All That We Seem
by QuillaWynter

Summary

With their father dead in the goblin raid that scarred them, Trisk and Viska have no reason
to stay in the Hills of Evendim, so they leap at the chance to join their father's old comrade
in his quest to reclaim Erebor.

Notes

Returning readers, please be aware – massive sections of this story have been completely
rewritten, including (usually minor) plot changes. I highly recommend starting at the
beginning. I am not going to commit to an update schedule, but I hope it will be weekly.
Real life spent the last two years kicking me every chance it got, so I am not certain how
many readers are even still interested, but I am determined to finish this story. It was never
intended to be so long! Also, as a bribe, I'm going to tell you this: I have managed to write
past the point that was previously posted. The Battle of the Five Armies is nearly complete
(save for some polishing), but it (and what follows) will not go up until I finish the rewrite.
General Note: This is a blend of book and movie canon, so dates and events may not
perfectly match either one. All Khuzdul (including the Dwarven names of the Valar) is the
result of research in the Dwarrow Scholar's Dictionary of Neo-Khuzdul, but any errors in
grammar and syntax are mine.
As ever, comments, criticisms, and reviews are always welcome. I will always try to
respond!
The gentle hills and rolling meadows of the Shire shone silver in the moonlight as the small group of Dwarves made their way through the small community of Hobbiton. They were recently arrived from a settlement in the Blue Mountains, weary after the long ride and eager to reach their destination and the dinner that awaited them. Their ponies remained behind at the local inn, enjoying oats and a well-earned rest. Several similar mounts had already been stabled there, stoking the Dwarves' excitement with the evidence that some of their companions had already arrived. It was common knowledge in that part of the world that the Shire folk rarely rode ponies, preferring their own tough, hair-covered feet, so there had likely not been so many well-outfitted equines under the care of the innkeeper since the autumn trade caravan from the Dwarven colonies to the West. The ponies safely stowed, the five travelers now made their way toward the landmark locally known simply as the Hill, and the cozy smial nestled there.

“And that, my lads, is how I found a diamond and lost it in the same day!”

Triskel, son of Kulvik, laughed quietly, glancing over at his sibling as the miner finished his tale. Visk's eyes were crinkled with humor behind the scarf that covered the younger Dwarf's face, concealing the healing scars of their recent loss. The two young Dwarrow had fallen in with Bofur, his brother Bombur, and their enigmatic cousin Bifur, shortly before leaving the border of Ered Luin. Their company had made the journey a cheerful one, mostly due to Bofur's stories and songs. The rotund Bombur was quieter than his brother, endlessly kind but speaking only rarely. Bifur limited most of his conversation to iglishmêk, as an old injury had robbed him of the ability to speak Westron, and even his Khuzdul often came out garbled. Visk, too, was restricted to the language of hand signs, although the injury that had taken the younger Dwarf's voice was temporary – a strained throat, as opposed to the Orcish ax that had damaged a part of Bifur's brain and remained lodged therein nearly a decade later. No healer had been confident enough in their skill to risk removing it and endangering the toy maker's life, so he had chosen to keep his souvenir in place. In the end, Bofur had cheerfully chatted for most of the journey, with occasional participation from Trisk, silent interjections from Visk and Bifur, and the rare comment from his younger brother. The jovial miner was winding up a new tale when Bombur spoke up.

“There it is.”

Only three words, but they silenced the miner neatly as all of four glanced ahead to the door at the top of the Hill. Round, and painted a cheerful green, it was no different from any other in the Shire, save for one detail. Down near the bottom, etched in blue light, was a single rune, signature of a Wizard.

“Aye, there it be,” Bofur agreed, resettling his large, rather odd hat over his messy braids. “Gandalf's mark, sure enough, just as described!”

“And you, my dear friends, are loud enough to wake the dead, much less the good folk of the Shire,” an amused voice commented behind them. Trisk spun to see a tall, gray-clad figure, like to an elderly Man, coming up the road behind them. He wore a tall, pointed hat and carried a gnarled
walking stick, his gray hair and beard moving gently in the evening breeze. “Well met, Dwarves of Ered Luin,” he said, stopping before them with a nod. “Bofur, Bombur, and Bifur, you are well met indeed.”

“At your service, Gandalf,” Bofur responded with a grin. “These lads, we met on our way out of the mountains, vouched for by none other than the Lady Dis, all the way from Emyn Uial!”

“Triskel, son of Kulvik,” the elder lad offered with a bow. “And my brother Viskel. We are here in our father's stead, if Thorin will have us.”

“Ah.” The Wizard nodded, his face growing grim for a moment. “I had heard of the recent troubles in the Hills of Evendim. A nasty business, though finally at an end. I believe that you will find Thorin willing to accept your offer. But come, our destination, at least for this evening, is just ahead. Good companionship awaits, and good food, for never have I found a table that surpasses what a Hobbit has to offer his friends.”

Bombur smiled brightly at that promise and started up the Hill at a quick pace, his kin on his heels. Trisk hung back a bit, watching his sibling as the other adjusted the heavy travel pack and gave him a nervous look. The older Dwarrow sighed and clasped his sibling's shoulder, giving a reassuring squeeze.

“This is what Adad would have wanted,” he repeated for what felt like the hundredth time. “You know he was determined to go when the Line of Durin sought to reclaim Erebor. He cannot, so we shall go in his place. Thorin will accept us. He must.” He realized that he had clenched his free hand unconsciously and made an effort to relax it as Visk raised an eyebrow and signed briefly. The young craftsman smiled and tugged his sibling's hood, pulled forward to conceal chestnut hair that had been cut far too short. “You too, Visk. I'll not leave you behind.”

When Visk nodded absently, he turned to hurry his steps and catch the others. Soon they stood on the stoop in front of the round green door, cheery light streaming from the windows to give it a welcoming look. Grinning with anticipation, Bofur reached out to ring the bell, only to have it come off in his hand when he pulled a little too hard. Gandalf sighed in good-natured exasperation and rapped with his staff.

The door was yanked open abruptly, nearly sending Bombur tumbling to the floor, warm light spilling out over the stoop. Several Dwarves were visible in the entry hall beyond, industriously transporting food as they called out in greeting. Directly in front of the new arrivals, however, stood a clearly annoyed Hobbit. Within moments, the little fellow's gaze had found the Wizard and the expressive face shifted to a kind of resigned frustration as he sighed explosively.

“Gandalf. I should have known.”

“Greetings, my dear Bilbo!” came the unabashed response as Gandalf ushered his companions through the door and closed it. “I see you have met several of our friends already! May I present Bofur, Bombur, Bifur, Triskel, and Viskel!” He peered around the interior of the little house, counting to himself. “I do believe that we are one Dwarf short,” he murmured.

“He is late, is all,” came the low rumble from a tall, balding Dwarf leaned against the nearby wall. “He traveled to a council with representatives of the other kingdoms.”

“Bofur! Bombur! Bifur! We were beginning to worry about you!”

Bofur laughed as a cheerful youth with raven-dark hair charged up from the side, pounding the miner enthusiastically on the back. A step behind the lad was a golden-haired Dwarrow, grinning
widely behind a close-cut beard and braided, beaded mustache.

“Told you I'd be here, didn't I?” he countered. “Bifur had to close down his shop, o' course, and we picked up some traveling companions that were on the road when the second message went out.” He indicated Trisk and Visk with a grin, then hurried off to help with the food, assuring the Hobbit on his way that Bombur did not, in fact required a cheese-knife. The two young Dwarves turned to face the new arrivals.

“Fíli...” said the fair-haired lad.

“...and Kíli...” added the other.

“...at your service!”

They concluded their introduction with a synchronized bow, looking inordinately pleased with themselves. Trisk suppressed a snort of laughter. Visk did not bother, though it quickly turned into a cough that made the younger Dwarf's green eyes water. Waving off the auburn-haired silversmith's concern, Visk stepped into the nearby sitting room to recover, leaving Trisk to study the young Dwarrow before him. Kíli was clad in blue and gray, taller and leaner than his brother, his dark hair restrained only by a distinctive silver clasp bearing the sigil of the Line of Durin. Fíli, in brown and buckskin, wore a matching clip, but he also wore the braids of the heir to the throne, one in front of each ear and one running above and behind. Each had his individual sigil, clearly derived from the royal one, worked into the embroidery decorating his tunic. Even without braids, beads, and sigils, the two looked enough like the handsome Dwarrowdam he had met in Ered Luin to make them immediately recognizable as her sons, and thus nephews to the exiled king of Erebor.


“Evendim?” Fíli repeated, looking surprised. “I had no idea Thorin had sent summons so far afield.”

“My father was a friend to Thorin during the Exile,” the young Dwarf explained quietly, glancing over as his sibling rejoined them. “He promised to join any attempt to retake Erebor, but now it comes to it and he is unable to fulfill that vow, so we will do it for him.”

The prince-in-exile nodded in understanding, but did not get a chance to speak further, as Bofur called to them from an archway several feet away.

“Come on then, lads! Dinner's on! Step lively, Master Baggins has provided quite a feast, fit for a king's hall!”

“I have done no such thing!” the Hobbit protested, but his comment was lost in the general confusion as fourteen Dwarves descended on the laden table.

A feast, Bofur had called it, and a veritable feast it was, especially to those who had spent the last week or more on the road. Trisk and Visk eagerly accepted piled plates and tankards of ale, taking seats on stools at the end of the table. Visk's scarf made eating a more complicated affair, but the youth merely adjusted by eating a little less enthusiastically than their companions – actually resorting to a fork.

A tankard thumped down on the wooden surface next to Trisk's plate and he glanced up into friendly blue eyes as Fíli perched on the edge of an occupied bench, nudging one of the others over smoothly. Cocking a brow at Visk, he looked at the silversmith curiously.
“Is the lad well?,” he asked with a small laugh. “He's eating like an Elf, all fancy manners.”

“And when did you ever seen an Elf eat?” scoffed the sharp-featured Dwarf across the table from the prince, even as Trisk's hand flew out to prevent the exceedingly rude hand gesture he knew was forthcoming from his sibling. The speaker, a red-head wearing an elaborate design of crests and braids who had briefly introduced himself as Nori, grinned at the youth, the humor in his face stealing the sting from his words. “Dine with them often, do ya? Does your uncle know?”

“Recovering from burns,” Trisk replied quietly, giving a reassuring squeeze to the tension-tight arm beneath his hand. “Our father was killed in a Goblin raid that destroyed half of our village. Viskel was caught in a burning building, and his injuries are still raw. He lost some of his hair, as well, so the healer cut the rest so it would come in even.”

Fíli's eyes widened in sympathy, bowing awkwardly in his seat. “My apologies, Visk,” he murmured, “and my sorrow for your loss. I did not mean to make you uncomfortable. My curiosity overwhelms my manners sometimes. I'll be sure to warn my brother as well,” he added with a fond smile. “If you think I'm thoughtless, you'll be horrified by Kíli!”

Trisk chuckled, glancing down the table to where the dark-haired Dwarf was currently shoveling food into his mouth, until he resembled nothing so much as a laughing chipmunk. Fíli sighed and shook his head at his brother's antics.

“Obviously, I got all of the manners in the family – there were none left over when little brother came along.”

At least he seems to have gotten the charm, Visk signed, a twinkle in the green eyes. Fíli winced and clutched his chest as if struck as Nori choked on his ale trying not to snicker. A bright grin spread across the golden-haired Dwarrow's face.

“Cut to the quick without a word spoken,” he laughed. “I'm not certain that my pride will ever recover!”

The white-haired Dwarf to his left hoisted an eyebrow as he turned toward the conversation for the first time. “You're a descendant of Durin, lad,” he commented dryly. “Pride is one thing you will never lack. Sense, on the other hand, seems in short supply.”

“And the attacks continue!” Fíli protested, drawing laughter from those close enough to hear him over the general din. “Even Balin turns against me. Surrounded and sorely beset! Unfair!”

“Coming, nadad!”

Trisk glanced up at the shout, unsurprised to see a grinning Kíli scramble up on the table and navigate its length, despite the protests from those whose plates his kicked aside in his haste. “Did you not hear him? My brother is beset and outnumbered!” he countered, laughing at the bald warrior. Another two steps, and he dropped easily to the floor next to Fíli. Balin sighed and shook his head.

“Near eighty years of training, and not a shred of decorum between the two of you,” he muttered. “What would your lady mother say?”

“Nothing,” Kíli replied cheerfully. “She'd be too busy boxing our ears.”

“While Uncle looked pained and pretended we were no kin to him,” Fíli added.

“I've a mind to do the same,” came the reply.
As dinner wound down, and the group began to scatter through the house, Trisk stood and collected his and his sibling's plates, turning toward the hallway, where their Hobbit host was having an agitated conversation with Gandalf. Ori, the quiet young Dwarf that had been introduced as brother to Nori and the dignified Dori, was already there, sounding a bit shy as he asked where the dishes should be deposited. Before Master Baggins could reply, Fíli was at Ori's side, a smirk on his face.

“Here Ori, give it to me,” he said innocently. “It's only polite we do the washing up, after all. Ki?”

Without waiting for a reply, he flung the plate down the hallway. Kíli, pipe in hand, snagged it easily in midair and turned to toss it into the kitchen. Since no sound of shattering crockery followed, Trisk supposed one of the others was there to catch it, but that did not stop the Hobbit from giving a yelp of dismay. Bofur chose that moment to begin drumming idly on the table with his silverware, while Nori and Bifur started a sword fight with their knives. Bilbo turned on them in protest.

“Can you not do that! You'll blunt them!”

And that's what did it. Trisk could see it in Bofur's eyes as they lit with mischief. The young silversmith had never met most of his new companions before that night, but there were many things that were common to the assorted Dwarven settlements of the West, and “Blunt the Knives” was one of them. It was a drinking song, and old one, possessed of at least a dozen stanzas and endlessly customizable to nearly any circumstance. Kíli started it off, his brother taking the second line before the rest of the gathering took their lead and ran with it.

Blunt the knives, bend the forks
Smash the bottles and burn the corks!
Chip the glasses and crack the plates!
That's what Bilbo Baggins hates!

With the song keeping the rhythm, the piles of dishes vanished from the table, tossed hand to hand in a dazzling display of Dwarven dexterity. It was a racial trait, their innate ability to keep track of one another without conscious thought, and one that often gave them an advantage against foes that judged them solely on their size. Unfortunately, Master Baggins either did not understand the full import of what he was seeing, or he was simply distracted by the fact that their props of choice were his heirloom crockery. He did not relax until he pushed by them into the kitchen to find every dish clean, stacked, and unbroken, his guests laughing good-naturedly at his consternation.

It was as the laughter died down that they heard it, the sound that they had been waiting for all evening, the one that brought every head up and turned every eye toward the door. Three heavy knocks.

Gandalf smiled.

“He is here.”
The atmosphere in the cozy smial shifted with the arrival of the exiled king of the Dwarves. The excitement was still there, but the high spirits were tamped down, honed to a fine edge. Trisk could feel the change in the air, an almost palpable sense of anticipation that set his heart pounding, even as he felt Visk's hand tighten on his sleeve. The Hobbit gave a put-upon sigh and marched over to the door, Gandalf on his heels. The Wizard's amusement, too, had ebbed, leaving an intense, focused look on the kindly face. For the first time, the young Dwarven silversmith wondered if perhaps there was more to the tales of the wanderer in gray than fireworks and pipe smoke creations. Then their host yanked the door open and the half-formed thoughts fled, replaced by his first sight of his rightful king – Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, called the Oakenshield, heir to the Line of Durin and to Erebor, one of the greatest Dwarven kingdoms of Middle Earth.

The profile was unmistakable, a clear echo of that borne on the old coins that still circulated long after the fall of the kingdom where they had been struck. Nose and brow, the blood of Durin was strong, even without the twin dark braids that framed his face. Sharp blue eyes found the Wizard immediately.

"Gandalf," Thorin rumbled, stepping through the round door with barely a glance at the frustrated Hobbit. "I thought you said this place would be easy to find. I got lost twice, and would never have found it at all were it not for the mark on the door."

The Hobbit frowned, peeking around the door as he shut it, then turning to glare at his latest guest.

"There is no mark on that door. I just had it painted last week!"

Gandalf sighed and put a placating hand on his shoulder.

"There is a mark," he responded quietly. "I put it there myself after my last visit. It was meant only for Dwarf eyes, my dear Hobbit, and it will fade. Now, Bilbo Baggins, may I present to you the leader of our Company, Thorin Oakenshield."

A subtle movement in the hallway alerted Trisk to the fact that several of the other Dwarves had moved out into the entryway to greet their king, Fíli and Kíli at the lead, with Balin and Dwalin only steps behind them. Thorin acknowledged his kin with a nod and a small smile, shrugging out of his coat and handing it and his gear off to his nephews before turning back to Bilbo. The exiled king's smile faded, leaving his stern features rather grim and decidedly unimpressed.

"So, this is the Hobbit," he observed dryly, flicking a glance at Gandalf and raising one imperious eyebrow. "He looks more like a grocer than a burglar, Wizard."

"I beg your pardon?" Bilbo started, sputtering slightly in confusion and frustration. The white-haired Balin stepped forward from the group of chuckling Dwarves, sweeping an arm toward the dining room as the others cleared a path.

"Come, Thorin. There is food, and much to be discussed."

Durin's heir nodded and allowed his old friend to lead him to the table, where Dori presented the choice selections that had been set aside for his arrival. Thorin sank into a chair, thanking him quietly, and watching with an unreadable expression as rest of the Dwarves settled in. Trisk spotted his sibling at the far corner, next to the two princes, and headed in that direction, only to be stopped by Thorin's piercing gaze.

"I do not know you, lad," the exiled king commented quietly, shooting a pointed look toward Visk.
“Nor the silent one trying to disappear into the corner, yet only those I know were summoned to this meeting. Who are you?”

Trisk offered a quick bow, producing the letter that had been sent to his father. “Triskel, son of Kulvik, at your service. That is my brother, Viskel. He means no disrespect, but he cannot speak.”

Thorin’s brow creased and he nodded slightly. “I did send summons to Kulvik, son of Tuvik. Why did he not come?”

The silversmith touched the healing scar that ran from his left temple down across his cheek. “Our village was attacked by Goblins less than a fortnight before your summons arrived. Our father fell in battle protecting our folk. My brother was caught in a burning building that same night. The smoke damaged his throat, and he covers his head while the scars heal and his hair grows back.”

Thorin closed his eyes and Trisk thought he saw a shadow of sorrow as the king bowed his head.

“T...
Balin shook his head, but it was Thorin that answered, his face grim.

“They refuse the call of an uncrowned king, heir to a kingdom that has held no living Dwarves in over a century,” he responded. “They hesitate to follow blindly the line that led so many to death at Azanulbizar.”

“They demand the Arkenstone,” Balin guessed, causing hisses of realization around the table. At his side, Trisk felt Kíli go still as Fíli made an indecipherable sound low in his throat at the mention of the heirloom of Durin’s Line, a stone they would never have seen but that would have loomed large in the tales of Erebor and her fall. For his part, Thorin merely nodded, glancing aside at Gandalf, where the Wizard sat quietly apart.

“They will follow only if I can produce the Arkenstone,” he confirmed. “Until then, this quest is ours, and ours alone.”

“You're going on a quest?”

The quiet, almost reluctant question came from the Hobbit, the first he had spoken since Thorin's arrival, and indeed several of the Dwarves seemed to have forgotten that he was there. The Wizard, however, simply smiled at him and reached into his voluminous robes, producing a neatly folded piece of parchment that he placed on the table.

“Bilbo, my dear fellow, a little more light, if you would,” he commented, unfolding it carefully until a map lay spread before them. Trisk could see little from the far end of the table, but Thorin's eyes widened slightly as their host returned with a lamp. His eyes, too, were drawn to the parchment, and Gandalf nodded, one long finger tapping a spot on the map. “Far to the East, over ranges and rivers, beyond woods and wastelands, lies a single solitary peak,” he intoned quietly.

“The Lonely Mountain.”

The words were barely more than a whisper from the golden-haired prince as Fíli leaned forward, his brother radiating excitement next to him.

“Erebor,” Thorin confirmed, smiling slightly at his sister-sons.

“Our home,” Balin murmured, taking pity on the confused Hobbit. “One of the great kingdoms of the Dwarves, founded nearly a thousand years ago and ruled by the Line of Durin the Deathless. Stronghold of Thrór, King Under the Mountain, ally and friend to Dale, city of Men, and to the Elves of the Greenwood. A mountain rich in precious metals and gems, the greatest of which was the Arkenstone, considered the mark of our maker's favor.” He sighed. “But never has peace been a lasting thing.”

“But our time has come again,” the red-haired Glóin stated firmly, glancing at his elder brother. “Óin has read the portents, and they say it is time!”

The healer nodded. “Ravens have been seen flying back to the Mountain,” he explained. “As it was foretold: When the birds of yore return to Erebor, the reign of the beast will end.”

“Beast? What beast?”

Bilbo’s question was nearly a squeak, the Halfling's face rather pale as he glanced at the map.

“Aye, the dragon,” Bofur responded earnestly, taking a deep drag from his pipe as he warmed to his subject. “Smaug the Great and Terrible, chiefest and greatest calamity of our Age. Airborne fire breather, teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks, extremely fond of precious metals -”
“Yes, I know what a dragon is, thank you!” the Hobbit interrupted the list of the beast's qualities, looking around at the Dwarves in bewilderment. “That is your quest? To take this mountain back from a dragon?”

“A task that would be difficult enough if we had an army behind us,” Balin confirmed, sitting back in his chair and looking around the table. “As it is, we number only fifteen, and an odd assortment at that. Some warriors, but mostly tradesmen and craftsmen, the aged and the untried.”

A rumble of protest rose and Fíli's fist cracked down on the table, startling those around him. “We may be few in number, but we're fighters, all of us! To the last Dwarf!”

“And we'll have a Wizard!” Kíli put in eagerly. “Surely we can handle a dragon with Gandalf's aid!”

All eyes turned to the tall Wizard as he coughed, choking on his pipe smoke. “My powers do not run to dragon-slaying, young Master Dwarf,” he temporized, looking rather put out. “I offer my advice and guidance, but I cannot take your mountain back for you!”

“Nor should you,” Dwalin growled. “It's for Durin's folk to retake Erebor.”

“But they won't come,” Dori countered. “They refused their king!”

Triskel shrank back slightly as several of the others came to their feet, expressing their anger with the answer Thorin had brought back from the other Dwarf lords. Pandemonium reigned for a long moment before the exiled king came to his feet, his face like thunder.

“SHAZARA!”

The shouting stopped immediately, sixteen pairs of eyes on the leader of the Company as he met each gaze in turn.

“If we have seen these portents, heard this prophecy, do you not think others have noticed them as well?” he demanded. “Rumors are beginning to spread. They speak of the fact that Smaug has not been seen in sixty years, that the vast wealth of our people may now lie unguarded. Eyes have begun to turn to the Mountain – assessing, wondering, weighing the risk.” He paused for a moment as the Dwarves settled back into their seats, then he nodded at Dori, then Balin. “But yes, the other kingdoms have refused us aid unless I wield the authority of the Arkenstone.”

“Which is lost with Erebor, somewhere in the dragon's hoard,” Balin retorted.

“That's why we need a burglar!”

Ori flushed as the others turned to stare at him, shrugging slightly in embarrassment, but Thorin was nodding. Pieces suddenly started coming together in Triskel's mind and the young silversmith turned to share a glance with Visk, then turned to the Hobbit, who did not yet seem to have reached the same conclusion.

“And that is why I recommended our host,” Gandalf agreed, puffing calmly on his pipe. “Thorin asked me to find the final member of this Company, and Mr. Baggins has my full confidence.”

Bilbo's eyes widened almost comically as he stared first at Gandalf, then at the king of the Dwarves.

“I’m afraid I have to concur with Mr. Baggins,” Balin nodded. “He is hardly burglar material.”

“He’d not last a day in the Wild,” was Dwalin's assessment, leaving the Hobbit looked torn between offense and agreement. Gandalf's face darkened and the Wizard stood, looming more than should have been possible with the low ceilings, the air around him crackling with power as the lights dimmed.

“Enough! If I say Bilbo Baggins a burglar, then a burglar he is!” he snapped. He glanced around at the startled Dwarves and slowly relaxed, the aura of power fading. “Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet,” he explained with a small smile. “In fact, they can pass unseen by most if they choose. And while the dragon is intimately familiar with the smell of Dwarf, the smell of Hobbit will be all but unknown to him.” He turned to Thorin, meeting that fierce sapphire gaze. “You asked me to find one I thought suitable for this task, Thorin, and I have done so. There is a lot more to Mr. Baggins than appearances suggest, and he has more to offer than anyone realizes, including himself. You must trust me on this.”

There was a long moment of silence before the exiled king nodded stiffly and turned to Balin.

“You have the contract?”

“Aye.”

The white-haired Dwarf produced a thickly folded parchment and handed it to the bemused Hobbit, who gulped slightly as it unfolded in his hand, trailing down to the floor, covered in neat writing in the Common language. He began reading it quietly as Dwalin spoke again.

“Even if we have a burglar, Erebor's gates are sealed, destroyed by the dragon. How do you plan to get in?”

Thorin sighed and shook his head. “There was a secret door, but I have long since forgotten its location, and no doubt it was intended to open from the inside.”

“And that is where I can offer counsel,” Gandalf interjected quietly, pointing to something on the map. “These runes here speak of a hidden passage to the upper halls. And this, your father entrusted to me long ago, in hopes the reclamation of Erebor might one day be possible.” Reaching into his robes, the Wizard produced a large iron key, clearly of Dwarven origin, ornate and heavy, which he handed respectfully to the exiled king. Thorin took it reverently.

“The door will have been made to be invisible from the outside,” Balin pointed out carefully. Thorin nodded, but Gandalf cleared his throat, pointing once more to the runes on the map.

“The answer to that riddle, I believe, is hidden somewhere in this map, my dear Balin. I simply lack the skill to find it.” He smiled ruefully and glanced down the table toward the princes. “As you can see, young Kíli, my abilities do have limits, though I appreciate your enthusiastic support.”

