite his schooled expressions.

“Bili,” Thorin breathed out. “My son. He is newly Adapted, he was once a hobbit, and he has only recently become my kin. He is out there, with my companions, and my sister-sons, and he knows nothing of fighting, and they know not of the dangers of spiders!”

“You have a Halfling-Adapted son?” Thranduil’s voice betrayed his shock.

“Aye, newly Adapted, it’s been a mere few weeks,” Thorin said quickly, his face plainly showing his fear. He no longer cared for the judgment of this hated elf. He needed to know that Bili and Fili and Kili were safe, that his friends and family were not devoured by spiders or poisoned and left to die, to rot forever in the awful wood…

He realized belatedly that he had spoken all of that aloud.

Thranduil was out of his throne in a second. He strode towards Thorin and then past the trembling dwarf, and whipped open the door to the throne room. Beyond stood two elven guards, whom Thranduil had banished to the corridor after they had dragged the dwarf inside and dropped him at the elvenking’s feet.

He spoke quickly to the guards in Sindarin, and they nodded and took off at a graceful run.

Turning back, Thranduil walked to Thorin’s side and stood before him, eyeing the dwarf.

“Please, elf,” Thorin paused, shaking his head. “Please, King Thranduil. Please.”

Thranduil nodded. “My scouts have been tracking you for days. I have sent word with the swiftest runners to find your companions and bring them here.”

With a stilted cry, Thorin dropped his head and let out a huge breath. “Thank you. You may ask your price for repayment, once my kin are safe.”

Looking uncomfortable, Thranduil clasped his hands behind his back. “I…have a son as well. He has been lost in the wood before, as a child. I will not accept payment.”

Thorin’s head bounced up in shock. “You won’t?”

Thranduil scowled. “No, but I have no space for you all. You’ll have to make do with empty cells in the dungeons, although they won’t be locked. And you will be on your way in two days, no exceptions.” His expression softened briefly. “I’ll send a guide to lead you out of the forest. Then we shall not speak of this again.”

“Aye, agreed,” Thorin nodded quickly. “Never again. And we needn’t speak to each other.”

“Obviously,” Thranduil spat out. “And before you leave, you’ll explain to me exactly what you’re doing in my forest.”
Thorin grimaced but said nothing as Thranduil called for another guard, and soon Thorin was led to an empty cell on the uppermost level of the dungeons. The cell was spacious enough, with a cot and a chamber pot, and the guard allowed him to leave the door open. He was brought a meal, one fit for a prisoner rather than a visiting king as he technically was, but he did not complain at the sight of food.

And then he waited. And waited.

He was going spare with worry when, hours later, shouting rang out from the level above. A single staircase led up to the main level, and Thorin could hear the clamor of many boots. Since the elves walked so quietly as to never betray their positions, blast them, Thorin could only assume he was hearing his companions.

Dwalin was first to appear down the stairs, being roughly nudged along by two guards. He spat at them angrily whenever they touched him, but his unsteady gait was obvious even to Thorin.

The dwarf king stood and made his way over to the group. All were immensely filthy, and in various states of alertness. Quickly he made his way to Fili and Kili, both of whom seemed to be faring slightly better than the rest of the group. He embraced them, and the group all called out in happiness to see their leader.

Pulling back from his sister-sons, he looked around. “Where is Bili? Is he all right?”

“Bili?”

“Where is Bili?”

“I thought he was in the back, with Dori!”

“Don’t put this on me, I’m not his keeper-“

“But wasn’t he following us? I know I saw him!”

“SILENCE!” roared Thorin, and all quieted, even the elf guards.

Thorin frantically pushed his companions aside, searching wildly. “Where is my son? WHERE IS HE?”

The group exploded in sound again, as all began to search around and count each other. But it was no use; there were only thirteen dwarves, and no dwarflings.

With a wounded cry, Thorin fell to his knees. He buried his face in his hands, and for a moment no one spoke.

Wordlessly, Balin lay a hand on his friend’s shoulder, but Thorin did not tolerate it. He stood up abruptly and, setting his shoulders, looked to the nearest guard.

“Bring me back to Thranduil.”

The guard shared a look with another elf, eyes wide. “This way.”

The others parted silently as the elf guard and Thorin passed through them and up the stairs. The guard led him back through the winding, wooded levels and up to the throne room.

With a quick, patterned knock, the guard opened the door and waited for Thorin to pass through.
“Do you find something to your disliking, dwarf?” Thranduil called from his throne as Thorin stomped up to stand before it.

“My companions are accounted for. All but my son,” Thorin stated. “I must find him. Now.”

Deep in the forest, Bili ran frantically through the trees. After he cut down the dwarves and pulled them from their web cocoons, they had fought the spiders together, and all seemed lost in light of the sheer number of spiders. All the dwarves moved sluggishly, and Bili felt it a miracle that none had been taken down by the fearsome beasts. And when he felt all was hopeless, he thought he might as well take off the ring and face the spiders on behalf of his fading companions…

And that was when the elves appeared.

They fought the spiders off quickly and efficiently, and with ruthlessness such that Bili had never witnessed. The guards were swift and fierce, and terrified the young dwarfling. But soon the spiders were all dead or fleeing, and the elves turned to the dwarves, some of whom had collapsed again.

And that was when Bili noticed that Thorin was not among them.

Panic raced through him, and he counted and recounted his dwarves, but not a single one of them was his adad. He watched fearfully as the elves begin leading the dwarves away, deep into the trees, carrying those who couldn’t force their legs to move. Some tried to fight, but were quickly subdued by flashes of daggers and knocked arrows.

Bili let them go, and did not follow.

He had to find his father.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was surprisingly difficult for me to write! Probably because I am horribly afraid of spiders and have been dreading this for so, so long. Shudder.

Thank you all so much for reading and reviewing and kudo-ing, I seriously appreciate it SO, so much. Seriously. It gives me life.

So…please don't hate me for the cliffhanger? (EVERYTHING WILL EVENTUALLY BE OKAY) (PROBABLY)
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

Bili is lost, and then he is found. Thorin fears the worst.

Chapter Notes

Hi all! A note before starting:

childatheart28 asked me about Bili's age and my headcanon for dwarven aging in this story, and I figured I'd share my answer with you all for clarity's sake: To me, 1-20 in dwarrow age is like 1-5 for humans, 20-40 is like 6-10, and 40-70 is like 11-18. 70 is like 18, where you're officially an adult, but some people are more mature at 18 than others are. I feel that since dwarves live for such a long time, their ideas of aging and what is age-appropriate behavior is a little less strict than what humans (or even hobbits) might have. Legally you're considered an adult at 70, but Kili's behavior is still pretty immature and often childish, and he's 77. Whereas Fili, who is 82, is more mature, but definitely still less mature than the rest of the company, and that's just his personality.

So Bilbo started as a middle aged hobbit and, despite Gandalf's assurances that he wouldn't completely revert back to tweenhood, he's flopping around ages and maturities as the Adapting takes place and his body/mind come to terms with the changes, and he'll definitely be a little more fragile/insecure/unsure of himself than most normal dwarrow children. At 50, he's pretty set in early tweenhood, about 12/13 years old. As such, the Company will have the tendency to coddle him out of worry (and novelty), and poor, neglected, adult-turned-child Bili will be surprised and overwhelmed by the coddling, but it also feels great to have people actually care about him and take care of him, and so he'll also get in moods where he'll seek that security and revel in it and act younger than his age.

tl;dr Bili's like an immature 12 year old.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Bili was cold and, in his own opinion, in a very sad state. His legs were sore from trudging through the thick underbrush. The path, if it did still exist, was long obscured, and his ankle hurt from when he twisted it after stepping in a deep foxhole hidden in the foliage. His left foot dragged with each step. He knew from the blood that kept dripping into his eyes that he had obtained a cut on his forehead, right at his hairline, during the fight with the spiders. It throbbed with every breath.

Still, he carried on, for hours and hours, determination carrying him through. He was doing his best to control the pain and the fear of being lost and alone, for the sake of his duty to find his adad. He was still confident in himself; hadn’t he just saved the rest of the Company, after all? And mostly by himself, for the others would still be trapped in spiderwebs if not for him! He felt sure, so sure, that he could help Thorin too.
If only he could find him!

But as he stumbled through Mirkwood, invisible and nearly blind in the darkness, it seemed less and less like a rescue attempt and more like foolhardy naiveté, had he the words for such a thing.

Soon he found himself at a river, smaller and clearer than the one that caused Bombur to fall asleep for weeks. He was wary of it at first, but it wasn’t black and the current was fairly calm. Feeling suddenly exhausted, he approached the sloped bank with the intention of curing his thirst and perhaps washing his face free of sweat and blood. But as he slowly made his descent, his injured ankle caught on a fallen branch and he tumbled the last few feet, falling headfirst into the water.

It was only a few feet deep and the current not very strong, so despite the initial shock and fear (for, like most Hobbits who weren’t Brandybucks, he had never learned to swim) he floundered to his feet and stumbled out of it easily enough. The cold water was an unwelcome shock to his system, and did much to damage his confidence; for now, not only was he lost and injured, he was wet and cold and just couldn’t seem to warm up, and he felt the strength drain out of him with each passing step.

The forest air felt musty and dense during most of their trek, but now any slight breeze sent shivers whipping through his body. His clothes didn’t seem to be drying at all, and it felt like the water was seeping through his skin and into his very core.

Worst of all, he hadn’t found any sign of his adad, or even the giant spiders. Nor had he found any elves, or any signs of life at all since he set off on his own. It was as if all the living creatures had disappeared when Bili slipped the ring on, and after hours of wandering all alone, his fear was enough to make him rip off the ring and shove it back in his pocket.

All he had left was his little sword tucked in his belt, which wouldn’t do him much good if he couldn’t find anything to fight.

Bili sniffled and crossed his arms, huddling in on himself for warmth. He felt wretched and worried and utterly miserable. He just wanted to find his father, and he had no idea how to do that. It seemed really simple at first, going back to the spot where the spiders first attacked, climbing the trees and searching the area until he found where the spiders had carried off his adad. But the farther he went, the more he realized that every part of the forest looked the same, and getting lost was completely inevitable.

He understood now that he hadn’t really thought through his plan. But he couldn’t just leave Thorin in the forest! He had to at least try! And if he didn’t find his adad, well…that wasn’t an option.

Bili might be lost, but Thorin was too, and maybe even in worse condition. He had to keep going. But…maybe he should rest, for just a minute. He had long lost the path, and the river, but there was a shallow clearing up in the distance, as if someone (or something) had recently cleared the underbrush in a wide circle. He would sit down, just for a bit, and get his bearings. That would be smart, right? Smarter than simply wandering aimlessly, lost and hurt and cold. And he was smart, his adad told him so.

Bili would find Thorin. Right after a short nap…

The fear and anguish that had gripped Thorin upon the discovery of his son’s disappearance had given way to a great and terrible rage. It was not directed at any one person or thing, but rather at the situation and the forest as a whole. Battle rage, some called it, and for a warrior like Thorin he found
it an apt name, for his temperament now was much the same as when he marched into war.

King Thranduil wasted no time in assembling two search parties out of his scouts and guards. Thorin, grateful though he was (as well as suspicious), could not bring himself to speak another word to the elves, for his focus was singularly on finding his son. It consumed his mind, his thoughts, and even his vision; if it did not aid him in immediately locating Bili, he cast it from his thoughts.

In a matter of minutes, Thorin, Dwalin, Fili, Kili, Gloin, Bofur, and Bifur were sprinting off in one direction, surrounded by elves armed with bows and daggers. Thorin had purposefully assembled this group with his top warriors, for they would be searching the farther reaches of Thranduil’s realm. The rest of the Company, led by elven trackers and scouts, was sent to search closer to the palace, in case Bili had attempted to follow the captured dwarves and lost them along the way.

Thranduil himself stayed behind, feigning his usual haughtiness, but even Thorin did not miss the set of his jaw and crease of his brow when he instructed his elves to find the Adapted child at all costs. He did not say dead or alive; it did not bear thinking about.

Bili awoke to an eerily similar sound…almost like a clicking…

Clicking. The spiders.

He was on his feet in seconds, but nearly collapsed again as soon as he put weight on his injured ankle. With a cry, he clumsily pulled his little sword from his belt, and held it out in front of him.

There were two giant spiders this time, both approaching him slowly. His breath came in short, sudden gasps, and through his fear he realized that he was still wet and shivering, only now his arms were shaking uncontrollably as well. Still, he kept his sword as steady as he could, and backed away from the spiders as quickly as he dared.

They followed, wary of the metal gleaming in front of their prey, but gathered speed with every second.

“Back!” Bili shouted, his voice trembling. “Back, I say! You don’t want to anger me, now! You really, really don’t! I’ll…sting you! I’ll sting you, I will, with this!”

He jabbed his small sword at the nearest spider, faking confidence that his tired muscles did not support. He continued backing up, stabbing erratically in the direction of both spiders in turn.

“This is my stinger!” He yelled, trying to sound bigger and louder than he was. “It’s name is Sting, and sting you it will!”

With a thump, his back hit wood and he realized he was cornered against a tree, with branches far too high for him to reach. The closest spider moved quickly, scuttling towards its prey with exaggerated speed, and Bili barely had time to scream before it was on him. He slashed at its head wildly, hoping at least to blind it and buy him some time, but the spider kept pushing back. All he saw was a flurry of dark, hairy limbs, and the occasional glimpse of venomous fangs. Screwing up his strength, Bili threw his entire weight behind the little sword, and tried to kill this one much like the first spider so many hours ago.

His sword sliced through the outer layer of the spider’s abdomen, and an unearthly screech resounded from the beast. To Bili’s great surprise, it fell over dead; and when he whipped around to face the other, it was only to find it also keeling over, with multiple arrows sticking out of its back.
“BILI!”

The dwarfling froze. A voice was shouting his name, and it sounded very close, but he could see nothing beyond a few feet around him. The trees were too dense, and something liquid was seeping into his eyes again, although he had thought his cut long scabbed over.

“BILI! MY SON! BILI!”

There it was again! The voice, the wonderful voice that knew his name! It must be his father, for who else would call him with such desperation? The tone of that voice exactly matched Bili’s feelings, for perhaps he had finally found his adad! Perhaps in his wanderings he had finally managed it!

“ADAD!” Bili screamed back, his throat sore and voice shaking. He wasn’t very loud, and although he tried to shout louder, he couldn’t quite make his lungs cooperate with his vocal cords. He heard many noises, boots trampling and people running, but try as he might he couldn’t make out the direction. It was as though a distant fog surrounded him, and he felt separate from the world.

Suddenly, arms grabbed him from behind and whipped him around. Bili’s eyes didn’t seem to be working as they should, but he knew anyway that it was Thorin.

“Adad!” he cried, before he was crushed into Thorin’s chest. The dwarf wrapped large arms around his son, clutching him as tightly and closely as he could. Bili was so relieved to simply breathe in the scent of his father that he didn’t even register the others around them. All that mattered was that he was found, his father was safe, it was no trick of the evil forest but his father was actually here, was actually holding him again! Oh, he was so happy, so relieved, and so very, very tired…

He lifted his arms weakly, meaning to wrap them around Thorin, but they barely moved an inch before his vision grew dark and he fell into deep unconsciousness.

When Bili opened his eyes again, it was to a sight completely unfamiliar to him.

So far on his journey, he had seen many things for the first time. Rivendell, a skin-changer, giant spiders, Mirkwood, real trolls, Orcs, wargs, some things truly foul and other things wondrous. But none of them compared to the sight that met his eyes when he regained consciousness in Thranduil’s palace.

As far as he could tell, he rested on a bed made from the softest materials in all of Arda. The light around him was white and green, like when the sun shone through the leaves of his favorite oak in the Shire. And sitting next to his bed, looking for all the world like a fixture of the palace, sat his father, clean and fed and more anxious than Bili had ever seen him.

Thorin held Bili’s limp hand in his own, tracing the contours of his small palm with a much larger thumb. In his lap lay Bili’s sword, cleaned of all the dirt and grime and blood and gleaming like the day it was created. The king stared at the sword intently, as though it could tell him everything his son had been through while lost in the forest.

“Sting,” Bili croaked, interrupting Thorin’s deep thoughts. “That’s…that’s what I’ve been calling it, in my head. Sting.”

Thorin’s head rose sharply, his eyes wide. The sword, Sting, clattered to the floor in his rush to stand
and lean over Bili’s bed.

“You’re awake!” Thorin said, his voice close to breaking. His eyes shone and his hands gripped Bili’s face on either side. “Finally! Oh, Bili. Oh, my son, what has happened to you? How are you feeling? Are you in great pain?”

Bili blinked the sleep out of his eyes and basked in the sight of his father, alive and whole and not eaten by spiders. He reached his hands out and grasped the braids that fell over his face, tickling his skin gently.

“I couldn’t leave you behind,” he said, ignoring his father’s questions. They didn’t seem that important anyway, and his head still swam with slight dizziness. It was hard to focus on everything at once. “You weren’t there, when the spiders came. And then I killed the spiders and cut everyone down and we all fought and then elves showed up and you weren’t there, and I put on my ring so they wouldn’t take me away too, I couldn’t go without you!”

“Ring? What ring?” Thorin’s brow furrowed. “You’re not making sense, my son. Oin!”

Thorin stood and looked to the doorway, where the elderly dwarf quickly entered. Thranduil was with him.

“He has woken, but he’s not making much sense,” Thorin said gruffly. One hand found Bili’s again, and Bili stared down at it with a distant smile.

Oin made his way to the side of the bed and leaned over the dwarfling. “Bili, lad, how are you feeling?”

Bili thought about it for a second. “Floaty,” he answered, not sure it was quite the right word.

Thorin and Oin exchanged concerned glances, but Thranduil swept up to the foot of the bed and stared down at the child.

“You are under the influence of certain herbs used for muting pain,” the elvenking said softly. “It often has such an effect. My healers are very skilled, but we have never encountered a creature such as yourself. The effects of the herbs were not completely predictable.”

“What do you mean, elf?” Thorin spat out, gripping Bili’s hand even tighter. “Is he all right?”

“Calm yourself, dwarf,” Thranduil returned, his expression hard as he turned to glare at the other king. “He’s awake, and he’ll stay that way. The herbs are merely dulling all his sensations, but they will wear off in time. He’ll be fine in an hour or so, to be sure.”

“Are you an elf?” Bili interrupted, a dreamy look on his face.

Thranduil turned back to the dwarfling, his expression much softened. “I am indeed, young one. I am King Thranduil, and you are in my home.”

Bili’s eyes widened in fascination. “Did you save us, King Thranduil?”

Thorin made a noise of protest, but bit his tongue.

“I did indeed, young Bili,” Thranduil said grandly. “I brought your father and friends to my halls, and have allowed them to stay. We found you missing, however, and went out in search of you. Do you remember?”
Bili nodded. He remembered everything, or most everything, up until the spiders attacked him for a second time, and he said as much.

“Aye, you'll probably not remember much more than that, even when your head clears,” Oin nodded. “You’ve a few new scars to brag about, and you have caught an illness deep in your chest. It will heal in time, but rest is necessary.”

“Oh,” Bili said in a small voice. He still felt unattached from the rest of his body, but his vision was already becoming sharper. “Does that mean we get to stay with King Thranduil?”

Thorin groaned at the hopefulness in his son’s voice, but said nothing. To his disbelief, Thranduil’s usually cold face melted into a smile, which Bili returned.

As soon as his son was fit to leave, they were escaping this disgusting elven compound, Thorin resolved. And they would certainly be having a talk about trusting elves.

It was nearly two days before Oin allowed anyone else in to see Bili. After a few hours, all the sensation returned to his limbs, but he felt all right as long as he didn’t move. Unfortunately, his lungs ached with the need to cough, and his nose constantly ran and caused him to sneeze. Whenever his body did either of these things, pain twinged through his chest and head. Altogether it was an unpleasant state of being, but Bili tried not to complain.

After all, he was safe, and so was his adad.

Thorin sat with Bili the rest of the day, helping him sit up to eat and blow his nose. Oin passed in an out, checking on the dwarfling as the day went on. Occasionally an elf healer came with him, and Bili was endlessly fascinated by the elves and their beautiful features.

Bili and Thorin didn’t speak much at first. Thorin was content to let Bili rest, and Bili was only slowly gathering the strength to hold an extended conversation. The morning of the second day, however, Bili awoke before his adad, and sat staring at the sleeping dwarf slouched uncomfortably in the bedside chair. He remembered most everything now, except a few bits at the end, but what he couldn’t figure out was how Thorin had come to be with them.

After a little while, Thorin roused himself, and smiled at his son before asking him how he felt.

“I’m fine, adad,” Bili said, although Thorin’s expression showed he did not believe him. “Will you tell me what happened to you in the forest?”

Thorin frowned. “Bili, I want you to know how sorry I am. I wish I had known how this would work out, but I didn’t, and it caused you grievous harm. I had hoped to spare you on this journey, hoped that between all of us there would always be someone to watch over you, but I have failed, and now you are sick and injured and we are at the mercy of the elves.”

“Did…did I do something wrong?” Bili asked, looking down at his covers, picking at the linen.

“No!” Thorin shook his head. “You tried to find me, didn’t you? You didn’t know where I was so you tried to come after me, and I wasn’t there for you to find. This is all my fault, little one, not yours.”

“Where did you go, if you weren’t lost in the forest?” Bili asked, voice wavering.

Thorin sighed. “I left during the night to seek help from the elves. I told Balin to watch over you and
I left, and I wandered the forest until I was captured by Thranduil’s spies, and then I demanded to see the elf king. I am ashamed to have pleaded before him, but it was to save the Company, and to save you. And for that I stand by my decision, for it did indeed save us in the end."

Bili’s face dropped again, and Thorin could not tell what he was feeling, although consternation was evident. He wanted to wipe it off his son’s face, to hold him and tell him it was all okay now, but he wasn’t sure if Bili would accept that yet.

“You left,” Bili said, confirming Thorin’s fears. “You left all of us to find the elves, and you were never in any danger?”

Thorin nodded. “I’m sorry you were so scared for me, little one. I should have told you what I was doing. I should have brought you with me, but I was so afraid of losing you to the dangers of the woods, and I had no guarantee of success. I very well could have been lost myself, never to return, and I wanted you to have the safety of the Company.”

“I…” Bili started, but cut himself off. He pursed his lips and looked up at Thorin, tears in his eyes that threatened to spill. “I wish you hadn’t gone off, adad.”

"I know, little one, I know, I’m so sorry I did that to you –”

Bili held up a shaking hand, his other moving to stem the flow of tears out of his eyes. “I wish you hadn’t left, adad. But I’m glad we’re here now. I’m sorry I couldn’t find you, and that I made you all come search for me. I just wanted to be a good dwarf, like you! I just wanted you to be safe!”

The tears came pouring down his face then. His nose, already runny from his illness, sniffled stuffily through his sobs. Thorin sat on the edge of the bed and gathered the dwarfling up into his arms.

“Shh, shh, little one, don’t cry,” he said soothingly. “Shh, now. You’re all right. You are a good dwarf. You did nothing wrong, you simply wanted to help. Shh. Stop crying. I’ve got you now, I’m here, and I’m not leaving again.”

“But what if you h-have t-to?” Bili asked through his shuddering tears.

“I won’t, I won’t,” Thorin said, reaching for a cloth and holding it up to Bili’s nose. “I won’t leave you again, I swear it. I swear to Mahal that I will stay by your side and never leave you again.”

Bili nodded and accepted the cloth from Thorin. They sat like that for many minutes, and Thorin was not ashamed of the tears that leaked from his own eyes. Eventually, Bili cried himself back into sleep, for which Thorin was grateful. Oin and the elven healers had told him the best thing for his son was sleep, and he needed much of it if he was to battle the illness that had taken root in his body. Thorin was also unsure of how much he had actually reassured his son, but he had every intention of proving his promise true.

Bili awoke a few hours later. His face was dry, but it now felt stretched too thinly over his bones, and he reached for the fresh cloth on the side of the bed to wipe his nose.

Thorin was standing in the corner talking lowly with Balin. At the sound of Bili’s movements, both dwarves looked over at him with expressions of relief.

“It’s good to see you up, laddie,” Balin said with a kindly smile.

Bili smiled back. “Is everyone okay, Master Balin?”
“Yes, yes, everyone’s fine, all thanks to you,” Balin said seriously. “Have you told your father of your brave deeds yet, Bili?”

Bili shook his head and blushed. “I fought spiders, lots of them!”

“You did, and I am very impressed,” Thorin said, before nodding to Balin, who bowed slightly and walked out of the spacious room. Thorin made his way to Bili’s bedside and sat. “I believe you owe me a tale, little one. But first I have a question for you.”

“Okay,” Bili said, still pleased with his father’s praise.

“Earlier you spoke of a ring,” Thorin said. “What were you talking about?”

Bili bit his lip. He knew he hadn’t planned to tell Thorin about the ring, but he couldn’t for the life of him remember why. It had seemed really important, back when he was a Hobbit, but now he couldn’t think of any good reason why he shouldn’t tell his father everything.

“I found a magic ring back in the Misty Mountains,” he started. “I fell off the ledge when you all got captured, and I met a creature that I named Gollum and we dueled with riddles! And he had a ring that he called his precious, and I stole it from him and put it on and I turned invisible, and that’s how I escaped! And I’ve been using it since then to turn invisible. That’s how I fought the spiders.”

“Invisible?” Thorin was staring, wide-eyed and open mouthed. “You have a ring that turns you invisible?!”

“Yeah!” Bili said excitedly. “But…I guess that’s kind of cheating. I guess it wasn’t really that brave of me, fighting the spiders. I had to use the ring so they wouldn’t see me, so it wasn’t like I was really fighting.”

Thorin shook his head. “You were very brave, Bili. So very brave. Magic ring of invisibility or no, you were smart and brave and fought very well for someone with no training. Which we are going to rectify the moment you are well enough, so don’t fret.”

Bili grinned. “I want to learn how to fight proper, like you!”

“And you shall,” Thorin promised. “But for now, you must rest and get better, so we can leave this wretched place. Where did you put your ring?”

“In my waistcoat pocket,” Bili said, suddenly noticing he was dressed entirely in a long, white gown. “Where are my clothes?”

“Don’t worry, they are just here.” Thorin stood and grabbed a small pile of what Bili had taken to be rags off the ground by the bedside. He found the ruined yellow waistcoat and dug through the pocket, pulling out Bili’s small golden ring. “Is this it?”

Bili nodded and reached out for it, but Thorin held back.

“Bili, I know you found it, but I’m going to have to keep it,” Thorin said, briefly examining the ring before tucking it into his pocket.

“But it’s mine!” Bili protested, suddenly feeling quite angry. “It’s not fair! I found it and it’s mine!”

“Bili,” Thorin said warningly. “Do not question my judgment. Rings and magic are not things for young ones to play around with.”

Thorin sighed. “If I tell you a story about magic rings and their dangers, will you listen to me and stop asking for it?”

“It’s not dangerous,” Bili huffed.

“Let me tell you the story, and you can decide for yourself,” said the dwarf, settling back into the chair. “It starts with long ago, when there were seven great dwarven kings…”

While Thorin sat with his son in the healing rooms, the rest of the Company was making themselves at home in Thranduil’s guest quarters. The elf had been waiting for them on their return with the young Adapted dwarfling, and when he set sights on the sick and injured creature, his entire demeanor changed.

Barking out orders to his servants in Sindarin, the Company had found themselves ushered into the guest rooms, far nicer than the dungeon they had previously occupied. Thorin, Oin, and Bili had been separated by a few other elves, and Thorin had paused long enough to shout at the others to do what Thranduil asked, promising to be back soon. Out of respect for their leader and concern for their dwarfling, they complied.

 Mostly.

“I want to see him!” Kili said, stomping his foot and glaring at the elf standing guard at the end of the hall. “Take me to Bili and Thorin!”

“Yeah, take us to them! Now!” Fili demanded, crossing his arms and standing close to his brother.

The other dwarves had spread out in the room, in various states of comfort. Bombur and Dori had immediately claimed alcoves with beds for their brothers. Ori and Balin were examining the connecting rooms with interest, while Bifur and Bofur had immediately fallen onto a bed and deeply into sleep. Gloin and Nori were sitting in a corner together and had struck up a card game, content to wait out their stay until further notice from Thorin. The princes had argued with each other quietly before making their way to the guard and stating their demands, but the impassive elf simply stared above their heads and refused to answer.

After a few minutes of listening to their heated shouts, Dwalin stomped up behind them and grabbed both by the hair.

“Your uncle told us to stay put until he says otherwise, and you’ll listen to him, you little brats!” Dwalin growled, dragging both of them back into the room, heedless of their protests. “Now sit down, go to sleep, whatever, I don’t care, just shut up!”

“But Mr. Dwalin –”

“We can’t!”

“Not until we know if Bili’s all right!”

“We want to see him!”

“It’s not FAIR!”
“Your Adapted is fine,” a new voice stated from the doorway. The dwarves turned to look and saw King Thranduil, staring distastefully down at them. “He is being treated by our healers as we speak, but suffers no life-threatening injury.”

The princes opened their mouths, but Balin stepped in front of them easily and bowed to the elvenking.

“We thank you, King Thranduil, for your hospitality,” he said. “Please have someone inform us if there is a change in his condition. As you can see we are all quite worried.”

Thranduil inclined his head briefly. “Someone will keep you informed. You seem a more reasonable dwarf than most. Walk with me.”

“Of course,” Balin said seriously, following Thranduil down the hall. The princes made to follow, but Balin shot back a glare to rival Thorin’s, and they immediately halted.

As soon as they were out of earshot of the others, Thranduil paused and turned to face the elderly dwarf. “Tell me, how did Thorin Oakenshield of all people come to acquire an Adapted son?”

Chapter End Notes

AHHH LONGEST CHAPTER YET. I hope you all liked it, it's basically ALL THE FLUFF. SO much fluff. Also I guess we're not leaving Mirkwood left...there goes my outline...oops.

I tried to carefully edit it all, but I'm very tired (it's 2:30 am, ahaha, why am I so bad at time management??) and there are bound to be mistakes/errors. Feel free to ask me about any inconsistencies or anything else you notice and I'll be glad to talk about it. Thank you all SO MUCH for reading and reviewing and leaving kudos, every morning after I post a chapter, I wake up feeling like it's Christmas! :D
Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

Mirkwood, nightmares, and jealous elven kings. Bili did not sign up for this.

Chapter Notes

OH MY GOD I FINALLY CONQUERED THIS CHAPTER. I am soooo sorry.
Please enjoy what will be, Mahal willing, the FINAL Mirkwood chapter. Ugh.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

More out of paranoia than compassion for young Bili, Balin immediately set up a rotation of dwarves to sit with the young Adapted as he recuperated in the healing wing of Thranduil’s palace. When Bili questioned the constant companionship, the others shrugged and said to ask Balin, but the elderly dwarf would merely shake his head with a gentle smile and change the subject to Bili’s health.

When Thorin asked, however, that was a completely different matter.

“As soon as Bili is well, we should take our leave,” Balin said, pulling Thorin out of Bili’s room just as a grinning Bofur walked in and plunked himself down on the bedside chair. It was the day after Balin’s talk with Thranduil, and the first moment Thorin had allowed himself to be pulled away from his son.

“That was the plan,” Thorin said in a low voice, looking around briefly for eavesdropping elves. “What have you learned?”

“Nothing we didn’t already suspect, but it seems King Thranduil has something of a soft spot for children. I would not leave Bili alone with him.”

Thorin scoffed. “Do you think I would allow such occurrence in any case?”

“No, but it does not hurt to be on one’s guard, especially when elves are in involved,” Balin said, raising his eyebrows imploringly.

“Too right, my friend. Too right.”

Bili’s physical wounds were healing quickly, which he considered to be at least partly because of the elves’ help. Bili found himself fascinated with each of the elves who graced the healing halls with their presence, and in his more lucid moments between doses of Oin’s painkilling concoctions he recognized it as a trait he had possessed long before the Adapting.

He knew better than to express as much around the dwarves. Mostly.
“Stop mooning over the leaf-eaters already,” Nori grunted, leaning back on the thin chair next to Bili’s bed. He and Ori had spent most of the morning with the Adapted, telling stories and talking to each other when Bili fell asleep.

“I’m not!” Bili said heatedly, tearing his eyes away from the dark-haired elf who busied herself with stocking supplies at the other end of the room.

“He’s just interested because they’re so different from us,” Ori added. “Right, Bili?”

“Yeah, that,” Bili said, shooting the scribe a grateful look.

Nori just grunted again and pulled out one of his many hidden knives, twisting and around his fingers effortlessly. Bili turned his attention back to the elf, who was now intently studying a ledger that usually rested on a desk near the door.

“What’s that?” the dwarfling called out. The elf glanced up briefly, giving him a small smile before turning back to the pages.

“It is a stock of all our healing supplies,” she said, her voice light and lilting and altogether quite pleasant to Bili. From the look on Ori’s face, he judged that the scribe felt much the same. Nori just rolled his eyes.

“What kind of supplies do you keep?” Bili inquired. “Any flowers?”

“Flowers?!” squawked Nori.

The elf ignored him and stepped lightly over to the foot of Bili’s bed. “What do you know of medicinal flowers, youngling?”

“Oh, lots!” Bili said excitedly. “I love flowers, and plants, always have! We use them lots for healing in the Shire. Do elves use them too?”

The elf nodded. “I’m afraid we are running low on some of our supplies, for the forest has been very dark as of late. Would you like to look at the ledger? Perhaps you can tell me if we’re missing any important ones.”

Bili’s grin was wide as he nodded. Ori scooted his chair over as the elf swiftly procured another and brought it to the side of the bed. She sat and handed the book to Bili, who sat up and held it reverentially. Ori pulled out his own journal to record Bili’s knowledge of medicinal flowers.

Nori resigned himself to a very long, boring watch.

That evening, the entire Company converged upon Bili’s room, which was a pleasant surprise for the young dwarfling, although more than a little overwhelming. Thorin bade an elf attendant to have their meal brought to the healing halls, and he even managed to be mostly civil in his request.

The elves brought food and drink and small, portable tables, and the dwarves all settled in for a rowdy meal. Bili felt tired just looking at all of them, but he was thrilled to have them all in one place. He had seen them all individually and knew them to be fine, but it was a different matter entirely to see them acting like their usual selves.
They swapped stories of heroism and danger that Bili was certain had been embellished, but he grinned to hear them nevertheless.

“And then I said to the goblin, I told him to come at me if he dared, and when he did I ran him through!” exclaimed Gloin, reminding them all of their recent journey through Goblin Town.

“Oh, did you fight many of them?” Bili asked, eyes wide.

“Aye,” winked Gloin.

“That’s right, you weren’t with us,” frowned Bofur. “What happened to you, Bili?”

“Oh, I fell and found a magic ring and a scary creature and we had a battle of riddles!” he said. “It was terrifying!”

The others fell completely silent, which was very rare for them, especially at a mealtime.

“You told me about the ring and the creature, but not the riddles,” Thorin said with a frown.

“A creature?” Kili asked.

“Like a goblin?”

“A magic ring? What does it do?”

“Do you still have it? Can I see it?”

“Were you hurt, laddie?”

“Quiet.” Thorin commanded, and after a moment the clamor dimmed. “Perhaps you should tell us everything, Bili. Leave nothing out.”

And so Bili told them of his time in the depths of the Misty Mountains, and did his best to remember every detail. He told them of the rogue goblin who caused him to fall off the bridge they had all been standing on, and how the fall killed the goblin but he, luckily, landed on a pile of mushrooms. Thorin looked appalled, but did not interrupt. Kili continually interrupted, but Fili soon slapped a hand over his brother’s mouth.

Bili continued to tell them of waking up and finding a shining ring on the ground that seemed to call to him. He then spoke of the creature, who he called Gollum, and gave his best impersonation of the rasping and coughing the creature continuously emitted. Ori was rapidly transcribing the entire story, and each dwarf seemed to be hanging on the dwarfling’s words. When he got to the riddles, Kili ripped Fili’s hand away and demanded to know, exactly, every riddle the two had exchanged. Bili was delighted by the attention, if he was honest with himself. He recited everything he could remember, as well as his own thoughts; it was vastly entertaining to have all the Company listening to him, for once!

“And so I said, “What have I got in my pockets? You have three guesses!” and he was so mad, said it wasn’t a proper riddle, but I made him guess anyway! And of course he was wrong, so I told him he had to show me the way out!”

“And did he?”

Bili grinned and told them all of his daring escape, starting with putting on the ring and becoming invisible, and then chasing after Gollum and leaping over him, only to be stuck in the doorway and
lose all his beloved buttons.

By the end of his tale, Thorin’s face was covered in his hands. Fili and Kili were firing rapid questions, and Ori was doing his best to draw Gollum based off Bili’s description.

“Ahem,” Balin cleared his throat, patting Thorin with one hand.

“Shut up, all of ye!” Dwalin shouted, backing up his brother.

“That was quite the tale,” Balin said to Bili. “I’m afraid you’ve rather frightened some of us, laddie.”

“Yeah, Gollum was scary!” Bili nodded solemnly.

“I meant scared for your health in such a dangerous situation,” Balin said.

“I am sorry we did not keep closer watch on you,” Thorin interrupted as he dropped his hands. “I wish you had not gone through that.”

“Aye, Gollum sounds nasty!” cried Bofur. “You’re not to speak to such creatures again!”

“Never again, Bili!”

“Aye, laddie!”

“I couldn’t help it!” Bili said. “I couldn’t find my way out of a mountain on my own.”

“But any one of us could have,” Dwalin growled. “Stone sense, all dwarves got it. You’re not to wander any mountains without one of us, from here on out.”

“Stone sense? Will I get that?” Bili asked hopefully.

“Hard to tell what the Adapting will bring you,” Oin answered. “You’ll have to wait and see.”

Bili nodded, stifling a yawn. He had spoken in detail of the entire event, which took much longer than he expected. It didn’t help that the others kept interrupting as he spoke.

Thorin, of course, was watching him closely. “It’s time for Bili to rest. Everyone else, back to your quarters. I will stay here tonight.”

The others grumbled, but stood and slowly made their way out, shoving the extra chairs and tables off to the corner of the room as they went. Each table was piled high with empty dishes, licked completely bare by Bombur.