In the hallway, Bilbo was steadily working his way through the contract, a myriad of emotions flitting across his expressive face as he read.

“Wait, funeral arrangements?” he demanded, his glance snapping up. Balin nodded.

“Of course, Mr. Baggins. Standard procedure on an expedition such as this, you know. A share of any treasure recovered, out-of-pocket expenses, time required – the usual.”

“Oh yes, of course, the usual,” the Hobbit muttered, continuing to read. Trisk wasn't certain if he realized he had started reading it out loud, however. “‘Present company shall not be held liable for
injuries inflicted by or sustained as a consequence thereof, including, but not limited to lacerations...evisceration...incineration?!’’ His voice rose steadily on each successive word, until he was nearly squeaking.

“Well, yes,” Bofur offered, friendly, but slightly confused. “I mean, it's a dragon. Basically a furnace with wings.”

“Of course, silly me,” Bilbo murmured faintly, his face going slightly gray. Even as Visk stood, brow furrowed, Trisk was on his feet and moving toward their host, who was beginning to sway visibly. Offering a supportive arm, the young Dwarf led the Hobbit down to the sitting room and settled him in the first comfortable chair that they reached. Behind him, he could hear some of others chiding the boisterous miner for his tactless comments. A minute later, Visk appeared in the door with a steaming teacup that was promptly handed over to Bilbo before the jeweler retreated once more. Gandalf entered a moment later, sparing a brief smile as he carefully took a seat on a low sofa.

“My thanks, young Trisk. If you don't mind, I need to speak to my old friend.”

Trisk nodded and turned to go, offering the Hobbit a sympathetic smile as he went. He wasn't certain if it was noticed – Mr. Baggins seemed to be debating whether or not to drown himself in his tea, shooting dark looks at the Wizard and muttering under his breath about “old friends showing up unannounced with a battalion of uncivilized Dwarves.”

“Hardly unannounced,” Gandalf returned mildly. “I was here Wednesday last and you invited me to tea, my dear Hobbit. I mentioned at the time that I might have some friends accompanying me, and so I have.”

The silversmith might have lingered a few moments longer, but a deep hum was coming from the parlor, a rich bass rumble that spoke his very bones. He was moving toward the sound before he even realized, drawn like a bit of iron to a lodestone. Joining Visk in the doorway, he closed his eyes and let the music wash over him even as he added his own voice to the melody, conscious of the younger Dwarf's hand clasped tight to his arm.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Far over the Misty Mountains cold,} \\
&\text{To dungeons deep, and caverns old,} \\
&\text{We must away, ere break of day} \\
&\text{To find our long-forgotten gold.}
\end{align*}
\]

It was a song as old as the Exile, a ballad of loss and yearning, one that was sung every year during *Lomilu Zul*, when Erebor's dead were honored. To hear it this night, on the eve of their attempt to reclaim their lost homeland, was both unexpected and fitting, and he was neither surprised nor ashamed to realize that there were tears on his cheeks.

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{The pines were roaring on the height,} \\
&\text{The winds were moaning in the night.}
\end{align*}
\]
The fire was red, it flaming spread,
The trees, like torches, blazed with light.

Silence ruled for a long moment as the final notes faded away, heavy with memory, sorrow, and a strange kind of joy. Opening his eyes, Triskel could see that he was not the only one that had been moved to tears – even Dwalin's had a suspicious glitter in the firelight. After a time, Thorin turned to face the entire Company, that fierce blue gaze drifting over each of them in turn.

“With or without Master Baggins, we will depart early tomorrow for the Misty Mountains, the first part of our journey. I know that many of our kin in Ered Luin feel this quest is unnecessary, even foolish. We have built a new home there, they say, a life of peace and plenty. And they are right.”

He held up his hand to halt the immediate indignant response, a small smile on his face.

“They are right,” he repeated firmly. “We escaped Smaug, survived the years of the Exile and the Battle of Azanulbizar, and came at last to the Blue Mountains. There, we rebuilt. In time, we were able to thrive. It was a chance to recover, to heal, to watch our children grow in safety. Perhaps that is enough. Perhaps it is folly to turn our backs on what we have and seek to restore what was lost. But perhaps it is not.”

He paused, taking a deep breath and holding up the key that Gandalf had given him, his eyes filled with memory.

“From my grandfather to my father, this key has come down to me. They dreamt of the day when the Dwarves of Erebor would reclaim their homeland. There is no choice, truly. Not for me. And I say now, I would take each and every one of you over an army from from the Iron Hills, for when I called upon you, you came. Loyalty, honor, a willing heart. I can ask no more than that.”

The Company did not see Bilbo again as they scattered through the expansive home, finding places to sleep in spare bedrooms and on sofas. The four youngest party members found themselves in possession of the living room. Visk was bundled into a comfortable chair while Trisk settled onto the floor next to it, his coat folded for a pillow. Fíli and Kíli were on the couch, talking quietly on the edge of sleep. Trisk glanced at the brothers.

“Everyone here seems to know one another except us,” he commented quietly. “Visk and I feel like we've stumbled into a story already in progress.”

Fíli smiled and Kíli chuckled, emptying his pipe.

“I guess we do all know one another,” the elder prince agreed. “Thorin is our uncle, of course, and Dwalin and Balin are his oldest friends, as well as being our teachers when we were Dwarflings. They are our cousins, a few generations back. Same with Óin and Glóin. And rumor has it that Dori, Nori, and Ori are kin to the line of Durin, as well, but no one will tell us how.”

“So this is mostly a family expedition,” Kíli added with a smile. “You two, Bifur, Bofur, and Bombur are the only odd ones out.”

“And all warriors?” Trisk realized he probably sounded a little dubious, but several of the Dwarves didn't really seem like fighters.
“Oh, no. They can all fight, of course,” Fíli assured him. “I imagine you've spoken to Bofur and his lot?”

“Yes, on the journey. Bofur's a miner, Bombur a tinker, and Bifur a toymaker. Which I will admit to finding surprising. He looks rather...fierce for a toymaker.”

Kíli shook his head. “He looks fierce, and he's a demon with his spear, but Bifur is actually a very kind soul. The children in Ered Luin love him.”

Fíli nodded and continued his listing of the Company and their skills. “Dwalin is a warrior, of course, and Balin, though you might be surprised to look at him. He's also a teacher, but he's no slouch in the sparring ring, I can tell you. Óin is our healer, Glóin is a merchant. Ori is a scribe, and something of an artist. Dori, his eldest brother, is a leather-worker. Nori...well....”

“Nori's a thief,” Kíli put in bluntly. “I think he's our backup in case Gandalf's suggested burglar falls through. He's a laugh, though, Nori. I think Dori would drive Ori crazy if his middle brother wasn't along to rescue him occasionally.”

And you? Visk signed, raising an eyebrow. Do princes have trades? Or are you simply warrior trained?

Fíli groaned. “Oh, we've had lots of training, in whatever you can imagine. We're both warriors, of course. I wield twin swords.” This last was said with some pride. “Kíli's an archer, and he uses a sword. We've both also been tutored in history and politics.” That was said with a healthy dose of disgust and Trisk chuckled. “Thorin and I are blacksmiths as well. Kíli is a hunter and tracker.”

“And now you are on a heroic quest to reclaim a mountain from a fire-breathing dragon,” Trisk commented, sighing as he lay down on the floor and stared up at the wood-beamed ceiling.

“As are you,” Kíli pointed out, just before succumbing to a massive yawn.

“And none of us will be able to sit a saddle if we don't get some sleep,” Fíli commented, making himself comfortable in the corner of the couch.

Triskel, son of Kulvik, lay awake for a long while after Visk and the princes finally fell asleep. Endless thoughts chased one another through his brain – memories, hopes, fears. Mahal, let me have made the right decision, he thought. Bring us through this and help me keep Visk safe and whole. Blinking in the fading firelight, Trisk reached up to give Visk's arm an affectionate squeeze.

“Zann galikh,” he whispered. “Sleep well, namadith.”

* * *

Bilbo Baggins had told Gandalf that he was going to sleep hours ago, but the Hobbit had not yet actually been able to doze off. Something about having a wizard and fifteen Dwarves staying in his home made it a bit difficult for him to simply settle in for the night. He had stayed in his room as he listened to his guests make themselves comfortable, claiming spare beds and overstuffed chairs. He quickly realized that silence was not going to settle over the snug Hobbit hole as the Dwarves fell asleep – instead, a chorus of snores began, near to rattling the windows in their frames. After
tossing and turning for a while, unable to fall asleep, the Hobbit gave up and got out of bed, tiptoeing into the hallway. Perhaps a pipe would soothe his nerves and let him get some rest.

He did not realize that the four youngest Dwarves were still awake until one of them spoke up, mentioning that he felt like he had come into the middle of a story. The analogy was so close to Bilbo's own feeling that the Hobbit stopped just outside of the room, listening as the two who had introduced themselves as Fíli and Kíli gave their companions a brief listing of the other Dwarves' trades. He had noted the resemblance between the lads and the gruff leader of the company – the relationship would explain their inclusion in the Company, despite their obvious youth. The other two in the room were the auburn haired Dwarf and his silent brother – their names had slipped his memory, though he knew they rhymed. He had heard the elder give their taciturn leader a brief explanation of a Goblin raid and lost kin, and something about the younger lad being scarred by a fire. And yet, here they were, seeking to join a dangerous quest to reclaim a homeland they had never seen from a deadly (fire-breathing) beast that had terrorized and murdered their folk before they were ever born.

*Dwarves are insane,* was the first clear thought to cross the Hobbit's mind as the group finally settled in for sleep. *It must be a racial affliction. Fíli said they aren't all family, so it can't just run in an isolated bloodline. Adventures? Heroic quests? Why would anyone willing seek them out?*

And yet, somewhere in the depths of his heart, where the Tookish side of him had slept quietly since the loss of his parents, Bilbo felt something stirring.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

smial – Hobbit hole.
Iglishmêk – The sign language of the Dwarves, created by Tolkien.
Westron – The common language of Middle Earth.
Khuzdul – The language of the Dwarves, given to them by their creator, Mahal, and preserved unchanging.
Adad – Father (Khuzdul)
The Exile – After the Sack of Erebor, Durin's folk wandered long years in exile before settling and beginning to rebuild, first in Dunland and then in Ered Luin.
Nadad – Brother (Khuzdul)
Aishâk binarzâm! - Faithless cravens! (Khuzdul)
SHAZARA! - SILENCE! (Khuzdul)
Lomilu Zul – Night of Memory
Zann galikh – Good night (Khuzdul)
namadith – Little/young sister (Khuzdul)
The early morning sun was stealing through the window and the spicy aroma of cooking sausage was drifting through the air when Fíli, son of Torvi and Dís, awakened. He had a brief flicker of confusion as the fog of sleep cleared from his mind, but recognition came quickly when his brother chose that moment to fidget and elbow the fair-haired prince in the kidney. He and Kíli had shared a bedroom for a good part of their childhood, resources tight as the Exiles of Erebor slowly rebuilt their lives, but the only time they tended to end up sleeping like pups in a pile was when traveling. With that realization came memory – the previous evening’s dinner party and the long-awaited quest that they were about to undertake. Sitting abruptly, and nearly dumping Kíli on the floor in the process, Fíli stretched and started working the knots out of his muscles. Trisk stirred on the floor, hazel eyes snapping open before he, too, remembered. The quiet silversmith sat up with a groan and reached out to tap his brother on the arm.

“Bakn galikh, Visk. Time to rise.”

The lad's eyes opened immediately, no sign of early-morning confusion or even a trace of sleep. Trisk grinned.

“You could have woken me. You didn't have to sit there and pretend to be asleep.”

Visk shrugged and signed briefly. You need your beauty sleep.

Fíli snorted, then reached over to shake his brother. He could hear the others moving around in the hallway and kitchen, and he did not want to be the last ready to leave. Kíli groaned and swatted his hand away.

“Five more minutes, Fi,” he whined.

“If you say so, Ki, but then you'll get no breakfast, and we might end up leaving you behind,” the elder brother retorted. Brown eyes shot open and Kíli sat up so fast that he overbalanced and fell off of the couch. He glared up from the floor, his perfect impression of Thorin's most forbidding look making Fíli howl with laughter. Trisk was laughing as well, while Visk's shoulders shook silently. Kíli muttered a rude comment in Khuzdul, rubbing his bruised hip, then lunged up toward his brother. Sidestepping, Fíli almost collided with Bofur. The miner was watching the lads from the doorway, chuckling softly.

“Bombur's making a bit of breakfast,” he informed them with a smile. “And Thorin wants to leave soon after. Doesn't look like our burglar will be going, but we'll figure something out along the way, I'm sure. There's always Nori, and won't that thrill Dori?”

Fíli nodded and offered his brother a hand up, then did the same for Trisk.
“A shame. Mister Boggins seems like an interesting fellow, his odd name not withstanding,” Kíli commented. The elder prince sighed and shook his head.

“Baggins, Kíli. His name is Baggins.”

“I could have sworn it was Boggins.”

“Well, you believing doesn't make it so.”

Breakfast was soon over and the Dwarves made quick work of returning the Hobbit's home to its original state, cleaning and moving the furniture back with easy efficiency. Their host still had not made an appearance, so they trooped out quietly, leaving the contract “just in case.” Their first stop would be The Green Dragon, the inn in Bywater where they had left their ponies, which seemed a fortuitous beginning to a quest such as theirs.

“I don't know why Balin left the contract,” Nori commented as they started down the road, the entire Company in good spirits, buoyed by the enthusiasm of a journey well-begun (even if only the first steps). “I doubt Master Baggins will be joining us. Too much a homebody, he is. Not prepared for life on the road.”

“No more were we when Erebor fell,” Glóin pointed out with a shake of his head. “Still, I think you've the right of it. He's no fighter, that much was clear.”

Óin, the big merchant's elder brother, half-deaf on his best day, was close enough to hear, and he gave his companions a thoughtful look. “'T'd not count our burglar out yet, lads,” he argued. “Gandalf vouched for him, you'll recall, and I would not dismiss the old Wizard's recommendation too quickly.”

Nori perked up, a predatory grin on his narrow face. “Care to make a wager on it, my friend?”

“You know, I think I will.”

Fíli glanced at his brother as several of the others took up the wager, some for and others against the chance of the Hobbit joining them. Kíli grinned and shook his head.

“I'd say not, brother,” he answered the unspoken question. “I agree with Nori. I don't think Mister Bog- Mister Baggins has it in him.”

Visk snorted, his hands moving quickly.

“Agreed!”

“What of you, Gandalf?” Ori asked hesitantly. “Do you think Mister Baggins will change his mind?”

The Wizard turned from his quiet conversation with Thorin, smiling as he glanced back toward the
Hill. “Yes, Ori, I do. I believe that Bilbo will argue with himself for a bit yet, but I think, in the end, his adventurous nature will win out. He has been sitting still for far too long, and some part of him knows it. We will have our burglar.”

The exiled king grunted, glaring darkly at his tall companion. “What I said stands, Gandalf,” he warned, so low that Fíli thought he might the only one that had heard. “I cannot guarantee the Hobbit's safety.”

“Understood,” the Wizard murmured, glancing down briefly.

“Nor will I be responsible for his fate,” Thorin persisted.

At this, Gandalf turned to study the king solemnly. “Agreed, my friend.”

With that, the conversation ended and the leader of the Company picked up his pace slightly, moving out ahead of the others. Gandalf watched him go, but did not speak. After a long moment, Fíli looked up at the Wizard, his face serious.

“Thorin bears many burdens,” the young heir explained quietly. “And he has borne them for far too long. He was younger than Kíli when Thrór fell, and Thráin vanished, nearly twenty years short of his majority when the lives of his people became his responsibility. He does not welcome another life added to the load.”

“Understandable,” Gandalf replied, glancing down at him. “Though he should know that it is no longer his burden to bear alone. He has two strong sister-sons at his side, now, to ease it somewhat.”

Fíli laughed. “That would require realizing that Kíli and I are adults,” he countered. “We are untried, as Balin said. Trained within an inch of our lives, but the only combat either of us has seen was with the occasional group of bandits, Men that were ignorant enough to attack Dwarven trade caravans, and most of those were fools with no skill or wit. We have lived our lives mostly in peace in Ered Luin.”

“Which is how your uncle wanted it, lad,” Balin put in. Thorin's advisor had moved up beside the young prince and was studying him closely as they walked. “How all of us wanted it. After Smaug, after the Exile, and Azanulbizar, we wanted a place where our children could grow in peace. Where young Dwarrow like you and your brother, and young Gimli, did not have to take on adult burdens before your time.”

“I just wish it did not feel like he held that against us,” Dís's son replied, his brow furrowed as he tried to articulate his frustration. “Kíli and I have been sheltered, perhaps, but through his actions!”

“Let's not forget your lady mother,” Balin murmured mildly.

“Well, yes,” Fíli conceded. “But if Thorin had wanted to take us with him more often, she would have yielded.”

“Thought you knew Dís better ’n that, lad,” Dwalin snorted. Fíli laughed at the big warrior's dry tone.

“True enough,” he granted with a nod, remembering the struggle of wills that had resulted when Kíli declared his intention to be part of the quest.

“Give him time, Fíli,” Gandalf said finally, smiling down at him as they walked into Bywater. “Your uncle loves you, and your brother. He may not show it so much as you might like, but he is
one accustomed to loss, and such a one is reluctant to wear his heart too openly, lest it invite more pain.”

The fair-haired prince-in-exile nodded and went silent, slowly dropping back through the line to his brother’s side, mind whirling with thoughts of loss and sacrifice. The Line of Durin had experienced much tragedy since the fall of Erebor, and Thorin had borne the brunt of it, it seemed. Mother dead in the dragon’s assault, grandfather and brother slain in battle, father vanished. Countless kin lost through the years, down to Fili’s own father, seventy-four years gone, little more than a vague impression of dark eyes and a gentle voice to the sons that he had left behind. He could understand why his uncle might prefer to lock his emotions behind a wall of stone.

A deliberate bump against his shoulder drew Fili from his thoughts and he glanced over at his brother. The excitement of their journey shone in Kili’s face, and the elder prince felt an answering smile spread across his own. Here was one Son of Durin who hid no emotion, bright or dark – whether Kili was giving his love, his loyalty, or simply giving of himself, he did it with his whole heart, for all of the world to see. Now, he simply rested one hand on Fili’s shoulder and gave a supportive squeeze. Words were unnecessary.

The Company arrived at The Green Dragon to find that Thorin had settled their account with the innkeeper and was carefully checking over the pack ponies, his own mount already saddled and waiting patiently. Off to the side was a tall horse that was obviously meant for Gandalf. The exiled king nodded a greeting to his companions, his mood somewhat lighter. The other Dwarves wasted no time tacking up the remaining ponies, their excitement bubbling over so that the Hobbits of the inn stared in some confusion and wondered at the strange high spirits from what was, in their experience, a rather taciturn race.

Their consternation only grew as the party prepared to ride out, when none other than Bilbo Baggins came jogging down the road from Hobbiton, a leather traveling-pack hoisted on one shoulder, and the Dwarven contract in his hand. He halted rather abruptly in the yard of the inn, color high and breath coming in little huffs. He seemed to shut down slightly as he realized that he had the attention of the entire Company, but he rallied quickly and advanced toward Balin, offering the contract.

“I signed it,” he stated shortly. “I’ll come with you. I don’t know why, and it’s certainly against my better judgment, but I am coming with you, if you’ll have me.”

Fili grinned, catching the please smile on Gandalf’s face. He wasn’t certain why the Wizard had been so set on the Hobbit as the final member of the expedition, but he had a deep, slightly uneasy feeling that anything the Wizard felt so strongly about was not to be ignored, and so he was glad that it had come right in the end. At his side, Kili looked slightly disgruntled, but the twinkle in his eye assured the elder prince that his irritation was at the loss of the hunting knife, rather than the addition of the burglar. Balin took the contract with great solemnity, making a show of scanning over it to make sure everything was in order before he stowed it away in one of his many pockets. He managed a small bow in his saddle.

“Welcome, Master Baggins, to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield,” he intoned with a small smile. Bilbo smiled uncertainly back, then his eyes widened as Thorin nodded and glanced over at his sister-sons.

“So be it. Get him a pony.”

“Oh, no, that won’t be necessary,” the Hobbit protested, eyes a little wild. “I much prefer walking,
you see. I'm quite a famous walker, actually. I've walked all over the Shire. I even went as far as Frogmorton, once.”

Exchanging a glance with his brother, Fíli urged his own pony forward, the two princes coming up on either side of their new travel companion, leaning down to scoop him up with a hand under each elbow. They then deposited him gently on the back of the least-loaded of the three pack ponies, a quiet brown mare named Myrtle. Bilbo yelped as he landed, grabbing Myrtle's lead line instinctively in a panicked grip.

“Easy, Mister Boggins,” Kíli chuckled. “Myrtle's not going anywhere without the rest of us – she'll follow her herd well enough.”

“Baggins,” Fíli corrected, grinning. “Honestly, Ki!”

The Hobbit did not seem soothed by their banter, since he simply set his face in grim determination and held on tightly as the party started out of the inn yard, Thorin at the lead. True to Kíli's word, the little pony followed placidly, moving up next to Bofur's amiable Bungle. Fíli hung back with his brother, waiting to take up rear guard for this first step of the journey. The Company had not quite cleared the yard when Bilbo let out an enormous sneeze, which he promptly blamed on a reaction to the ponies as he dug into his pockets. He did not seem to find what he sought, for he pulled Myrtle up short and tried to turn her back toward Hobbiton.

“Wait, please! I have to go back. Sorry, should be just a little while. Don't know what I was thinking!”

“What's the matter, Master Baggins?” Trisk asked, moving up to help Bofur corral the anxious Hobbit.

“I've – well, I've quite forgotten my pocket handkerchief,” came the defiant reply. “And that won't do at all. I'm sure I'll be right back.”

“Is that all?” Bofur laughed and produced a rather crumpled one from his own pocket, handing it to Bilbo with a smile. “Here ya go, my lad. If all our problems are so easily solved as that, it should be a quick journey!”

The golden prince chuckled as the Hobbit stared at the bit of cloth in consternation, offering no resistance as Bofur got Myrtle moving again in the right direction. Thorin, who had been watching the conversation with a thunderous expression on his face, did not speak, but merely turned to urge his mount down the road. The others followed, strung out along the road like beads on a cord. It wasn't long before Óin turned in his saddle to shout down the length of the column at Nori.

“Pay up, laddie! Wager's won!”

The aging healer caught the tossed bag of coin neatly, cackling as he tucked it away in his pocket. Several other payments followed to various members of the Company as Bilbo looked on in confusion. Fíli grinned at his brother and waved off the silver that Kíli tried to press into his hand.

“You'll win it back soon enough, nadadith. You always do. Just keep it and we'll consider it square when it happens.”

Settling into his saddle as they moved out onto the Great East Road, the golden-haired prince left his brother to keep track of their environment for the moment as he studied the two young Dwarrow riding directly ahead.

Trisk was burly and sturdy, his dark auburn hair mostly loose, save for six thin braids that wound
into a seventh, thicker one on the side of his head. His beard, not yet as thick as it would probably get, was just down to his chest, gathered there with a heavy silver bead. It was marred by the raw slash of a healing scar that ran from temple to chin, lasting reminder of the Goblin raid he had spoken of the previous evening. His gear was good quality, but worn with use, a heavy mace in a harness on his back. A long hunting knife was strapped to each hip, and he rode easily, the gray hood thrown back, hazel eyes alert and attentive.

Visk was more of an enigma. The younger lad was slimmer, though not so slim as Kíli, and his seat in the saddle was relaxed to the point of lazy as he moved easily with the pony's gait. A slender sword rode in a sheath on his back, and he wore a single knife on his right thigh, as well as a sling tucked into his belt. The lad's features were obscured by the scarf, of course, but Fíli had noticed a keen intelligence and spark of humor in the green eyes. Both brothers seemed like Dwarves with whom he and Kíli would get along well, which made this trip all the more promising. They would either have a marvelous time, or Thorin would kill all four of them before they ever reached Erebor.

The first several days of their journey passed uneventfully, for the most part. They chatted, and Bofur led them in boisterous traveling songs, leading to many an odd look from the Hobbits as they passed through the little communities of Frogmorton and Whitfurrows, as well as any number of farms set well back from the road. Though, to be honest, Fíli wasn't certain if the looks were for the Company so much as they were for the singular Hobbit that in their midst. Bilbo always looked slightly defiant when any of his folk met them on the road, his chin rising slightly and a rather fixed smile on his face. He relaxed a bit as they approached the Brandywine Bridge, though, his mood lightening at the friendly greetings they received as they entered Buckland.

"The Brandybucks are more familiar with outsiders and travelers," he explained, correctly interpreting the fair-haired Dwarf's inquisitive glance. "Not so...judgmental...as those deeper in the Shire. In fact, they have a reputation of producing the occasional adventurer, so I don't know why Gandalf insisted on seeking out a perfectly respectable Baggins for this expedition," he added with a laugh. Ahead of them, the Wizard glanced back and gave an enigmatic smile as his only reply.

Thorin chose to bypass Bree, the mixed settlement just beyond the border of the Shire. There was a Hobbit community there, but also Men and the occasional Dwarf, passing by on the way to or from Ered Luin. Few beyond the heads of the Seven Families and his own kin knew of the Company's goal, and he preferred to keep it that way, Fíli knew. Dori and Balin went into town to purchase some additional supplies, but the rest of them made camp and eagerly awaited the fresh quail that Bombur had roasting over the fire.

They had flushed a covey from the bushes early that afternoon, quite by accident, and it was only luck and fast reflexes that taken down any of the plump birds. Kíli had lunged for his bow, Ori for his slingshot, but Visk had beaten them both, tugging the loaded sling from his belt and letting fly after only a few swings. The first bird had fallen to the silent Dwarf's shot, with Kíli bringing down the second, and Ori a third a moment later. Their companions had laughed and cheered the young hunters until Ori ducked in embarrassment, his face an alarming shade of puce. Visk had simply reloaded his sling and returned it to his belt before dismounting to collect their feathered prizes and tie them to his saddle, returning Kíli's arrow wordlessly. Fíli had laughed at the look on his brother's face, equal parts confusion and consternation. Kíli was not used to being out-shot, much less by a sling.