Bili snuggled down into his soft bedding. Thorin pulled the chair right next to the bed and reached out to stroke his son’s hair gently. Bili hummed happily.

“I will protect you from now on,” Thorin said quietly. “No more scary solo adventures for you, my son.”

It took barely any time at all for Bili to fall asleep.

However, he did not stay that way for long. Thorin was far from sleep himself, and noticed immediately when Bili began to toss and turn. Hoping he would fall back asleep on his own, Thorin settled in merely to watch.

Bili did not calm. His breathing became quick and labored, and his forehead beaded with sweat. At
his first cry, Thorin reached over and shook his son gently.

“Wake up, Bili,” he said. “Wake up! Tis but a dream, come now!”

He repeated that over and over until Bili finally opened his eyes. They darted around, and he immediately curled in on himself, sensing the presence over him and instinctively turning from it.

“Adad?” he said, ever so fearfully.

“I am here, I am here,” Thorin whispered. “Hush, little one. It was only a bad dream. I am here with you, and you are safe.”

“Oh,” Bili blinked, still breathing heavily. He uncurled and reached up for Thorin, who gathered him gently into his arms, mindful of Bili’s healing injuries.

“Shh, shh,” he repeated, wrapping his arms around the smaller creature. “It’s all right. Go back to sleep. I’ll be here.”

And soon, Bili did. But it would not be the only time Thorin had to shake him awake that night, or for many nights after.

After such a restless night, Bili felt very tired the next morning. Thorin still sat at his side, and although some of the others filtered in and out to check on their king and his son, Thorin declined any offer to take a break from his watch.

After a few hours, in which Bili dozed on and off and spoke few words to Thorin, Dori ran quickly into the room.

“Bombur has broken a table, and Bifur has gotten into something of a shouting match with some elf, with both of them yelling in different languages,” he said quickly. “Your presence is needed.”

The king leapt to his feet. Glancing at Bili, who just nodded at him to go, he walked out into the hallway and called for the nearest attendant.

“I must attend something, please go to our quarters and inform the first dwarf you see to come here immediately,” Thorin said to the elf. It was a thin, dark-haired man who Bili had seen around the healing halls frequently, though never spoke to him.

“We must go, Thorin,” Dori said, wringing his hands.

The elf gave the briefest of nods and set off. Thorin stepped back into the room.

“Will you be all right for a moment alone?” he asked Bili.

“Go, it’s okay!”

“I’ll be back very soon,” he assured. “Someone should be here to sit with you in a minute.” And with that, he and Dori left.

Bili didn’t truly mind being alone, but he understood his father’s desire to keep him not only entertained but protected; what he didn’t quite understand was Thorin’s complete mistrust of all elves, even the ones who had been helping to heal Bili.

He knew the story of Thorin and Thranduil, to be sure, but Thranduil had been nothing but helpful –
icy, maybe, but helpful nevertheless – towards Bili, and he found in himself a growing fondness for the elvenking.

(And no, it wasn’t just that he had always found elves to be beautiful, and King Thranduil especially more stunning than anything or anyone he had ever laid eyes on. He knew far, far better than to ever mention such a thing to his adad or anyone else, for that matter).

He pondered on it a little longer, staring into the space around his bed and taking in the general beauty of the halls. It was truly amazing that such a marvelous place could exist in the middle of that awful forest.

Bili was only afforded a few minutes of silence, however, before the icy king himself entered the room. The young dwarfling immediately sat up as straight as he could in the bed, no longer languishing into his pillows. To his surprise, the king didn’t maintain his usual distance, but rather came to be seated in the exact bedside chair that Thorin had so recently vacated.

“Hello,” said Bili tentatively, a little intimidated by King Thranduil’s impassive stare.

“Hello, young one,” Thranduil said, his face never changing. “How do you fare?”

“I feel much better, thank you,” Bili said politely. He fought to tamp down the questions that were flooding his mind, and he feared it would soon be a losing battle.

“May I ask you about yourself?” the king continued, heedless of Bili’s squirming. “We have yet to speak privately, and I would see that you’re treatment has been fair.”

“Um, sure?” The dwarfling wasn’t sure what to make of that, but it was best not to turn down the king currently hosting them, he felt. A small part of him relished the chance to speak to the king, but now that he was faced with the opportunity he found Thranduil to be quite intimidating.

“I have spoken with your dwarves regarding your Adaption, but I would hear from you the situation as it stands,” Thranduil explained. He spoke calmly, but after a moment leaned in close to smaller creature. “Have they treated you with any unkindness? Do you feel…safe with them, little one?”

Bili blinked. “Of course! Thorin was scary at first, but he’s my adad now! I love him!”

Thranduil sat back, examining Bili through otherworldly eyes. For once in his life, Bili held his tongue and waited for the other to speak.

“You may speak openly to me, young one,” Thranduil continued after a minute. He continued to gaze at Bili as though he were the unfathomable one. “You need not lie about your treatment, or your loyalties. I will not betray your confidence. But should you so desire, I would also open my home to you, little Adapting.”

Bili did not even think to hide his shock. Was the great, cold elvenking offering the same thing that Thorin had mere weeks ago, as they sat around the campfire on the Carrock? Thorin’s worst, most fearsome enemy would offer protection and…family to a former Hobbit who he had only recently met?

But why?

“You may think on it for the duration of your convalescence,” Thranduil said when Bili did not respond. “I do not detect any immediate danger in your situation, my opinion of your king and…father notwithstanding. You seem content enough. I would never have believed Thorin Oakenshield to lower himself to beg for my assistance, but the changes you have wrought in him, even in this
short time, are plainly evident.”

“Thanks, I think,” said Bili softly. “I know you two don’t get along very well.”

Thranduil’s lips quirked, briefly, in the semblance of a smile at Bili’s assessment.

“Truly, I’m much happier with the dwarves than I was when I lived with the other hobbits. They didn’t like me much,” Bili said, nodding at Thranduil as though confiding a great secret.

“I certainly couldn’t imagine why,” Thranduil said with an actual, honest-to-goodness smile. A small one, but Bili grinned to see it, and his eyes lit up to see Thranduil’s cold gaze soften.

With all the grace afforded to his kind, the elf rose from his seat. He looked down at the young Adapted, judging silently.

“Young ones are a gift, Adapted or not,” he said, his tone regal. “I would not have you stay with your dwarves out of fear or obligation. My son is away, but he would welcome a brother, if you decide to stay. I will protect you from any repercussions of such a decision.”

“Thank you, my lord,” Bili stuttered out, unsure of the proper response to such a declaration. “But I’m truly very happy –“

“BILI!”

The panicked shout was unmistakably Thorin’s. The dwarf rushed into the room and pushed immediately past Thranduil to Bili’s side.

“What have you said to him?” he demanded of the elf, his tone dangerous.

Thranduil met his gaze with equal vitriol. “I am merely explaining to your young one his options.”

Thorin’s hand found Bili’s. “Did I not make it clear that you were not to speak to him alone?”

“You do not command me in my own home, Thorin Oakenshield,” Thranduil hissed back. “And the welfare of young ones comes before all, even you must agree.”

“Aye, but you’ll leave the welfare of MY young one to me,;” spat Thorin.

“Adad, stop it!” Bili exclaimed, tugging on Thorin’s hand to turn his attention away from the elf. “King Thranduil just wanted to make sure I was okay. I told him I am!”

Thorin studied Bili, as though searching for some sort of trauma inflicted. “Nevertheless, he should not bother you.”

“He wasn’t bothering me, adad,” Bili sighed, shaking his head.

“Who’s bothering who?” Kili and Fili both pushed through the doorway at that moment, eyeing Thranduil with suspicion.

“No one!” cried Bili, who was ignored as his cousins came to stand by his bed.

“Ah, wonderful, stay with Bili,” Thorin instructed. “The elf and I need to talk.”

“So it seems,” said Thranduil stiffly. He turned to the door and walked out, not waiting for Thorin to catch up.
“Stay with him,” Thorin growled at his nephews, glaring them both in the eye before turning to follow the elf.

“What was that about?” Fili frowned, staring at the empty doorway.

“What was King Leaf-Eater doing here?” Kili asked Bili.

“He said I could stay with him if I wanted. I told him I didn’t!” Bili assured at their stricken faces. “He was just being nice.”

“Yeah, nice, right.”

“Uncle Thorin’s right, you shouldn’t talk to him alone.”

“Well, I’m not anymore, am I?” Bili rolled his eyes.

“And you won’t again, little cousin,” Fili promised. “Now, who wants to play a game?”

Thranduil led Thorin out of the healing halls, winding down the hallways into a secluded room with a simple set of chairs. Thorin sat reluctantly, but he knew the elf wouldn’t speak to him unless he did.

“Leave my dwarfling alone,” he began without pretense.

“Your dwarfling,” Thranduil said the word disdainfully, as though it pained him to refer to Bili as such. “Was found wandering my forest, alone, injured, and ill. No thanks to your no doubt misguided venture. Which you have yet to share with me, and I demand you do so now.”

“I sought help, if you remember,” Thorin growled. “He was alone out of fear and misunderstanding. I have since rectified the matter and he knows not to wander again.”

“What were you doing in my forest to begin with?” Thranduil demanded. “Yes, starving, trying to reach the other side, please dispense with the obvious distractions from my greater question. You know what I’m asking.”

Thorin studied the elf before him, sitting stiffly yet with all grandiose manner as he could summon. Thorin did not want to share his quest with this elf, this so hated and despised elf, who had already caused him no shortage of grief. And yet this elf had seen him in yet another desperate hour, and unlike when Erebor fell, did not ignore Thorin’s pleas. He worried that Thranduil would seek to detain him as Elrond had, but he could not see a way out of Mirkwood without Thranduil’s acquiescence.

“We are going to Erebor to reclaim our home,” he said, finally. “And if you seek to stop us, you will find yourself sorely regretful, I vow you that.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to everyone for bearing with me this past week! I LOVE all your comments and kudos and I super appreciate your patience. I have two jobs that became quite busy and innumerable unexpected family issues that inexplicably popped up this past week, and whenever I did have free time, I couldn't muster the energy or the focus necessary to
write. I apologize, and while I can't promise it'll never happen again, I can say that I am INCREDIALLY HAPPY that Mirkwood is almost over and very motivated to write the next chapters.

Thanks again, I love all of you so much and I really hope you enjoy this chapter! (Holy crap, dialogue much?? This chapter is like all dialogue. SORRY).
Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

The FINAL Mirkwood chapter. Finally. Thorin's had enough, too.

Chapter Notes

Sorry it's up late tonight, I won tickets to the Marvel Experience from the radio and I spent most of this evening running around dressed up as Ms. Marvel. It was glorious, nerdy fun :)

Enjoy the new chapter, and I'll try to update soon!

Thranduil stared impassively at Thorin, his face deceptively blank. Thorin knew this, and refused to speak another word until the elf reacted.

Finally, after long minutes, Thranduil leaned back in his chair.

"Erebor," he stated, his tone completely flat.

Thorin stuck out his chin, adopting a haughty glare. "It is past time I reclaim my homeland."

"You're a fool, but that is hardly news," Thranduil sneered. "And I would be a fool not to question the wisdom of this…expedition."

"I care not for your opinion, elf," Thorin said, folding his arms. "This is our quest, and you are not in a position to stop me."

"You cannot seriously be considering bringing your underage, underdeveloped, newly Adapted hobbit son to face a dragon," Thranduil continued on, heedless of Thorin. "I care little if you wake the beast and get yourselves swallowed whole, but I cannot in good conscience allow you to place the young one in danger."

"Were it up to me, he wouldn't even be on this quest. But he was hired to help us and began Adapting after the fact, and I've had little choice but to continue with him at my side. I will not abandon him now," Thorin said, shaking his head.

"If you care for his wellbeing, leave him here, in comfort and peace, where he may rest and recuperate and come to learn of his new position," Thranduil said, his voice calm and steady and entirely rational.

"Never," spat Thorin. "Would I leave him in the care of an elf. Especially one who has already attempted to win his affections away from me."

Thranduil’s mouth twisted into a curved, wicked smile. "Attempted? Why, you do not give me
enough credit, Thorin Oakenshield. I have merely engaged in conversation with your son. I would have him maintain his free will; if that were not the case, I would need no words to keep him here with me.”

“Is that a threat?” growled Thorin.

“You’re free to take my words however you see fit,” Thranduil said, gaze wandering around the room with deceptive nonchalance.

“And if I choose to take them as a threat?” Thorin spoke in a low tone, eyes flashing with anger. “What then? Will you stop me, elf? Will you keep me here against my will, take my son by force? Will you betray me and my people as you did before, long ago when we called for your aid?”

“That decision was not made lightly, nor was it made out of malice,” Thranduil snapped, a brief flicker of emotion racing through his eyes.

Thorin laughed, a deep and biting sound that echoed through the room. “Not made out of malice, says you. Well, it matters not anymore, does it? The very least you could do is not hinder me now, as I try to reclaim what was lost, partly due to your actions.”

“Do not think I allow any to speak to me in such a way, dwarf,” the elf said, his icy gaze matching Thorin’s fiery glint. “I have tolerated you and your kind far more than you deserve. I could have you locked away until your mortal bones disintegrated unto dust. Were I interested in hosting such vile prisoners, I would do so, and you would have no power to stop me, Oakenshield. But as I am uninterested in your continued presence, much less in your continued existence, I will grant you leave from these halls. It is only out of my endless compassion for the poor youngling who had the misfortune to be swept along by dwarves rather than kindly elves that I don’t expel you with greater force.”

Thorin stood, and for one moment the shivering air between them seemed precursor to greater violence. But after that moment, Thorin squared his shoulders and marched toward the doorway pausing only briefly when he reached it.

“I thank you for your care toward Bili,” he said, turning his head so that Thranduil could not mistake his words. “But it is only out of care for my son that I say so. Once we leave, I will not allow you near him ever again, and if our paths meet once more, your feelings towards my dwarfling will do you no service.”

He gave the elvenking no chance at a response, and Thranduil did not speak up to stop him. Thorin’s footsteps echoed long after the dwarf had gone.

“…and that’s how our amad found us, tangled in a heap and poor Gimli covered from head to toe in syrup!” Fili finished with a grin.

“No!” Bili gasped, eyes wide.

“Aye! Took a full week to get it all out of his beard, it did!” Kili added, roaring with laughter.

“H-how!?” Bili wheezed, tears welling up in the corners of his eyes. “How did you mess up hide and seek so badly!?”
Fili and Kili were doubled over, each relying on the other for support. Their laughter set off a fresh swell of Bili’s, who clutched his now aching ribs.

“Did you get in trouble?” Bili asked when he was at last breathing calmly enough.

“Oh, loads,” said Kili, rolling his eyes. “Amad was quite creative with that punishment!”

“Gimli’s amad too, he wouldn’t talk to us for a month!” Fili added.

They dissolved into laughter again, and Bili smiled brightly at the sight of his cousins enjoying themselves so much.

“I’m sure you’ll see amad’s impressive anger for yourself once she comes to Erebor,” Kili said, mischief written all over his face. “Between us three and Gimli, she’ll have her hands full!”

“Right, no stopping us except her punishments,” Fili stuck out his tongue.

“Is she…is she mean?” Bili asked hesitantly.

“Mean? Of course not,” Kili said. “Family’s not mean to each other, Bili.”

“We get in trouble and she gets mad, sure,” Fili nodded. “But she’s never mean.”

Kili’s face was clouded. “Was your amad ever mean to you, Bili? Your hobbit amad, I mean?”

“No!” said Bili, looking shocked. “No, not my amad! She loved me, and so did my first adad. But…”

“But?” prompted Fili, whose brow had furrowed as well.

“But none of my other family was nice to me,” Bili said quietly. “No one wanted to…to deal with me after my first parents died. All the Tooks said I had too much Baggins in me and all the Bagginses said I had too much Took in me. And there were just so many cousins and aunts and uncles, I think they all thought someone else would check in on me sometimes, but since I was of age no one made sure. Only the Sackville-Bagginses ever remembered me, and they hated me and wanted Bag End for themselves!”

“Oh, Bili,” Fili started.

Kili looked crushed. “That’s awful! You’re never going back there!”

“We’re your family now, and you can share our amad!” Fili nodded, placing one hand on Kili’s shoulder and one on Bili’s.

Bili bit his lip, looking between the two brothers. “Do you think she’ll like me?”

The smiles dropped off Fili and Kili’s faces.

“Of course she’ll love you, Bili!” Fili said, grabbing Bili’s hand in his own. “You don’t have to worry about that.”

“She can yell with the best of them, but she loves us,” Kili said earnestly. “And you’re family. That means she’ll love you too.”

Bili looked down, far from reassured. The brothers exchanged a glance.
“What makes you think she wouldn’t, Bili?” asked Fili.

Bili mumbled something that neither brother could hear.

“Speak up, little cousin,” Kili said encouragingly.

“Most people don’t,” he said, just loud enough. “Like me, that is.”

Mindful of Bili’s still healing injuries, Kili climbed onto the bed and snuggled close to his cousin, wrapping one arm around his shoulders and cuddling him close. Fili kept a tight grasp on Bili’s hand.

“I’m sorry that you’ve been made to think such horrible things,” said Kili, nosing into Bili’s hair.

“Our amad is not like the hobbits who were mean to you. She’ll love you, just like Thorin loves you and we love you,” Fili continued.

“I love you too,” Bili said, immediately blushing and burying his face into Kili’s shoulder.

The dwarves smiled, and for a moment all was right in the world.

Thorin barely said a word to the rest of the Company when he returned from his meeting with Thranduil. Instead, he immediately made for Bili’s side, and merely grunted at anyone who spoke to him. They recognized that he was lost in thought, and let him be. Fili and Kili stayed for a while longer, until Bili was tired enough to go to bed.

The elf healer who checked on him that evening proclaimed the dwarfling nearly well; he was to stay in bed another day or two, and make sure his illness had completely fled before allowing him back out into the wild.

Bili was happy they would be moving on soon, for he felt rather guilty that he was the reason for their delay. He knew Thorin needed to get to the mountain, and soon, and sitting around in Mirkwood wasn’t helping anyone. Thorin simply dismissed the healer and settled down in the bedside chair to rest at least one more night.

It took hardly any time at all for Bili to fall asleep, and like every night, he knew he wouldn’t stay asleep for long. This night was no different. Two hours after he had fallen asleep, Bili woke to his adad shaking him gently. Thorin leaned over the bed, one hand on Bili’s shoulder and the other threading through his hair.

“Wake up, my son,” Thorin whispered. “Tis all right, everything is okay now. You’re safe, I’m right here.”

Bili looked around wildly for a moment before realizing the situation was the same as every other night. “Was I making a lot of noise, adad?”

“No more than ever,” Thorin said. He sat on the edge of the bed, continuing his gentle stroking through his son’s hair.

They sat like that for a few minutes, Bili’s rapid breathing slowly calming.

“What did you dream tonight?” Thorin asked.

“What kinds of feelings?”

“Everything felt…dark,” Bili said slowly. “It all just felt dark and I felt really bad about it. And I still feel bad, and I don’t know why.”