"Carefully, nadadith," he teased. "You might find yourself replaced as primary hunter!"
Kíli had shaken his head, then grinned brightly. “More hunters, more food,” he commented with a shrug. “And less work for me!”

A general round of laughter had followed that remark, and the column continued on. Fíli did note, however, that his brother kept his arrows ready the rest of the day, taking down two more birds later in the afternoon. With Ori and Visk's contributions, Bombur managed a meal with little effort and judicious application of herbs.

Dori and Balin met them on the far side of Bree the next morning and they continued on their way, leaving the Shire behind and moving into the largely empty lands that stretched to the feet of the Misty Mountains. They were well east of the Weather Hills the evening they made camp on a sheltered ridge. Dinner that evening had been a boisterous affair, the Dwarves' spirits bolstered by the ease of their journey thus far, but it had been a long day in the saddle and their weariness began to assert itself as the night settled over them. Fíli sat with his brother, back to the rock wall that hid them from the plains, staring absently at the fire as he smoked. Kíli was cleaning his own pipe, and those that had the later watches were beginning to settle in for sleep. Thorin had wandered away, lost in his own thoughts. Trisk seemed to have already dozed off, but the prince was fairly certain that he could still see the glitter of Visk's eyes as he lay back-to-back with his brother, staring into the night. Bilbo was returning from visiting his pony (sneaking her a treat, more like) when a piercing cry rang out in the distance. The Hobbit's spine snapped straight and he stared around with poorly-concealed panic.

“What was that?”

It was merely the cry of one of the night hunters, in all honesty, but swordsman could well imagine how terrifying it might sound to one unused to the nocturnal predators that ranged through the West. He was about to answer, to soothe the burglar's fears, when his brother spoke up, and the golden-haired Dwarf nearly choked on his pipe.

“Orcs,” Kíli replied, dark eyes wide as he made a show of glancing around uneasily. “Or Goblins.” Fíli controlled his expression with an iron will as the Hobbit turned to stare at them.

“*Orcs*?” Bilbo's voice was barely a whisper, his blue eyes round. “Or-*or Goblins*?”

“Aye,” the elder prince chimed in, ready to kick his younger brother if Kíli so much as snickered. “Sounds more like Orcs to me, unfortunately.”

“Orcs are worse?” the burglar asked faintly. Kíli shrugged.

“They're bigger, and smarter,” he explained. “Goblins are faster. Both are bad news, though. They're vicious and ruthless, striking in the small hours just before dawn.”

“At least the Orcs just kill you,” Fíli added mischievously. “Goblins have been known to drag away survivors. No one knows for sure what happens to them, but we can guess.”

“Goblins eat anything, you see,” the archer offered grimly. The Hobbit blanched, his face deathly pale in the firelight, and the elder prince could not blame his brother when Kíli finally glanced at him and lost the battle to repress his laughter. Fíli smiled as well, just before he realized that Visk was now sitting up, his back pressed against the rock of the ridge, huddled into a ball. Then Thorin was standing over them, disgust in his face and a storm in his eyes.

“You think that's funny?” he demanded, pinning them with that glare that always seemed to pierce every defense. “You think a night raid is a joke?” Kíli flinched and ducked his head, looking guilty and ashamed. “We didn't mean anything by it,”
he muttered defensively.

“No, you didn't. You never do.” He stared at them in silence for a long moment, finally turning away dismissively. “I should have left you in Ered Luin,” he snapped, walking away. “You know nothing of the world.”

Visk was watching them, a look in his eyes that made Fíli feel even worse than Thorin's comment, but Kíli had gone stiff and still at their uncle's parting shot, and the elder prince turned toward his brother in concern. Balin was there a moment later, his mere presence soothing as he rested one hand on the raven-dark prince's shoulder.

“Don't take it to heart, laddie,” the old councilor murmured, his gaze moving between the brothers, then taking in the confused Bilbo as well. “Perhaps not the most well-conceived plan for scaring our burglar, but you did not intend to be cruel.”

Balin settled on a large rock near the princes, staring into the fire as Fíli met Bilbo's gaze and recognized both the irritation and the lack of understanding.

“Azanulbizar,” he offered by way of explanation, doubting it would mean much to the Hobbit, but unwilling to delve further into a story that was not his own.

“Aye, Azanulbizar,” Balin agreed, meeting Bilbo's perplexed gaze with his own weary one. “We told you something of our history that night in your home, Master Baggins, but the tragedy of Erebor's people did not end with the coming of the dragon.

“We spent long years in Exile, traveling the lands east of the Misty Mountains in search of succor and a place to rebuild. In time, we came west through the Gap of Rohan, and north into Dunland. There, we settled for a span of years. But our leader, Thrór, former King Under the Mountain, was not well. He had not been well since the loss of his kingdom, leaving the leadership of his people to fall on his son, Thráin, and his grandchildren. Thorin and his brother Frerin were far too young for the burden that they shouldered.”

“Fifty-three,” Fíli murmured. “Thorin was fifty-three that year. Frerin even younger. By comparison, Mister Baggins, my brother is the youngest of our company, and he is seventy-seven. He's only been of age two years by our standards.”

“Hobbits reach their majority at thirty-three,” Bilbo replied, working it out in his head as he studied Kíli. “They would have been as young tweens to us, no longer children, but not yet adults.”

“ Exactly. Too young for what was coming,” Balin agreed heavily. “We settled in Dunland after ten years of wandering, seeking only to preserve our people. But Thrór was not satisfied, and soon turned his gaze north, to the lost kingdom of Khazâd-dûm, now known to most as the Mines of Moria. An age ago, we lived there, before Durin's Bane was wakened, and we lost two kings in the space of a year. It was then that we moved to the Lonely Mountain and founded Erebor, but we never forgot the halls of our fathers, now infested with all manner of dark creatures. Against the wishes of his people, against the advice of his council and the other Dwarf lords, he called in the oaths that had been sworn on the Arkenstone, the King's Jewel, and demanded they march to reclaim the ancient halls.”

“Months, we spent,” Dwalin chimed in, his face grimmer than usual in the light of the dying fire. He and the others were gathered around the fire once more, alert and attentive. Trisk was sitting up next to Visk, the young Dwarrow leaning slightly on his shoulder. “Gathering, arming, preparing, marching back through the Gap of Rohan to come at the halls from the Eastern Gate, since the western approach was unfriendly to an army. Thrór demanded all the lads aged forty and older – so
long as they could wield a weapon.”

“In the end, it came down to a great and bloody battle at Azanulbizar, called the Dimrill Gate in Westron,” Balin continued. “We were met by a great army of Orcs, Goblins, and Wargs, and the slaughter was beyond telling. We were there, Dwalin and I, fighting at Thorin's side. Óin, as well, and Bifur. He was not of Erebor, but his people had been driven from those halls with ours, and they came when called from where they had settled in Ered Luin. Fundin, our father, was part of a group cut off and trapped between the enemy and the waters of Kheledzâram, the Mirrormere, the great lake set in the dale. He died there, with Frerin, Thorin's brother.” He glanced at the young Dwarves from Emyn Uial. “Kulvik, father to young Triskel and Viskel, was very nearly among the dead as well.” He sighed heavily. “And if that wasn't enough, the enemy army was led by a massive pale Orc, a giant among even their foul kind, and possessed of a terrible intelligence. He was called Azog the Defiler, a war chieftain out of Gundabad, their great northern fortress, and there had been trouble with him even before the fall of Erebor. He hated the Line of Durin, the line of kings that led our people, and had sworn to end the line, root and branch.” The white-haired Dwarf trailed off, his eyes closed against the memory.

“He began,” he stated simply, “by beheading the king. He hewed the head from Thrór's body and cast it at the feet of his son and grandson. Thorin would have attacked him then, charging heedlessly against his terrible foe, but Thráin intervened. He led the charge against the pale Orc, instead, and he was never seen again. We do not know his fate. He was not found among the dead.”

“Then Azog went after Thorin,” Óin spoke up, his face solemn. “I saw that first clash, when Thorin lost his shield and the Orc flung him down, sliding across stone and blood. Azog went after him with that great mace. I saw when he raised it to bring it down and crush our prince's skull.”

“And I saw Thorin defy him,” Dwalin rumbled, dark eyes shining with the memory. “No shield, armor rent, wounded and grief-stricken, he cut a branch from a fallen oak tree and held it before him to catch Azog's mace. Then he swung his own weapon and struck off the beast's arm, sending arm and mace flying. And the Orc stumbled back into the mercies of his own kind.”

“He showed the Gundabad Orc that the Line of Durin endured,” Balin continued. “And then he rallied our forces and drove the Orcs back. Their lines broke, and they were driven from the field. We were victorious, but the victory was a hollow one. Our dead were beyond the count of grief, and still the halls of our people were lost to us, for we knew that Durin's Bane dwelt still in the deep shadows of the mountains, and we would not risk our remaining people. Thorin gathered what was left of our armies and released them to their homes after the dead were tended. It was then, as he led our people for the first time, that I thought to myself 'there is one that I could follow. There is one that I could call king.’”

* * *

Thorin had stalked away from the camp in an effort to keep himself from yelling at his nephews any more than he already had. They were young, and foolish, and Kíli in particular did not think before he spoke, but he knew that it had only been one of their pranks. He had spent years making sure that they were permitted to grow up in peace, allowing them the relatively carefree youth that he and his siblings had been denied. It was unfair to be angry with them because they had not yet discovered the true nature of the world. Still, the knowledge did not keep the memories from coming back in a rush as Balin told the tale.
War is hot, and loud, and it reeks.

He is surrounded by allies, yet he is alone. Countless dead lay around him as his eyes search the battlefield. He does not know how long it has been since he saw Frerin, his younger brother's flail coated with black gore, fighting beside Fundin and Kulvik. Fundin's sons are nearby, that he knows, for Dwalin is his shadow, and Balin is ever at his brother's side (as you should be at Frer's, his conscience chides, but they got separated when the pale Orc appeared, and things have happened so quickly since then). The king is dead...Thrór Uzbad has been beheaded by the Defiler, and Thráin Uzbad-dashat is missing. The Defiler has fallen – Thorin himself hacked off the beast's arm, defiant behind a shield of nothing more than a sturdy oaken branch – and the Orcs have been routed. The Dwarves stand triumphant at the Battle of Azanulbizar, before the gates of Khazâd-dûm, but the cost has been too high. His grandfather is dead. His father is lost. Náin of the Iron Hills has fallen, and Dáin his son stands in his stead. Of Fundin and Frerin, there is no sign, and he begs Mahal not to make him return to Dís without their brother.

* * *

“And the pale Orc?” Bilbo spoke up, reminding all of the Dwarves that there was one listener to whom this tale was new. “What happened to him?”

Thorin snarled, making his way back to his gear. “He slunk back to the hole whence he came. That filth died of his wounds long ago.”

Fíli was not the primary tracker on the expedition, but he had always been perceptive and attentive to those around him, so he did not miss the look that passed between Balin and Gandalf as Thorin returned to his pallet. His uncle might be sure of Azog's demise, but something told the young prince that others were not so certain. A sudden groan from his brother drew his attention and he glanced over to see Kíli glaring at him.

“Why do you let me do that?” he whispered, frustration in his voice.

“What?”

“Open my big mouth. Aren't you supposed to be helping me convince Thorin that I'm a responsible adult now?”

Fíli chuckled and tapped out his pipe. “I cannot help you with that one, nadadith, since our uncle still isn't convinced that I am a responsible adult. His temper will ease by morning, I am sure.” He sighed, looking over at their leader. Nearby, Trisk had settled back into his bedroll and Visk seemed to have dozed off still leaning against the ridge. “He is right, though. We'd never left the relative safety of the trade routes before we set out on this expedition. We tread now in territory that we only know from books and maps.”

“But we are trained warriors, not fools,” Kíli argued, still stung by Thorin's dismissive attitude.

“Trained, but inexperienced,” the elder brother countered. “He wouldn't have let us come if he didn't think we would be assets to the Company, Ki.”

“You, perhaps,” Kíli grumbled quietly. “I still think he only let me come along because you did not
want to leave me behind.”

“That's as may be, but the fact remains that he did,” Fíli replied curtly. “And he stood up to Amad to do so. You missed that conversation, and I did not hear most of it, but I can attest that Thorin looked like he had gone a half dozen rounds with Dwalin in the sparring ring when it was over. Remember, on this expedition, he is not our uncle, not our mother's brother, not the Dwarf that raised us when our own father was lost. He is, must be, Thorin Oakenshield, our king.”

* * *

Balin, son of Fundin, sat up late into the night, staring at the fire as he lost himself in memory. The abridged tale of the Battle of Azanulbizar had been intended to do two things – explain to the young princes why the king's temper was a little short regarding their poorly-chosen joke on the burglar, and remind that king why so many had agreed to follow him on an expedition that most thought foolish at best and suicidal at worst. Judging by the murmured conversation from Fíli and Kíli's bedrolls, he had accomplished the first goal. Time would tell on the second. A third, not unexpected, result was the rush of recollection into which he found himself drawn. He and his brother had walked away from that battle, but so many Dwarrow had not. Balin remembered searching through the dead, hoping against hope to find Fundin alive after losing track of him early in the battle. He and Dwalin had searched in silence, unwilling to compete with Thorin's more vocal search for his missing brother. In the end, they had found Fundin and Frerin within steps of one another, a third barely-breathing Dwarf huddled over them, trying to shield the young prince against blows that could no longer harm him. Kulvik's eyes had been wide with shock as he apologized to Thorin over and over again for not being able to save Frerin. Dwalin had had to sling the lad over his shoulder to carry him for healing, leaving Balin to mourn their father and offer comfort to one who had lost grandfather, father, and brother in a single dark day. He would never forget the sight of Thorin's dark head bent over Frerin's coppery locks. The lad should never have been in the battle. He was too young. They were all too young, and the attempt to retake Khazâd-dûm had been doomed from the start, but there had been no way to convince Thrór.

Mahal, please don't let this quest be another Azanulbizar, the white-haired adviser thought wearily, staring across the darkened campsite at his sleeping king. We can't lose Thorin, or those bright-eyed lads. I'll not be the one to bear that news to Dís. Hasn't the Line of Durin suffered enough?

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

Bakn galikh – Good morning (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
uzbad – king (Khuzdul)
uzbad-dashat – prince (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
The night air is thick with ash and smoke, the shrieks of the Goblins mixing with the screams of the dying as the Dwarven settlement in the Hills of Evendim is slaughtered. Viska stands paralyzed in the middle of the burning village, unable to force her legs to bear her forward. She isn't even sure where to go – her father will be at the northern gate, where the fighting is fiercest, but her brother will be helping to protect the noncombatants that have fled to the tunnels. Looking down at her hands, she realizes that she has run out of the cabin without even grabbing her sword, so she stands unarmed and frozen in the midst of a massacre. And still, she cannot move. Her hair is unbound, chestnut gleaming in the light of the flames, her hands empty and useless as she suddenly realizes that the screams have stopped. There is no more sound of Dwarven voices, for her entire village lies dead at her feet. Father, brother, neighbors, friends – all lay butchered on the central green, their glassy eyes unmoving accusations of her failure, even as the Goblins drag her away....

Viska, daughter of Kulvik, sister of Triskel, known to the Company of Thorin Oakenshield as “Viskel,” woke from the nightmare with a choked cry, her heart pounding as she fought her way out of the clouds of twisted memory. It had not happened that way, she knew that, and yet that primal dread had sunk its claws deep into her imagination in the intervening weeks. Over and over, she had watched her neighbors murdered, her family butchered, all the while knowing that it was her fault, somehow. She should have done more to prevent it, and the deaths were on her hands.

It wasn't true, of course. She had helped to save one of her young friends, and she could not have saved her father, even had she been at his side. Kulvik had been a veteran of Azanulbizar and a thousand skirmishes since, and those who had been at his side that final night had spoken of him with awe and a deep respect. He had fought to the last, giving many of the families a chance to flee to safety before the Rangers had arrived and driven the last of the enemy from the settlement. He had died a hero, defending his people, and that was of some comfort to his children as they gave him to the stone and left him to rest beside his beloved wife.

When her breathing and heart were under control, she glanced around at the sleeping Company. Across the dwindling fire, Bifur was watching, concern in his dark eyes as he signed a gentle inquiry. She nodded, settling her scarf more firmly about her face as she moved closer to her sleeping brother.

Nightmare, she signed back to Bifur, knowing he was one that would understand the hold of dark memories. The raid.

He nodded, his face compassionate and thoughtful. After a moment, he smiled and turned to rummage in his pack. When he found what he had been seeking, he tossed it carefully over and she
caught it with one outstretched hand. It was a small wooden Dwarf, intricately detailed, one of the many oddments she had seen him carving as they traveled together. She smiled behind her scarf, tracing the edge of the figure's helm with one careful finger. When she spotted a familiar scar on the figure's face, she raised her eyes to the toy maker to see him smiling broadly and nodding.

*Your father,* his fingers said. *He took that scar in the battle. He would be proud of you lads, joining Thorin. You honor his memory. It is a gift.*

She thanked him silently and settled back to try and salvage what sleep she could, the wooden effigy held tight in her hand. This time, when she dreamed, the memories were gentler.

Viska spent much of the day in quiet contemplation, the nightmare and Bifur's gift bringing memories to mind with unusual strength. In a way, she felt that the tale of her life had become sharply divided by the Goblin raid on her village. There was *before* – her childhood with Da and Triskel, a hard-headed Dwarf lass with no mother, but doted on by her adoring father and elder brother. And there was *after* – father dead, disguised as a lad, riding with her brother to take back their homeland of Erebor, in the company of a Wizard, a Hobbit, her rightful king, and twelve other Dwarrow.

*Before,* she had been possessed of a certain quiet beauty, with long chestnut hair worn in bronze clips and beaded braids. A jewelery-maker by trade, she had learned the sword and the knife at her father's insistence. She had trained with her brother, hunted with her father, and thought little of the world beyond her village, except for her father's tales of Erebor and his hopes that the Line of Durin would call upon him when time came to retake the mountain.

Then had come the Goblins, and the fire.

*After,* she hid her face behind a scarf (and it was only the most easily visible of the damage that she had suffered), and she concealed her ruined hair beneath an ash-gray hood. The tools of her trade were gone, what little was left after the raid sold to complete their outfitting for the expedition. She still carried the sword that her father had made, and the hunting knife her brother had given her for her coming of age. Her father was gone, and her brother had taken up the burden of the family's fortunes. They had faced the future together, uncertain what it might hold.

Then, like a blessing from Mahal, a missive had come, addressed to their father, summoning him to join Thorin Oakenshield in an expedition to the Lonely Mountain, to drive out Smaug and retake the kingdom of Thrór. Trisk and Viska had read it together, at first grieved for the long-awaited news to come so soon after their father's death. Then Viska's mind had taken a dangerous turn, and she had met her brother's gaze, recognizing that the same thought had occurred to him. It was daring, it was daft, and it went against all precedent. Triskel might be allowed to take his father's place, but Viska would never be permitted on such an expedition. *Viskel,* however, another lad, would be a different story. They knew their father had not been the best correspondent – what was the possibility that he had ever told his old friend much of anything about his children? Their mother would have, had she lived, for she had been a great confidante of Dís, daughter of Thráin, in their childhood, but that connection had died with Laika on the day Viska was born. It was an absurd plan, but it was a plan. They could leave Evendim, which no longer had any hold on their hearts, and fulfill their father's dream of helping their people return to Erebor. In the end, there was very little discussion. Viska asked “Might we?” and Triskel asked “Dare we?” and the answer to both questions was a resounding “Yes.” And so they had. They had traveled first to the Blue Mountains, where many of Erebor's displaced dwelt in Thorin's Halls in the southern part of the range.
Viska sits at a sturdy oak table in a neat kitchen, her brother at her side and a steaming mug of kafh warming her chilled fingers. Across the table, an elegant Dwarrowdam watches her, a small fond smile on her face and tears standing in her eyes.

“You do look so like your mother,” Dís finally murmurs, silvery-blue eyes staring back into memory. “I knew, when no word came of the second babe, that Laika had passed in childbirth. I am happy to learn that her daughter survived.” She sighs, turning to Trisk and reaching out to touch his forearm gently. “And I am sorry to hear of the loss of your father. Kulvik was a good friend to my brothers, and a kind Darrow. I know he was a devoted husband to Laika, and would have taken her death very hard.”

Trisk nods, glancing at Viska. He knows the guilt she sometimes feels at their mother's death, and is always ready to head it off, reminding her that Laika insisted the healer save the babe when the complications became dire. Viska meets his eyes and shakes her head. Today, Thorin's sister has reminded her that her parents are once more together, and no matter how she misses her da, she cannot be sad that he is reunited with his beloved.

“He did, in a way,” Trisk replies, answering Dís with a small smile. “But he cherished us all the more, for being her gifts to him before Mahal gathered her home.”

“I feel the same about my sons,” she agrees. “For so long after Torvi's death, Fíli and Kíli were the only reasons that I had to stay strong.” She sighs and stares down at her hands, folding them tightly in her lap. “And now they are grown, they tell me, and it is their duty to be at their uncle's side as he seeks to retake our stolen home. So young, but so determined.” She raises her head, fixing them each in turn with her steady, clear-eyed gaze. “You are set on this course of action?” she asks quietly, one dark brow arching as she studies Viska's face. The Dwarrowlass nods, her jaw set. At her side, Trisk bows his head slightly to the daughter of Thráin.

“We are, my lady. Unless you-”

“No,” Dis responds quickly, a small smile darting across her face. “I do not seek to discourage, only to make certain that you have considered your choices carefully. I understand you wishing to take your father's place, Triskel, son of Kulvik, and it is humbling to know that he so honored my brother that he instilled the same feeling in his children. But Viska, lass...you do not have to go. I would be happy to welcome you here, daughter of my old friends. The road will not be easy, and we Dwarrowdams are so few in these late days. Thorin will not be pleased if he learns of your deception.”

Viska sits in quiet thought for a long moment. Her brother is silent, one hand on her shoulder offering support without judgment. Finally, she meets the exiled princess's gaze and nods once more, her hands moving through the signs with an almost formal precision.

“I go with my brother, my lady. I understand the risks, but I cannot stand aside. Perhaps the two of us will be enough to replace my father. And I will not watch my brother go into danger without me.”

Dis chuckles and nods.

“So like my lads,” she comments, standing and clearing the table with graceful movements.
"Never far from one another, since Kíli started crawling. I knew – when Thorin told me that the time had come for an attempt on Erebor, I knew that he would take Fíli. And I knew Kíli would follow his brother. In my heart, I knew. As I knew that I must stay behind, no matter how much I might wish otherwise." She pauses, her head bent over the counter in the kitchen as she sags minutely. Viska and Trisk rise, but move only a few steps toward her, unsure in the presence of she who should be princess of Erebor. After a second, Dis takes a deep breath and straightens, sweeping back the wisps of silver-black hair at her temples as she turns to face them.

"Thorin sent a second message, but I fear you missed it on the road," she tells them, her expression proud and kind. "They are departing from Hobbiton, in the Shire. Gandalf the Gray has recommended a final member for the expedition, and they will be meeting him there. Fíli and Kíli departed two days ago, and if their sense of direction is anything like my brother's, they'll still only barely make it in time. Tomorrow, however, Bofur and his kin leave to join them. You can travel with them."

* X *

And so, here she was, riding rearguard with her brother as the party made their way along the Great East Road, bound for the Misty Mountains. Trisk's pony walked off to the right side of the road, hers at the left, while Fíli and Kíli were just ahead of them, having been banished to the back of the group for a prank involving several slimy bugs finding their way down the back of Bilbo's shirt. It was raining, and the early summer evening had turned chill, and she was more than ready for Thorin to halt the Company for the night – but she was doing what she chose with her life. She rode with her sling loaded at her belt, keen eyes ever on the lookout for game. She had already taken two rabbits since they had broken camp that morning, and Ori and Kíli had each taken another, but with so many Dwarves to feed (not to mention the Hobbit!), there was no such thing as too much meat. The storm was beginning to strengthen, though, and she felt it would probably be wise for the column to make camp soon, before the wind became too strong, or the lightning scared the ponies. It appeared that the same thought might have occurred to Thorin, for he was consulting with Gandalf at the head of the Company and their pace had slowed.

A shout from the front of the line alerted her that Thorin had indeed decided to stop for the night, and the Dwarves were making their way off of the muddy road toward a nearby copse of trees that would at least provide some protection from the rain. Viska relaxed and turned to wave to her brother, to make sure that he had gotten the message as well. And that was when her luck ran out.

A great bolt of lightning split the cloud-dark sky, striking somewhere quite close, followed by a clap of thunder like Mahal's great hammer. Several of the ponies startled, but only one panicked. Gentle, biddable Lily, who had borne her rider so patiently from the Emyn Uial, to Ered Luin, into the Shire and now out of it, suddenly bolted in terror, carrying Viska with her. The Dwarrowlass kept her seat, but she could not calm Lily, for the equine was beyond soothing. Before the lass knew what was happening, she had passed the leading members of the Company and the pony was still moving. The river loomed ahead of them, swollen with snowmelt from the northern mountains, and Lily kept running, and there was suddenly no ground beneath her hooves, only water, and they were in the river, and Viska was slipping from the saddle, her heavy clothing and gear too much when combined with her Dwarven build.

She was under water, and it was cold, and she could not breathe, and then a strong arm was around her waist, tugging her toward the surface and lovely, life-giving air! She tore her scarf away from
her face and gasped, sucking in great gulps of it, and saw a white-faced Trisk dragging Lily to the shore, while a stone-faced Dwalin was reaching out toward her, coaxing the pony toward the bank. The strong arm still held her, and someone was hauling her to safety. Golden braids trailed through the water as Fíli pulled them closer to the big warrior. Then Dwalin was grabbing her arms and hoisting her out, and she was collapsing into Trisk's arms, and her beloved brother was holding her close, burying her face in his shoulder. She could hear the elder prince shouting for his brother, joined by Dwalin and Thorin as the latter arrived on his winded mount.