Thorin nodded sympathetically, but couldn’t hide the deeper concern in his eyes. This was often the case with his son’s nightmares. Ever since Bili had been rescued and brought to the healing halls, his sleep was interrupted by dark dreams that he was unable to describe when he woke. He only ever remembered how the dreams made him feel, and it was always terrible.

He wanted to make it all better, and take the dreams away from his son, if only he knew how. Thorin had yet to notice if anything made them worse or better, but he was certain part of it was due to the horrible dank forest.

“I’m sorry, Bili,” he said quietly. He pulled his son up and into a hug. Bili relaxed into Thorin immediately, and they sat that way for a long while. Eventually, Bili’s breathing evened out, and Thorin lay him back down to rest, his own mind too troubled to sleep.

The next morning, Thorin left Bili to learn some words in Khuzdul with Ori and Bifur. He sought out Balin in the rooms the Company was sharing. With a quick glance around the room, Thorin settled down next to his old friend, who was making notes about supplies on a piece of paper borrowed from the elves.

“When are we leaving?” Balin asked without preamble.

“The elves say Bili will be ready either today or tomorrow. I suggest as soon as possible,” Thorin said darkly. “I think this place is getting to all of us, including my son. He has nightmares every night.”

Balin nodded, never taking his eyes off his paper. “You have yet to share with me your plan once we leave the palace.”

“It’s not much of one,” said Thorin with a grimace. “You may not be impressed.”

“Any plan is good enough for me, old friend.”

Thorin nodded. “The elvenking offered a guide out of the forest. We will take it, if only to avoid any more mishaps with spiders and enchanted rivers. Then we must follow the river all the way to the town of men, where we may resupply and arrange for better plans. We’ll need weapons, among other things.”

“And what of the mountain? The dragon?” Balin pressed. “We no longer have a burglar.”

“That isn’t quite true,” Thorin said, casting his gaze around the room until it landed on a certain dwarf with star-shaped hair.

Balin glanced up and followed Thorin’s gaze. “You raise an interesting point. Very interesting, indeed.”

Fili and Kili sat together in one of the rooms branching off from the healing halls. It was void of any elf or dwarf, but had many empty cots lined up for future use. The two brothers had taken to
sneaking off on their own at least once a day, sometimes to spar or spy on the others, but often simply to sit and talk.

Fili had taken one look at Kili that morning and dragged him off to the empty room, where they perched close to each other on the edge of a cot.

“What are you thinking, Kee?” Fili said, nudging his brother with his shoulder.

Kili shrugged. “Just thinking a lot about Bili. And what we’re going to do now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well,” Kili said, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “First, what are we going to do when we get to the mountain, since we don’t have a burglar. And then how we’re going to fight a dragon, and get all our treasure back, and clean up the mountain since it’s bound to be a mess after the dragon lived there so long…”

“All those are things we’ll worry about together, as a Company,” Fili interrupted, resting his chin on Kili’s shoulder. “What’s really bothering you?”

Kili looked down at his lap. “Remember what Bili told us Thranduil said? That Bili could stay here if he wanted instead of going to the mountain, and Bili said no?”

“Yeah, stupid leaf-eater, trying to steal our little cousin!” scoffed Fili.

Kili bit his lip. “What if he’s right, though?”

“What’s really bothering you?”

“About making Bili stay here!” Kili exclaimed, turning to face his brother. “Bili shouldn’t go to face a dragon, Fee! What if he gets hurt again? What if he dies?”

“Kili,” said his brother, eyes wide. “We won’t let Bili die –”

“What if we can’t stop it?” shouted Kili. “We can’t control everything! What if the dragon gets him and there’s nothing we can do about it? He shouldn’t be here, amad didn’t even want us to come, and she was probably right! We probably should have stayed behind with her! I don’t want us to die, Fee! And I don’t want to watch Bili die!”

Fili sat, stunned. It was the most Kili had said about his feelings in weeks, and Fili felt he was remiss in his duties as the elder brother if he hadn’t even noticed all of this going on in Kili’s heart.

“Oh, Kee,” Fili said with a sigh. “You make a great big brother, you know.”

“What do you mean?” Kili said, confused.

“I mean, that that’s how I feel about you, all the time,” Fili said, shaking his head. “I always worry about you, and if you’re safe, and if you’re going to do something to get yourself killed. And I’ve worried about you this whole quest. If I hadn’t wanted to come along for Uncle, I would have come just to chase after you and keep you safe.”

“Really?” Kili asked with wide eyes.

“Of course! You’re my little brother. That’s how it works,” Fili smiled.

“But this is terrible! I’m constantly worried and thinking about the future!” Kili cried. “I hate it!”
“Welcome to my life, little brother,” Fili said, ruffling Kili’s dark locks. “I look after you, and we both look after Bili. That’s what big brothers do, even if we’re only cousins.”

Kili nodded resolutely, beaming at his brother. “Yeah, we look after him!”

Fili laughed. “See? Don’t get yourself so worked up. It’ll be okay. And Uncle and the others are definitely coming up with a new plan, one that doesn’t involve letting Bili anywhere near the dragon. So don’t worry too much, okay?”

Kili nodded. “You’re right, Fee. Thanks.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” Fili said, wrapping an arm around his brother contentedly.

That evening, Bili was given leave to move out of the healing halls. He did so with great delight, his steps light as he followed Thorin down the hallways and into the Company’s rooms. The other dwarves let up a cheer when they saw him, and Bili blushed.

Thorin stood in the center of the room and the others fell quiet.

“We will be leaving on the morrow,” Thorin began, loudly and clearly. “The elvenking will provide supplies, provisions, and a guide. We will move swiftly and be out of this wretched forest in a few days.”

Another cheer went up at his words, and he allowed them a moment before coughing audibly and gathering their attention once again.

“After that, we’ll follow the river to Laketown, where we’ll rest again and resupply before taking the mountain,” Thorin said. “I hope you all have used your time wisely and rested up, for we are in the final stretch of our journey. Before long, we will back in the halls we deserve, and Erebor will be ours!”

This time, the cheers went on for many minutes, and Thorin let them to it. He directed Bili to a corner with a few cots arranged close to each other. Thorin gestured for Bili to sit on one, and he took the other.

“I need to ask you something, and I want you to answer me honestly,” Thorin began. He waited for Bili’s tentative nod before continuing. “Thranduil has offered you a place here if you wish to stay. The contract you signed as a burglar hobbit is no longer valid, and you will be facing no dragon, whether you come with us or not. I told Thranduil that I would not leave you behind, but now I see that you should at least have the chance to say how you feel.”

Bili sat back, surprise written on his face. It contorted into a dark scowl. “I don’t want to stay here! You can’t make me!”

Thorin’s lips quirked upwards. “I can’t?”

“No!” Bili said with a huff. “You can’t make me stay! King Thranduil is nice but you can’t leave me behind! I’m going with you, adad!”

The last bit belied a desperation that Thorin immediately recognized. He knew his son feared being abandoned, left behind and forgotten, and he regretted that Bili feared such from him.

“Then go with me you shall,” Thorin said, nodding solemnly. “I do not wish to leave you with the
elves, nor would I ever wish you to speak to them again. Tomorrow we leave, so rest well tonight.”

Bili nodded, and as if to show his eagerness and preparedness, flung himself back onto the bed and pulled the covers up to his chin. “Good night, adad!”

Thorin relaxed into a smile. “Good night, Bili.”

The final morning of their stay in Mirkwood began early. Thorin and the elder dwarves were up at first light, packing and arranging and haggling with the rather distraught looking elves who had been sent to deal with them.

Slowly, the others awoke as well, mostly when breakfast was presented. They ate their fill, laughing and shouting and generally disturbing the peacefulness of the halls. Bili was thrilled to be a part of the group again, and the energy they carried seemed indestructible.

Of course, that lasted only until they had finished packing, and the elvenking himself entered the room. Head held high and hair flowing majestically behind him, Thranduil placed himself squarely in front of the group.

“Your guide will meet you in front of the palace,” he spoke, looking just over the heads of the dwarves.

Thorin grunted his thanks and lead the way out into the halls. Thranduil and his attendants followed at a short distance, as though herding the group out of their kingdom.

At the steps of the palace, Thranduil stepped forward and placed a hand on Bili’s shoulder.

“Are you certain of your decision, little one?” he asked, holding onto Bili lightly.

The dwarfling nodded sharply. “Thank you for healing me, King Thranduil. I hope I can meet you again someday, but I must go with my adad now.”

Thranduil looked unsurprised. “Remember that you must only call for my aide and it will be granted, to you who I name elf-friend.”

The dwarves, all of whom had been watching warily, all looked varying degrees of surprised.

Thorin stepped right next to Bili and folded his arms. “What do you say, Bili?”

Bili grinned, first at his adad and then at the elf. Without any warning, he flung his arms around Thranduil’s stomach and hugged him tightly. The look on the elf’s face was one of uncharacteristic shock, and Bili let go before Thranduil could make any sort of response.

“Bye, King Thranduil! See you later!” Bili shouted, waving happily as he walked down the steps and over to the waiting elf guide. The dwarves followed him down, talking loudly amongst themselves.

Thorin gave the elvenking one last glare, then turned around and stomped to Bili’s side.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Get us out of here!” he barked at the guide, who raised a single eyebrow before setting off, leaving the dwarves to follow through the thick underbrush as best they could.

Thranduil watched until he could no longer see the tiny mop of thick brown hair.
Yay, what did you all think? I know I didn't get around to responding to every comment on last chapter, I'll probably do so tomorrow. Thanks for reading and reviewing and kudoing! Let me know if there's anything you'd like to see! I love all your comments, questions, requests, and theories!
Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

Did someone say Laketown?

Chapter Notes

WE'RE FINALLY AT LAKE TOWN WOO!!! Due to how long it took me to get out of Mirkwood, I'm now anticipating 16 chapters for this story, although that could change if I get long-winded again (who am I kidding? Of course I will...I intended to have far more happen in this chapter, but then Dwalin and Tilda happened! Sigh...) Anyway, enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Even with an elven guide, it took days for the entire Company to make it through the rest of Mirkwood forest. Neither their guide nor Thorin spoke much during this time; the former out of clear distaste for the dwarves, and the latter for reasons known only to himself, and probably Balin.

Bili secretly suspected his adad was frustrated over something. He tried to talk to him, and while Thorin would respond and smile at him, he wouldn’t answer Bili’s questions. Troubled, Bili tried to eavesdrop on his father’s conversations with Balin each night, but he was always caught and sent off to sit with his cousins.

During the days as they walked the long paths through the dark forest, Bili spent most of his time wedged between Fili and Kili, and the three of them were by far the most high-spirited of the group. Their constant laughing and chattering was almost enough to lift the others out of the despair that Mirkwood placed over them, and even the elf guide was known to cast the three young ones small smiles from time to time.

Finally, after nearly a week of traveling and traipsing through all manner of underbrush, the group began to notice the trees thinning and light shining through. The guide stayed with them until they reached the edge of the trees, and then he cast an arm out to point at the river flowing out of the trees and down to a very distant lake.

“Follow the river to Laketown, a human village, and rest. It is a long walk from there to the Lonely Mountain, no matter how close it appears from here,” their guide said. It was the most words he had spoken the entire week, and Bili felt a little disappointed that he did not even know the guide’s name.

“Thank you, sir!” Bili piped up when it became clear the other dwarves would offer no such signs of gratitude.

The elf inclined his head. “You are welcome, young one. On behalf of King Thranduil, I would remind you to call on him if you ever are in need of aid.”

With that, the elf disappeared back into the forest, leaving behind a brightly smiling dwarfling and his
disgruntled father.

It took even more days to reach the distant lake, but the mood amongst the Company was far brighter now that they were out of the forest and Erebor was in sight. To Bili’s delight, Thorin declared that his lessons in dwarf culture would begin now that they were out of the forest. His day was split up according to his lessons. In the morning, he would walk alongside Ori and Bifur and learn vocabulary and basic sentence structure of Khuzdul. Ori was a great teacher, very patient and happy to answer all of Bili’s questions. Bifur was also quite helpful, often the first to correct Bili’s pronunciation and teach him the accompanying signs in Iglishmek. In the afternoons, Bili walked with Balin to learn the basics of the life he would live as a dwarven prince. Fili and Kili often walked nearby and contributed to the conversation, often without prompting. Bili found these lessons to be both enlightening and utterly terrifying; Balin, however, was surprisingly perceptive, and whenever he sensed Bili was feeling overwhelmed, he would give a sharp whistle that always had Thorin rushing to Bili’s side to comfort and calm the dwarfling.

In the evenings when they made camp, Dwalin gave Bili basic weapon training. Bili found this to be the most challenging of all his lessons, and perhaps the thing he had the least experience in. Much like his older brother, Dwalin was extremely patient and always seemed to know exactly when Bili needed to take a break or stop for the night.

Overall, it was an exhausting journey to Laketown, and Bili’s good behavior could only last so long. The last night before they made it to the town of men, Bili found himself to be thoroughly tired and completely disinterested in his lessons with Dwalin. The whole day had tried his patience; he had awoken with a headache that didn’t seem to fade, making concentrating on learning basic verb conjugation difficult, and Ori’s sympathetic but disappointed frown made him feel bad. Then his mind kept wandering during Balin’s lectures, which caused Balin to scold him more than once. It didn’t help that, in light of their proximity to Laketown, Balin had chosen to speak about the manners expected of a dwarven prince when visiting foreign lands, and Fili and Kili had barely heard one mention of “proper greetings” before immediately vacating the general area, leaving Bili to suffer on his own.

Bili sat around the campfire that evening, eating his food as slowly as possible so as to put off the inevitable lesson with Dwalin. Usually he liked these lessons, but he was just so tired and worn out, and all he wanted to do was fall into his bedroll next to his adad and sleep.

Soon, he was the only one left eating, and Bombur kept sending him glances from where he was washing their plates in the river. Bili pushed what was left of his rabbit meat and berries around his plate, refusing to acknowledge to himself how sullenly he was acting.

Dwalin made his presence known to Bili by stomping right up to the dwarfling and standing, muscled arms crossed. Slowly, and with great regret, Bili looked up at the warrior.

“It’s time to practice,” Dwalin grunted.

Bili heaved a heavy, dramatic sigh. Much to his further annoyance, Dwalin smirked at him.

“Do we have to?” whined the dwarfling, not moving to stand. “I’m tired.”

“You’re tired?” Dwalin repeated, raising both eyebrows.
“Yes, I’m tired!” Bili exclaimed, slamming his metal plate onto the ground. “We spend all day walking and I have to learn all sorts of stuff and my head has been hurting all day and my legs hurt and my feet hurt and my arms hurt and I don’t want to practice!”

Dwalin was quiet. With growing dread, Bili realized that everyone was silent, and the entire campsite listening to their conversation.

With eyes wide in fear at what he’d just done – dug his own grave, he was sure, judging by the way Fili and Kili were staring at him – Bili turned back to look up at Dwalin. He felt the overwhelming urge to run and hide and make himself small, but found his muscles to be completely frozen in place.

After a moment, to the utter shock of the dwarfling, Dwalin gave a simple nod and sat down next to Bili. His hulking girth nudged Bili as he settled himself down, cross-legged and awkward.

Finally Dwalin stilled. Bili couldn’t rip his eyes away from the warrior.

“Are you gonna finish that?” he said, gesturing to the remains of Bili’s dinner.

Bili shook his head mutely. Dwalin picked up the plate and scooped the bits of last few bites of rabbit meat into his mouth. Distantly, Bili heard someone else bark out a laugh (probably Bofur, or maybe Nori) and the rest of the Company go back to their previous tasks.

“What are you doing?” Bili finally asked, no longer able to take the suspense.

“Eating,” Dwalin said plainly.

Bili frowned. Why was Dwalin making this so difficult? If he was going to get yelled at, he wanted to just get it over with!

But before he could think of something else to ask, Dwalin slurped down the last piece of meat, and with a small burp set the plate on the ground next to him. He reached into one of the many layers of his tunic and furs and pulled out a small jar.

“This is a salve for bruises and sore muscles,” Dwalin explained, holding the jar up to Bili’s eye level. “Oin’s real good at makin’ it. You should put this on all the parts that hurt before you go to sleep tonight. Ask Thorin to help you if you need.”

Bili accepted the jar as Dwalin handed it over and set it on top of his pack.

“I’m sorry for what I said,” Bili mumbled. “Am I in trouble?”


Bili stared, mouth open.

“Thing is,” Dwalin continued, looking at Bili seriously. “You need to tell me, or Thorin, or someone when you’re too sore or tired to do what yer asked. Don’t wait til it gets so bad, next time. And yes, there’ll be a next time.”

“Sorry I didn’t say anything sooner,” Bili said softly.

“S’alright,” Dwalin said, leaning back on his hands.

They sat together quietly for a few more minutes. Bili thought it was rather nice, spending time with Dwalin without the looming threat of being maimed, bruised, or otherwise injured.
Dwalin grunted again and got to his feet. “Don’t forget the salve. And talk to Oin bout what to do for your head, if it still hurts.”


The warrior nodded and stalked off to his own bedroll, not before Bili caught a glimpse of a smile in return.

The next morning came quickly, and Bili felt much better than he had the night before. There was still a distant darkness hanging over all of them, and to Bili it seemed to be coming from the tall mountain the crept ever closer.

Around mid-morning, they reached the edge of Laketown, and the guards at the gate seemed stunned into silence at their approach.

“Who are you and what do you want?” shouted the first guard to remember his position.

“Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror King under the Mountain! I wish to see the Master of your town,” Thorin said steadily. He pulled Bili up next to him. Despite their bedraggled state, when Thorin stood with his head and shoulders back and eyes lifted high to meet the guards’, he looked to Bili for all the world like the true king he was.

The guard laughed, albeit nervously. “The Master ain’t available right now. Who else you got there?”

“My kin and companions,” Thorin said, just as regally. “My sister-sons, Fili and Kili of the race of Durin, and my newly Adapted son, Bili.”

“Adapted, you say?” said the second guard, speaking for the first time. “We got one a those, too.”

“Aye!” said the first guard, standing up straight. “And maybe he’d be up for…entertaining, since the Master’s indisposed, an’ all.”

“Think you might be onto somethin’ there,” said the second. “Why don’t you follow me, and I’ll take ya to him.”

“We would be grateful,” said Thorin, but Bili could tell he was less than satisfied.

The man led the entire group through the winding streets and bridges of the town. He reassured them that the walk wasn’t long, but to Bili it felt like it took forever. The air was frigid this close to the water, even under the bright sun, and some of the wood they walked over seemed close to rotting. Bili walked close to Thorin, one hand wound through his father’s, as was custom for them now.

Finally, the guard stopped in front of a raised wooden house, no different than the many others in the area. All looked fairly rickety, and Bili wasn’t sure how warm they could possibly be inside, with all the holes in the slats and rotting edges.

The guard marched right up to the door and pounded on it. Thorin stood shortly behind him, with Bili next to him. Fili and Kili followed, Dwalin and Balin next, and all the others at a short distance.

Bili could hear shuffling and moving inside the house, and after a moment the door pulled open, just
a crack.

“What do you want?” came a small voice from inside.

“Got somethin’ fer your father,” said the man. “Go and fetch him.”

“He’s not here!” the voice said, more forcefully. “He’s out working, like you should be.”

“Watch yer tongue!” the guard barked, before looking sharply at Thorin. Shuffling, he turned back to the door. “Got something your father’ll be interested in. A bunch of dwarves, one of em Adapted.”

“Adapted?!” the voice squealed. “Just like Da!”

Suddenly the door whipped open, revealing a young human girl about Bili’s size. Bili was not entirely familiar with how men aged, but he had known some human rangers back in the Shire, and this girl seemed to be close to his own dwarfling age.

“Greetings, I am Thorin son of Thrain son of Thror,” Thorin began. “This is my Adapted son, Bili.”

“Wow, an Adapted dwarf!” the girl shrieked. “I’m Tilda! What were you before you Adapted, Bili? A man?”

“No, a hobbit,” Bili said, rather shyly with all the attention on him.

“Mama used to tell stories of hobbits!” Tilda said, her tone appropriately awed. “That’s so great Bili! Wait til you meet Da!”

“Tilda? What’s going on? Who’s there?” Another female voice came from inside the house. Another human older than Tilda (clearly too young to be her mother) reached the doorway and stepped out, pushing Tilda slightly behind her.

“Begging your pardon, I was just lookin’ for your Da,” the guard said, a sickly smile on his face. “Seems we got some dwarf visitors, and what with the Master busy and all…”

The older girl scowled. “That’s enough. Da’s not here right now, but you can return this evening and talk to him then.”

“That one’s a hobbit Adapted, Sigrid!” Tilda exclaimed loudly, pointing at Bili. “He’s a dwarf now! I bet Da would want to meet him!”

Sigrid looked where her sister pointed, and her mouth fell open slightly when she saw the dwarfling. “Oh my, he’s just a child!”

“I wasn’t, I was a grown hobbit, but I’m a dwarfling now,” Bili said, defensively.

Sigrid looked troubled for a brief moment, before glancing down at her sister’s excited expression. Casting a glance behind her into the dark house, she turned back to the group.

“You can leave them with me, sir,” Sigrid said to the guard, squaring her shoulders.

The guard mimed tipping his hat and stalked away without a word to the dwarves.

“We mean no inconvenience to you or your family,” Thorin began, addressing the girls. “We simply seek refuge in this town until we may recover and resupply ourselves, hopefully with the aid of your town’s Master, and then we will be on our way.”
“On your way to where, Master Dwarf?” asked Sigrid.

“To Erebor, to reclaim our homeland,” Thorin said. Bili was a little surprised that Thorin kept answering that question honestly, seeing as how much trouble it had gotten them in the past, but he supposed this close to the mountain it was fairly obvious they weren’t there simply to visit the markets.

“I see. That is quite a feat, considering what lies inside,” Sigrid responded. To her credit, her eyes widened only slightly when Thorin had given his answer, and Bili felt the dwarves would respect her for her composure.

“Let them in, Sigrid!” Tilda shouted from just inside the door.

Sigrid looked at the group, slightly uneasily. Her gaze fell on Bili, who was shivering slightly in the cold wind.

“We mean no harm to you or your family,” Thorin said, as gently as he could. “We merely wish to speak to the Master, and would appreciate a place to rest until he may see us.”

“May be resting a long time,” Sigrid muttered. “But all right. I do not doubt your intentions, Master Dwarf. Your Adapted son speaks much to your character.”

She stepped back and gestured for them to enter. Thorin and Bili came in first, and Bili felt his original judgments about the house were fair. It was larger than he expected, for it was hard to tell from the outside where one house began and another ended, but it was indeed drafty and looked near collapse, though its inhabitants walked surefooted enough.

All the dwarves filed in, and Sigrid told them to sit wherever they could find a spot. Tilda immediately grasped Bili’s hand and dragged him over to the fireplace where a large fire burned, pushing him by his shoulders to sit down in front of it.

“You look half-frozen! What kind of shoes are those, anyway? And your clothes are so thin! Surely you packed better than this!” she rambled, grabbing a thick wool blanket off the hearth and wrapping it around the dwarfling’s shoulders.

Bili couldn’t help but snuggle into the blanket. It was, after all, very warm, and he felt chilled to the bone.

“Our father and brother should be home for lunch shortly,” Sigrid said, addressing the room at large. “It will take me slightly longer to find food for all of you, I apologize.”

“Do not trouble yourself,” Thorin said, still acting the ambassador. “We expect to find supplies at the hand of your Master, not yourself.”

Sigrid bit her lip. “Right. Well, er, make yourselves at home, I suppose.”

The dwarves did just that. Thorin dragged a chair nearby the fire and sat close to Bili. Fili, Kili, and Ori all plunked down next to Tilda and Bili, while Dwalin took to standing near all of them, as though on guard. Balin, Gloin, and Oin all took chairs as well, leaving the others to scatter along a bench on the wall or on the floor.

The young ones spoke excitedly to each other, with Tilda asking Bili the most questions and the others pitching in now and then.

“Your father’s an Adapted too?” Bili asked the young girl.
Tilda nodded rapidly. “Oh, I’ll let him tell you that whole story. But it’s fascinating, really! And we hardly ever get the chance to meet someone else like him!”

Bili smiled. “I get the feeling there aren’t that many of us.”

“Da says only good people Adapt, and only good people accept those who need Adapting,” Tilda said, sounding as though she was repeating something oft-repeated. “That’s how Sigrid and I know you’re good people.”

“Oh, the dwarves are good, Tilda, I promise!” Bili nodded earnestly. “I didn’t know how bad my old family was til I met them. Everyone used to be really mean to me, until I met Thorin and everyone and I started Adapting!”

“You poor thing!” Tilda cried, wrapping arms around Bili. With a look of embarrassment, he returned the hug.

They continued to chatter for another few minutes, until finally a back door opened and sounds of boots on wood was heard.

“Ooh, Da and Bain are home!” Tilda said, jumping up and tugging on Bili’s hand. He stood too, and Tilda dragged him around all the dwarves and into the adjacent room, where a dark-haired man and his son were just entering the house.

“What’s all this?” the man demanded gruffly.

Sigrid and Thorin entered the room behind Bili and Tilda.

“Da, this is Bili, he’s an Adapted like you!” Tilda said, her grip tight on Bili’s arm.

“The guards brought over a whole group of dwarves and their Adapted child,” Sigrid explained, wringing her hands together. “This is Thorin, he says he’s King under the Mountain, and looking to talk to the Master.”

“Aren’t we all,” said the man. He strode forward and offered a hand to Thorin, who took it and shook in the human style. “I am Bard, called the Bowman. You’ve clearly met my daughters, and this is my son, Bain.”

Thorin nodded to Bain, who looked entirely out of place.

“With their situation being what it is,” Sigrid began, glancing at Bili. “We let them in to wait for you.”

“That is fine, Sigrid,” Bard said, placing a hand on her shoulder. “Thank you for looking after things.”

She nodded and smiled, reassured by her father’s presence. With a final glance at the dwarves, she disappeared up the stairs near the back door.

“You are welcome here, Master Thorin,” Bard said. “We have but little to share, but share it we will. I believe you and I have much to speak about.”

“We thank you for your hospitality, for truly our journey has been a long one and we are without supplies,” said Thorin. “You act with much authority for one who is not the leader of this town.”

Bard frowned. “This town hardly has a leader. The Master calls himself such, but where is he to be
found? Nowhere! Probably off squandering what remains of the town’s treasury before the winter sets in and we all starve.”

“I think we do have much to speak about,” Thorin said, his expression grim.

“You’ve no idea,” Bard said. “Tilda, go help your sister prepare the guest rooms. They’re not much,” he directed at Thorin. “But this house was built for multiple families to share, and as it is just the four of us, we do have some space to share.”

“We are grateful,” said Thorin.

“Bain, please speak with Thorin and his companions about what they might need in terms of supplies, then after lunch you can run down and see what the market is offering today,” Bard continued, addressing his son, who nodded. “I would have a conversation with your Adapted, if that is acceptable.”

Thorin looked to Bili, who shrugged. “It is.”

With a pat on Bili’s shoulder, Thorin turned to follow Bain back into the room where the others relaxed.

Bard took a seat on the staircase and gestured for Bili to sit next to him.

“Well, little one, I’ve never met an Adapted quite like you before,” he began as Bili sat.

“I’ve never met another Adapted at all,” said Bili apologetically.

“Then we also have much to speak about,” Bard said with the friendliest smile the dwarfling had yet to see him give.

“I’d like that,” Bili said. “Bard, what were you before you Adapted into a human?”

“I was an elf,” said the man, grinning at Bili’s disbelieving expression. “Well, an elf with mixed blood. And I daresay my story is almost as interesting as yours.”

Chapter End Notes

Is it obvious yet that Dwalin is basically my favorite?? Well, Dwalin and Bard. Wow, I hope everyone likes what I did with Bard...I've been excited about him since chapter 3! And yes, I kept Tilda and Sigrid, despite ignoring just about everything else from the movies. I don't care, I love them. And I love Bard, and Luke Evans, and Bain, and they're all important in my story because I want them to be.

Also, I realized a lot of people link to their tumblrs here, so if any of ya'll wanna come chat, I'm violentgril.tumblr.com. I run a multifandom mess of a blog, but you're all welcome to come yell at me about anything you want, any time. I also realize that since I respond to basically every comment (which I think is uncommon, but I love doing it, so whatever), there's a lot of me blabbing about random story-related topics in the comments section, which is something I'd be happy to do at greater length on tumblr.

Thanks for reading! <3
Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

Bili and Bard have their talk, and Thorin strategizes.

Chapter Notes

Hi everyone! So I'm about a million years late with this. I apologize, profusely, because I feel really bad about taking so long, and then making some empty promises about updating. I really thought there were times over the past week or so when I'd get this out, but I was met with resistance each time. I won't enumerate the many issues I've had these past few weeks, but suffice it to say, if something in my life could have gone wrong, it did. Thank you to everyone who has waited patiently and sent me such nice comments, I truly do not know what I would do without the kindness of strangers on the Internet.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“An elf?” Bili said, eyes wide. “Like Thranduil?”

“You’ve met Thranduil?” Bard frowned.

Bili nodded. “He was really nice to me, but he didn’t like the rest of us very much.”

Bard looked down, hiding a smile. “No, I imagine he didn’t.”

“So you were an elf, then?”

“Half-elf, actually,” Bard said casually, looking back at the dwarfling.

“Half-elf? Like Lord Elrond?”

“You’ve met Elrond?” Bard’s eyebrows shot up.

Bili shrugged. “It’s been quite a big adventure.”

“Apparently,” Bard said, eyes still wide. “But no, not like Elrond Half-Elven. It might be more apt to say I was part-human, I suppose.”

Bili just stared at the Adapted man expectantly, exuding patience the youngling most certainly didn’t possess.

“Know you much of Elvish history, young one?” Bard asked.

Bili shook his head. “Just what I learned while we were in Mirkwood and Rivendell. We didn’t get to talk to a lot of elves, though.”
“Right, well, then maybe you won’t know this, but rarely do humans and elves…interact more than necessary,” Bard explained, not meeting Bili’s gaze. “Men’s lives are fleeting, to most other races, you know. But there are always those who find exception.”

Bard paused, glancing Bili up and down. The young dwarfling sat on the steps of the staircase, hands on his knees and eyes shining up at Bard, who sat a few steps above but no less comfortably.

“How old are you, Bili?” Bard asked, his tone guarded.

“Fifty,” Bili answered. “That’s quite middle-aged for a hobbit, but only very young for a dwarf. I don’t what it is for an elf or a human.”

Bard sighed. “You’d be about my Tilda’s age, if you were a man. And there are some things about my life I wouldn’t tell to my young daughter, do you understand?”

Bili nodded. “But tell me what you can, oh please, I’ve never met another Adapted!”

“Aye, I will, don’t worry yourself so,” Bard reassured. “I think I know how to begin, now. Many years ago, long before the fall of Erebor, the city of Dale thrived. It was ruled by a lord named Girion. He was my grandfather, and he was a human. He eventually died when Smaug attacked, but years before that, he was largely responsible for creating peaceable relations with the elves of Mirkwood.

Girion spent much time with the elves, establishing trade and treaties, and apparently caught the attentions of an elven woman. She was, I’m told, the fairest creature to look upon, nearly rivaling the Lady Galadriel of Lothlorien herself.”

“I haven’t met her,” Bili said, awed.

Bard smiled. “I hope one day you do. I have the strangest feeling you two would get on.”

Bili matched Bard’s grin. From the other room, they heard the front door open and shut, and Bard assumed Bain must have left to check out the market wares for the day, measly as they no doubt were.

“Anyway,” he said, pulling his attention back to the story. “Girion fell in love with this elf, and although most deemed it unwise, they would hear no protest and swiftly married. As she was not of the Peredhil, she could not give up her immortality for a human lifespan, but the story goes that she did not care and married him anyway.”

“Who deemed it unwise? King Thranduil? Was she related to him?” Bili demanded, firing questions in rapid succession.

Bard shook his head. “Thranduil and his son are Sindarin elves, and they are a minority in the woodland realms. Most of the elves that live in Mirkwood are Silvan elves, and she was the same. And it didn’t matter who thought it unwise, for soon after the woman became pregnant, Smaug attacked and Girion died defending Dale. His wife lived long enough to have a son, my father, before fading.”

“Fading?”

“Dying, Bili,” Bard said softly. “Elves can die of a broken heart.”

“That’s so sad,” said the dwarfling with a frown. “She must have really been in love.”
“No one doubted it, then,” Bard nodded. “But that left her half-human son alone, and with few humans left alive to take him in after the destruction wrought by the dragon. So Thranduil ruled that he would be raised by her kin, for as a half-elf he would at least share many elven qualities and would fit in well enough. And live as an elf he did, and married an elf, my mother. I was born and all was well, for a while.”

“What happened to them?”

“I’m not sure how much of this to share with you, young one,” Bard said quietly. “You see, I have come to regard this legacy as something of a curse.”

Bili’s brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“Just as my grandfather died in battle, so did my father. I’ve rather feared it to be my fate as well someday, truth be told,” Bard sighed heavily. “But that’s not part of the story. My father died, and my mother soon after. They were both great warriors, although I remember little of them. I was very young by elf standards when I Adapted; a mere thirty-two years old. My human blood allowed me to age faster than I would have as full-elf, and I was somewhat more mature than elflings at that age.

With both my parents dead, I began to question my place in Mirkwood, for I had no other close kin. Elves do not quite share the same views on extended family as humans do, you see. And with my half-human father dead, there were no others like me to understand the troubles of growing up only part-this and half-that. Thranduil extended to me the same invitation he once issued to my father, allowing me to live amongst his people, but I was unsatisfied and unhappy. Eventually, being young and impetuous and rather resentful, I ran off to Laketown, Adapted, fell in love, married…I believe you can work out the rest.”

“What happened to your wife?” Bili asked before clapping his hands over his mouth. “Oh, I’m sorry, I don’t mean to pry!”

“She’s passed on, let’s leave it at that,” said the man, although he didn’t sound offended. “Do you have any other questions?”

“Oh, lots!” said Bili. “But mostly, I’m really glad you found a family, just like I did. Well, they found me, really, but you know what I mean.”

“I do,” Bard smiled. “I take it you didn’t have much of one before.”

Bili shook his head. “I love my new family, especially my adad. Have you met many other Adapteds, Bard?”

“Oh, here and there,” he said. “Mostly ones like me, who for one reason or another were forced out of their homes and taken in by humans. Usually a result of death or displacement from their homes. Others are humans who’ve Adapted into elves, although that’s a less common transition. If you ask me, humans and elves are the closest in nature to each other, and the most common trade partners.”

“Have you ever met another Adapted dwarf before?”

“Never,” Bard said, raising an eyebrow. “But I have never met a hobbit either, Adapted or otherwise.”

“Oh, there aren’t any Adapted hobbits, because we never leave the Shire, you see,” Bili explained. “I think I’m the first in a very long time!”

“How did you come by this band of dwarves, then? Were you spirited away?” said Bard with a
small smile.

Bili laughed. “I guess you could say that. This wizard, Gandalf, was an old friend of my mother’s, before she died, and he came to me one day and asked me to go on an adventure! I said no, of course, because respectable hobbits don’t leave the Shire, but then I met the dwarves and they were so fascinating and nice and funny and I just couldn’t stay behind! It suddenly all seemed so awful, living all alone with no one to talk to and only my mean old neighbors and greedy relatives and…”

“I understand, young one, I do,” Bard said with sympathy, placing his hand on Bili’s shoulder. “I’ve heard many things of dwarves, most of them less than flattering. But I have never quite seemed to agree with the elves, either, so I knew there must be something more to them than what I’d been taught.”

“Is that why you’re helping us?”

“Oh, you’re why he’s helping us,” a different voice answered. Bili and Bard looked up and saw Nori leaning against the doorway.

Bili scowled, head whipping back to look at Bard. “Don’t mind him, Bard, he’s not always very nice-“

“No no, it’s fine, your dwarf has the right of it,” Bard said with a shrug. “I have not had many dealings with dwarves, and I can’t say I think this quest of yours is based much in wisdom. But Adaptions are no small matter, young Bili. It is a rather large testament to the fine nature of your dwarves that you would Adapt to be one of them.”

“Well, we certainly weren’t all that nice to ‘im, no matter what he thought,” Nori said, his tone flat with disinterest. “Maybe it just says more about his previous life than his new one.”

“Nori, what’s gotten into you?” Bili said, jumping to his feet. “Don’t say things like that, especially to our host!”

“It’s a fine thing, hearing you scoldin’ for once,” Nori smirked. “But our host isn’t offended, is he, Bard?”

Bard was grinning fully now. It seemed to Bili that Bard and Nori were both playing some sort of game that he didn’t quite understand, and he certainly didn’t like it.

With a pout, he folded his arms and sat back down on the steps. “I’m talking to Bard, Nori. What did you want?”

“Nothin’ much,” said the dwarf, examining his hand. “Thorin wants you to come back and sit by the fires some more. And I thought I’d talk to Bard here a bit, seems like this town’s got some fine opportunities I may be interested in.”

“Nori’s something of a thief,” Bili mock-whispered to Bard. “His brother Dori told me.”

“Dori thinks what he wants to think, and you’ll do best not to repeat things you’ve got no business thinkin’,” Nori glared, exhibiting the first real bit of emotion since he entered the conversation.

Bili just shrugged defiantly.

“You’d better go see what your father wants,” Bard said, nudging the dwarfling. “We can speak again later, perhaps after dinner.”
“Okay, I’m going,” Bili said. He stood up and walked towards the doorway, giving Nori a wide berth and a dark scowl as he passed. Nori didn’t seem bothered in the slightest.

Bili wove his way around the many dwarves lounging in the next room and walked over to Thorin, who still sat near the fire. Thorin noticed his presence immediately and smiled widely.

“Did you get the answers you were looking for, my son?” Thorin asked, reaching out to pull Bili close to his chair.

The dwarfling went easily, playfully pushing a napping Kili out his way. Kili merely grunted and squirmed closer to the fire. Despite the early hour, relaxing as they were was throwing into sharp relief the exhaustion that each of them felt. Only Thorin, Dwalin, and Ori seemed on alert, the younger dwarf sketching fervently in his notebook.

“He told me about how he Adapted, and I asked some questions,” Bili responded. “But Nori came in so Bard said he’ll talk with me later tonight too.”