“Kíli!”

“There he is!” Thorin bellowed. “Fíli, to your right, lad!”

“I've got him!” Fíli's voice was faint and breathless, but Viska heard a faint cheer from some of the others as the two princes were hauled from the water. Risking a glance over her shoulder, she saw Fíli collapse on the riverbank, staring at his brother.

“He's not breathing!” he shouted as Thorin as approached at a run. “Thorin, he's not breathing!”

The king did reply, but simply dropped heavily to his knees beside the raven-haired archer and began a series of rhythmic compressions on the still chest.

“I'tim, Kíli!” he ordered. “You can do this, my lad. I'tim! I'tim!”

“Kasamhili, nadadith,” Fíli added, his face pale.

Then the youngest Dwarf was choking, lurching over onto his side to cough up half of the river, and Fíli was hugging his brother tightly, while Óin tried to get to the lad's side.

“Glöin, get a fire going!” Thorin ordered, the relief clear under the frightened gruffness of his voice. He looked back down along the road they had just galloped, pointing to the small copse of trees where they had planned to stop. “There!”

“On it!” the burly merchant replied, turning his pony back toward the trees and kicking it gently to a trot.

“I'll get water started for these herbs,” Óin added, hurrying after his brother.

“Dwalin, take Kíli to shelter and get him dry,” the exiled king continued, turning toward where Trisk knelt, his arms around Viska both comforting and concealing. “Trisk, do you need help with your brother?”

“I have him,” the silversmith assured him, getting to his feet and pulling her up.

“You, too, Fíli. Get out of that wet gear before the exhaustion catches up with you.”

The golden-haired prince nodded heavily and got to his feet as Bofur rode up leading his pony.

“Here, lad, don't bother tryin' to mount, just hang on to the saddle and she'll steady you enough to get there. We'll go slow.”

The Company moved back toward the sheltering trees, the three young Dwarves receiving varying levels of assistance. Fíli was moving mostly on his own, one hand resting on Misty's saddle to keep himself steady, while Viska leaned heavily on her brother's arm and Dwalin was almost carrying
Kíli. Glóin had the fire lit and was feeding it steadily when they reached the shelter. Dori handed out packs and blankets and the bedraggled youngsters scattered to get dried and changed before rejoining the others and settling in to warm themselves at the cheery flames. Thorin dropped heavily onto a fallen log, his gaze falling on each of the young ones in turn before he turned to Gandalf.

“The pony is well?”

Gandalf nodded, straightening his robes as he sat back against a tree. “Soothed and resting with the others,” he replied with a nod to Viska. “It happens, Thorin, you know that. Just the right combination of thunder and lightning and the calmest beast will bolt.”

“Aye, I know it,” the dark-haired Dwarrow replied, turning back to Viska. “You kept your seat well, lad. At such a speed as she was running, you would probably have done worse damage if she'd managed to throw you.” He sighed then, turning to glance at his sister-sons. “And it was well-done of you two to go in after him. You were right, Fíli – there was no time to wait on the rest of us, or rope. Just...do all of us a favor, lads. *Never* tell your mother.”

Fíli grinned and Kíli let out a laugh that turned into a cough and had his brother pounding on his back for a moment before he could catch his breath. Leaning against her brother's shoulder, Viska let herself relax as her eyes started to drift closed.

“Here now, none of that yet, my lad!” Bofur murmured, tapping her on the shoulder. She looked up as he handed her a steaming plate of rabbit. “Wrap yourself around some warm dinner first. It'll fortify you for whatever noxious potions Óin'll decide you need to drink to keep from catching a chill from that dunking.”

Viska managed a tired smile that the miner probably couldn't even see, then nodded and signed her thanks before taking the plate and eating her portion carefully. Across the fire, Fíli caught her eye and flashed a quick smile.

“Next time you decide to go swimming with your pony, Visk, wait for warmer weather, would you? And calmer waters?”

Viska set down her plate and started signing quick, heartfelt apologies, but Fíli shook his head and held his hand up.

“I'm teasing you, my friend. I'm just glad you're all right. Your brother got to the river first, and didn't realize you had fallen off when he got hold of your pony. As dark as it was, you're lucky I saw you in the water at all. You need a brighter color coat if you're going to make a habit of that!”

Viska grimaced, but her eyes sparkled with amusement. *We can't all have that golden beacon of hair, oh Prince of Sunshine*, she signed. Kíli choked on his dinner laughing. Fíli just gave a grin and returned to his food.

Trisk glanced over at the younger prince. “I think Kíli got it worse than Visk. Is he alright?”

Kíli ducked his head and shrugged, brushing a loose lock of raven-dark hair out of his face. “Óin already gave me one of his concoctions. I think I was in more danger from Thorin's reaction than I was from the river – my chest is one giant bruise. I'll leave the water rescues to Fíli from now on.”

“I am the better swimmer,” his brother agreed with a nod.

“Ah, but not so great with boats,” Kíli teased.
Later that night, after everyone was bedded down (the youngsters had all been spared watch shifts that night, due to the need to rest after their unfortunate dunking), Viska once more lay back to back with her brother, listening to him snore. Fíli and Kíli sat several feet away, talking softly.

“Are you sure you're alright, Ki?”

“I'm fine, nadad. Chest hurts a bit, but that's as much from Thorin pounding on it as from the water. Óin gave me that Mahal-forsaken potion of his, and I don't doubt I'll get another dose or two tomorrow.”

“Why did you follow me in, Kíli? You've never been a strong swimmer.”

The dark-haired lad sighed and scrubbed at his face with one hand. “Habit, I think. I've always followed you – I just didn't stop to think. Visk is my friend too, and when he went under the water, I just reacted, same as you did. I know, I'm a fool. Thorin, Dwalin, Balin, Óin, and Gandalf have all told me so.”

“A fool, but an honest and loyal one.” Fíli smiled, then reached over to pull his brother close and press their foreheads together. “Just – please, try to start using your head, little brother. I thought I'd lost you today, and I thought I would die, too. Don't make me break my promise to Amad. I swore to her that I would protect you, that I would bring you back safely. Don't make me break that promise.”

Viska watched them silently through lidded eyes, wondering at the sense of duty that had brought both princes, Heirs of Durin, to the river to rescue a Dwarf they had known less than a month.

And occasionally, before she drifted off, she thought she saw Fíli casting thoughtful, puzzled looks in her direction, as though he was trying to solve a riddle.

* X *

Dwalin, son of Fundin, volunteered to take first watch that night, knowing it would be a long time before he slept, anyway. Balin and Thorin looked slightly surprised when the big warrior spoke up, as he generally preferred the last watch before dawn, but his brother's eyes flickered with understanding after only a moment. Thorin's took a bit longer, but in time, his old friend's gaze moved from his face to the four lads huddled around the fire and he nodded silently.

Dwalin made a round of the campsite as the last of his companions settled in to their bedrolls, then took a seat on the fallen log. Before long, his gaze drifted back over to the quiet forms of the youngest Dwarves. Fíli and Kíli had finally settled in to sleep, near their uncle. Fíli slept like a stone, rarely moving, but Kíli, ever the restless one, changed position every few minutes. If he had known the lad any less, Dwalin would not have believed that he actually slept, but having watched Dís's sons grow up, he knew that Kíli simply could not stay still. Which was why the warrior's heart had chilled at the sight of the dark-haired lad unmoving and unresponsive on the river bank. Dwalin had seen the terror in Thorin's eyes when his nephew was pulled unresisting from the swollen river, the panic in Fíli's when he realized that his brother was not breathing. He himself was still engulfed in the initial dread that had seized him when Viskel first slipped from his pony
and he realized that not only was the younger son of his lost comrade in danger, but both of the princes he had helped raise were going into the water after the lad. Pride had battled fury and fear in his heart as he waded out to help Trisk pull the unburdened pony to the bank, then turned to pull Visk from Fíli's strong grip to safety. Pride that they would spring so quickly to the aid of their friends and companions, fury that Durin's heirs would risk themselves so early in the quest to regain their homeland, fear that he might lose the closest he had to sons. Thorin was their uncle, and the closest to a father that they had had since Torvi's death when Kíli was very small, but Dwalin had helped train them in combat, and Balin had seen to the more academic portions of their education. The two bachelors took nearly as much pride in the lads as their closest kin, and were probably among the only ones who understood the conflict in Thorin's soul when it came time to decide whether to include them in the Company. The other was Dís herself, for Thorin's sister was just as much a child of Durin as she was a mother.

And now there were two more young lads to watch over, though they would certainly deny the need. And so far, Dwalin had been impressed with Trisk and Visk. They did their share without complaint, fitting themselves neatly into the expedition with light hearts and a strong sense of duty. Not that he expected anything less from the sons of Kulvik. Their father had been only a few years younger than Thorin, a close comrade in the early years of the exile from Erebor. He had nearly died trying to protect Frerin at Azanulbizar – Dwalin remembered carrying the lad to the healers' tents before returning to Balin's side to mourn their fallen father. Thorin had been grieved when Kulvik decided to leave Ered Luin for a small settlement in Emyn Uial, but their friend had ridden away from the memories with a small group of like-minded Exiles, only sending a few letters over the next years. Dís had been delighted when word came of his marriage to her old friend Laika, and even more excited when the letter announcing Triskel's birth arrived. The word of Laika's second pregnancy had been the last word from the Hills of Evendim – Kulvik had never been much of a correspondent, and Dwalin had been surprised when Thorin thought to summon him for the quest. Thráin's son had arched a brow at the warrior's questions. “Kulvik was ever loyal – I cannot blame him for failing to protect my brother when I could do no better. At least he was at Frerin's side at the end. Even when his wife wrote to tell Dís of their firstborn, he made sure she included his pledge to stand by my side when time came to retake our homeland. I will not reject an offer of help, nor turn my back on a willing heart.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

kafh – coffee
I’tim – Breathe!
Kasahili, nadadith – Please, little brother
nadad – brother
The next morning, the sun seemed to rise with great reluctance, hiding behind a thick cloud cover. The rain had stopped, but the gloomy dreariness put a damper on spirits just as effectively. Kíli, son of Torvi and Dís, was not one to stay abed long past dawn, but waking to the thin sunlight made him groan and turn over in his bedroll, determined to go back to sleep until the sun decided to shine properly. He had been plagued the night through by nightmares and a pesky cough left over from his swim in the river, and he saw no reason to rise if no one was rousing him to pack for their departure. Instead, he buried his face in the back of his brother's hood and drifted off once more.

When he woke again, Fíli was gone and there was a bustle of movement in the little camp as some of the others packed their gear. Yanking himself from yet another dark dream of watery depths, the raven-haired archer scrambled up into a sitting position and glanced around the campsite for his brother's golden head. A calming hand landed on his shoulder a moment later, and he looked up into Trisk's concerned gaze.

"He's with Thorin," the silversmith told him, jerking a thumb in the direction of the road. "They are discussing the path with Gandalf. I think the Wizard's plan differs slightly from your uncle's."

Kíli sighed and nodded, getting to his feet. "That means they're arguing," he replied. "I'll leave them to that. Any idea of when we are leaving?"

"Soon," Trisk answered, tying the binding on his bedroll and setting it aside with the rest of his gear. "Fíli has you nearly packed, he just left the bedroll to you. Said you probably needed the extra sleep."

"Mahal's blessing on big brothers," the younger prince replied, shooting his friend a grin as he shook out his bedroll in preparation for rolling it up. "How is Visk?" he asked, sobering slightly, his thoughts going to the events of the previous evening. "At least I went into the river of my own accord, even if it did not go quite as planned."

Trisk shrugged his pack into place, glancing over to where his brother seemed to be communing silently with his pony. "Well enough. Bit of a cough, like yours. It's bothering his throat, with the smoke damage that was already there, but Óin gave him something to soothe it. More damage to his pride than anything else, I think."

Kíli nodded absently and finished tying up his bedroll. "A feeling that I know well," he agreed with a grimace, hoisting the roll to his shoulder. "Just ask my brother. No, actually, don't ask him. The last thing I need is Fíli starting a round of 'what's the most foolish thing you've ever seen Kíli do.'"
“This week, this year, or ever?”

The dark-haired prince groaned and turned to find his brother behind him, wearing a smirk that never boded well for the dignity of...well, anyone in the vicinity, honestly. Kíli shook his head and turned back to Trisk.

“What I find unfair,” the young archer explained breezily to the silversmith, ignoring his fair-haired shadow with an air of nonchalance, “is that everyone always thinks they know how we work. Thorin, Balin, Dwalin – ask any one of them, and they'll tell you that I'm the hellion, and that Fíli just follows along to mitigate the damage. Fíli's the responsible one, the elder brother, Thorin's heir, the golden child of Durin.” He grinned at the gagging noise behind him, but did not glance back, focusing instead on his companion as he snugged his burden behind his saddle. He paused to scratch his pony behind the ears, Brownie's favorite form of affection, and smiled slightly when the bay whuffled at his pockets looking for a treat. “No one ever stops to think that, perhaps, Fíli was the mastermind behind the exploding fish bladders under the cushions in the council chambers,” he continued indignantly, warming to his complaint. “Or that he might have been the one to suggest 'borrowing' shields from the Warrior's Hall to go sledding at Midwinter....” he trailed off, turning a look of suffering on Trisk as the other Dwarrow laughed. A few steps away, Fíli was chuckling and shaking his head in mock disappointment.

“Lies and calumny, nadadith. Is that how you talk about your own blood?” he asked, blue eyes twinkling. “The loving brother that pulled you from the river not twenty-four hours past?”

Kíli grinned at his brother, but Fíli's words had wakened the memory of those brief moments of eternal terror in the water, and he hoped the expression did not look as strained as it felt. “I have done many foolish things in my life,” he admitted after a long moment, much of his good humor draining away and leaving chilling realization in its wake. “But few so foolish as leaping into a river nearing spring flood stage. I think I might need to work a bit more at being a 'responsible adult.'”

Fíli, bless him, heard the words he did not say and was suddenly standing in front of him, hands gripping his shoulders as he leaned in to touch his forehead to Kíli's own in a brotherly gesture of support and love.

“You scared a year off my life, I think,” the swordsman stated, his voice a low rumble. “But you are safe. We are safe.”

“Thanks to you,” the archer mumbled, shame creeping through him. “I did not even help you rescue Visk, just gave you someone else to rescue. Mahal, Fíli, you could have died coming back for me!”

“But I didn't,” came the firm reply, accompanied by a tightening of the gloved hands on his shoulders. “I found you, and Dwalin helped me pull you ashore, and Thorin got you breathing again, and Óin checked your lungs and said all would be well. You acted before you thought, as is your wont, but you acted in good faith and with selfless intent, to save a friend, and that was the act of a Son of Durin, nadadê.”

“And one that I, certainly, cannot condemn,” Trisk added, offering a twisted little smile when Kíli glanced at him. “You were trying to save my brother, and even...” he faltered slightly, then nodded firmly. “Even if you both had failed – even if Visk had been lost, I would honor you for that.”

Kíli nodded, bumping his forehead against Fíli's briefly before he straightened, a little of the
burden falling from his heart. He had been raised to know his worth, to honor his ancestors, and to prove himself worthy of the Line of Durin, but it was difficult to be the youngest scion of such a high house. Of his elders, he had only his brother to show that he was not alone in his struggles to be what was expected. Only Fíli confided his misgivings, his questions, his mistakes. Dís, his mother, was supportive to her brother and hid her sorrow from her sons, while Thorin showed only strength to his people. Balin's history lessons told much of deeds, but little of the doubt that must surely have plagued even the great kings of Durin's Folk when they were young and untried.

“Ahkminruki astnu,” he said quietly, a little of his normal cheer returning as he clapped each of them on the shoulder with a smile. “Mahal's blessing on big brothers, indeed.”

They had no chance to respond, for Thorin returned then, a dark glower on his face that reminded the young archer that his uncle had been arguing with the Wizard regarding the next part of their route.

“Mount up,” the leader of the Company ordered, pulling his pony up short and nodding approvingly at the fact that most of them were clearly ready to leave. “We've lost a good part of the day already, and there are still decisions to be made, so we'll not be going far, just well along the Trollshaws. That will put the Last Bridge and the river behind us for the night, and we'll start out again with the dawn.”

Kíli saw Thorin's eyes flicker toward where he and his brother stood, and thought he could see a certain softening of the exiled king's dour demeanor.

“You lads could use a bit more rest, Óin tells me,” he added with a glance at the healer, who nodded as he swung into the saddle.

“Rest today to prevent relapse tomorrow,” the elder Dwarf replied seriously, peering at each of the younger Dwarrow with a critical eye. “Should be no lasting harm, though. Tough as any of Durin's Folk, the lot of 'em, and young enough to recover at speed.”

“Very well, then we will....” Thorin trailed off, turning that formidable sapphire gaze on the unfortunate Hobbit, who was sitting his pony with only a little more ease than he had first shown, a concerned look on his expressive face. “Yes, Master Burglar?” the dark-haired Dwarrow asked, a rumble of irritation in his voice. “You have something you wish to say?”

“Well, I only wondered...Trollshaws?” The slight squeak on the last word was inquiry enough and Kíli stifled a laugh as he settled into his saddle.

“It's the wood on the far side of the river,” Ori explained, eager to share his knowledge. “Stretches from the Hoarwell to the Loudwater.”

“Someone studied the map,” Nori teased his brother, grinning as the young scribe blushed and ducked his head.

“Which is just as well, since Mahal knows you have no idea where we are or where we're going,” Dori countered, earning a shrug and shake of the head from the younger Dwarf.

“That's what you lot are for,” came the unrepentant reply. From the look on Bilbo's face, however, his actual question had not yet been answered, and Kíli took pity on him.

“It's just a name, Mister Boggins,” he assured the Hobbit, ignoring Fíli's hissed “Baggins, you nungbâha!” “There haven't been any Trolls in the 'Shaws in ages.”

“Ah. Well, that's good, then.” The Hobbit relaxed slightly and the young archer smiled brightly at
his brother as Fíli rolled his eyes.

“If that is settled, we will be leaving,” Thorin commented dryly, turning his mount with a flourish. “Kíli, Fíli, Visk, and Trisk – stay close to Óin so he can keep an eye on you for today. Nori, Dori, you two are on rearguard. Dwain and Balin, with me. This Wizard is determined to test my patience.”

“Wasn't aware you had any,” Dwain commented with a broad grin. Kíli enjoyed the rare treat of seeing his uncle's impressive glower turned on someone other than himself.

True to his word, Thorin kept them on the road for only a few hours before turning aside to set up camp well within the tree line. His debate with Gandalf had lasted the entire trip, and the Company had barely begun to dismount when the Wizard turned abruptly and strode back to his horse, muttering under his breath about stiff-necked Dwarves who held grudges for far too long. Kíli watched him go and exchanged a puzzled look with his brother before Fíli shrugged and began unsaddling his pony. Following suit, the archer glanced toward his uncle, spotting him consulting with Óin. The healer nodded and the king looked up, catching the younger prince's eye.

“Fíli, Kíli, take the ponies to the clearing through the trees there,” he ordered, pointing to where a patch of brighter sunlight showed a thinning of the forest. “It will do them good to have a bit of freedom to graze and rest. Bifur and Bofur will replace you shortly after sundown.”

The brothers nodded and finished stripping the gear from Misty and Brownie. With the help of the others, they tended and settled the ponies in the broad clearing and then took up a position on a little hillock at the edge to watch over their mounts. Humming tunelessly, Kíli rested his back against a small tree and drew his belt knife as he picked up a piece of fallen wood and began whittling at it aimlessly as the last of the sunlight faded and the moon's silvery gleam filled the meadow. After a few minutes, he glanced up at his brother, noticing for the first time that Fíli seemed unusually distracted. The elder prince's brow was furrowed and he looked as though he was trying to figure out one of the twisty logic puzzles that Balin had delighted in posing when they were Dwarflings. The dark-haired lad put his knife away and reached over to poke him in the side.

“You alright, Fi?”

His brother took a deep breath and nodded, but his mind was clearly elsewhere. “Yes, just thinking.”

“What about?”

There was silence for a long moment, before Fíli turned to look at him, eyes shadowed.

“What do you think of Triskel and Viskel?” he asked abruptly.

Kíli stared at him, wondering what had prompted the question. Had the lads from Emyn Uial given him reason to distrust them? Or was this some thought of Thorin's that had his brother concerned? He concentrated for a long moment, going back over the past days of travel and conversation.

“I like them,” he replied finally. “Visk is a bit quiet, of course. Trisk is quite pleasant – he seems to get on with everyone, but I think there is a bit of mischief in his heart, too. Why? Do you not?”

Fíli shrugged and shook his head. “No, I like them. It's good to have others close to our age – I don't feel so outnumbered by Thorin and the older guard. And both of them have that bit of
mischief. It's just...there's something odd about Visk. Not bad, just...different. Like there's something he is concealing."

"Kíli tensed. ‘Do you think he's a danger to the Company?’"

"No.” Fíli answered instantly and Kíli relaxed. He trusted his brother's judgment – Fíli had always been good at reading people.

"Gandalf seems to like them, too,” he offered with a grin. The swordsman nodded.

"Like I said, I don't think they are dangerous to us, there's just something strange about Visk. When I hauled him out of the river yesterday...it just...blast!” Fíli groaned dramatically and ran a hand through his hair. “It's impossible...never mind.”

"Now you have me curious, and you know what that means. Just say it, nadad.”

"Let me think about it a bit longer, see if I can put the pieces together. No more than a day or two, I promise.”

Kíli shrugged and glanced back toward camp as the sound of rustling foliage drew his attention. A moment later, Bilbo stepped into the little clearing, looking around curiously. The dark-haired archer grinned and waved at him.

"Over here, Mister Boggins!” he called cheerily, laughing as Fíli thumped the back of his skull. The burglar, for his part, simply gave a slight smile and shook his head as he walked over to join them.

"It is a bit confusing,” he commented genially, “that you have twenty-seven years more than I, yet you act like a mischievous Hobbit-lad twenty years my junior.” There was a thoughtful look on his face as the burglar glanced back toward the camp. “What of the others?’” he asked with a frown. “Trisk and Visk are close in age to you lads, yes?”

"The four of us are the youngest of the Company, save yourself,” Fíli replied with a nod. “Trisk is the eldest of us and he's not even ninety. Next youngest would be Ori, and he's, what, a hundred and thirty?”

"A couple of years more, I think,” Kíli agreed, watching Bilbo's brows climb toward his hairline in surprise. “He's just so quiet and meek most of the time that he seems younger. Balin is the eldest, overall.”

"Two hundred and one,” Fíli stated confidently.

"What is the general lifespan of a Dwarf, then?” the Hobbit asked faintly, his eyes rather wide.

"Perhaps three hundred years,” Kíli answered.

"If he's so lucky as to die from old age, rather than in battle or disaster,” Fíli added, his blue eyes darkening. “Which hasn't happened for any of our ancestors in many years.”

"Not since Thór's grandfather,” Kíli agreed thoughtfully.

"Do you know, my grandfather lived to be one hundred and thirty,” Bilbo murmured. “No other Hobbit on record had ever lived that long.”

Kíli glanced at his brother uncomfortably, unsure what to say, or if he should just keep quiet. Fíli
shrugged, but watched their companion closely for a long moment. Finally, Bilbo seemed to shrug it off and glanced back at them, smiling.

“And Elves live forever, or so I've heard. Seems a bit exhausting to me. I think I'd rather know that there will be a little rest waiting at the end,” he concluded with a small laugh. “And that's not really what I came out to ask you.”

“Oh?” Fíli cocked an eyebrow at the burglar and Bilbo shrugged.

“I wondered if I could ask you lads a few questions,” he explained. “Without causing offense, I mean. I know very little about Dwarves, you see. There aren't many books about your culture, not that I have found, anyway, and, well, I'd like to know enough about my traveling companions that I understand more than one comment in ten.”

Kíli laughed brightly as his brother smiled.

“We'll do our best, Mister Baggins,” the elder prince replied. “I doubt you can offend either of us, but there may be some things that we simply cannot answer. Dwarves are a very private people, and we keep our secrets close. What we can tell you, we will.”

“What is the Line of Durin?” the Hobbit blurted without preamble. “Balin mentioned it during the tale of that battle, and it seems to mean something very important to all of you.”

“An easy question, with a rather long answer,” Fíli said, meeting Kíli's eye.

“The shortest answer is us,” the raven-dark prince answered. “Thorin, Fíli, me. And our mother, of course. The short answer, since I'm sure that explains very little, is that Durin was one of the first kings of the Dwarves. His line has continued, unbroken, eldest son to eldest son, down to Thorin. Thorin has no children of his own, but our mother is his younger sister, so he has named us his heirs.”

“But if we retake Erebor, and Thorin becomes King Under the Mountain, like his grandfather?” Bilbo asked, glancing at the golden-haired swordsman.

“Fíli will become king after Thorin,” Kíli confirmed, chin raised proudly.

“That will be a long time yet, I hope,” his brother muttered.

The younger prince nodded slightly, but did not reply. He knew of Fíli's reservations and concerns for the future, the insecurities and even fears that were kept concealed from their kin.

“What else might we explain for you, Master Hobbit?” he asked, taking the chance to shift the focus of the conversation. Bilbo blinked and thought for a moment.

“Well, this might be a bit personal, but...I wondered...your braids? Do they have meaning? Some are so elaborate, while others seem very simple. And you wear none at all.”

Fíli chuckled. “Again, you ask a simple question with a complex answer, my friend. Many braids have meaning, yes, but often that meaning is personal to the Dwarf that wears them.”

“And others can be read by any with a knowledge of our culture,” Kíli added. “You noticed that Thorin only wears the two, one at either temple?”
“That's why I wondered. They seem almost plain, for the rightful king.”

“Yet they mark him as the leader of a high house, and the beads bear the sigil of Durin's Line,” the elder prince replied. He indicated the matching braids that he wore, then the secondary plait that ran behind each ear. “These mark me as his heir. When Thrór and Thráin lived, Thorin wore these as well.”