“Of course,” Thorin said, as though the news of Nori’s interruption did not surprise him. “But we should take advantage of a warm hearth and safe environment while we can. Why don’t you lie down for a bit with your cousins.”

Bili had to admit that Fili and Kili looked cozy and warm, lying by the fire and murmuring to each other lazily. He nodded and went to sit, the other two dwarves immediately creating a space between them for the youngling.

He hadn’t been resting long when the front door pushed open and Bain stepped inside, his arms full of packages and a pack slung across one shoulder. He looked down hesitantly at the group of resting dwarves, as though reminding himself of their presence. The boy gave a nod to Thorin before making his way around the dwarves and into the connecting room, which Bili assumed must lead to a kitchen somewhere.

He closed his eyes and listened to the dim racket of talking dwarves, and after a few minutes he heard footsteps on the staircase. Tilda’s shrieks and giggles were loud, but she didn’t enter the room. Bili heard the two sisters walk toward the other end of the house, presumably to wherever Bain was.

Bili must have slipped off into sleep, for the next thing he knew he was being shaken awake.

“Wake up, wake up!” trilled Tilda, the young girl kneeling at his side.

Sitting up slowly, Bili saw all the other dwarves were awake and far more active than they had been earlier. Some weren’t in the room anymore at all, including Thorin, Balin and Dwalin.

“What’s going on?” asked Bili sleepily.

Tilda shrugged. “Da’s having some sort of meeting with your dwarves, or some of them, anyway. I’m not invited to it, he says. He told me to go play with you. But I don’t think it’s very fair when they leave us out of stuff just cuz we’re kids, do you? Besides, you didn’t used to be a kid, even though you are now. Do you want to listen in anyway? I know the perfect place to eavesdrop!”

Bili blinked, his mind struggling to keep up with all the words pouring out of Tilda’s mouth. “Um… yeah, I do want to know what they’re talking about, I guess. Are you sure we won’t get caught?”
“Of course not!” Tilda grinned. “I do it all the time, not even Sigrid or Bain knows about it! Come on!”

She stood up and grabbed Bili’s arms, pulling the drowsy dwarfling to his feet. Bili accepted her outstretched hand and she quickly led him through the room and out into the hall. She headed for the staircase that Bard and Bili had sat on earlier that day.

“Tilda!” Sigrid shouted, her head popping out of a doorway a little further down the hall from the staircase. Her hair was mussed and fraying, and she had a line of flour across her cheek. “Where are you going? Da said to start dinner!”

“I’m just showing Bili the rooms we made up!” Tilda said, continuing up the staircase. “We won’t be long!”

“You should ask Bombur for help, he’s our cook!” Bili said with an apologetic look as Tilda pulled him up each step.

Sigrid nodded and disappeared back into the room. At the top of the stairs, Tilda barely gave Bili time to look around before dragging him down another hallway.

“There’s four rooms up here,” she explained as they walked. “Sigrid and I made them up to be bedrooms, although there aren’t enough beds for all of you. Sorry about that.”

“That’s okay,” said Bili. “Where are we going?”

“There’s a big window with a thick ledge in the last room,” Tilda said, shooting a mischievous grin back at him. “Da and your dwarves are on the back porch talking. We’ll be able to hear everything from up here!”

She pushed open the door to the last room on the hall, and Bili saw indeed that it had a large window that overlooked the neighboring buildings. None of them looked anymore impressive or well-built than Bard’s home, but at least Bard’s family had this whole house to themselves.

Tilda and Bili crept up to the window, and Tilda dared to peek out of it.

“They’re down there all right!” she said in an excited whisper. “I’ll push the window open just a bit. They shouldn’t see us unless we lean out over the ledge.”

Bili nodded, and the girl quietly unlatched the window and pushed the panes until the window was propped open a few inches. They each stood on either side of the window, backs pressed flat against the wall. After straining for a few moments, Bili began to make out the conversation.

“…simple matter of acceptable risk,” a voice was saying. Bili recognized it after a second as Nori.

“I still don’t like it,” sniffed another voice. Definitely Dori, thought Bili.

“We hardly have many options,” Thorin said gravely. “And without the Master around to help us resupply, we must make haste.”

“Remind me again why this must be attempted at all?” Bard chimed in, his tone exuding disapproval. “Surely you’ve heard not to wake a sleeping dragon if one can help it.”

“You said yourself it hasn’t been seen in decades. Could be dead.” That was Dwalin, Bili was sure.

“Or it could be sleeping, as dragons tend to do,” said Bard.
“Regardless, we must find out,” Thorin said over the others. “Balin, what do you think?”

There was a brief silence, and Bili could only imagine Balin’s expression and his secretive little smile whenever he was thinking hard.

“I think you’ve certainly thought this through, Thorin,” the older dwarf said finally. “But I must say I also don’t like it.”

“Like does not factor in to this matter. Plans change.”

“That doesn’t mean we have to resort to-“

“Oh, shut it, Dori-“

“I won’t sit back while you waltz into the literally dragon’s den-“

“Then don’t sit back!” spat Nori, nearly shouting. “Do something useful while I’m scouting, like watch over Ori and Bili. Make them each a new sweater. Mahal knows how much you like mothering them.”

“Excuse me,” Bard interrupted. “I don’t believe these suggestions to be productive, or practical. I understand why you brought so few dwarves and not an army, but do you really think sending a single dwarf into the mountain to find Smaug’s weakness will be effective? I can’t say I truly believe that.”

Bili’s mouth dropped open, and he looked wide-eyed at Tilda. She was listening with utter fascination, and put a single finger over her mouth and then pointed back at the open window.

Bili could barely listen to anymore. They were planning to send Nori into the mountain, alone. Thorin was planning to send Nori into the mountain! But that was his job, wasn’t it? From the start! Not that he’d been very eager to try and steal from a dragon, but wasn’t the whole point of him joining the quest to be the one who did the stealing? Wouldn’t the dragon recognize the smell of dwarf?

Perhaps that meant it would now recognize him as well, but he wasn’t sure. He was still Adapting, after all, and maybe the smell of an Adapted was different from the smell of a natural-born dwarf.

Either way, Bili didn’t feel it was right to ask Nori to go in his stead, despite how accomplished a thief the dwarf might be. It was simply too dangerous!

“It’s settled, then.”

Thorin’s words, firm and severe, brought Bili out of his thoughts. What was settled? What would happen to Nori?

“Fine, if there’s no way around it,” Dori intoned with a harrumph. “I’ll just be accompanying him as far as possible, then.”

“Oh, for the love of-“

“That’s a great idea.” Bard said, halting the brothers’ bickering.

“What, sending Dori in as well?” asked Dwalin.

“Not just Dori specifically. But you should do it in groups,” Bard continued. “Not the actual stealing part, that would get too loud with more than one of you, but you should split up and enter at different
times, in groups of three or four. That gives a higher likelihood of survival for at least part of the group, and no one will waiting to hear from a single dwarf who may or may not have been burnt by dragon-fire.”

There was a pause as they all considered the man’s words. Bili felt sick to his stomach at the idea of all the dwarves entering the mountain, although he had to admit to himself that he hadn’t really thought this far at all. He should have expected this; after all, wasn’t getting the mountain back from Smaug the whole point of this trip?

Bard was talking again. “I’ll even go with you. I know the lands leading up to the mountain, and it may throw off the scent of dwarf a little bit if I accompany you.”

“We can’t ask you to endanger your life so,” Thorin said grimly. Quite right, thought Bili.

“You let me worry about my own life,” said Bard dismissively. “And Sigrid and Bain will look after Tilda and Bili. They needn’t come any closer than Laketown, at least until the dragon is slain or run off.”

Bili felt his stomach drop. He looked at Tilda frantically, but the girl simply looked put-out at what they were hearing. As afraid as Bili had been of entering the mountain, he was even more afraid of being left behind while the others went at it alone. They couldn’t leave him here, couldn’t make him stay and be minded by the humans! He was just as much a part of this quest as they were, now!

“Are you okay?” Tilda whispered, leaning close to Bili. “You’ve gone awfully pale.”

“I think I need to sit down,” Bili whispered back.

Worriedly, Tilda shut the window and helped Bili onto the nearest pallet. “What’s wrong?”

“What’s wrong? They’re going to leave me behind, that’s what’s wrong!”

“Did you really want to go face a dragon?” Tilda asked, her head cocked to the side.

“No!” Bili exclaimed. “Of course not, but that was what I was hired to do in the first place, way before I Adapted!”

“But things’re different now-“

“But it’s not fair! They can’t leave me behind! And they can’t send Nori in, it’s too dangerous!”

Tilda nodded, her face scrunched up as though she were thinking hard about something. After a moment, she stood.

“You’re right,” she said. “It’s not fair. And I hate it when they leave us behind, don’t you?”

Bili nodded. “Not fair.”

Tilda brightened up immediately. “Well then, it’s decided! We’ll come along too, whether they let us or not!”

“What? How?”

“We just have to beat them there,” she said, with a knowing look. “I know the way out of Laketown, and I know the path to the mountain. I’ve never been up it myself, but it truly doesn’t look that frightening. At least, not in the daylight.”
“You think we should just go ourselves?” Bili asked, his tone hushed.

Tilda nodded resolutely. “They simply can’t leave us behind. Especially if Da is going. They’ll need us, they just don’t know it yet.”

Bili nodded as well, a little less firmly than the girl. “When should we leave?”

“They’ll probably be on watch all night,” said the girl thoughtfully. “Everyone’s always more on guard at night. Plus it would be harder to see in the dark. So tomorrow, right after breakfast, then. When they’re all still tired and full and planning out the day, I’ll tell Da I’m taking you for a walk around the town to see everything, and instead we’ll run off to the mountain!”

“Won’t they notice we’re gone and come after us?” said Bili.

“Of course, but that’s the point, silly,” Tilda smiled. “We just want to come with them. We don’t want to do it without them. And when they’ve seen that we made it all the way to the mountain ourselves, they’ll know we can help. And it’ll be too much work to bring us all the way back, so they’ll have to let us stay!”

Bili still felt unsure. He didn’t like the idea of getting any closer to the mountain than he had to, but even more than that he hated the idea of his adad leaving him behind to go face a dragon.

“You’re right,” he declared. “We’ll have to show them we can do it. We’ll leave after breakfast.”

“Yay!” squealed Tilda, and Bili grinned too.

Chapter End Notes

Omg Tilda, you’re such a bad influence! I tried my best to get through as much Laketown stuff as I could this chapter, but I’m certain at least part of next chapter will still be Laketown, but we may also be heading to Erebor! I won't make any promises about when I'll update, but you're all welcome to bug me about it here or on my tumblr, violentgril.tumblr.com. Thanks for reading!
Chapter Twelve

Chapter Summary

Tilda and Bili set out on their own to take on the Lonely Mountain. There is literally no way this can go well, and even they know it.

Chapter Notes

Oh my god, first this chapter was crazy hard to start, but then when I got into the groove it was by far one of the most FUN. I thoroughly enjoyed writing it and was grinning the entire time. I really hope you all love it too! (This may also be the longest chapter to date, yay!)

Btw, I hated Alfrid in the movie, so he doesn't exist here. I also really didn't care for how Laketown happened in the movie, so all of this, including the Master's personality, is more my imagination than anything else.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The rest of the night flew by for Bili and Tilda. Bard sought Bili out after dinner to speak with him more, but the commotion of the dwarves, now fed and warm and content, led for a disruptive evening. As much as Bili wanted to talk more with the other Adapted, he found himself grateful for the distraction; he worried that under too much scrutiny, his plan to escape the next morning with Tilda would be revealed.

When Thorin called him to bed early that night, Bili didn’t object. Thorin, Fili, Kili, and Bili would all be sharing the same room where Bili and Tilda had eavesdropped from earlier that day. Tilda shot him one last grin as he traipsed up to bed, and Bili tried not to smile too widely in return.

He still had one thing to do before they left that morning, and he hadn’t shared it with Tilda. Her plan would get them to Erebor, but he had to go farther than that; he couldn’t let Nori enter the mountain alone, not when that was supposed to be his job. He knew that things had changed since the night in Bag-End when he had signed the contract, but it just didn’t feel right to come this far and not do his fair share of the work. He had to get the ring back from Thorin.

Smaug might be big and scary and smell him a mile off, but if he was invisible, what could really go wrong?

After he went up to bed, Bili lay awake for a long time. The others slowly made their way up the stairs and into the different guest rooms, and Bili listened for voices and footsteps for at least an hour. Finally, after Fili and Kili had come up and fallen asleep, Bili crept out of bed and over to Thorin’s pack. He moved slowly and carefully, knowing he only had until Thorin came up to bed himself to
find the ring.

He dug through the pack carefully, but the ring wasn’t there. He checked the outside pockets, and found nothing. He supposed it could be in one of the many pockets of Thorin’s coat; if that were the case, he wasn’t sure what he would do, because Thorin was still wearing the coat.

Unless…he had taken the coat off, and it was still downstairs…maybe he could sneak down, search the pockets, and sneak back up?

It was worth a shot, he thought.

He crept out of the room, mindful of the large, creaking door, and stepped quietly past the second bedroom. The door was shut, but he could still make out loud snoring – Bombur and his family must be in that room, probably Oin and Gloin as well. That left Dwalin, Balin, and the Ri bothers in the final room.

As he tiptoed past the third bedroom, he saw the door still propped open and heard voices speaking within. Bili pressed himself against the wall and breathed slowly, willing himself not to cough or sneeze.

The voices were undoubtedly those of Nori, Dori, and Ori; Balin and Dwalin had to be downstairs with Thorin still, probably speaking of plans for the next day. Bili would have to sneak past the final bedroom, but how to do it?

“You’re certain it’ll work like Thorin says it will?” came Dori’s overbearing tone from the bedroom.

“Course it will. Stop worrying,” said Nori, clearly exasperated.

“I can’t even believe it truly exists, oh, I would love the chance to study it once this is all over!” Ori chimed in, his tone rapturous.

“It’s not a toy,” snapped Dori. “It's dangerous. Magic is for wizards, not dwarves.”

“But it’s so fascinating-”

“And the only reason we’re even considering this is because Nori is a fool and has agreed to confront a dragon, for Mahal’s sake,” Dori continued. “He’ll need it and then it’s going back to Thorin, who will give it to the wizard and we can forget all about it.”

“Come on, Dori, it’s not every day the lad gets the chance to study a fabled ring of power…”

Bili felt his stomach drop. Thorin had given Nori the ring to help him get through the mountain and face Smaug. It made sense – after all, that’s what Bili himself planned to do – but for a moment he felt a sense of helpless rage at the idea of someone else wearing the ring, slipping the precious artifact on their finger and using it as Bili had used it…it was awful, it wasn’t for anyone else, it called to Bili…

A loud sigh pulled Bili out of his dark thoughts, and he shuddered. He knew it was evil, and he knew it was better that no one used it (after all, look what it had done to Gollum, that poor wretched creature), but that didn’t quell his desire to have it back.

Inside the room, the discussion seemed to be over. Ori was saying good night to the others, and Dori also seemed to be readying himself to sleep while Nori hummed happily. All Bili had to do was wait, quiet as a mouse, for the three to fall asleep, and then he could sneak into the room and steal the ring back.
It took quite a long time for the Ri brothers to fall asleep, and longer still for Bili to gather the courage to sneak into the room. He had slowly counted to one thousand in the style of Shire fauntlings playing hide and seek (one chrysanthemum, two chrysanthemum, three chrysanthemum, four...) before he was satisfied.

Bili took a deep breath and peeked into the room. All three brothers were piled into a single bed, Dori closest to the wall and Nori closest to the door, with Ori squished between them. A small pile of packs sat next to the bed, Bili wasn’t entirely sure which one was Nori’s, but if he was quiet he was sure he could figure it out.

He tiptoed inside, very conscious of the even breathing of the three dwarves. There was a tense moment when Nori grunted and Bili froze, wide-eyed. But Nori simply rolled over on his side to face the doorway, and Bili breathed a sigh when he saw Nori’s eyes still closed. He searched the packs quickly and quietly, and found the ring in the front pocket of the second pack.

Smiling, he tucked it into his pocket and crept back towards the doorway, slipping out and back to his room. He didn’t notice Nori’s slitted eyes following him as he beat his retreat.

The next morning, Bili and Tilda found their plan to sneak away was even easier than they had anticipated. The small house was a flurry of activity as the dwarves prepared for the day, and no one paid the youngest two much attention as they pretended to talk and play by the fireplace.

“Bili!” Thorin called, striding over to where his son sat. “I’m going with Bard and Balin to see if we can’t find this Master. I won’t be gone too long. You’re to stay here with Tilda, do you understand?”

Bili nodded and smiled. He was practically being given permission to spend his whole day with Tilda, and that’s exactly what he planned to do.

Thorin nodded back and placed a hand on Bili’s head. “Be good. I expect you to listen to our hosts and do as they say. If you need me, ask Dwalin or one of your cousins to come fetch me.”

“Yes, adad,” said Bili. “See you later!”

With a smile, Thorin left.

“This is perfect!” Tilda said excitedly. “Come on, are you ready to go?”

Bili nodded. “I put my pack and my sword out on the back porch when Adad was eating breakfast.”

Tilda grinned. “Perfect. Time to leave.”

Scrambling up, Bili followed the young girl through the house. She stuck her head briefly into the kitchen, where Sigrid and Bombur were already planning lunch for the entire group.

“Sig! Me and Bili are going outside! Bye!”

“Be back for lunch and don’t wander far or talk to anyone!” Sigrid called back. “I mean it, Tilda!”

Bili and Tilda were already out the door.
Nori stood in the bedroom shared by Bili and his family, watching carefully out the window. Just as he suspected, two small figures came out the backdoor, giggling and looking around for any nearby dwarves. They didn’t even think to look up.

With a sigh, Nori turned from the window and headed out into the hallway. As he passed the third bedroom, he paused.

“Dori, I’m heading out,” he said to the older dwarf, who was painstakingly making up the bed they had slept in. “I’ve got some scouting to do.”

“Come on, Bili, follow me!” Tilda skipped ahead of the dwarfling, her energy high and effusive. Both younglings were rather pleased with themselves, but Bili still harbored doubt that the young girl certainly didn’t feel.

“How are we getting to Erebor? It looks big, but it seems far away still,” said the dwarfling, gazing into the distance at the large, looming mountain with no small amount of fear.

Tilda pulled herself up to full height and gave him a knowing look. “Oh, we’ll have to take a boat, of course.”

“Where are we going to get a boat?”

“We’ll steal it from one of the fishermen on the edge of town,” she said, as though this was the most obvious answer in the world.

Bili hurried after her, trying not to look too nervously at the various men and women they passed. “Tilda! Isn’t that sort of mean?”

“Don’t worry about it, Bili,” Tilda said, still leading him purposefully through the many wooden houses and slatted streets. “We’ll return it later when everything is over. They won’t be too mad, not after the dragon is gone!”

“If you say so,” Bili said uncertainly. Tilda knew the city best, after all. He had never been in a city of men before. Maybe they really wouldn’t mind too much.

They walked for what felt like an hour, but no one bothered them as they made their way through the city. Tilda clearly knew where she was going, and told Bili she had explored the city on her own many times, although her father didn’t often know about it. They had to duck behind houses a few times to avoid the meager few city guardsmen who wandered around, hassling citizens more often than not.

Eventually, though, they made it to the edge of town, where the houses were fewer. There were quite a few docks, many of them empty, but they walked until they found a single wooden boat tied up with simple rope.

“This one, quickly!” Tilda said, gesturing for Bili to climb down the wooden ladder. “Before someone sees!”

Before he could take another step, however, large hands grabbed Bili around the collar and yanked
him off his feet.

“What’s this, then?” said a large, heavyset man. He was dressed like one of the guardsmen, but his breath reeked of ale. “What’re you two doin’, eh?”

“Let go of me!” Bili demanded, struggling in the man’s grasp.

“Put him down, now!” shouted Tilda, stomping her foot.

The man laughed, and then hiccupped. “Say, aren’t you one a Bard’s kids?” He peered at Tilda, and then at Bili. “And yer no kid! What are ya?”

“I’m a dwarf!” he scoffed. “And my father is the king of the dwarves! So you better let me go, or he’ll be mad!”

The guard’s eyes widened. “King of the dwarves, ye say? Well now, that’s very interestin’. I must say, I can’t let you two little ones wander on your own, now. Wouldn’t be right of me not to look after ya.”

He tucked Bili under his arm and grabbed Tilda by the wrist. She wrenched away, but he held fast.

“Now now, don’t be afraid, we’re just goin’ to see someone who can help,” said the guard, dragging both children back the way they had come. “Behave, now. The Master is waitin’.”

Nori watched from behind the nearest ramshackle house as the guard accosted Tilda and Bili. It made his blood boil to watch the sack of shit manhandle the little dwarfling and his girl friend, but it wouldn’t do to run out and steal them back now. The guard had just admitted to knowing where the Master was, after all, and he wasn’t actually hurting the kids.

No, Nori would have to follow, and wait for the right moment. But certainly not until after the idiot man had revealed the Master’s location; then Nori could return with both kids and the intel his king was searching for.

It never occurred to the dwarf to think of the Master as a threat.

The guard pulled the children down a winding path away from the center of the town. Bili tried to reach for Sting, but he was held firmly by the much larger man and couldn’t free any of his limbs enough to do anything.

“How dare you kidnap us, you great brute!” Tilda yelled. “You’re going to wish you’d never been born! You can’t just take children!”

She kept up a rousing stream of abuse, berating the man for his terrible decision in kidnapping them, but the guard didn’t seem to care.

“Keep shouting, little miss, and you’ll regret it first,” he said after a few minutes. “See who cares when I tell ‘em I’m returning such bad children to their families. No one cares for stupid little runaways.”
It didn’t stop Tilda, but it did quiet her. Bili thought she was very brave for standing up to the man like that, but wished she wouldn’t call such attention to herself. Eventually they reached what appeared to be a long-abandoned warehouse. It opened easily on a long, narrow room made of decaying wood. From the smell of it, Bili guessed that they used to house barrels of fish meant for trade, but now it sat empty but for a trapdoor in the center of the floor. The guard walked over to it and stomped on it twice.

About a minute passed, and then the door flipped open and Bili peered inside. Another guard stood about seven feet down, in what appeared to be the entrance of a long, dim tunnel. A few rungs of a metal ladder remained leading into the dark hole.

“I got somethin’ for the Master,” said the first guard. “Found Bard’s youngest and the son of the king of dwarves tryin’ to steal a boat.”

The second guard looked entirely uninterested but held his arms out anyway. “Fine. Pass them down.”

The first man looked at Tilda intently. “Run, and I hurt your friend.”

She nodded shakily and stayed put as he let go of her arm. He grabbed Bili with both arms and knelt down at the edge of the hole. The second guard reached up and grabbed the Adapted dwarf roughly. Setting Bili down, he reached up and grabbed Tilda as she was passed down.

“Make sure to tell him who brought ‘em in,” said the first guard. “Else there’ll be trouble. From me.”

“Yes yes, I’ll make sure the Master knows who is responsible,” said the second irritably. The trapdoor banged shut, showering all three of them in dirt and darkness. Down the tunnel, a distant light glowed. The guard headed towards it.

“Follow me or starve down here,” he called over his shoulder.

The two young ones followed hurriedly. At the end of the tunnel, they found a small, softly lit chamber. Furnished solely with a chair and a desk and a few candles set around to emit the light, the guard swept through it and into another room off to the side. The children followed, Tilda slipping her hand into Bili’s and grasping it tightly.

The next room was much larger than the first, and far more brightly lit. Torches lined the walls and emitted dancing shadows over the piles of gold and jewels and coin that lay scattered about the room. At the far end, in a large chair covered in moth-eaten cloth, sat a very large, very fat man.

“That’s the Master of the town,” Tilda whispered in Bili’s ear.

The guard bowed halfheartedly to the Master and gestured to the children behind him. “Your Lordship, I bring you the youngest daughter of Bard, the Bowman, and the son of the king of dwarves who has taken refuge with Bard and his family.”

“Well now, let’s have a look,” the Master said, shifting his extensive girth to lean forward into the gleaming light. “How did you come to find them?”

“The guard known as Felix found them and brought them here, my liege,” listed off the guard. “Does this please you?”

“Oh, indeed it does,” said the Master, smirking. “Bard has been a thorn in my side for years, and the reason for my retreat. He has rallied the townspeople against me, despite all my efforts to help their sad lives.”
“You’re not helping anyone, you great selfish git!” Tilda shouted.

“Tilda,” hissed Bili, pulling on her hand.

She shrugged, a fierce glint in her eyes. “What? He’s mean to da.”

“Shut up,” the guard said, shaking Tilda by her shoulder. “Shall I send for her father, sir?”

“In a moment. First, I want this other one to tell me what business the king of the dwarves has in my city,” the Master said, looking at Bili.

“N-none of your b-business!” Bili said, gripping Tilda’s hand tightly.

“Answer the Master!” the guard demanded, gripping Bili’s shoulder as well. The young dwarfling willed himself not to tremble.

“Now now, it’s all right,” the Master said with a sickly smile. “He doesn’t understand what’s at stake, of course. Now child, you must understand, that I care not for you or your friend. I can just as easily send word to Bard and the dwarves that you two ran off on your own and were found, drowned, on the edge of town. Is that what you’d prefer?”

Bili and Tilda shared a look, both looking as terrified as the other felt. Bili turned back to the Master, unable to mask the trembling anymore.

“We’re here to take back Erebor,” he said in a small voice. It felt like betrayal, telling this man their plan, but what other choice did he have? These men were much larger than he, and his fighting lessons were still very new. Not to mention he had Tilda to worry about, and he certainly couldn’t let her get hurt because of him. It was bad enough he had agreed to come along with her at all. He should have said no, and told her it was too dangerous! But at the time it seemed so sensible, and she had so much confidence…

“Erebor?” said the Master stupidly. “But there’s a dragon in there!”

“And treasure, my lord,” inserted the guard, who suddenly looked a little less apathetic.

“The famed treasure horde that called a dragon,” breathed the Master. “And the dragon could be long dead, for all anyone knows.”

He looked at the younglings carefully, clearly thinking intensely. After a moment his face lit up and he laughed.

“Why, this is perfect!” he nearly shouted. “The dwarves will take back the mountain, hopefully get that wretched Bard killed in the process, and I’ll keep these little ones here until they’re all done fighting that worm. And then, if they want their little younglings back, they’ll have to get me at least half the treasure in the horde!”

Dread filled Bili from head to toe. There was no way around his betrayal now. Not only had he revealed their secrets to this awful, horrid man, he had just ensured that he would not be able to enter the mountain himself – and he took the ring, so no one else could enter safely either!

Oh, Bili felt wretched. What would his father say when he found out? When the Master sent word to him, and he discovered his own son’s treachery and stupidity? Would he be worried, or just angry?

Bili didn’t know what Thorin would say. But…he felt like he did know what Dwalin would tell him, if he could see Bili right now.
An idea came to the dwarfling as he thought of the gruff warrior, so patient when teaching and yet so fierce on the battlefield. He would encourage Bili to be just as fierce, but use his head, and always try his hardest.

Bili looked over to Tilda and caught her eye. The Master and his guard seemed to be wrapped up in their impending plan, and for a moment they didn’t pay attention to the children.

“Tilda,” whispered the dwarfling. “I’ve an idea. When I give the signal, grab my sword and hit the guard.”

The girl grinned and nodded, looking far more confident than she had mere seconds ago.

“Excuse me!” Bili shouted, stepping directly in front of Tilda. “Excuse me, Master! I need to tell you something else.”

Both men turned back to look at the children.

“And what’s that?” the Master asked, leaning back in his chair. Bili hoped his girth was as great as it seemed, or else this plan might be for naught.

“I’m not simply a dwarf, you see,” started Bili, his voice growing stronger. “I’m an Adapted. I was a Hobbit before, but now I’m a dwarf. And the reason I’m here with the dwarves is that they need me to take back the mountain.”

“Need you? An Adapted child?” the Master guffawed.

“Yes, they do!” Bili nodded fervently. “You see, they think Smaug is still in there, and he knows what men and dwarves smell like! But Hobbits live far away to the west, and he definitely wouldn’t know my smell. So they need me to sneak in there and find his weak spot so we can kill it!”

The Master looked doubtful, but he didn’t protest the plan. “That does make some sense, I suppose…”

“Oh yes, it does, and there’s something else you should know about Hobbits,” continued Bili. “They have magic, you see. Even the Adapted ones like me.”

“Magic!” cried the Master, looking at the guard to confirm this fact. The guard raised his shoulders and shook his head. Neither had met a Hobbit before, and certainly knew little about them.

“Very great magic, indeed,” Bili said, fingering the ring in his pocket. He placed his other hand behind his back so Tilda could see. “We can do many great things. We can even disappear!”

In the middle of his little speech, Bili gave Tilda the thumbs up behind his back. As soon as he said “disappear,” two things happened: Tilda reached forward and pulled his sword from it’s sheath, and Bili shoved the ring over his thumb.

Shouting wildly, Tilda ran over to the guard and whacked him with the blunt edge of the blade. It didn’t pierce through his clothing, but he doubled over, winded and surprised, and she kicked him ferociously in the shin and brought the flat edge down on the back of his head.

The guard fell to his knees, surprised and shocked at the assault. Invisible, Bili ran over to the nearest pile of treasure, lifting up a heaviest looking thing he could find, a large golden cup gilded around the rim with jewels.

Bili hefted it in both hands and rushed towards the makeshift throne. With a grunt that mustered all
his strength, he heaved the cup towards the fat man. The Master sputtered and stared dumbly as the large cup seemed to fly through the air of its own accord and smack him right in the face. It fell to the ground with a huge clatter, and Bili was satisfied to see his nose gushing with blood.

He ran over to Tilda, slipping the ring off and grabbing her by the sword arm.

“Let’s go!”

Both men were too shocked to immediately give chase. Bili and Tilda ran as fast as they could, out the room and into the first chamber, then down the dim tunnel. They could hear distant angry shouting, and Bili pushed Tilda in front of him as they reached the end of the tunnel and the ladder rungs.

“Climb it, go go go!” he insisted, grabbing Sting from her hands and shoving it into its sheath.

She quickly ascended the ladder, but stopped as she came to the closed trapdoor. She pushed against it fruitlessly.

“It’s too heavy, I can’t push it open!” she said frantically.

Bili climbed up the ladder behind her as far as he could. “I can’t make it any higher! Try again!”

Tilda grunted and shoved at the door with both hands, trusting Bili to keep her from falling. In the distance they both heard the Master and the guard shouting. Bili knew the guard wouldn’t be down for long, and they really had to get out of here before he caught them.

“Come on, come on! You can do it, Tilda!”

“I am trying!” she said through gritted teeth. Bili was just about to suggest switching places when the guard came into view at the end of the tunnel, limping but moving swiftly.

“Hurry!”

“I can’t!”

“Yes you can! Push, Tilda! You’re strong!”

“YOU LITTLE BRATS!”

This was it, this was as far as they were going to make it, they couldn’t get the door open and they were trapped down here…

“I’m sorry, Bili, I just can’t lift it!” Tilda cried, looking down at her friend with fear in her eyes.

Bili was about to tell her it was okay, he didn’t blame her, when suddenly the trapdoor lifted open all on its own.

No, not on its own.

“BILI! TILDA!”

Both their heads whipped up to the door. There stood Thorin, Bard, and Dwalin around the edges of the trapdoor. The rest of the dwarves, as well as Bain and Sigrid, all stood beyond it in varied states of fear and anger.

Bard reached down and grabbed his daughter, pulling her easily out of the hole. Bili climbed the last
few rungs hurriedly and found himself lifted into the air by his adad.

“Adad!” Bili cried, burrowing his face in his father’s shoulder. Thorin hugged the dwarfling back as he stepped away from the trapdoor.

“What were you thinking, Bili?” Thorin demanded, holding the youngling out to look at him. “What have you gotten yourself and poor Tilda into?”

“May not be the time, Thorin,” Dwalin said, looking back down into the hole as the guard came climbing up the ladder.

Bard and Thorin both stood in front of their children, glaring at the man who emerged.

The man took one look at the assembled group and let out a strangled yelp. He climbed right back down the ladder and took off running as fast as he could on his bruised leg.

Thorin gave a look at Dwalin, who nodded resolutely.

“C’mon, then,” Dwalin said to the group behind him. Foregoing the ladder altogether, the large warrior jumped straight down into the hole, landing at the bottom with a great thud. Fili, Kili, Gloin, Bofur, Bifur, Dori, and even Bain followed, all with weapons drawn.

This left a slightly smaller group in the empty warehouse. Sigrid and Bard set to checking over Tilda, who was talking excitedly about stabbing the guardsman. Thorin knelt down to look over Bili, beckoning Oin over to do the same.

“I’m fine, adad,” Bili said, pulling away from the healer’s touch. “We weren’t hurt.”

“I’d rather find that out myself, laddie,” Oin said. “But I see nothing too alarming. We should get them back to the house first.”

Thorin nodded. “The others will meet us back there when they’re done with their business.”

Bard looked over to the dwarves. “The Master is surely to be down there, probably with all the wealth he’s stolen from the town.”

“Yeah, he’s got a lot. I hit him in the face with a gold cup,” Bili said agreeably.

All heads turned to stare at him.

“And I hit the guard with Bili’s sword! And I kicked him too!” Tilda said proudly, drawing the attention back to her.

Thorin seemed to be taking deep, steadying breaths. Bard looked stunned.

It was Sigrid who got everyone moving again.

“Tilda! Bili! You are both in heaps of trouble!” She snapped, pulling their attention to her. “You directly disobeyed my orders, and you lied about where you were going! And you most certainly talked to strangers, and Nori here told us all about your plan to go to Erebor, and you most certainly were NOT HOME BY LUNCH!”

Tilda and Bili stared, wide-eyed.

“Now,” Sigrid continued, slightly more calmly. She brushed her hair away from her eyes and bent down to straighten Tilda’s dress. “We are going home, and you two certainly will be punished.
Won’t they, Da?”


“You heard him!” Sigrid said to the children, clapping her hands sharply. “Now, march!”

Herding the young ones in front of her, she kept a hand on their shoulders as they left the warehouse. Thorin and Bard followed closely behind, while Nori set off with a smirk to scout the route back. Ori, Balin, Oin, and Bombur all followed behind, each properly impressed with the young woman’s command.

And within the hour, the young ones were back at Bard’s home, warming up by the fire and chattering about their grand adventure. But their fathers were quickly regaining their wits as the dangers faded into the past, and Tilda and Bili were certainly in for a long and unpleasant night.

Chapter End Notes

THANK YOU SO MUCH to everyone who continues to read this story! Thanks again to everyone who leaves me such encouraging comments, I really truly need them some days, and I never would have completed so much of this story if it weren’t for you all. Please leave me any questions/comments/criticisms and I’ll gladly respond. Love you all and thanks for reading!

violentgril.tumblr.com, if you wanna chat about this or anything else.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

The aftermath of Bili and Tilda's kidnapping. Thorin and Bard are two very upset fathers.

Chapter Notes

Hello everyone, my most sincere apologies for the long gap between chapters. The reasons for that lengthy wait could fill a full chapter all by themselves, and so I'll refrain. Instead, I want to thank everyone for their incredible patience, and for all the wonderful comments and kudos you left. I never stopped thinking about you all, and am finally glad to be in a place again where I can post. Please enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

As they silently walked back to Bard’s house, Bili wasn’t sure what worried him more – the distressed look on his father’s face or the frightened one Tilda adopted whenever she glanced up at her sister. Bili would have expected Bard to be the disciplinarian of the family, but it seemed like Sigrid was all the more fearsome despite her smaller stature.

The dwarfling had known all along that he would be in trouble with Thorin over this, but he had thought to have more to show by the time he was caught. Instead, he was all too aware of how fruitless this venture must look in his father’s eyes. He had disobeyed, lied, stolen, snuck out, put Tilda in danger, and worried everyone, all for nothing.

The shame he felt was so overwhelming that he nearly looked forward to a punishment, if only to help lessen his enormous burden of guilt.

When the group reached Bard’s house, Sigrid immediately ushered Tilda and Bili inside and pointed sternly at the hearth. A small fire still burned in the fireplace and Bili was glad of its warmth as he sat and cast a miserable look up at the surrounding faces. The remaining Company quickly made themselves scarce, leaving Thorin, Bard, and Sigrid alone to handle the younglings. Bili was grateful not to have an audience to his shame, but felt a need, still, to apologize to the others.

Perhaps that’ll be part of my punishment, he thought.

“I don’t know what you two were possibly thinking,” Sigrid snapped, hands in fists on her hips. “You’re both lucky that Master Nori followed you-”

Yes, we were, thought Bili.

“-could have gotten seriously hurt-”

We nearly did.
“-you blatantly disobeyed-”
I didn’t listen to adad, why didn’t I listen to adad…

“-don’t know what you truly expected to happen-”
Not this.

“-could have been KILLED-”
It’s true, it’s all true, Tilda was almost hurt, we both could have died and I should have known better, I should have listened, why didn’t I just LISTEN…

“I CANNOT believe you two!”
I can’t either.

“What were you thinking?! You irresponsible, immature-”

“Sigrid!” Bard’s voice, strong and clear unlike it had been all day, cut through his eldest daughter’s tirade.

Sigrid stopped abruptly and took in the sight before her. Little Tilda’s head was bowed, her gaze averted except for the glances she kept sneaking at Bili. The dwarfling’s face was contorted, as though the act of holding back tears was causing him immense pain. His entire body, from his pointed ears to booted feet, trembled slightly.

Thorin dropped to his knees and lurched forward, pulling Bili into his arms. The moment Bili’s head hit Thorin’s shoulder, he let out a choked sob, and then another, and another.

“Shh, shh, it’s all right,” Thorin whispered, holding his son close. “Everything’s okay now. You’re safe. We were worried but you’re safe and it’s okay.”

“I’m sorry!” Bili cried, his sobs muffling his voice.

“I know, I know. It’s okay. We’ll talk about it but all that matters now is that you are safe. Shh, shh. Calm down, Bili. It’s okay.”