“But Kíli has no braids,” the burglar commented, looking a big confused. “Is he not also an heir?”

Kíli grinned and shook his head. “An heir, but not the heir,” he explained easily. “And, in all honesty, my hair does not hold braids well. It is too fine. Oh, I manage if they are needed for a ceremony, but the clasp is all that I generally use.”

“And your beards?”

“Again, a personal choice, though they are a matter of great pride. The loss of a beard is generally a mark of shame,” Fíli explained. “Traitors are shaved, once they are convicted, to show that they are dishonored.”

“That is why Visk conceals his face,” Kíli murmured, a surge of sympathy welling up for the lad. “His injuries in the raid meant his hair was cut back to let it regrow, and his beard will have been burnt off in the fire. He will wear the scarf and hood until they have grown back enough that he does not look like one who has been cast out in disgrace.”

“We wear ours short by choice, however,” his brother continued. “Thrór had a mighty beard before Erebor fell, adorned with chains and precious stones. Like Visk, he lost most of it to flames when the dragon attacked. As a gesture of mourning, for him and for the countless wounded and dead, Thráin and Thorin trimmed theirs short as well.”

“Although, I have an additional reason,” Kíli admitted. “Few Dwarrow wield a bow as a primary weapon, because a beard is dangerous around a bowstring.”

The archer grinned and stood to do a headcount of the ponies, hoping that Bifur and Bofur would be arriving soon to take over pony watch, so the princes could get dinner and the extra rest that Óin had recommended. Sixteen? He frowned, eyes searching the clearing, counting once more. And a third time.

“What's wrong?” Fíli's voice was sharp, having noticed the younger prince's stillness as he frantically counted yet again.

“Didn't we have eighteen ponies?” the dark-haired lad asked.

“Yes.”

Kíli turned wide eyes on his brother. “Not anymore.”

Fíli swore luridly as he scrambled to his feet and looked out over the clearing.

“What's the matter?” Bilbo was staring at them in concern, looking from one to the other.

“We are short two ponies,” the younger prince replied, hurrying down the hillock and over toward where he had last seen the two vanished mounts, the elder right on his heels. “Daisy and Bungle are missing.”

“Oh dear.”
Kíli crouched at the edge of the clearing, studying the ground. He was a hunter, accustomed to tracking game through the wilds of the Blue Mountains, and the signs of the shod ponies were easy to read, even in the dim light.

"The others aren't anxious," Fíli noted behind him, patting Bifur's Baffle on the nose as he walked quietly among them.

"They wandered off," the archer responded, irritated with himself for missing the animals' restlessness. "That way." He pointed to a patchy trail that was just visible, long abandoned by the look, but clear enough to be followed for a short way.

"Lads?"

They turned at the sound of Bofur's voice, raised with an edge of concern. The miner and his cousin had just arrived to take their turn at pony watch. Kíli groaned, knowing that meant dinner was waiting back at camp. A dinner that was likely to be cold when they returned.

"A couple of strays, Bof," Fíli replied, waving at him. "Ki and I will fetch them. You two stay and watch the others, if you would."

"D'ya want us to alert Thorin?"

Kíli felt his stomach plummet and fought to keep from shooting his brother a pleading look. A second later, Fíli spoke up, sounding rather embarrassed himself.

"Uh, no. Let's not worry him. We'll handle it." Reaching out quickly, the golden-haired prince snagged Bilbo by the elbow and pulled him along toward the edge of the clearing. "Come along, Mister Baggins. You are our official burglar, after all. Who better to help us find what is lost?"

"I'm not sure what that has to do with being a burglar," the Hobbit answered, looking rather nonplussed. "But I'll help you, if you wish."

Kíli led the way along the thin path, crouching frequently to make sure the hoofprints did not wander off into the forest. Several twists and turns from the clearing, he halted abruptly, barely noticing when his brother crashed into his back.

"Ki?"

The archer's hand moved quickly, warning the swordsman to silence and stillness, then he crept forward slowly, eyes on the confusion of tracks and broken foliage ahead. He retched as a foul odor teased his nose, chasing away his earlier hunger. He glanced back at his brother, then turned to peer ahead at the newly-widened path, where the waxing moon's light was filtered by the leaves above them.

"Something took them," he murmured, starting forward once more. "Something big."

"Something quite probably very dangerous," Bilbo muttered behind him, although he did not protest as they continued their progress. Kíli stopped again, checking the ground before him, only to glance up as Fíli pushed ahead, his eyes on something off in the trees.

"A light," the elder prince whispered, hand on the falchion hilt that rose above his right shoulder. Following his gaze, Kíli spotted it. A campfire, not far ahead. Shadows shifted around it, and he drew his sword as he fell in behind his brother, Bilbo hurrying along behind them on silent feet. At the edge of the firelight, Fíli dropped behind a fallen log and carefully raised his head to look over it. As the raven-haired prince joined him, he glanced up with a hint of humor in his eyes.
“Trolls.”

“What?”

Incredulous, Kíli stared as a massive, squash-faced Troll lumbered in front of the fire, Daisy struggling under one arm. As he watched, the pony was deposited in a pen with Bungle and the Troll turned to its two companions. At his side, Bilbo was pale.

“You said there weren't any Trolls in Trollshaws!” the Hobbit hissed. Kíli grimaced and shrugged apologetically.

“I was wrong, apparently,” he muttered.

“Apparently!”

Fíli hushed them with a raised hand and fierce glare. “They are here, and they're going to eat two of our ponies,” he ground out.

“There are three of them. If they spot us, we won't stand a chance,” Kíli replied.

“I don't think we would stand a chance against one,” his brother said. “Their hides are tough, and look at the size of them!”

“So what do we do?” the Hobbit asked, a determined set to his face. Fíli studied him for a long moment.

“Gandalf says Hobbits are light on their feet,” he finally commented. “Do you think you might be able to sneak over and free the ponies? Without being seen?”

Bilbo blanched, but leaned forward to study the scene before them. “Possibly,” he allowed. “Where will you be?”

“Right behind you,” Fíli assured him, ushering the Hobbit toward the campsite. Looking resigned, the burglar disappeared into the underbrush and the elder prince's hand landed on Kíli's shoulder.

“Follow him, but stay out of sight,” came the order. “I'll return with the Company. If our burglar is successful, well and good. If not, I'd rather we had a backup plan in motion.”

Kíli nodded, eyes wide as he tightened his grip on his sword and started forward.

“Kíli!”

He glanced back, reading the warning in his brother's face.

“Don't do anything foolish,” Fíli warned. “I'll return with the Company. Wait for us!”

“And if I can't?”

Fíli set his jaw, his face grim. “Then do as much damage as you can, nadadith.”

Kíli blinked and nodded, and his brother was gone, moving back along the path as quickly and quietly as he could. Taking a deep breath, the archer hurried after the burglar.

In the end, Bilbo was almost successful. The Trolls were squabbling over their planned meal, and the Hobbit was trying to get the gate to the pen unlatched when the purest bad luck led to one of
them glancing over at the wrong moment. The Troll lunged and Bilbo was caught, and the youngest heir of Durin held his breath as the burglar was held aloft and studied through tiny piggish eyes.

“What's this, then?” one of the other Trolls asked. The one holding the Hobbit shrugged rounded shoulders.

“Dunno, do I?” it responded. “Never seen a bite like this a'fore. Don't smell like Dwarf, too small to be Man. What are you, little morsel?” This last question was accompanied by a shake that had Bilbo looking rather nauseous.

“I'm a bur-a Hobbit!” he answered.

“Never heard of it,” the third Troll declared. “Maybe it's a kind of Goblin?”

“I am no such thing!” Bilbo protested.

“Nah, smells better 'n a Goblin,” the one holding him stated, holding the burglar close to its nose for a good long sniff. By the look on the Hobbit's face, the Troll's stench was much worse up close. “Looks like it might be tasty, though,” the Troll continued.

“Bah, no more'n a mouthful by the time he's skinned and boned,” one of the others replied.

“But if we had some more like 'im, we could make a pie!” came the suggestion of the third.

“Any more of you out there?” the one holding Bilbo demanded.

“Yes, lots!”

Kíli winced, even as Bilbo seemed to realize that perhaps he shouldn't give up the existence of his companions quite so easily and corrected himself.

“Actually, no. None at all. Just me.”

“I think he's lying,” stated the tallest Troll, drawing himself up slightly, brutish features contorted with the effort of thought. “What's 'e mean by 'lots' and 'none at all'? Hold 'is toes over the fire, and see what 'e says then!”

The Troll holding the burglar nodded agreeably and reached out to do just that, and Kíli could wait no longer. Praying that his brother and the rest of the Company were close, he lunged into the little camp, striking at the closest Troll ankle and rolling clear of a huge hand that reached out for him. Standing just out of reach, he leveled the full force of the Durin glower on the massive creatures, hoping it hid the fear that was coursing through him. He didn't stand a chance – he knew that. Against a single Troll, his best strategy would be to flee. Against three, and unwilling to leave the Hobbit to their mercy, there was no strategy at all, save one.

Don't get caught.

“Let him go!”

“That 'un's a Dwarf,”’ one of the Trolls commented. “Mayhap that's what 'e meant. 'Lots' and 'none at all,' eh? No more 'burrahobbits,' but lots o' Dwarves.”

“Sounds better 'n pony for dinner,” another replied.

“Ay, that it do,” the third agreed.
Well, this wasn't going very well. At all.

“I said, let him go!” the dark-haired prince snapped, taking a step closer to the Trolls, his eyes flickering to Bilbo and wishing he could apologize for the rather poor job he was doing of rescuing the Hobbit.

“What you gonna do if we don't?”

Kíli didn't get a chance to answer, which was just as well, since he had no idea what kind of threat he could offer. He had no more than opened his mouth when a shout rang out from the foliage behind him, only to be taken up by a dozen more voices ringing the campsite.

“*IGRIBI! DU BEKAR*”

Startled, the Troll holding Bilbo dropped the Hobbit, sending the little fellow rolling across the clearing toward the pen that held the ponies. Kíli hesitated just long enough to see that the burglar was back on his feet before charging in to join the fray, instinct bringing him to his brother's side within moments.

“Thought I told you not to do anything foolish!” Fíli shouted, stabbing down at a massive hand that was trying to grab Ori.

“No choice!” the younger prince replied, dodging a huge foot and jabbing his sword toward the back of a Troll knee. “They were going to start toasting Bilbo's feet!”

Then there was no more time for words, only the relentless dance of dodge and strike, duck and swing. The sad truth was that even the entire Company, fifteen brave and daring Dwarves, were no match for three Trolls, with hides so thick that even the sharpest blades rarely drew blood. They could not win, and they all knew it, so Kíli was not surprised to hear Thorin's voice rise again, echoed by Dwalin and Glóin within moments.

“*IKHRISHABÎ*”

Shooting a glance toward the pen, the archer was relieved to see that Bilbo had managed to get the ponies out and was ducking out of sight in the foliage. Satisfied that the ponies were freed, and the burglar was safe, he dove between the feet of the nearest Troll, aiming for the relative safety of the undergrowth. If they could scatter into the woods, they could flee and regroup, hopefully loosing the enemy in the process. He had nearly reached his goal when he heard it – a hoarse cry of fear torn from an already damaged throat, the voice unfamiliar but instantly recognizable, for it could only come from one of their Company.

“TRISK!”

Skidding to a stop, Kíli turned to see the auburn-haired silversmith in the grip of one of the Trolls, the Dwarf's arm held between the fingers of the creature's other massive hand.

“Throw down yer arms, 'fore I rip his off!”

There was a scuffle off to the dark-haired prince's right and he glanced over to see his brother bodily restraining Visk. Fíli had one hand clamped on the wrist of the young Dwarrow's sword hand, even as the older prince turned urgent eyes on Thorin. To his credit, the exiled Dwarf lord hesitated for only the briefest of moments before he threw his sword to the ground and ordered the rest of the Company to do the same. One by one, they dropped their weapons, instinctively gathering close around their leader. Kíli stared in dismay, his hands flexing helplessly on the grip of his blade before he followed suit. With their weapons, their only chance had been escape.
Without them....

Wherever Tharkûn has gone, Mahal send him back to us, else our quest will end here, in the bellies of these beasts, he thought grimly.

* X *

Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, son of Bungo and Belladonna, crouched in the undergrowth and watched in horror as his companions were stuffed into filthy burlap sacks. The drawstrings were pulled tight above their shoulders so that they could not work themselves free, only their heads left uncovered. This, of course, did nothing to muffle the shouts of anger and promises of retribution, of which there were many, but the Trolls seemed to pay little mind. Instead, they were rummaging through their supplies, discussing the best way to prepare their dinner.

The Hobbit wasn't entirely certain what had gone wrong. When the Company had come to his rescue, he had quickly gotten out of the way, completing his initial goal of freeing the captured ponies, then making a hasty retreat under the assumption that the others would join him. He had, in fact, been headed for the path that he and the young Dwarves had followed to the Trolls' campsite when a scream of rage had stopped him in his tracks. When it was quickly followed by the clatter of weapons being dropped, he had reluctantly backtracked to the campfire. Just in time to watch the Dwarves being bagged neatly, one after another, and set aside to await their fate.

“Easy enough,” said one, holding up a packet. “Skin ’em, rub on a bit o’ sage, and roast ’em til they’s nice and tender, I say.”

“Quicker to just eat ’em raw,” another grumbled. “Ain't nuthin' wrong wif a bit o' raw Dwarf.”

“Could sit on ’em, squash ’em into jelly and eat it wif toast,” offered the third.

“Whatever we do, make it quick. I'm so 'ungry me guts is grumblin',” the second added.

“The two of you've eaten a village 'n a half between ya since we come down outta the mountains,” the first Troll countered, irritation in his voice. “I does the cookin', you does the eatin'. So quitcher gripin' and let me cook!”

“Fine, Bert,” the third replied, obviously trying to placate him. “Roast ’em, boil ’em, whatever. Just so's we gets to eat. And you shut yer gob, Bill,” he added as his other companion muttered under his breath. “I don' wanna be here all night!”

The one called Bert nodded and produced a nasty, curved blade from his belt. As he reached for the nearest Dwarf, Bilbo suddenly realized that his companions were not biding their time, awaiting the perfect moment to strike out and escape. They were well and truly caught. And unless something was done, they would all be dead quite soon, their quest ended before they ever even reached the Misty Mountains.

“Wait!”

The three Trolls turned, surprise scrawled across their blunt features, as he charged into the clearing. And to be fair, they were no more surprised than Bilbo himself, for he did not remember making the decision to...do whatever it was he was doing.
“It’s the burrahobbit!” Bill made an expression that might have been a smile and the burglar felt his stomach turn over. “Come back for dessert, ‘ave ya?”

“Mister Baggins, run!” Kíli yelled, struggling in his bag. Next to him, his golden-haired brother was also shifting around, a look of deep concentration on his face. When he caught Bilbo's eye, Fíli winked, tilted his head in the direction of the Trolls and nodded slightly. Hoping that he had caught the older prince's message correctly, the Hobbit focused on keeping the attention of the massive creatures fixed on himself, while also staying out of easy reach.

“I've come to point out out that you've no idea what you're doing,” he countered, his mind racing. “You think a little sage will make this lot palatable? You probably want to wash them thoroughly first. I mean, have you smelt them?”

Several cries of protest met his comment, but he could see Thorin watching him with narrowed eyes, as though waiting to see what his plan might be. Wish I knew, he thought briefly, fighting the nervous laughter that threatened to escape every time he opened his mouth.

“I think I knows how to cook Dwarf,” Bert replied.

“Mince 'em fine and boil 'em!” the third Troll said. Or, at least, it sounded like the third Troll. Bilbo, who had been watching all of them rather closely, hadn't seen any of their lips moving.

“Blast it, Tom, let's not start that again,” Bert argued. “I'm the cook!”

“I didn't say anyfin'” Tom told him, looking rather confused.

“We ain't got enough water to boil 'em, not wifout goin' to the well,” Bill chimed in.

“Roast 'em, then,” Tom grumbled. “Just so's we gets dinner a'fore sunrise."

“No time for that now. Dawn's nearly here.”

This time, it sounded like Bert, and the other two glared at him. Bilbo, meanwhile, was staring at all of them in confusion. Once again, he had not seen any of their mouths moving, but the voice was loud and clear. Whatever the source of the irritating comments, however, the effect was clear. The three Trolls were soon arguing loudly and Bilbo began to cautiously edge his way over to the Dwarves.

“Untie the bags, quick!” Kíli hissed, dark eyes fixed on the Trolls. Bilbo struggled with the knot on the archer's bag for a long moment, the rope pulled tight by massive fingers.

“Here, Mister Baggins. This might help.”

The burglar glanced over to where Fíli sat next to his brother. The bag that held the young Dwarf appeared to have been sliced open just enough for him to work his hand out into the open air, and with it, a small knife. Taking it, Bilbo was able to make short work of the drawstring on the older prince's bag as the sky began to lighten. Once Fíli was free, he moved to help Kíli and Bilbo went to the nearest Dwarf (Nori). Soon, nearly all of the Company was unbound, moving quietly toward where their weapons had been cast aside.

Which is, of course, when the Trolls noticed that their dinner was trying to escape.

“Look at these little rats, taking us for fools!” Tom cried, lunging for Bifur. The fierce-looking toymaker dodged aside, and an immense crack sounded from the eastern edge of the clearing. Everyone turned to find a large boulder there had split down the middle, and a tall figure stood next to it.
“The dawn will take you all!” Gandalf cried.

For just a moment, the Trolls hesitated, staring at him in confusion. Then the first rays of sunrise shot through the cleft in the rock and fell upon the massive creatures, and they began to wail in pain. Bilbo could not move, or even look away, but only stood frozen in place, watching the Trolls' hides turned to stone before his eyes. Never had he seen anything like it, nor did he ever wish to see its like again. Around him, the Company was cheering and whooping, but the Hobbit simply stared.

“Are they dead?” he finally asked, his voice little more than a whisper.

“Mountain trolls cannot stand the sunlight,” Trisk explained with a grin. “Thanks to your cleverness, Mister Baggins, they lost track of time and did not realize that the sun was on the rise. How did you manage to mimic their voices so well?”

“That wasn't me,” the burglar told him, glancing over toward the Wizard. “I rather think it was Gandalf.”

“It was, but I think you had something to do with delaying them long enough for me to find you, my dear fellow,” Gandalf agreed, tapping one massive stone Troll with his staff as he approached. “Is everyone in one piece, then?”

One after another, the Dwarves agreed that they were all well and whole. All save Thorin, who was watching the Wizard through narrowed eyes.

“We thank you for the assistance,” he finally said, nodding incrementally. “Where did you go, if I may ask?”

“To look ahead,” Gandalf answered enigmatically.

“And what brought you back?”

“Looking behind.” This time, there was a small smile on the aged face.

Thorin nodded, then his expression darkened as something occurred to him. “Since when do mountain Trolls come this far south?”

Gandalf shook his head, a look of concern in his kind blue eyes. “Not for an age. Not since a darker power ruled this land.” He stood in silent thought for a long moment, then glanced at Thorin. “They could not have moved in daylight.”

Thorin nodded. “There must be a cave nearby.”

* X *

Bifur, son of Drobur, was not afraid of death – but he was also just as glad that he would not die to fill the belly of a mountain Troll. He was even more relieved that his younger cousins would not be subjected to that fate. The erratic toymaker was not always completely connected to what was going on around him, but any threat to his kin tended to bring the world into clear focus, if only briefly. Bofur and Bombur were his only remaining blood relatives and he was fiercely protective of them. The Company was quickly becoming his extended family, as well, and he watched with quiet affection as they gathered up their gear and possessions from around the Trolls' campsite.
before setting out to find the Troll cave that Gandalf was certain would be nearby. His cousins were unharmed, thanks to the quick thinking of their burglar. Dori was fussing over Ori as their middle brother rolled his eyes and sharpened the blades of his wickedly curved knives. Óin was going from Dwarf to Dwarf, checking for injuries as his brother hovered at his shoulder. Balin was looking a little worse for wear, but had waved off Dwalin's concern, insisting that it was nothing that a full night's sleep couldn't remedy. Thorin strode along next to Gandalf, deep in quiet conversation, as his heirs trotted close behind them. Fíli seemed lost in thought, with his brother shooting him quick glances. Külvik's sons brought up the end of the procession and Bifur signed briefly to Visk as they passed, asking the lad if he and his brother were alright after their little adventure. Visk nodded, adding an emphatic tired. Which only made sense – the difficulty with the Trolls had kept the entire Company awake all night, and Thorin did not seem inclined to let them make up the rest before continuing on their way. Bifur sighed quietly and took up his place as rearguard with Bofur. The irrepressibly cheerful miner seemed much the same as usual, a twinkle in his eye and a grin on his face as he hefted his mattock and led his pony after the rest of the group. He shot his older cousin a smile and Bifur could not help returning it.

“That's another bit of excitement safely over,” Bofur commented genially. “On to the next!”

Bifur shook his head with a rueful grin. Careful what you wish for, cousin.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:

nadadith – little brother (Khuzdul)
nadadê – my brother (Khuzdul)
Ahkminruki astnu – Thank you [both] (Khuzdul)
nungbâha – lovable idiot
IGRIBI! DU BEKAR! - ATTACK! UP AXES! (a battle cry of the Dwarves) (Khuzdul)
IKHRISHABÎ! - SCATTER! (Khuzdul)
Tharkûn – Gandalf's name among the Dwarves
The Troll hole was locked.

Gandalf had led them to it easily enough, but a massive oak door blocked off the entrance to the cave, complete with an iron lock. The Company crowded around as Thorin and Dwalin examined the mechanism. After a long moment, Nori stepped forward, holding out a large iron key. Thorin took it with a questioning look, but Nori simply shrugged and winked, shooting a glance at his elder brother.

“Might have fallen out of a Troll's belt pouch during the battle,” the thief commented, refusing to elaborate further. Thorin sighed and shook his head, then turned to open the door.

Even Gandalf fell back a step as the door opened and the smell of the Troll hole billowed out to meet them. Bilbo looked like he might faint and the Dwarrow were wrinkling their noses at the reek permeating the air around them. Trisk covered his face, envying his sister her scarf. Rotten meat, spoiled food, old death – the combination was eye-watering. Bofur wheezed as he and Bifur joined the rest of the group.

“Oof, what is that smell?” the miner demanded, watching uneasily as Thorin and Dwalin followed the Wizard down into the darkness. Glóin and Nori trailed along, and it was only a moment before Bofur was on their heels. Trisk glanced at Viska as Fíli and Kíli joined the group, then sighed and followed along as she hurried after them.

“Don't worry, Bofur, that's just Fíli's boots,” Kíli answered the older Dwarf cheekily. A second later, he yelped as his brother's elbow buried itself in his stomach. Getting his breath back required a deep inhalation of the rancid air and the young Dwarf fought to keep from retching. Trisk grinned at him unsympathetically as they surveyed the cluttered Troll lair. Everything was jumbled together, regardless of value, and Bofur was staring at a scatter of gold coins on the earthen floor.

“Seems a shame to just leave it lyin' around,” he murmured quietly. Glóin, too, was gazing at a pile of precious metal, having found a small chest half-filled with more coins.

“Agreed,” the merchant commented. “Nori, see if you can find a shovel.”

Trisk joined the princes in rummaging through the collection as Gandalf and Thorin moved deeper into the cave and studied an assortment of swords. Viska moved up next to him, eyes flickering over the Troll plunder as her hands flashed through a series of signs. Trisk shrugged.

“I think Thorin just wants to see if there's anything useful,” he replied absently.

“Or shiny,” Kíli added with a grin. “Looks like they found some swords.”
“Ooh, knives,” Fíli spoke up, pulling a handful of sheathed blades from a large pile. Trisk brightened and moved to the fair-haired prince's side.

“I know that look,” Kíli teased, watching his brother. Viska nodded and Trisk could see the glint of humor in her eyes as she smiled at him behind her scarf. He grinned back at her.

“Some of us appreciate the value of a good blade,” he retorted. He was a silversmith, not a warrior, but a single experience along the route of the trade caravan had taught him the importance of an unexpected weapon, and the small knife snugged into his boot had come in handy more than once. He glanced over at the elder prince, one brow raising in consideration as he recalled the blade that Fíli had managed to reach even while bound in a sack. Kíli had carried sword and belt knife into the battle, and both had been taken from him when they yielded. The golden-haired prince, however, had been stripped of the clever scabbard with his twin blades, the hunting knives in his vambraces, and the four throwing axes sheathed on his boots. Yet he had still produced a blade in time to assist Bilbo in freeing them.

“How many knives do you carry?” Trisk asked.

“Enough to make him dangerous to hug,” Kíli replied with a chuckle. “I know of four, for certain.”

“Five.” Fíli was mostly ignoring the teasing, checking the quality of the blades carefully and setting aside those that impressed him. He tossed the rest back where he had found them, then turned a thoughtful gaze on those he had kept out. “How many of these do you think I can stash, Ki?”

Kíli shrugged, eying the knives. “How many of them are worth it?”

“Quite a few, actually,” the elder replied. He shot Trisk a side glance and a smile. “Help yourself, Trisk. There’s a good half-dozen worth saving.”

Trisk studied the knives closely for a long moment before selecting two to add to his collection. When he glanced up, Viska had found a small dagger with a hilt barely large enough for her hand, and the blade not much longer. She signed a question and he took it from her long enough to examine the blade. It was clearly of Dwarven make, the bone handle and steel blade both etched with the geometric designs favored by their race. It was also obviously very old, but it was sturdy and had been made with pride. He nodded and handed it back.

“Needs sharpening, but it's a decent quality. Too small for my liking, but should be be handy for you, Visk.”

Kíli shot the small knife a look. “Not much of a blade.”

“Small means easier to hide, nadadith,” Fíli commented without looking at his brother, busy gathering his newly acquired weapons. “Never underestimate the power of surprise, especially when there is a blade involved.”