But the young dwarfling found, once he started crying, that it was impossible to stop. Thorin seemed to recognize this and continued to hold Bili close, murmuring inanities that neither listened to but nevertheless comforted them both. Bard quietly gestured for Sigrid and Tilda to come upstairs with him to their own room. Tilda cast one last concerned look at her friend, but followed her father out of the room.

Minutes passed that way until Bili felt his sobs lessen and the flow of his tears ebb. It left him with a strange feeling inside him at the very core of his being. It was as though he had finally eaten a large, full meal after a long day of fasting. It felt warm, and good, but also like he couldn’t quite settle himself.

He pulled himself away from Thorin’s damp tunic and rubbed the salty tracks from his face. Suddenly he felt overwhelmingly drained, but far calmer than before.

“Do you feel like you can talk to me, now?” Thorin asked, studying Bili closely.

Bili nodded. “I guess. I’m sorry.”
“I know,” said Thorin. “But I would like to be sure that you are sorry for the right things.”

“What do you mean?” asked the dwarfling.

“There are many reasons that we offer up apologies,” his adad began. “Sometimes, we apologize out of fear of punishment, or because we got caught doing something we weren’t supposed to. But if you do not truly understand that what you did was wrong, and feel remorse for your actions, then an apology is worthless. Do you understand?”

“I do, adad,” said Bili. “And I’m sorry for everything –”

Thorin held up a hand to stop him. “I would like for you to save your apologies for the end, after we have had our discussion.”

Bili nodded.

“Good,” said Thorin, offering his son a small but reassuring smile. He pulled Bili away from his body and adjusted himself more comfortably on the hearth, allowing Bili to settle onto Thorin’s knee and face his father. “Now, I want you to explain to me what you were thinking. From the very beginning.”

“Well…” Bili started, trapping his bottom lip miserably between his teeth. “Tilda and I heard you talking with Bard and Balin and Nori and everyone about leaving without us and making Nori sneak into the mountain instead of me, which isn’t fair because that’s why I came in the first place and I don’t want to face a dragon, but I don’t want Nori to have to do it either, cuz he’s a dwarf and Smaug will smell him far off, even if he does use my ring! And Tilda had this idea and I knew it wasn’t a good one but I couldn’t just let you all go without me, and I didn’t want her to go neither but it was her da who’s gonna be in danger, so I figured she has the right to go too, and so I thought if I could just get my ring back then we would be ok. But when we left, even though Tilda knew where she was going and we had a plan, we weren’t fast enough and one of the mean guards caught us and he grabbed me and told Tilda he’d hurt me if she tried to run so she didn’t. And then we were trapped and couldn’t get our and the Master wanted to know what we were doing here and I couldn’t think straight and I told him! I told him even though I didn’t wanna b-betray you and I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to and I’m sorry for being a traitor!”

“Hush, hush, it’s all right!” Thorin exclaimed, interrupting Bili’s breathless rant. He placed a hand on Bili’s shoulder and another on his chin, forcing his son to meet his gaze. “Take a deep breath, and listen to me, very closely.”

Thorin waited until Bili did as he was told before continuing.

“You are not a traitor,” said the dwarf king, his voice infused with all the regality of his position. “Younglings are younglings, not traitors. You did the right thing when you were taken by the Master.”

“But I know you didn’t want him to know about the Quest and I told him because I was afraid –”

“Exactly. You were afraid,” Thorin said firmly. “You were afraid and in a position you never should have been in. You’re not a traitor saying what you had to when you were scared and in danger. Now, if it were Dwalin in danger, or any one of my warriors, I would expect them to behave differently. But you are a young, adapted dwarf with no training and no means to protect yourself in such a situation. Do you understand?”

Bili’s eyes were wide and glossy. He nodded, hesitantly at first, but then more quickly.
“Good,” Thorin continued. “I never want to hear you say you’re a traitor again. I don’t want you to even think it. Are we clear?”

“Yes, adad. I’m not a traitor and I’m not to think that way ever again,” he said, sitting up straighter.

Thorin let go of Bili’s chin and nodded as well. “Now, about the rest of what you told me…”

Bili’s gaze dropped back down.

“I fear part of the problem lies with me.”

The dwarfling’s head snapped back up.

“I see now that leaving you in the dark must have been frustrating and frightening,” Thorin said, his tone world-weary and thoughtful. “I should have explained to you outright that the plan had changed and why, rather than treating you like I would a…average dwarfling. That was my fault, and I’ll explain myself to you now. But, it remains that you knew better than to react as you did, and part of the blame is on you as well. For that you will be punished.”

“I understand,” said Bili glumly.

“Do you also understand that there is no way I can allow you to face a dragon?” Thorin said, eyebrows raised. “No matter what contract you signed back in the Shire, you’re no longer Bilbo Baggins, Hobbit Burglar. You’re my very underage dwarf son, and whether you can see it or not, you behave like one. That is why it was necessary to change the plan.”

“I know!” Bili said earnestly. “I know. But I don’t want Nori to face the dragon either. That’s not what he signed up for, and it’s not fair to poor Ori and Dori either!”

“Ori and Dori also know what they signed up for, and as adults they were able to consider all the risks associated with this Quest,” Thorin said. “It is kind of you to worry for Nori. But all of the dwarves in the Company knew from the start what we were up against, and they understood that they could be called upon to serve in any capacity necessary. Besides, Nori was not ordered; he was asked, and he agreed. You do not get to make decisions for Nori. That is what isn’t fair. Understood?”

“But you’re making decisions for me, and I wasn’t always underage!” Bili said indignantly.

“And you made the decision to accept the Adapting, and have given me the right to make decisions on your behalf, as your father and guardian,” Thorin lectured. “I’ve told you before that I’ll not risk your safety no matter what. Nori, however, is capable of making his own decisions.”

“I’m capable,” said Bili defensively.

“Truly? For you have not shown me such with your behavior today,” Thorin reprimanded. “Nori will go into the mountain with the aid of the magic ring that you discovered. But I must also remind you that I have confiscated that ring, and it is no longer yours. I cannot allow you to play with something that powerful. We have no idea what it can do, or the effect it might have.”

Bili looked as though he wanted to argue, but remembered their previous conversations about the ring and bit his tongue. He didn’t see any winning that one, even if he dearly wanted the ring back.

“So the plan now stands as follows,” Thorin continued when Bili didn’t respond. “Master Bard knows the safest route to the mountain, and is familiar with the land surrounding it. He will help us find the entrance, and then Nori will enter the mountain and discover whether the foul beast still
lives. He’ll use the ring to make him invisible, and he will be very careful not to get too close to the beast and call attention to himself. Once we know the fate of the dragon, we will form a plan to kill it and take back the mountain.”

Bili nodded along, again holding back his commentary that he knew would only be refuted.

“I was planning to leave you here under the care of Master Bard’s elder children,” Thorin said with a musing tone. “But I no longer feel you are safe enough here alone. Nor do I trust you to remain put.”

“I’ll stay here, adad, I promise!” protested Bili, eager to regain his father’s trust.

But Thorin shook his head. “Part of your punishment will be that, until such need arises that I must enter a dangerous situation, you will not leave my side. Not to eat, not to sleep, not to train, not to talk with any of the Company, and certainly not to plot with your little friend Tilda. You will stay with me at all times, and you will ask me for permission before you go anywhere. Do you understand?”

“Yes, adad.”

Bili looked less stricken by the pronouncement of his punishment than Thorin expected. Rather, he looked almost relieved at the idea of being kept so close to his father’s side. Thorin expected him to rebel against such coddling, but perhaps the events of the day had been more frightening than his young one had yet admitted.

“Good. I also expect you to apologize to Tilda and her family, and for the rest of the Company for worrying them.”

“I will,” said Bili resolutely. “I’m sorry, adad.”

“Apology accepted,” Thorin said, a warm smile finally crossing his face.

Tilda sat down on the bed she shared with Sigrid and looked anxiously up at her father. “Are you sure we should just leave Bili and Master Thorin alone, da? Bili seemed very upset, maybe he’s frightened of being punished…”

“Better to mind your own coming punishment,” Bard said sternly, casting a chastising look down at his youngest.

“But-”

“Tilda, just hush,” Bard groaned. "Don’t think I don’t know you’re the mastermind behind this. It’s got you written all over it.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say mastermind…” Tilda said, puffing her chest out ever so slightly.

Sigrid huffed from her spot in the doorway, and her younger sister glared.

“Oh, so you didn’t convince Bili – who is, as far as I’ve seen, a very well-behaved young dwarf – to eavesdrop on us, simply because you were curious?”

Tilda bit her lip. “Well…”
“And you didn’t,” Bard pressed on. “Talk him into leaving with you on a mad adventure all by yourselves throughout a town that you know very well is dangerous?”

Tilda looked down at her shoes dangling high off the bed.

“Answer me, Tilda.”

She shrugged. “It seemed like a good idea, and he didn’t want to be left here either.”

“But you convinced him to go along with your plan, didn’t you?” Bard asked knowingly.

“Yeah,” Tilda admitted with a pout.

Bard nodded. “Well, first things first, you’re to apologize to Bili and to Master Thorin for your part in this.”

Tilda nodded. She had expected as much.

“You’re also forbidden from leaving the house without myself, Bain, or Sigrid for the next month,” Bard continued. “And since you seem to have enough time on your hands to come up with elaborate and dangerous plans, you will be spending your free time helping your brother and sister with their chores.”

“Aw-”

“And no complaining, unless you want more punishments, Tilda!”

“Yes, da,” Tilda whined. “Can I go see if Bili’s okay?”

“I think we should give Bili and his father some more time,” Bard said, eyeing the doorway. “You’re to stay up here and think about what you’ve done until I say you can come down, understood?”

Tilda scowled, but nodded.

Bard turned to Sigrid. “Shall we get started on dinner? I would like to be prepared when the others return.”

“Yes, da.”

While the two fathers dealt with their errant younglings, Bain and half the Company cornered the guard and the Master in their secret treasure hoard.

Dwalin and Kili wasted no time restraining the Master, one of Dwalin’s axes pressed sharply against the man’s back. Gloin and Bifur did the same to the guard. Bofur and Dori set about exploring the depths of the large room, looking for secret exits and any other hidden criminals. Bain and Fili stood before the Master. Despite his youth, Bain’s expression was murderous and his grip on his sword strong. Fili looked every bit the fearsome, regal prince as he observed the scene, his relaxed posture betrayed by the dangerous look in his eyes.

“Well, it seems to me that we’ve finally located the elusive Master of Laketown,” he began, speaking to the room at large but never taking his eyes off the Master. “And we’ve also located all the treasure that has mysteriously disappeared from the hands of the townspeople. Does that seem right to you,
“Master Bain?”

“Aye, they stole all this, and then some,” agreed the young man, glaring fiercely at their captives.

“Now, Master Bain, I’ll have to defer to your judgment here, this being a settlement of Men, not dwarves, but I believe that these men have been apprehended in the middle of a crime,” Fili continued in that deceptively cheerful voice. “Not only have we discovered stolen property, but they were also caught kidnapping children. What does this town do with liars and thieves? With child-stealers? Do you have a court to bring them before?”

“No we don’t,” answered Bain. “Not since this piece of filth took charge and destroyed everything!”

Fili inclined his head understandingly. “I see. And as one of the crimes committed was against a dwarf, a child no less, does it not follow that it be up to the family of the victim to deal out punishment? Since you have no formal court in which to bring up charges, of course.”

“Aye, sounds fair to me,” Bain agreed, his tone still terse and glare fierce. “But please, Master Dwarf, allow my father to be involved in the judgment as well, for his daughter and my youngest sister was also made victim to this man’s misdeeds.”

“Of course. Justice must be done, after all,” Fili said. He glanced away from the Master and exchanged knowing looks with Kili and Dwalin. The two began to drag the large man out of the room, made no easier by the man’s struggles. However, the two dwarves were far stronger than the Master, and had weapons with which to prod him. Dori eagerly followed them, kicking the Master’s shins and shoving him forward when he slowed.

“I believe this one was also complicit,” Fili said, gesturing to the terrified-looking guard.

Gloin and Bifur began pulling the second man down the tunnel as well. He went along much more easily, being all the more terrified of the dwarves and their weapons.

Bofur came up behind Fili and clapped him on the shoulder. “That was well done, it was. Shall we take ‘em back to Thorin?”

Fili nodded. “Thank you for your help, Master Bain.”

“Course. Thanks for getting my sister back,” said the boy, his voice trembling slightly now that the brunt of his anger had passed.

Fili exchanged a solemn nod with the lad.

“Come on, now, I’d hate to miss it when Thorin gets hold of these two!” Bofur crowed, strutting jauntily down the tunnel. Fili and Bain hurried behind.

By the time the dwarves managed to drag the Master and his guard back to Bard’s house, they had gathered quite a crowd. Despite their confusion at the sight of the dwarves, many of the inhabitants of Laketown had no qualms making their shock and disgust for the Master’s appearance clear.

The dwarves allowed no one to stop them, but if one or two townspeople managed to throw a stone at the Master, well, Fili didn’t see any reason to stop them.
Bain ran ahead into the house to fetch Thorin and Bard. They emerged, Thorin clenching Bili's hand and Sigrid holding tightly to Tilda. The rest of the Company, comprising of Oin, Bombur, Nori, and Ori, followed them out and formed a solid line behind the fathers and their children.

The dwarves dragged the Master and the guard to stand before the others. Thorin raised his free hand, and the gaggle of townspeople quieted immediately and watched with eager eyes.

It was Bard who spoke first.

“Master of Laketown, you are hereby accused of the following crimes,” he began, speaking loudly for all to hear. “You have lied to the townspeople about your whereabouts and the location of our wealth. You have stolen from the townspeople and hidden that wealth away in a secret location beneath the town, accessible only by tunnels. You have abandoned the town in its time of need. Finally, you kidnapped my youngest daughter and the son of the visiting dwarven king, Thorin Oakenshield. What have you to say on your behalf?”

The Master spluttered, looking around fearfully at the gathered crowd. There was not a sympathetic face in the lot.

“I was merely frightened for my own life, you see!” he said, finally. “The people of this town don’t appreciate all that I’ve done for them! I had to hide, or else they might attack me, like the savages they are!”

“Savages?” said Thorin, eyebrows raised. “These people, who have welcomed us and led us to shelter? Bard and his family, who have fed and clothed and sheltered us? These people who have done what they must to take care of their families, despite being abandoned by their leader? Savages, indeed.”

Bard turned to address the crowd. “People of Laketown, I trust in your ability to make your own judgments of the Master and his corrupt guards. But as one of the wronged parties is not one of us, indeed is the family of a visiting diplomat, the dwarf King Under the Mountain no less, I ask that we step aside and allow justice to be served by his hand, before we take our own.”

There was murmured assent throughout the crowd, and no one stood forward to challenge his words. Bard nodded and turned to Thorin.

“Do as you please, Master Dwarf. I ask only that you refrain from taking his life, for here in Laketown we do not pursue such a punishment unless a life has been taken first.”

“I should not desire his life,” said Thorin. He looked down at Bili, who gazed back up at his father with wide eyes. “But for the harm and fright he has caused my son, and for the terror I have witnessed him rain upon this town, I would banish him from civilization, never to seek aid or shelter from Laketown or any dwarven settlement for as long as he shall live.”

“I believe this fair,” Bard nodded. “What say the townspeople?”

There was a chorus of “Aye!” and “Yes!” and “Hang the bloody bastard!”

“So be it,” said Bard, now looking at the Master. “You are no longer Master of this town. You are no longer welcome here. Begone, and never return.”

Dwalin and Kili shoved the man away from them, and with one terrified look at the frothing crowd, he turned heel and ran. Hoots and jeers followed him out.

“What of this guard?” asked Bard, once again garnering everyone’s attentions. “He was acting on
the Master’s behalf, willingly, and along with his other guardsmen threatened harm to the children.”

“Banish ‘im too!”

“Get rid of all the guards!”

“Throw ‘em out!”

Thorin once again held up a hand to quiet the crowd. “This guard has been caught in the act, but undoubtedly there are others who remain guilty. Perhaps an inquisition by your people could be made, and then judgment passed?”

Bard nodded solemnly. He turned to face the crowd. “For now, lock him away, and make sure someone not in the guard watches him.”

Gloin and Bifur allowed two large men, commoners by the looks of them, to relieve them of their burden. The guardsman trembled at their hands and was easily dragged away.

Slowly, the crowd began to dissipate, as they realized the main event was over. A few lingered to stare curiously at the dwarves, but were eventually shooed away.

“You handled that well,” Thorin complimented Bard as they made their way back in the house. “You have no training in a leadership role?”

Bard shook his head. “I’ve lived much longer than these people, and I do remember something of my time before I adapted. My understanding of humans and their nature is much more thorough than theirs.”

“Your people will need a new Master, one who is trustworthy and capable,” Thorin continued. “It is not my place to offer opinion, but you have it anyway. I believe you would be a good ruler, and should we regain Erebor, I believe we could establish trade and communication between our two peoples.”

Bard looked slightly nauseous as the suggestion. “You have yet to regain your mountain, Master Dwarf. As for my people, we shall see. Adapteds are not accepted as rulers, you know.”

“Exceptions have been made throughout history, especially under…extenuating circumstance,” Thorin said with a small smile. “Plus, it isn’t as if you have a kingdom to run. Unless Dale is rebuilt.”

Bard turned an incredulous stare at the dwarf king. “Dale? Never. It is entirely destroyed, and the foul beast still lives in your mountain yet!”

“Consider my words,” Thorin said as a parting shot. “Come, Bili. We have much to do before we leave for Erebor.”

After dinner that night, Bili sought out Tilda by the hearth.

“I’m sorry!” they said simultaneously, and then shared a grin.

“I’m sorry I talked you into doing something so dangerous,” Tilda said with a frown. “I really didn’t think it would go so bad.”
“And I’m sorry I went along with it and didn’t stop you,” Bili looked down. “I knew better, and we both got hurt because of it.”

Tilda launched herself at the dwarfling, enveloping him in a hug. Bili wrapped his arms around her, their comparable heights making for the perfect hug.

And if either noticed the fond looks cast at them from the adults in the room, well, they just pretended not to see.

The dwarves took a few days after that to recover. Tilda and Bili found themselves constantly busy, and never left alone in the same room. The entire Company seemed to be working together to keep an eye on them, and thus it was two disgruntled younglings who found themselves saying their farewells early in the morning three days after the incident.

Tilda was staying behind with Sigrid and Bain, while Bard was accompanying the dwarves up to the mountain, for he knew the safest ways to reach the mountain and the paths beyond it.

The trip itself took the better part of the day, for they had to trek across the town, load themselves up in a barge, and be paddled across the lake to the other side. Once on solid ground again, it took Bard some time to pick up the seldom used trails, and then they hike to the base of the mountain took several hours.

It was in the shadow of the Lonely Mountain that they set up camp, and started preparations for the monumental task ahead.

...and Bili was determined not to be left behind again, no matter what he promised.

Chapter End Notes

Ok, so about 18 more things were planned for this chapter, but every time I get to writing dialogue it just goes on and on forever...sorry about that! Next chapter should have far more action. Oh yes, far more. I hope this chapter doesn’t disappoint too much, and I will try my very best to update far more quickly than last time. Thanks and love!!!

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