Trisk watched his sister slip her new dagger into a pocket of her coat, then go back to sorting idly through the oddments piled haphazardly throughout the den. Several steps away, Thorin turned abruptly from his conversation with Gandalf, heading for the door and beckoning for them to follow, but a tap on his arm drew Trisk's attention as he turned after the others. Viska stood at his elbow, holding a small, leaf-shaped blade with elegant lines. Studying it, he raised an eyebrow.

“Elven, I think. Very well-made, but an awkward size. Too long for a knife, but too short for a sword, even for you. What is your thought, mim-mushzith?”
Viska's hands moved quickly, spelling out the name.

*Bilbo. It would serve him for a sword.*

The silversmith hummed thoughtfully as he climbed up out of the cave. Taking a deep breath of the fresh air outside, he glanced at his sister.

“Hobbits are a peaceful folk. Do you think he'd carry it?”

*I fear he might need it,* came the answer, her eyes dark. *It is a long way to Erebor.*

Trisk nodded, then led the way over to where the Hobbit waited. Bilbo glanced up, looking a bit surprised at their approach. He looked even more confused when the young Dwarf offered the blade in his hand.

“Mister Baggins, my brother and I found this in the Troll hoard. We thought you might be able to use it. It's an odd size for us, but it should work well as a sword for a Hobbit.”

The burglar frowned, taking it reluctantly. “It is lovely, Master Trisk, but I don't really think-”

“That is an Elven blade, my friend,” came the gentle voice of the Wizard. “It will glow blue when there are Orcs or Goblins about. Take it. It may serve you well.”

Bilbo sighed, looking up at Gandalf. “I'm not a fighter. I've never used a sword in my life.”

Viska stepped forward, hands moving quickly, and Trisk interpreted for the Hobbit.

*Nor had you ever left the Shire, but here you are. You have never stolen anything, but you joined our Company as a burglar. Please. We will teach you to wield it, though I hope it never comes to that.*

“And if it does, my dear Bilbo, remember one thing,” Gandalf added, sharing his smile among the Hobbit and the young Dwarf siblings. “True courage is not about knowing when to take a life, but when to spare one.”

Leaving the burglar to his thoughts, Trisk took a seat on a stump and watched Viska sharpen the tiny blade she had found. The princes were talking softly on the other side of the small clearing and he took the opportunity to pose a question that had been bothering him since shortly after the river incident.

“Why does Fíli watch you so strangely?” he asked quietly. “Like you are a puzzle he must solve?”

He expected her to simply shrug, but she raised her head and peered across the clearing with narrowed eyes before she looked at him.

*I do not know, brother, but it worries me.*

* X *

Thorin, son of Thráin, king-in-exile of the Dwarves of Erebor, was rather surprised to find himself carrying an ancient Elvish sword out of a Troll den. Once clear of the fetid reek of the dismal little cave, his head cleared somewhat and he studied the blade, reluctantly concluding that Gandalf had
spoken truly. It was a magnificent sword, perfectly balanced, even for a wielder smaller than those for whom it had been intended. Dwalin was eyeing it suspiciously, and Balin looked startled to see the graceful blade as Thorin adjusted the sheath on his back.

“That blade looks a bit...Elvish, cousin,” his adviser pointed out mildly. Thorin grimaced and resisted the urge to drop it on the ground. Balin raised an eyebrow and the dark-haired king could have sworn his old friend was laughing at him.

“Gandalf says it was forged in Gondolin,” he admitted. “Still, it is a fine blade. Too fine to be left to moulder in a Troll den.”

“True enough,” Balin agreed with a small smile. He glanced across the clearing to where Fíli and Kíli were talking quietly. The elder appeared to be stowing sheaths in his clothes as his brother sharpened a series of mismatched knives. Balin chuckled. “Young Fíli’s adding to his collection, I see.”

Thorin followed his gaze and smiled slightly. “He and Trisk both,” he commented, turning his attention to the other young brothers. “That one takes after his father, fearless in battle. He did well against the Trolls. I am glad he chose to join us.”

The older Dwarf nodded. “The younger, as well,” he added quietly. “Not as fierce, perhaps, but clever.”

“They both need practice,” Dwalin growled. “Trisk said himself that they were tradesmen more than fighters. Kulvik trained them well, but they lack experience. That's why the lad got himself caught.”

Thorin nodded thoughtfully, watching the auburn-haired silversmith conversing quietly with the young jeweler. “The same can be said of others. I imagine they will all gain that experience before we reach our goal. Still, sparring sessions would probably be a good idea.”

“Not until we've all caught up on the sleep we've lost,” Balin put in firmly.

“True enough, my old friend.” The exiled king smiled warily at the brothers, knowing that he need conceal nothing from them, his loyal friends since before the fall of Erebor. Dwarves were a hardy folk, able to travel far on little rest, but it had been a taxing two days for the Company and he knew Óin would be demanding the same soon enough. A gruff voice calling his name caught his attention and he glanced over. "Ah, right on schedule.

“I hope you don't planning on pushing ahead,” the healer stated bluntly, holding his battered ear horn up to the side of his head. “I'm no youngster, nor are any of you. If the danger is past, there is no point in taxing reserves that may yet be needed.” He glowered, clearly ready for an argument.

“Peace, Óin,” Thorin offered, raising a hand to forestall the angry words he knew were being prepared. “Balin and I had already reached that conclusion. We'll get clear of this foul reek and back to our camp. It should be safe enough – I doubt many other predators lingered once those Trolls moved into the area. This time,” he added, raising his voice enough to be heard across the clearing, “we will keep a closer eye on the ponies, so none go wandering.” He did not acknowledge the guilty wince from Kíli, nor the slight stiffening of Fíli's posture, focusing instead on Óin. “Everyone is well, I hope? No injuries?”

“None more than scrapes and bruises,” came the easy reply. “Visk has likely strained his throat again, but I've given him a honey mixture to help soothe it. The lad'll be lucky to get his voice back before we reach Erebor at this rate.”
“If you knew my brother as well as I do, you might consider that a blessing, Master Óin,” Trisk offered with a grin, expertly dodging a swift kick aimed at his shin.

“Mahal save us, now there's four of them,” Dwálin muttered behind him. “Two úgumak wasn't enough?”

“What else did you expect from Kulvik's sons, brother?” Balin countered, humor in his voice. “You remember his fiery spirit.”

“Aye, and the pranks he used to play, with-” Dwálin broke off, clearing his throat. Thorin didn't have to see his old friend to know the cautious sideways look he was giving the leader of the Company.

“With Frerin,” he finished for the Weapons Master, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “They led our fathers a merry time of it, didn't they, the orphaned craft-lad and the young prince? Fundin lost his temper more than once, as I recall.”

“That he did,” Balin agreed. “Still, not as often as he might have. There was no malice in them, and their mischief often lightened hearts weighed down with heavy cares.”

The sound of something large crashing through the forest at great speed interrupted their conversation and Thorin spun toward the sound, the Elvish blade leaping into his hand. With the hyper-awareness of his companions common to all Dwarves, but honed and refined in those who led, he noted the quick reactions of the Company. Experienced warriors and tradesmen alike were alert and ready, weapons in hand, despite their exhaustion.

“Is that...a bunny?”

A lightweight wooden sledge bearing a tall, ragged figure in brown had crashed into the clearing, drawn by rabbits the size of large dogs. Bofur was staring at the giant animals in wonder, but Gandalf had approached the sledge's passenger.

“Radagast!” the old wizard greeted him warmly. “What on earth are you doing here?”

Thorin exchanged a glance with Balin. This was Radagast the Brown? He certainly looked more at home with the wild creatures than with any of the Free Races. There was something in the old man's eyes, though, that reminded Thorin of Gandalf – a depth of knowledge and compassion he had seldom seen. And he looked troubled, which could not be a good sign.

“Dol Guldur. Why does that name send a chill through my heart?” Thorin murmured, half to himself. The Company had returned to their campsite from the previous evening, settling in for a day of rest. Bifur and Bofur stood guard over the ponies, and Bombur was taking advantage of the rest time to start a rich stew for that evening's dinner. Ori had his journal out and was writing busily, no doubt eager to record the events with the Trolls. Dori sat next to him, studiously ignoring the dice game that Nori had talked Glóin into joining, while Óin seemed to be sorting through his healing supplies. The four youngest Dwarrow had pulled the burglar into their group and were peppering him with questions about Hobbit stories and traditions. Balin had his head together with Dwálin a few steps away. After a quick introduction, Gandalf and Radagast had stepped aside from the Company and were talking softly, but Thorin had caught bits and pieces of their discussion. At his comment, Balin ceased his conversation with his brother and turned in shock.
“Dol Guldur? What brought that cursed name to mind?”

Thorin tilted his head toward the Wizards. “The Brown Wizard says it is occupied again, by a Necromancer. I knew the name, but could not remember why I knew it.”

“Well, you never were too keen on history, beyond our own, but I am glad to hear that you have not forgotten everything that we learned in the school room,” Balin huffed. “But this is ill news, if that fortress is no longer abandoned. That cannot bode well. It sits on the southern border of the Mirkwood, but even that distance is too close to Erebor for comfort if evil haunts it once more.”

Thorin nodded silently, wondering. Gandalf had been very anxious regarding this expedition since their chance meeting in Bree, almost desperate for the Dwarves to reclaim their Mountain and end the dominion of Smaug. Was there more to it than seeing Thráin's people home once more? He glanced at Balin, only to find that his advisor was studying Gandalf closely. After a moment, he turned back to Thorin, one brow raised.

“He seeks to reinforce the Eastern kingdoms,” the white-haired Dwarrow stated, his voice low and thoughtful. “With the mountain once more in the hands of Durin's Folk, Rohan will have an ally to the north.”

“One more likely to give aid than that shaik Thranduil,” Dwalin rumbled. “And that dragon would make a mighty enemy, if he were roused by one so dark.”

The king-in-exile nodded, settling back against a fallen tree and lighting his pipe as he fell into deep thought. His first, instinctive reaction was to resent being used in such a fashion – a Wizard's pawn. And yet...

And yet, what harm is there, even if this be his true motive, so long as we work toward a common goal? We would rebuild Erebor in strength regardless – it is in our blood to stand against evil when it rises. We will regain our homeland, and Tharkûn will have his strong Northern ally to the lands of Men.

The day passed in quiet camaraderie and restful peace, at least among most of the Company. Gandalf had calmed Radagast somewhat, but the Gray Wizard had taken on the tension that the other had shed, despite his attempts to hide it from the Dwarves. Thorin doubted that many of the others had noticed, though Fili had cast the occasional concerned look Gandalf's way, all of which were either unseen or ignored. Radagast had eventually settled in to sleep, surrounded by the ponies and the team of massive rabbits that pulled his sledge. They had come from the depths of Mirkwood, if Thorin had heard correctly, covering a vast distance in little time, so exhaustion was understandable. And something of a relief, since they weren't certain how the Brown Wizard might react to the Dwarves' dinner of meat-rich stew, given his obvious affection for his furry companions. Bofur's fanciful tale did not wake him, nor did the songs that followed as pipes were finished and eyelids began to droop. Even Nori's startled yelp and quick exit from his bedroll upon the discovery of a harmless, and rather confused, snake (as well as the subsequent creative cursing, the cackling of the miscreants responsible, and the thief's heartfelt promises to ensure that the Line of Durin ended with Thorin) failed to disturb the sleeping Wizard. Once order was restored, the Dwarves began to doze off one by one, leaving Thorin on first watch. He sat on the fallen log, eyes scanning the darkened wood beyond the flickering firelight as he remembered another set of pranksters on another journey, so long ago.
Frerin's face is alight with mischief, while Kulvik wears that innocent expression that screams his guilt to anyone who knows the craft-bred lad. The look Fundin wears is one part irritation and two parts fond exasperation as he regards the youngsters before him.

“What exactly did you think you were doing?” he demands, a curl of his lip betraying the smile that he is trying to suppress. Frerin gives a cheery smile and Thorin covers his laugh with a cough. The copper-haired lad is only forty-five, barely more than a child and long years from his majority, a fact that he uses without hesitation or shame.

“What exactly did you think you were doing?” he demands, a curl of his lip betraying the smile that he is trying to suppress. Frerin gives a cheery smile and Thorin covers his laugh with a cough. The copper-haired lad is only forty-five, barely more than a child and long years from his majority, a fact that he uses without hesitation or shame.

“Helping, Cousin. You asked us to help keep the little ones out of the way, so Tíla could rest and Srófa could assist Gróin with his rounds.”

Dís lets out a silvery peal of laughter before she can muffle it behind her hand. Her companion, the lass Laika, makes no attempt to conceal her amusement but simply buries her face in the princess's shoulder and howls. Fundin's cheek is beginning to twitch.

“And you thought the best way to keep them occupied was to have a mud fight, did you?”

“They wanted to have a snowball fight,” Kulvik explains earnestly. “But it's not cold enough for snow any more. It's just been raining.”

“So there's plenty of mud,” Frerin adds.

“This I can see. Though I doubt there is much left in the field where you have been playing.”

Thorin is inclined to agree. The Dwarflings that were given into the lads' charge are clustered over to the side, twenty-two lads and lasses aged twenty to thirty-five. He knows one is his cousin Glóin, but they are indistinguishable under the layer of mud that coats each of them from braids to boots. Frerin and Kulvik are also liberally splattered, including a clear hand print on the young prince's cheek.

“What happened to your face?” Thorin asks, smirking.

“Kul's troops took me hostage to make mine yield,” Frer replies as Kulvik draws himself up proudly and half of the little mud-monsters cheer.

“Swarmed right over him, they did,” Tíla tells her husband, her eyes suspiciously bright. It was she who discovered the little warriors on the field of battle. “Held a stick to the prince's throat and demanded surrender.”

“I see.”

“It was nearly dinnertime,” one of the youngsters offers reasonably. “Didn't wanna miss dinner.”

“Still gonna miss dinner,” another mumbles. “She's gonna make us wash.”

Thorin lets out a bark of laughter at his little cousin's complaint, for the grubby little face behind that comment definitely belongs to Glóin.

“I'm afraid so, my little u'zugh harb,” Tíla agrees with a smile. “However, dinner will not be missed, only delayed. Until everyone is clean. Frerin and Kulvik, you will be responsible for...
making sure each and every one of the lads is clean enough to pass my inspection.”

The grins disappear from Frer and Kul’s faces and Thorin loses the last of his control over his laughter. It only begins to taper off when he is sitting on the soft ground, tears running down his face. Tíla, however, turns to him with a raised brow.

“Thorin, of course, will be helping,” she adds, then turns to Dís and Laika, who actually start to shake their heads before she can speak. “You ladies, meanwhile, will be helping me with the lasses.”

Dís looks rebellious for a moment, her jaw tightening imperceptibly before she deflates and nods. “Yes, Aunt Tíla.”

“Yes, Lady Tíla,” Laika echoes, though there is still laughter in her tone as she rolls up her sleeves and motions to the Dwarflings. “Lasses, follow me. We’ll get you cleaned up and back to your folks for dinner.”

Thorin watches in bemusement as five of the muddy children take off after the princess and her friend, Tíla bringing up the rear.

“Not quite fair,” Frer mutters, surveying the seventeen lads that remain. “We have a lot more to clean up.”

“Then I suggest you get started,” Fundin’s wife replies with a pleasant smile. “You don’t want to keep these children from their evening meal any longer than necessary.”

“I’ll help,” Fundin offers, allowing his grin to show now that his wife has settled things. He offers Thorin a hand and pulls him to his feet, then claps him on the shoulder. “Come along, Thorin. Let’s get these little miscreants clean so we can have our dinner, as well. And maybe next time I ask you and your sis to keep an eye on your brother, you’ll do so.”

* X *

The memory faded, leaving a small smile on the exiled Dwarf lord’s face. It was good to remember his *nadadith* in happier times, muddy and mischievous instead of bloody and broken. So many were gone – Frerin and Fundin at Azanulbizar three years later, Tíla of a heart seizure only a few months after the battle, Laika in childbed, and then Kulvik in the Goblin raid. He no longer remembered the names of all of the Dwarflings that day, but he knew that some of them never made it to Ered Luin, and more had likely died in the intervening years.

*Mahal, hold them tight and let them rest until the Remaking of the World,* he prayed, deep in the silence of his own mind. *And watch over my Company as we seek to retake our home, to make a safe haven for our folk once more.*

The next morning began with a bustle of preparation as the early sunlight stole through the trees. Refreshed and eager to move, the Dwarves made quick work of packing up, watching with fascination as Radagast harnessed his rabbits in preparation for departure. He had just finished when Thorin heard a sound that changed the day’s plan.
A feral howl cracked through the air around them, far too close.

“W-was that a wolf? Are there wolves out there?”

Thorin glanced over to see that their burglar had gone pale, hand clenched on the hilt of his new leaf-shaped sword.

“That was no wolf.” Bofur's eyes were wide and the genial miner had moved to the outer edge of the group, mattock at the ready. But the attack came from the other direction, out of the depths of the forest. A massive Warg crashed through the trees, knocking Dori to the ground. Thorin reacted without thought, driving his blade into the creature's throat. A low growl behind him chilled his blood, but an arrow flashed by his head before he could move as his younger nephew lived up to his training. Dwalin finished the beast off with a twist of its thick neck.

“Warg scouts!” the king snarled. “There's an Orc pack nearby.”

“Orc pack?” The Hobbit certainly had a tendency to squeak when he got nervous.

“We need to get out of here!”

“The ponies have bolted!” Ori yelped.

“Thorin, who beyond your kin had knowledge of this quest?”

The Dwarf leader locked eyes with Gandalf. “No one. All those who know are here, save only my sister. What in Durin's name is going on?”

The Wizard's face was grim, and weary. “You are being hunted.”

“Could we barricade the Troll den?” Trisk spoke up. “Would the door hold?”

Thorin looked to Dwalin, but the big warrior was shaking his head. “Good thought, lad, but it won't hold against a pack of Wargs, and I doubt that there is a back way out.”

“Even if it held, we'd die of the stench,” Dori muttered, dusting himself off.

“We need a plan. We can't outrun them,” Glóin rumbled.

“I'll draw them off!”

The entire Company turned to stare at the ragged Wizard. Gandalf shook his head.

“Radagast, those are Gundabad Wargs. They will outrun you.”

The nature Wizard smirked, a strange expression on his kindly face. “These are Rhosgobel rabbits,” he countered. “I'd like to see them try.”

Radagast's plan appeared to be working. The mad brown-clad Wizard sped across the boulder-strewn plains of the Angle, taunting and teasing the Warg pack that bayed at his heels. The speed of the massive rabbits was indeed impressive – Thorin certainly had not expected them to be able to outrun Gundabad Wargs for any length of time. The Company was taking advantage of the distraction, sprinting from cover to cover behind the rock formations that dotted the area like a giant child's forgotten toys. They followed Gandalf's lead, although the heir of Durin felt a suspicion growing in the back of his mind. The gray Wizard clearly had a destination in mind and
he had been adamant about seeking counsel in Rivendell. For the moment, however, survival was the more important consideration. Rhosgobel rabbits or no, a company of fifteen Dwarves, a Hobbit, and a Wizard would be hard-pressed to evade a hunting pack of Orcs and Wargs while crossing the plains in broad daylight. Odds were against them, and the burden of leadership was heavy on his shoulders. He could not imagine who was hunting him, much less why, but now the fate of the quest and the future of his people were at stake, and he would not let them fail and fall.

Thorin looked his companions over as they took a brief break, leaning against the warm bulk of a sand-colored boulder. The Hobbit was beginning to flag, but his face was set in grim determination as he stayed close to the Wizard. Fíli, Kíli, Trisk, and Visk were in the best shape, being the youngest, but the others were holding up better than he had expected – Dwarves were natural sprinters but tended to wear down quickly if required to keep the pace up for longer distances.

Glancing at Gandalf, Thorin was about to give the order to move out once more when he heard the sound of claws on stone, and the snarls of a Warg – too close. He shot a look at Dwalin, who was pointing grimly to the top of the boulder, signing briefly. Their scent had been caught and one of the creatures stood above them. The king glanced at Kíli, gesturing subtly to his sister-son. Even as the dark-haired archer nocked his arrow, though, Thorin knew they were discovered. The lad could not finish both Warg and rider with a single shot, and any sound would draw the rest of the pack down on them. The other warriors in the Company knew it, too, and Dwalin already had his axes Grasper and Keeper in hand. Bifur's spear was ready, and Fíli slid his twin falchions from the sheath on his back. Trisk's eyes noted their preparation and he hefted his mace, setting his jaw.

Kíli stepped out, drew, let fly – and the Warg tumbled with an arrow in its throat. It and its rider did not have time to scramble to their feet before the Dwarves fell on them, blades hacking. Gandalf was already moving and Thorin bellowed for the rest of his companions to follow the Wizard. A great clamor of howls and yips went up from the distant pack as they realized they had been deceived. The noise only served to spur the Company onward, drawing on their reserves of stamina to put as much distance as possible between themselves and their pursuers.

Thorin suddenly found himself plowing into several of the others huddled in a group near another rock formation. Before he could demand to know why they had stopped, Kíli was shouting from ahead of them.

“There's more coming!”

“We're surrounded!” Fíli added, braids whipping around his face as he tried to keep an eye on all of the Wargs at once.

“Kíli, shoot them!” Thorin ordered, turning to look for Gandalf.

The Wizard had vanished.

Thorin swore under his breath, creatively and at length, as his Company spread out in a defensive circle. They had their backs to the rock formation where he had last seen the dratted Wizard, but their perimeter was as wide as they dared. Kíli was ranging off to his left, releasing arrow after arrow at the oncoming Orcs and Wargs. Fíli was just beyond him, twin falchions in hand. Visk and Trisk completed the arc on that side, carrying sword and mace. Dwalin was to Thorin's right, followed by Glóin, then Dori and Nori. Beyond that, he wasn't certain who was where, but he knew Dori and Balin would be keeping track.

“This way!”

Gandalf had reappeared and was waving them over to what looked like a cave or tunnel beneath the
very rock formation where they had made their stand – which told the irritated Dwarf that the Wizard had led them there very deliberately. Regardless, there was nothing else to be done, as the Company did not stand a chance against a fully mounted Orc pack. Trusting Dwalin to watch his back, Thorin began sending the others to safety, starting with young Ori and the Hobbit. The rest of the group began drawing back as their numbers diminished, tightening the circle – except for the four youths on the far left.

“Kíli! Fíli! Fall back!”

The archer risked a glance over his shoulder and nodded, then started calling for his brother and the two lads from Emyn Uial, covering their retreat. Thorin, heart in throat, saw very clearly when it all went wrong.

Trisk was in the lead, auburn braids gleaming, Visk just a few steps behind. They were just out of reach when the leaping Warg ran Fíli down, sending his golden nephew tumbling. Once he was down, the lad was invisible to his companions in the tall grass, but he must have called out, because Trisk glanced back and veered left, heading back toward the Warg.

“Visk! I need a boost!”

The younger lad skidded to a halt on his knees, hands clasped in front of him as his brother charged toward him from one direction, the Warg from the other. Kíli was pelting for them as well, screaming his brother's name as he tried to aim on the run.

Trisk hit the ground in front of Visk and pushed off, planting one booted foot in the cradle of the younger lad's hands. Visk leaned back and gave a powerful lift as he dropped backward, out of the elder's path. The young silversmith's mace was already in motion as he plowed into the Orc rider, knocking him clear of his mount. Visk lunged up with his long hunting knife as the Warg reached him, opening its throat just as Kíli’s arrow drove through its eye into the brain. The Warg dropped, right on top of Viskel.

“Fíli!”

Thorin charged forward, unsure what he could do to help, but determined to reach his nephews. Wheat gold hair appeared behind the fallen Warg as Fíli scrambled toward the others. Trisk was making his way over, mace dripping with black blood. The two elder brothers put their shoulders to the Warg's massive corpse as Kíli grabbed Visk under the arms and pulled him clear. The lad was staggering, but on his feet. Fíli and Trisk took him from Kíli and ran for safety as the raven-haired archer dropped two more pursuers.

Then they were past Thorin, and he was pushing Kíli ahead of him down into the tunnel Gandalf had found. Outside, the sound of a hunting horn filled the air, followed by hoof beats and the sounds of a short battle. After an endless moment, an Orc corpse slid down the embankment, nearly knocking Balin over. Thorin pulled a broken arrow from the body and glared at Gandalf

“Elves.”

But there was no time to berate the Wizard. He had a Company to tend, and some were now wounded. He glanced over at the youngsters. Fíli was leaning against the wall as Kíli fussed over him, while Visk was fending off Trisk's attempts to check him for injury.

“Fíli? Kíli?”

“I'm alright,” Fíli waved him away. “Just a little trampled. And I think I ate a couple of bugs and
inhaled some dirt. I'll live.”

“T'm fine,” Kíli answered shortly, turning to stare at the other two lads. “Trisk? What in Durin's name was that?”

“That,” Thorin replied, nodding respectfully to his old friend's sons, “was a maneuver I had not seen in quite some time. That was a specialty of Kulvik's, though I think one of the trainers taught it originally. It never had a name, that I recall. Kulvik just called it 'The Step.’”

Trisk nodded, finally catching his breath. “Da rarely trained us himself, but that move, he did. I'll never forget the pride in his eyes the day we mastered it. We usually do it the other way since Visk is lighter, but -”


Trisk shrugged uncomfortably. “Kíli saved Visk. And that was just today.”

Thorin smiled grimly, then glanced up as Dwalin returned from scouting down the tunnel.

“I canna see where it goes,” the big warrior admitted, “not without going further on. Do we follow it or no?”

“We follow it, of course!” Bofur spoke up, shooting a nervous glance up at the plains they had just left. The sounds of battle had died out, but there was no telling if the danger was actually gone. Thorin nodded wearily and pushed through to the head of the Company.

“We follow it, and see where our Wizard has led us.”

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Óin, son of Gróin, was thankful to be out of reach of the Orc pack, as he was exhausted. The healer was getting a little long in the tooth for a cross-country run with slavering Wargs on their trail. Not to mention ending the day with a slide down a steep embankment. He sighed grumpily as he edged his way through the narrow crevice in the rock, following an unknown path to an unknown destination. He'd have more work to do once they stopped, he knew. He had not missed Visk's limp and the bloodstained trousers, nor the slice down the back of young Fíli's coat. At this rate, his healing supplies would never last until Erebor.

The healer was last in line, just ahead of the Hobbit and the Wizard, so he was the only one who heard their quiet conversation.

“Gandalf, where are we?”

“You can feel it?” the wizard asked, sounding surprised.

“Yes,” the burglar responded, confused. “It feels like...well, like magic.”

“That's exactly what it is. A very powerful magic. It shortens the distance to our destination for just such an emergency as this.”

Óin glanced back, curious. He could not feel anything. What kind of magic did they mean? But then Dwalin was calling from the front of the tunnel.
“Light!”

The column cleared the narrow corridor in the rock, coming out onto a wide, deep ledge that looked over a lush valley. An assortment of buildings seemed to have grown out of, or around, the forest, graceful architecture melding with its surroundings, threaded through with waterfalls, pools, and meandering streams. Óin stopped and stared as Gandalf followed them out, looking rather proud of himself.

“The Valley of Imladris. In the common tongue, it's know by another name.”

“Rivendell,” the Hobbit murmured in awe.

“Here lies the Last Homely House east of the Sea.”

Óin groaned. Rivendell. The Hidden Valley. Elves. Thorin was going to be thrilled.

Chapter End Notes

Translations:
nadadith – little/younger brother (K)
mim-mushzith – little mouse (K)
Gondolin – Elven city of the First Age
ugmâk – jokers, pranksters (K)
shaik – craven, coward (K)
Tharkûn – Dwarven name for Gandalf
u’zugh harb – mud-warriors (K)
A line of fire burned its way down Fili's back and his breath hissed between his teeth as the Company began the long descent into the Elven valley. He had not noticed the injury at first, caught up in the flight from the Orcs, but it had made itself known as the Dwarves eased their way through the tunnel. It had begun as a low throb as his pulse slowed and the frantic energy of battle ebbed. The muscles began to cramp as he moved awkwardly, trying to ease the painful pull. Gradually, he fell toward the rear of the party, grimacing at the feel of the blood trickling into the waistband of his trousers. Thorin, too, had fallen back, and the fair-haired swordsman could hear him in grumbled conversation with the Wizard.

“Rivendell! So now your plan is revealed – you have delivered us to our enemies!”

Gandalf's retort was as harsh as the exiled king's, a clear sign that his temper was fraying.

“Do not be a fool! This is no Goblin camp, no Orc lair! The Lord of Rivendell is wise in lore and ancient history. He has the potential to be a powerful ally!”

“No Elf is an ally to Dwarves,” Thorin replied, his tone dripping with disgust. Gandalf sighed.

“Once, there was a great friendship between the Elves of Eregion and Durin's Folk of Khazâd-dûm,” the Wizard countered, his voice filled with old sorrow. Fili felt a surge of curiosity that pushed aside the pain for a moment, but Thorin snorted dismissively.

“If ever that were true, those days ended an Age ago,” he stated, his voice dark with contempt. “Khazâd-dûm is a thousand years lost, and Eregion even longer. Not within the living memory of any Dwarf have Elves given us aid or succor.”

“I understand your anger with Thranduil of the Wood,” Gandalf offered gently, “but Lord Elrond is not he. I do not ask that you call him friend, or even ally, if you do not choose. I only ask that you accept that he is not your enemy. Whatever secrets hide in that map, he is our best chance to discover them.”

“And what do you think he will do?” Thorin demanded. “You think he will help us? That he will give us his counsel, and his blessing, and simply send us on our way? You are not so naïve, Tharkûn. He will try to stop us!”

“Perhaps. But he will not succeed.” There was steel in the Wizard's voice such as Fili had never heard from the kindly wanderer, a strength like unexpected armor beneath a tattered cloak. “You are not the only one set on this course, Thorin Oakenshield. I will not have this Company turned aside from their quest. Elrond is among the Wise, yes, but so am I, and I believe that this must be done. For the good of more than just the Dwarves.” There was a moment of silence, and the
golden-haired prince risked a glance back over his shoulder to see Gandalf looking at him with concern before the Wizard spoke again. “Besides, there is no greater healer in all of Middle Earth than he who rules Rivendell, and we have wounded that need tending, my friend.” Thorin glanced around, sharp eyes taking in Fili’s slumped posture as his face tightened, then he was moving forward.

“Kili! Get back here and help your brother!”

The archer’s head snapped around in panic, eyes widening. “Mahal’s ass, Fili!” he snarled, darting over to slip a supporting arm around his back. “You said you weren't hurt!”

“It’s nothing. Just a scratch,” the elder protested, trying to ignore the pain as he moved. Kili peered at his back and gave him an incredulous look.

“That 'scratch' runs from shoulder to hip, through coat and tunic. How very noble and self-sacrificing of you, nadad. Bofur, a bit of help?”

“What your brother means, lad,” the cheerful miner offered, moving to offer assistance on Fili’s other side, “is that 'tis better to speak up and have it mended now than to wait until an infection slows you, and the rest of the Company, later.”

Fili grumbled under his breath, but nodded in reluctant agreement. He knew how even a minor injury could turn serious if left untreated. He grimaced slightly as they moved him aside on the narrow path, allowing Gandalf and Thorin to pass by them to the front of the group. The exiled king’s face was thunderous, although he spared a look of concern as he passed his nephews. The Wizard offered them a small smile of reassurance before continuing his conversation with their leader, his tone one that permitted no argument.

“This will need to be handled with tact, and respect, and no small amount of charm, which is why you will leave the talking to me,” he instructed, leading the way down into the valley. The rest of the Company followed slowly. Fili could see Visk trying to conceal a limp as they moved down the stone staircase and he had a brief flash of resentment that the younger Dwarrow was hiding his injury better. Then he felt Kili’s arm tense around him and the archer spoke up softly.

“Trisk, look to Visk's leg.”

Fili managed a pained smile as Visk glared fiercely, just before the silversmith appeared at the younger lad's side with concerned hazel eyes. The elder prince and those with him paused for a moment, allowing Trisk to offer an arm to his brother. Fili relaxed slightly, allowing his own brother to take some of his weight, easing the burden on the leg he had twisted slightly when he fell. He let his eyes drift closed for a bare moment, but opened them quickly when his escort began to move once more. Kili and Bofur kept up a quiet exchange of commentary as they moved ever downward, but he was not surprised to hear them both drift into silence as they came around a final bend and were able to see the expanse of Rivendell spread out before them.

At first glance, it was impossible to tell whether it had actually been built, or if the Elves had somehow convinced the trees to twist themselves into towers and halls, interspersed with sparkling streams and clear ponds. As they drew closer, he could see that the buildings were stone, not wood, but crafted in such a way that they blended with their surroundings and made it difficult to tell which had been there first. The music of dozens of waterfalls filled the air, which had a fresh, invigorating feel to it. Graceful arches decorated everything, and the valley had a solemn, yet joyful aura of peace and calm. Fili could sense an easing of the tension in several members of the Company as they moved over a narrow bridge and into wide, round courtyard. An officious-looking dark-haired Elf approached Gandalf, speaking in a liquid tongue that sounded like a brook
dancing over smooth stones. They had exchanged only a few sentences, the Wizard looking slightly disappointed at whatever he had learned, when the clatter of hooves announced the arrival of a number of armed and armored Elves arriving on horseback. Fili remembered the Orc that had been felled by the Elven arrow, but before more than an idle thought could pass through his mind, he found himself in the middle of a protective ring of Dwarven weapons, along with Bilbo, Ori, and an indignant Visk. The swordsman was feeling rather annoyed at being pushed to the rear, but he reached out and caught the silent lad's arm when he would have elbowed his way back out, blade in hand.

“You're wounded,” he hissed, resolutely stifling his own urge to follow Visk's example. Gandalf had moved to address the leader of the new arrivals, a smile on his aged face. “As am I. We'll only hinder them if they need to fight.”

The younger Dwarrow glared at him, but moved back to Bilbo's side as Fili turned his attention to the conversation going on before them. There were more exchanges in that fluid language, then the Elf speaking with Gandalf turned to study the Dwarves, finally lighting on the king-in-exile with a nod of greeting.

“Greetings, Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thór. I am Elrond, son of Eärendil, Lord of Rivendell, and I bid you welcome. I knew your grandfather when he ruled under the Mountain, and I was grieved to hear of the losses suffered by him and his kin, both when the dragon attacked and later. Gandalf tells me that you and your companions could use rest and counsel. Please, join us for the evening meal, and I will offer what advice I can.”

Thorin drew himself up and Fili winced, knowing that his uncle's pride had been tweaked, if only by the Elf's claim to have known the King Under the Mountain. Before the Dwarf lord could speak, however, Gandalf was stepping forward once more.

“We have some wounded warriors as well, if you wouldn't mind.”

Elrond nodded graciously, his dark eyes studying each of the Dwarrow in turn. “Certainly. Our Halls are open to all good folk in need. Who among you requires healing?”

“My brother, if you please, lord,” Kili spoke up, resolutely not meeting Thorin's eyes as he sheathed his sword and moved once more to Fili's side. Aided by the archer and Bofur, the elder prince moved forward carefully, even as Trisk slipped his brother's arm over a shoulder and stepped out of the clustered Company.

“Mine as well, my lord,” the silversmith added. Beneath the hood, Fili could see a flush of embarrassment suffusing Visk's face, and the lad's hands moved awkwardly in furious signs.

*I'm fine! Leave me alone!*

Triskel met him glare for glare. “Don't try to pretend your boot isn't filling up with blood, *nadadith*. You thought I missed the gash in your leg? If Fili can accept Elven healing, so can you!”

“Here, lad. Let me help.”

Trisk stopped as Nori appeared at Visk's other side and hooked that arm over his shoulder. Between the two of them, they took his weight off the injury effortlessly – and rendered him silent by depriving him of the use of both hands. Unable to even sign in protest, the young jeweler gave up, his face burning with humiliation. Fili managed a sympathetic grin as the pathetic little troupe started to follow Gandalf and Elrond from the courtyard.
“Galling, isn't it?” he commented, stifling a hiss of pain as his brother shot him a concerned glance.

“'Tis no shame to accept healing when yer injured,” Bofur countered, his voice solemn. Fíli glanced at him, catching the glint of grief in the miner's eyes as he made a mental note to speak to his friend later. There was a story there, he was certain, and that he did not already know it meant that it was an important one. Rather than press, however, he turned his attention to their surroundings as they walked slowly through the halls of Rivendell. Rather than the straight lines and geometric designs of Dwarven architecture, the Elves appeared to prefer gentle waves and rounded edges, decorated in twining vines and leaves. Finally, they reached a set of large doors that stood open on graceful hinges. Elrond and Gandalf paused outside for a moment, their heads close together as the Wizard murmured something. The Elf lord's dark eyes flicked quickly to the Dwarves, then away and his face betrayed nothing as he gave their guide a quick nod in response. Gandalf turned to them, his gentle blue eyes finding Fíli's face and offering a small smile.

“I leave you now in Elrond's capable hands, my friends. Bofur, Nori, if you'll come with me, we will return to the Company. I believe that Kíli and Trisk have their siblings well in hand. I'd like to speak to Balin.”

“Before Thorin starts a war, you mean?” Nori asked, the corner of his mouth quirking.

“Indeed.”

* X *

Thorin remained with the Company just long enough to see them settled in the suite of rooms that the Elves had assigned to them, then he asked for a guide to the Halls of Healing to check on his wounded. The Elf that had met them escorted him graciously, leaving him with the reminder that the Dwarves were welcome to join them at dinner in an hour's time. He nodded briefly and offered his thanks as he hurried in to the healing complex and followed the sound of Kíli's voice to find the younger prince glaring at his brother in a small room.

“You're bleeding. Everywhere. Now get in that bed and let the healers do their work, or I will get Dwalin and Thorin in here to hold you down!”

Behind Kíli's back, Thorin cleared his throat, then met Fíli's gaze and nodded, keeping a stern expression on his face. The flaxen-haired prince sighed in frustration, then drained a small glass of medicine and sat carefully on the edge of a chair. Kíli smirked in triumph and stepped over to help his brother ease out of his gear and strip off the torn coat and shirt so he could lay face down on the bed. Elrond and the young Elf that was assisting him stepped forward to examine the wound and Thorin winced to see the ragged slash that ran down his nephew's back, weeping blood. The slide down the dirt slope into the tunnel had embedded dirt and rocks into the injury that the young healer began removing carefully with a set of silver tweezers. Thorin glared at his heir.

“'Just a bit trampled,' eh?”

Fíli winced as a large piece of rock was dug out of the gash in his back. “Didn't feel it at first,” he mumbled. “Thought it was just a scratch. Ow!”

“Well more than a scratch, brother. I think the Warg was trying to peel you like an orange,” Kíli commented.
Thorin glanced at the Elf lord and Elrond nodded. "It is not as deep as I feared. Once it is cleaned, it will be stitched and covered. He will be well. I hear Dwarves heal quickly, so he should be back on his feet soon."

"Is there anything I can do?" the exiled king asked.

Elrond eyed the sturdy young Dwarf. "I would ask that you remain while we stitch the injury," he murmured. "You and his brother might be the best ones to keep him still."

Kíli gave a wicked grin and Thorin knew exactly what was going through the younger lad's mind. Fíli hated being stitched up. That was probably why he had tried to downplay the wound in the first place. As Dwarflings, the two lads had gotten into innumerable scrapes, and Fíli had always fought Óin when the healer decreed stitching. Dís had once commented in exasperation that she thought her eldest would prefer a broken limb.

"Hear that, Fí?" Kíli chortled. "Stitches!"

Fíli's eyes widened and he tried to lurch off of the bed, but Thorin lunged for him and between the two of them, he and Kíli held the elder prince down to let the Elf finish cleaning the wound. Thorin gave the archer a disgusted look and Kíli reddened.

"Behave, or I will kick you out myself," the king growled. "I know that you are relieved that your brother is not in danger, but he is injured and you are not helping." His face softened as he held a soothing hand on his golden nephew's shoulder. "Easy, lad."

"Sorry, Fí," Kíli mumbled.

Fíli blinked sleepily, the Elven draught finally starting to take effect. "S'alright...I'll get you back later. Ow! Mahal, that hurts!"

"That's the last of the debris," the Elf commented quietly, laying aside the tweezers. "Now we'll clean it and put on some numbing salve before we stitch."

* X *

Next door, Viska sat in her own small room, reluctantly allowing her brother to help her strip off her boot and peel back the edges of her torn breeches leg.

"I swear you are in competition with the princes," Trisk groused. "You go in the river, Kíli almost drowns. Fíli gets trampled by a Warg, you get mauled and end up under its corpse. Oh, and we were all nearly eaten by Trolls. You've nearly died three times, and we haven't even reached the Misty Mountains!"

And now we're being healed by Elves, she responded silently.

"Yes, well, I'm not sure which side of the ledger that falls on just yet," he grumbled.

The door opened and a tall, dark-haired she-Elf with a gentle smile entered, carrying a tray covered with bandages and supplies. Setting it down, she nodded graciously to the two Dwarves.

"I am Arwen, daughter of Elrond. My father asked me to tend to your injuries while he sees to your
companion.” Her eyes twinkled mischievously. “Gandalf warned him that you might be more comfortable with a female healer. Is that acceptable?”

Viska exchanged a startled look with her brother, fear surging in her heart for a moment before she tamped it down. It should come as no real surprise that the Wizard knew of her secret – that he was obviously aiding her in keeping it was an unexpected boon. Trisk's hand squeezed hers gently as he apparently came to the same conclusion, and she looked up to study the Elf lass.

“Viska, daughter of Kulvik,” she offered. “And my brother, Triskel. Your assistance is more than acceptable, thank you.”

She grimaced at the rough, scratchy sound of her own voice and coughed as a dull pain shot through her throat. Trisk turned to her concern and she waved him off as she got it under control.

“Ada did not mention a throat injury,” Arwen commented as she set down the tray, her eyes darkening. Viska shook her head and signed briefly, relying on Trisk to translate.

“That is an old injury, and it is healing,” he explained. “Same as the cut on her face...and others. The only new injury is the bloody one.” The last part was stated with wry humor and a brow arched at his sister. Viska shrugged.

*I'm not very graceful.*

Trisk did not bother translating that, but simply glanced at the concerned Elf. Arwen smiled and waved him out of the way so she could finish peeling away the leg of Viska's trousers and start cleaning the slash made by the Warg's claw.

“No deep,” she murmured as she worked. “No serious damage, really, aside from the risk of infection. Warg claws are filthy.”

*Their breath is pretty bad, as well,* Viska signed with a grimace. Trisk chuckled and translated his sister's comment, earning a bell-like laugh.

“And why exactly were you close enough to smell the Warg's breath? Much less get mauled?”

“They are fast, and the attack was unexpected,” Trisk supplied dryly. “We are indebted to Lord Elrond and his hunting party for their timely intervention.”

He turned his back politely as Arwen helped Viska out of her torn and bloodied clothes and helped her wash with a basin of warm water. A startled hiss told the Dwarrowlass when her healer had found the new scars that littered her back, and a widening of the dark eyes met the removal of the hood and scarf.

“Elbereth, what happened?” Arwen murmured, one finger tracing gently over the angry ridge that ran from the center of Viska's forehead down to skip from right brow to cheekbone before it tapered out. “It was well-tended, but this scar will never fully fade.”

“Goblins, my lady,” Trisk replied, his back still turned so that Viska could see the tension that held him stiff with the memory of that terrible night. “A raid on our village in the Hills of Evendim.”

“The clan that the Rangers wiped out?” the Elf maid asked, her face lighting with recognition. Viska nodded and a small smile flickered across the smooth face.

“Aye, the same,” Trisk confirmed. “They arrived sometime after the attack began, slaying many of the surviving Goblins and pursuing the rest back to their lair.”
“My brothers were among them,” Arwen offered, her face grim. “They told us of what they found. We are well rid of such foulness.”

Finally clean, Viska slipped into the soft sleeping outfit that left only the wound on her leg uncovered. Arwen was helping her back onto the bed when several loud curses in Khuzdul erupted from the next room and they could hear Thorin and Fili trying to calm the fair-haired prince as his wound was stitched. It sounded like Fili had been given something for the pain – his insults made little sense, although Durh'atam! came through clearly. Viska snickered and saw Arwen's eyes sparkling with mirth.

“I would roll my eyes and bemoan the stubbornness of Dwarves,” the Elf maid commented quietly, smearing a numbing salve along the Dwarrowlass's wound, “save for two things. For the first, I have a perfectly behaved, if slightly annoyed, Dwarf patient of my own. For the second, I have twin brothers who behave much the same way.”

“Then perhaps it is the gender, rather than the race,” Viska whispered with a smile.

That sparked another silvery peal of laughter from Lord Elrond's daughter. Viska had always thought Elves serious and aloof, but Arwen seemed kind and light-hearted, quick to smile as she stitched the Dwarf lass's Warg-abused leg. Trisk made a face at his sister, but did not comment, glancing instead at her healer as the dark-haired Elf tied off the last bandage.

“No serious damage done?” he asked quietly, taking Viska's hand. Arwen smiled and shook her head.

“As I said, infection was the greatest danger, but it is clean. Rest, and sleep, will do the work now. I would advise you stay off of it for at least a day,” she added, giving Viska a stern glance. “I would prefer longer, but I doubt you would listen, so I insist on a day at the minimum, and I will leave your brother to enforce it. I will also leave orders that all visitors must go through your brother, to ensure you are not caught unaware.”

Trisk smiled and nodded, ignoring Viska's betrayed glare. Arwen chuckled and gathered up her supplies, leaving the room with unconscious grace. Viska growled softly as she wound her scarf back around her head and face. She felt awkward in the light gown she had been given while the Elves took her gear to be cleaned and mended. She was also exhausted, the panicked energy of their pursuit and the desperate flight through the tunnel fading.

“I would appreciate it if you would at least try to avoid injury for a fortnight or so,” Trisk murmured, taking a seat in a chair he had pulled to the side of her bed. “Longer, if you can manage it. After all, I doubt Óin will keep your secret so readily, and it would be hard to explain why you did not want him to tend you.” He sighed, his face darkening as he met her eyes. “This may be more difficult than we expected, mim-mushzith.”

Viska met his gaze, her gut churning with a strange mixture of fear, guilt, and determination. She, too, had begun to wonder about the wisdom of their plan. The dangers that they had already encountered had made her certain that greater peril lay ahead, but her fear was more for the reaction of her companions if she should be discovered. Would they accept her? Or would they turn their backs, angered at her deception? Already, the thought of losing any of her new friendships was painful.

I am sorry, brother, she replied, her signs slow with weariness. But I will not turn aside, not unless you order it of me, as head of our family. It is your right, and I would accept it, but my heart urges me onward, and I will not abandon the Company of my own volition.
Her brother grimaced and shook his head. “Unfair, to make me the villain. But I will not command you thus. We discussed the options and possibilities as well as we could before ever we set out, and again with Lady Dís. I agreed with you then, and I will not turn my back on you now. I only warn you of the difficulties that might arise. We are Durin's Folk, and we will stand with our king and take back Erebor, if it can be done.”

She nodded, muffling a yawn, and he rested a hand on her shoulder as she burrowed under a thin blanket, settling back into the soft bed.

“Sleep, namadith,” he murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “I will rest in a chair in front of the door so no one will disturb you, but I think most of the Company will be sleeping anyway. I doubt you will even wake before your day of bed rest is over.”

* X *

Fíli woke in darkness, a single flickering candle the only light. The sound of Kíli's familiar breathing (well, snoring) soothed his initial anxiety and he glanced over to see his brother still sleeping in the chair by the bed.

Rivendell. Healing Halls, his brain processed. Stitches in my back from that damn Warg. And... he peered under the sheet to find himself clad only in his smallclothes and a pair of light trousers. My clothes are missing. Brilliant.

“Psst, Kíli!”

“Wha?” The younger lad startled and sat forward, dark eyes blinking in confusion. Then his gaze settled on his brother and he smiled. “Hullo, Fí. Good to see you awake.”

“How long have I slept?”

“It's just about dawn the day after we arrived,” Kíli replied. “You passed out in the late afternoon. So did most of the others, according to Gandalf. He was by a while ago. Uncle comes by every few hours – I'm not sure if he has slept yet.”

“What about Visk?”

The dark prince stood and stretched, groaning as his joints creaked. “Next door. I peeked in about midnight. He was out cold, Trisk snoring in a chair near the door. The healer says you'll both be fine soon.”

Fíli started to sit up and winced as the movement pulled at his back.

“Careful, nadad,” Kíli admonished, offering him a supportive arm. “You don't want to rip any stitches out.”

The elder prince shuddered at the reminder and glared at his brother, but accepted the assistance in sitting up.

“How is Thorin getting along with the Elves?” he asked warily as the archer wedged soft pillows behind his back. Kíli grinned.

“Well enough, surprisingly. Lord Elrond supervised your healing, of course, and that helped a bit. He also identified that sword from the Troll hoard as an ancient blade called Orcrist, used in the
Goblin Wars, and he gave his blessing for Thorin to keep it. I don't think he's let Gandalf ask about the map yet, though.”

“And how long am I supposed to stay in this bed?” Fíli grumbled, anticipating the worst.

“Just until dinner tonight,” Kíli replied with a smile. “You'll still sleep here for another night or two, so they can watch for infection, but you won't be restricted to bed. Same for Visk, I believe.”

“My clothes?”

“The Elves cleaned and repaired them. Your coat and all are in that chest with your weapons. Don't worry – I cleaned out your knife stash before anything left this room.” He grinned, dark eyes twinkling. “The Elves were rather impressed.”

* X *

Viska had never been more grateful for the concealing scarf than the moment she and Trisk entered the open dining area the evening after their arrival, accompanied by Fíli and Kíli. She had hoped to slip quietly into a seat, but the Company was clearly waiting for their two wounded companions and burst into raucous applause when they appeared. Fíli took it graciously, offering a broad grin and a shallow bow (which cost him, by the small wince). Viska, on the other hand, could feel a deep blush creeping up to her hairline, and she ducked her head awkwardly, stumbling into the nearest chair. She found herself sitting next to Bofur, who greeted her with a wide smile and a gentle clap on the shoulder.

“Good to see you up and about, lad! Trisk told us you were getting a bit frustrated confined to your bed.”

She nodded, rolling her eyes. Nothing to do but stare at the ceiling, she signed, and listen to Fíli snore next door.

He chuckled and relayed her comment to the rest of the table, causing a general roar of laughter.

“I'd wager at least half of the snoring you heard was Kíli,” Fíli countered with a grin. “But for the rest, I plead the influence of the Elvish pain medicine.”

The Dwarves settled into a spirited conversation, bemoaning the abundance of vegetables in the Elven diet. There was meat, but Dwarves tended to prefer for it to dominate the meal, while the Elves seemed to delight more in delicately spiced dishes of cooked greens and savory soups.

“How's a Dwarf supposed to live on such?” Dwalin demanded, glowering at the salad that sat before him. “Warriors need meat!”

“And you have it, brother,” Balin countered with a small smile, indicating the plate of rich venison next to the salad. “A bit of variety will do you good.”

“At least you haven't been on an invalid's diet of broth the past day,” Fíli pointed out, filling his plate with heaping servings from every dish that he could reach as his brother watched in awestruck horror. “I thought they were trying to starve me.”

“So you'll retaliate by eating everything in sight?” Dori asked, one silver brow raised. The fair-
haired Dwarrow grinned and popped a bite of venison in his mouth, chewing with relish. Nori snickered.

“At least he's not eating like an Elf.”

Viska laughed behind her scarf and ate quietly, watching her companions as they teased one another with more ease than she had expected, given their surroundings. There was still a slight edge of tension, and the occasional suspicious glance at the Elves as they served food and removed plates, but it was far less than it could have been. It appeared that the assistance that had been rendered to the king's heir had won some allowance from the Company, although they were less than impressed with the sedate music that the Elves seemed to consider the best accompaniment for the meal. Óin asked peevishly if they had wandered into a funeral by mistake before stuffing a cloth napkin into his ear horn and nodding with satisfaction.

* X *

In the end, the Company spent more than a week in Rivendell. Fíli and Visk were released from the Healing Halls after only a few days, Elvish medicine and Dwarven constitutions making short work of their injuries. Before Dwalin could even suggest it, Fíli had invited Visk to spar, soon joined by Trisk, Kíli, and Bilbo, at Visk's insistence.

“You need to at least learn the basics,” Trisk translated from his brother's urgent signs. “We'll not make a blade master of you, Master Baggins, but at least we'll make it less likely you'll cut your own foot off.”

“Or one of ours,” Kíli quipped with a smile. “Come on, Bilbo, I'll teach you. Nothing too taxing, I promise.”

Fíli smiled as his brother pulled the Hobbit aside. For all of his reckless energy, Kíli was actually good at teaching, endlessly patient and careful in his explanations and demonstrations. Trisk watched, offering occasional suggestions. Fíli faced off with his opponent and drew his blades with a flourish, offering a cheeky grin much like his brother's as he saluted Visk. The younger Dwarf's brows rose and he drew his own sword over his shoulder. The green eyes were alight and Fíli imagined a sly smile beneath the concealing scarf.

By the end of the afternoon, it was clear that Fíli was the better swordsman, but Visk was improving with every round. The lad was a quick study, alert, watchful, and eager to learn. He had scored several hits on the more experienced warrior through sheer ingenuity and daring. Fíli finally called a halt when Visk started to limp and his own wound started twinging. Bilbo had wandered off, and Trisk had long since taken a seat on the sidelines, calling encouragement to his brother. Kíli were doing the same – apparently, everyone was in the silent Dwarf's camp, Fíli noted with an arched brow.

“Tomorrow, you two will teach us your 'step' maneuver, yes?” Fíli asked the older lad, accepting a cup of cool water. Trisk smiled and nodded.

“We'll do our best. Although your brother has already renamed it.”

“Oh?”

“The Flying Dwarf!” Kíli crowed cheerfully, throwing an arm around his brother's shoulder.
Nori, son of Tomri and Nif, thought Rivendell was a delightful place to spend a week or so, Elven inhabitants notwithstanding. For one thing, it was full of lovely and valuable little bits and pieces. For another, their hosts were either completely naïve or insanely trusting, for many of those trinkets lay out in the open, unattended, where anyone might walk off with them. It was a shame, really. Nori had promised his older brother that he would not “acquire” things on this trip. After all, he didn't want to set a bad example for young Ori. He had done well at the Hobbit's home, and anything that might have found its way into his pockets in the Troll cave was fair game, of course – especially since he had been the one to “find” the key.

But Rivendell! Rivendell was full of tempting treasures, all left out to beckon enticingly, enough to tantalize even the most moral of Dwarves (which he was not), and taunt the most brazen of thieves (which he was). So it was not really his fault that the hidden pockets in his pack were beginning to bulge a bit, was it? He'd tried to be virtuous, but the Elves left everything lying about! And it wasn't as if Ori even noticed him filching. The lad was too busy with his journal and his sketchbook. Dori, of course, would not see it that way, so the middle brother made sure to avoid the elder whenever his fingers were “itchy.”

That was how he found himself in a spacious room, staring up at a broken sword displayed on a cloth-draped plinth. The walls were covered in an expansive mural with scenes of darkness and battle. It seemed almost out of place in the peaceful Elven halls, especially since the sword was not of Elven design.

“That's Dwarf-craft, or I'm a Hobbit,” he muttered to himself, his keen gaze darting over the broken blade. “How came it here, I wonder.”

“You have a good eye.”

The Dwarven thief spun on his heel, hands going instinctively to the hilts of the wicked blades that he wore at the small of his back. The dark-haired Elf that stood behind him took a single step back, both hands raised to show they were empty.

“Peace, friend Dwarf,” he said quickly. “My apologies. I am Elladan, son of Elrond. We met at dinner the night of your arrival.”

“Aye, one of the twins,” Nori agreed with a nod, slipping his knives back into place. “Your pardon. You lot are quiet on your feet.”

“We are Elves,” came the response, dry as autumn leaves. The corner of Elladan's mouth twitched and Nori smirked in response.

“So you are. What were you saying of this sword, then?”

“It is Dwarven handiwork, as you thought. You look upon the Shards of Narsil, forged by Telchar of Nogrod during the First Age for my father's brother.” He indicated the mural on the wall, drawing Nori's attention to a tall figure in evil-looking armor. A fell light shone from the eyes of the helm, and a band of gold gleamed on one finger. “This is the blade that cut the Ring of Power from the hand of Sauron during the Last Alliance and ended his power over Middle Earth. My father preserves it against the day that it might be needed again, reforged with the Line of Elendil.”
Nori turned to regard the pieces of the sword, a slight chill creeping down his spine. He had never been more than an indifferent student, but he knew enough to recognize the weight of the history behind the shattered blade, and to wonder why it might need to be used again. After all, Sauron had been defeated, Middle Earth freed from his terrible shadow. Still, it was probably best if it remained where it lay.

Chapter End Notes

Translations & Notes:
Tharkûn – Dwarven name for Gandalf
nadad – brother (K)
nadadith – little/younger brother (K)
Elbereth – Elven name of the Vala Varda, Lady of the Stars
Durh'atam – Troll-breath (K)
mim-mushzith – little mouse (K)
namadith – little/younger sister (K)
Telchar of Nogrod – A famous Dwarven smith of the city of Nogrod, that once stood in the Blue Mountains. It is canon that he crafted Narsil, which became an heirloom of the house of Elros, Elrond's twin brother and founder of the ruling line of Númenor from which came Elendil, Isildur, and ultimately Aragorn.
“Gandalf? A moment?”

The Wizard smiled to himself as he turned to the auburn-haired silversmith. He had been expecting the request since shortly after the eventful arrival in Rivendell, but it had taken the young Dwarf several days to approach him, and even now he appeared slightly hesitant.

“Of course, Triskel. What seems to be troubling you?”

Hazel eyes studied his face for a long moment, the Dwarrow's brows furrowed in concern. When he spoke, he sounded rather accusatory. “You were the one who chased Nori and Bofur out of the Healing Halls. And I saw you talking to Lord Elrond just before Visk was given a separate room. Lady Arwen knew she was a lass before she ever came in.”

“Ah, yes,” the Wizard murmured, nodding absently as he tucked his pipe away. “You noticed.”

“How long have you known?” Triskel asked bluntly. “And why have you not told Thorin?” Gandalf sighed. “I am a Wizard, Master Dwarf. Can you not simply accept that I know things?”

“Things, yes,” came the retort. “But when it comes to my kin, I'd prefer to know how you know them.”

A chuckle escaped before the Wizard could restrain it and he nodded in understanding. “I have suspected since the Shire, my dear fellow. It simply took me a while to be sure of my memory. I met your father once, when you were very young, and I was fairly certain that the younger of his bright-eyed Dwarflings was female. As to why I have not told Thorin...” He shrugged. “It is not my tale to tell, and good rarely comes of telling tales before their time.”

Trisk's probing gaze held his for a brief eternity before relief flickered across the lad's features and he nodded with a small smile.

“I was half afraid you were going to tell me that you had seen some great task in store for her,” he admitted, his voice low and gruff. “That you were only allowing her on the quest because she had some foretold destiny.”
“And what would you have done, if that were the case?” Gandalf asked, studying him curiously. Trisk shook his head.

“Left as quickly as I could have dragged her in the opposite direction,” he stated flatly. There was no hint of humor in his face or speech, only a grim determination. “We are not Durin’s heirs, Master Gandalf. We are ordinary Dwarves who just want to do our duty by our father, and our king, not heroes.”

“And yet, you tie yourselves to those heirs, to the king and his Company. Do you truly think that you will not be affected by their fortunes? If your quest succeeds, do you not think all of your Company might be counted as heroes?” the Wizard asked reasonably. The silversmith hesitated a moment, then shrugged.

“Perhaps, but that would be all of us, and it would be something that we had earned, something accomplished. Not some ancient foretelling that led to being used like pawns on a chessboard by those who thought they had the right.”

The Istari studied the young Dwarrow for a long moment, seeing the new lines carved by care, the concern in the deep set eyes.

“I promise you, I know nothing more of you or your sister than I have learned on the journey, aside from that small bit of knowledge that she was a lass,” Gandalf assured him gravely. Trisk bowed.

“Then I thank you for your discretion, and I will leave you in peace.”

The Wizard watched him stride down the pathway of the garden, a swell of optimism for the outcome of the quest growing within his heart. The more time he spent with the Dwarves of the Company, the more he dared believe that they would find a way to succeed. Too often were Aulë's children dismissed as stubborn and prideful, few taking the time to discover the loyalty that was carved into their very bones. Thorin's companions were a varied assortment of craftsmen and merchants, noble and common, but he did not think the exiled king could have chosen better had all the Dwarves of the Seven Families stood ready to serve. And that was a very good thing, given the news that Radagast had brought from the depths of the Mirkwood.

Still, much of the future was hidden yet, and many choices lay ahead that might alter fate for good or ill, and the last words he murmured were for his own ears alone. “Not even the wise can see all ends, dear Triskel. We can only chose from the paths before our feet, and hope that we do not falter. Who knows what ultimate destiny awaits Viska, daughter of Kulvik?”

* X *

It was evening in Rivendell, the sixth since the Company's arrival, and two days until Midsummer. Fili sat beside one of the many streams, deep in thought as he watched his brother craft new arrows to fill his depleted quiver. There was a rhythm to the work, clever fingers twisting moistened sinew into place around the broad Dwarven arrowheads and the slender shafts provided by the Elves. Their hosts had offered arrows, but they had proved too long for the compact Dwarven bow, so the young archer had set about making his own. The elder prince sat with him, his back against a sturdy young tree as he sharpened his collection of blades, the whisk of the whetstone a soothing accompaniment to his wandering thoughts. He did not even know that he intended to speak until the words were spoken.
“Visk is a lass.”

Kíli froze, then carefully added the arrow to the pile of those he had finished. The task done, he turned to stare at his brother with bewilderment on his face. “Iggin, nadad?”

Fíli sighed, his thoughts racing back over the connections that he had made, mostly unconsciously, following them once more to the same inescapable conclusion.

“Visk, or the Dwarrow that claims to be Visk, is a lass. That is what has been troubling me since the river, the thing that has been teasing at my mind. I knew something was being hidden.”

His brother frowned. “A lass? Are you certain?”

Fíli gave the young archer a withering look. “Well, I haven't checked, but yes, I believe so. Did you see the way she moved while we were sparring? Remind you of anyone?”

Kíli was lost in thought for a long moment, brow furrowed as he chewed on the inside of his cheek before understanding lit his eyes. “Amad. She fights like Amad.”

The swordsman nodded. Dís did not spar often, but the brothers had seen her in the ring often enough to recognize the subtle tricks utilized by Dwarrowdams to capitalize on speed and avoid a foe's greater strength and sheer power. In fact...he thought back to one of the clever maneuvers Visk had used the day before and his blue eyes widened.

“Amad knew.”

Now Kíli looked completely perplexed. “Kud?”

Fíli sat forward, setting the blade and whetstone aside as he warmed to his topic, his certainty growing with every spoken word. “In the Shire, Trisk told Thorin that they went to Ered Luin first, and Amad sent them on with Bifur and his cousins. You think Ma wouldn't have noticed that 'Visk' was a lass? And that last move she used to disarm me yesterday? I've seen Ma use it against Thorin in the ring.” He laughed slightly, returning the dagger to its hiding place in the back of his belt. “She's lucky none of the older warriors came down to watch us, or her ruse would have ended then.”

Kíli was staring at him narrowly. “But the ruse is ended, nadad, if you are correct.”

“Well, I've figured it out, and now you know,” Fíli hedged, feeling strangely reluctant to be the reason the spirited lass was not permitted to continue with the Company. “But no one else. Do you plan to tell Thorin?”

“Do you plan to not tell Thorin?” Kíli countered swiftly, dark eyes wide. “I thought I was the rule-breaker, Fíli. I'm the one everyone says is a headstrong, impetuous fool. You are the sensible one. And you want her to continue on with us? A lass?”

“Has she been a burden so far?” Fíli asked neutrally.

Kíli hesitated, seeming to consider his response. “No, but that is not the point. It's -”

“In fact, she helped save my life,” the golden-haired prince pointed out, cutting him off ruthlessly. “Don't think of her as a lass, Kíli. Were she truly Viskel, son of Kulvik, would there be any reason to leave her behind?” Kíli sighed and shook his head.

“No,” he grumbled reluctantly.
“Then I'll not be the one to reveal her to Thorin,” Fíli decided. “She does her share and more, and she's becoming a good friend.”

“Besides, Thorin would likely leave the both of them,” Kíli commented grimly, gathering his arrows as he got to his feet. “Then we would be down two fighters before we even reach the mountains, and we've few enough as it is.”

“Aye. I will speak to her, however. Tomorrow.”

* X *

The afternoon of Midsummer's Eve found Viska sitting in a quiet grotto in Rivendell, her scarf pulled down just enough to enjoy the fresh air and her head tilted back to let the sun kiss her eyelids. Just beyond the thick foliage, she could hear the merry bustle of the Elves as they prepared for the evening's festivities, their conversation light and cheerful. The words were in a language she did not know, and the voices could never be mistaken for those of Dwarves, but she could not help but be reminded of days spent in similar circumstances. Excitement had always run high in her home village as they prepared for Mamahudlanakhamrâg in the early spring or Gabashzudnamrâg, the harvest fest held before the long months of winter. Such festivals were marked with days of feasting and song, contests and dancing, for Dwarves devoted themselves to celebration with the same single-minded focus that they gave to their work. The same that the Company, to the last Dwarf, now gave to their quest.

A quest that, for the moment, was suspended, the Company detained in Rivendell to await the coming moonrise. Thorin had come back from his first meeting with Elrond with the news that there was, indeed, hidden information on the old map, but that due to the nature of the enchantment laid upon it, they would not be able to discover its full secrets until the full moon of Midsummer's Eve shone upon it. The Dwarf lord's glower at the delay had prompted Balin to point out that they were lucky to have arrived shortly before the solstice, rather than after, which would have meant either moving ahead blindly or waiting another year. That piece of logic had eased Thorin's irritation slightly, and he had reluctantly agreed that a brief rest should do them no harm. The problem, of course, was that Rivendell was an Elven stronghold, and one that was not made for the entertainment of a group of boisterous Dwarves. They slept, they healed, they ate, they sparred, and they grew steadily more restless as the days drifted by. When Viska had left their assigned quarters, her brother had been caught up in an animated conversation with Nori, Glóin, and Dwalin regarding the virtues of knives as opposed to axes. Thorin and Balin had removed to the balcony to discuss their route through the Misty Mountains while Ori, as always, had been lost in his journal, busy writing of their encounters and sketching little illustrations to accompany each entry. Dori, Bormb, and Óin were going through a thick book of herbs that Bilbo had brought back from the library (after making certain it was written in Westron, rather than an Elven tongue), jotting notes and debating the information that they found. Bifur and Bofur had been whittling, the miner singing cheerfully as he worked, and Fíli and Kíli had been arguing quietly in a corner, golden head and dark close together. Bilbo, for his part, had probably returned to the library, or was out exploring the gardens again. Of all the Company, save Gandalf, he seemed the most at ease with the Elves, and the Wizard had been seen only rarely since their arrival.

Thoughts of the Company brought her back, as ever, to the concerning conundrum that was the fair-haired son of Dís. The considering looks that Fíli had been throwing her way had only increased over the past days, and she was starting to get a sinking feeling that he knew. Somehow,
despite all of her caution and her brother's support, he knew her secret. He would tell Thorin, of course. How could he not? It only remained to be seen if he would pull the king aside and reveal the truth, or if choose to announce it in front of their entire party. She hoped he chose the former. It would be the end of her journey either way, but at least a quiet word to Thorin would spare her the looks of betrayal from the others. She had actually, briefly, considered going to Thorin herself, but she had not been able to force herself to take that step. Even now, she felt she had made the right choice when she decided to join the Company.

The Dwarrowlass sighed heavily as she banished the dark thoughts once more and tried to regain some of the peace she had found in the sun-warmed garden. It was only then that she realized with a jolt that she was no longer alone. Her eyes popped open and she was on her feet in an instant, her heart pounding even as she reached for one of her boot blades. She only caught herself at the last moment, staring up at the intimidatingly beautiful Elf woman that stood before her, hair shining like a crown of gold in the afternoon sun. Power surrounded her like a tangible aura and Viska bowed her head hurriedly, feeling rather unpleasantly surprised when the Elf did not simply acknowledge the respectful gesture and move on. Instead, crystal blue eyes studied her openly and a gentle smile shone on her. The Dwarf lass simply stared for a long moment, unsure what else to do. She doubted the lady would understand iglishmêk, even if Viska could think of anything to say. Finally, a kind, rich voice spoke in her mind.

I am Galadriel, Lady of Lórien. You are well met, Viska, daughter of Kulvik, but you walk a precarious path. Your heart is true, but the road ahead will not be an easy one, daughter of Durin's Folk.

Is it ever? Viska thought in response, opening her mouth to reply with slightly more tact. Galadriel held up a hand before the lass could manage a hoarse whisper, however, making it clear that she need not speak aloud.

It is not too late to stand aside. Your future holds the potential for great joy, but also great heartbreak.

Viska blinked, attempting to form her thoughts into a coherent reply. I believe I must go forward, lady. To whatever end. Can you see the future? Will my presence on the quest bring disaster? For only the certainty of being the cause of failure will convince me to stay behind.

The powerful Elf studied her for another long moment, then shook her head and placed a hand on Viska's cheek as if in benediction.

Go in peace, child of the Mountain. May your cheer balance your sorrow, and your presence be comfort and blessing.

As suddenly as she had arrived, she was gone, and Viska stood in a slight daze, her mind buzzing with confusion until a gentle hand landed on her shoulder.

“My mother's mother has that effect on those who have no experience of her,” Arwen murmured softly. “Are you well, mellon-nin?”

Viska nodded, still rather numb. “She was talking in my head,” she whispered painfully. “And I think she was reading my thoughts!”

Arwen smiled sympathetically. “She describes it as reading your heart, though she does have some ability to see glimpses of the future. Did what she said frighten you?”

“A little.”
“Do not dwell on it overmuch. Simply let any advice she offered guide you on your road ahead, and remember that the Lady of Lórien wishes you well.”

The Dwarrowmaid nodded, then glanced up at her new friend curiously. Arwen nodded.

“I was seeking you at the request of one of your own. The young princes wanted to speak with you. I thought I had seen you wandering in the gardens, so I offered to seek you out. They await you by the silver fountain. They seemed most anxious.”

Viska signed a quick thanks and turned her steps toward the great fountain, a sinking feeling in her heart.

* X *

Fíli waited alone by the fountain, his brother dispatched to keep anyone else from wandering in on the conversation without warning. The elder prince was beginning to doubt that Visk would join him, but he finally heard hesitant steps on the stone path and glanced up to see the familiar gray hood. Visk approached him slowly, reluctance in every line of the young Dwarf’s posture. Fíli took a seat on the side of the fountain and waved the other over. When Visk sat, the swordsman let out a breath that he hadn’t realized he had been holding.

“Visk, we need to talk.”

Guilt surged through him as he saw panic flash in his friend’s eyes and he raised one hand in a placating gesture.

“Calm down – it’s alright. Please, I just want to talk. My brother isn’t even here, and he’ll make sure that no one else disturbs us. You can leave whenever you want.”

Visk gave a resigned sigh and nodded, then stared resolutely at the ground. Fíli took a deep breath.

“I want to say this first. No matter what you tell me, I am not going to go running to Thorin. I just want to promise that, straight out. You are my friend, and nothing can change that. I know that you have not been honest with us, but I am also certain that you have your reasons, so I will not betray your confidence to Thorin unless there is a threat to the Company or to the quest. Does that set your mind a little at ease?”

Dark green eyes flickered up to meet his gaze and Visk nodded slightly.

“Good. I am not trying to threaten you. I just want to find out the truth.” He took another deep breath and decided to follow his brother’s example and simply jump in with both feet.

“Visk...you’re a lass, aren’t you?”

There was a long pause, a nod, then a series of letter signs, spelling out a name.

Viska.

“Daughter of Kulvik?”

Another nod. *Trisk is my brother. The rest of our tale is true. Mother dead in childbirth. Goblin raid. Father dead. Summons came.*
“And Trisk couldn't leave you behind? You had no other family?”

No one. Did not want to stay. There was a determined emphasis to that, making it clear that joining the expedition was as much or more her idea. She sighed. What gave me away? The river?

He nodded, smiling a little. “For the first clues, yes. Lasses and lads feel a bit different under soaked clothes. I was very confused,” he commented wryly. “I thought I might be imagining it, but then I started noticing things. And when we sparred – you fight like my mother, and that is a compliment, I promise.”

She shook her head. Never should have sparred. Never should have used the new moves.

“I've seen my mother fight,” he agreed. “Kíli and I recognized what she had taught you.”

She closed her eyes and dropped her head dramatically. Fíli chuckled, realizing what worried her.

“Despite appearances, Kíli can keep a secret if it's needful. Out of sheer self-preservation, if nothing else.”

Does anyone else know? Gandalf has assured my brother that he will not speak.

He shook his head quickly. “Not that has mentioned it to me. There are certain people who couldn't possibly know, or you would already be out of the Company. Like Thorin, or Dwalin.” He sighed and scrubbed his face with both hands. “Viska, lass...are you sure that you want to do this? You are good in a fight – you have shown that already, so I'll not deny you have earned your place with us. But if the truth comes out....”

You are the second person this afternoon to ask if I want to stand aside, she signed rapidly, eyes flashing. I will not. I wish to serve my king as my father would have. I will take the consequences of my choices, but I will not be left behind. She stopped, and he thought he saw a hint of desperation in her eyes before she glanced away. He waited, certain that she was not finished, and finally she turned her gaze to his once more.

We grew up on tales of the Mountain, she added, her signs slow and thoughtful, as though she sought to express feelings that she did not fully understand herself. Tales of the dragon, the Exile, and the war. The burning determination to win back what was ours. I cannot turn my back now that the time has come.

He nodded. That, he could understand. It was a fire that smoldered in the soul of every Dwarf, after the loss of so many homes. Khazâd-dûm, Tumunzahar, Gabilgathol, Zeleg’ubrazul – the litany of fallen strongholds was carved on every heart, the stories passed down from generation to generation, never to be forgotten. He rested a hand on her shoulder, unsurprised by the tension he found there even as he gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“My word holds,” he told her, meeting her gaze openly. “We will keep your secret, Kíli and I, for as long as it does not present a threat to Company or quest. I promise.”

She nodded and her hands flickered as some of the strain left her face.

I thank you, my prince. By your leave, I will return to my brother.

He nodded, his eyes following her as she turned toward the quarters that the Dwarves had been given for their stay. Not until she had turned a corner and disappeared behind a graceful column did he whistle sharply and raise one hand to tell his brother that his watchful guardianship was no longer needed. An answering whistle came back, followed quickly by the dark-haired archer himself. Fíli stood slowly, meeting the curious brown eyes. Kíli was fairly bouncing with impatience.
“Well?” he demanded, lowering his voice quickly before the elder prince had a chance to remind him. “Were we right? We were right, weren't we?”

Fíli cocked an eyebrow at him, feeling the corner of his mouth quirk as he gave a curt nod. “I was right, yes, nadadith. She is Viska, daughter of Kulvik, and Triskel is indeed her brother. I have promised her that we will not mention what we know to Thorin.” This last was delivered as a warning, steel glinting in his eyes.

“Of course we won't!” Kíli responded indignantly, apparently forgetting the previous evening's debate on the subject. “I am not sure what possessed her to join the Company, but she has been valuable as a hunter, and good company, besides. Not to mention the small detail that she helped save your life when that Warg ran you down!”

Fíli nodded slightly, then shrugged. “But you know that many of the Company would only see a Dwarrowmaid needlessly endangering herself. She says Gandalf knows, as well, and he has certainly not rushed to tell anyone.” He sighed heavily, shrugging his shoulders to work out knots of tension as they walked. “You'll have to keep thinking of her as a lad, though, Kí. Guard your tongue, lest it reveal all.”

The dark-haired prince shot him a dirty look, then sighed and nodded. He was prone to such errors, and he well knew it – Fíli called it enthusiasm, their mother called it recklessness, and their uncle...well, his terms for his nephew's slips started with irresponsible and went downhill from there. “Did she at least explain why? Why did she not stay with other relatives while her brother rode with us? Or continue in her trade?"

Fíli started along the path toward their rooms, Kíli falling into step at his side.

“The same reason that any of us follow Thorin, brother. Loyalty and honor. She was raised on the same stories as Trisk, after all. Perhaps some of the same stories that we heard as Dwarflings. They had no kin once their father was gone, and she is as much a Dwarrow as any in the Company. Is it any wonder she follows with as willing a heart as any of us?”

* X *

“Fíli. Kíli.”

It was late, the evening meal long since past when the brothers glanced up from their low conversation to see that Thorin had returned from his meeting with Elrond. Balin nodded at the lads as he slipped by on his way to rejoin his brother, then waved them toward their uncle.

“He wants to speak to you,” the elder Dwarf told them quietly. “He has news of the quest.”

Fíli nodded and stood immediately, Kíli a beat behind. They hurried over to greet Thorin in the doorway and he gave them a small smile before motioning for them to follow him into the hallway. They fell into place to either side, flanking their king, and accompanied him in silence as he walked through the deserted corridors of the Elven complex.

Thorin strode along in silent contemplation, dark head slightly bowed. After long minutes, Kíli shot his brother a questioning look behind his uncle's back. Fíli shrugged and signed, wait. The dark prince nodded and lapsed into a thoughtful silence of his own as he considered what Fíli had told him of Viska's brief explanation.
“Durin's Day.”

Thorin's deep, quiet voice broke into his reverie and Kíli blinked, realizing that they had come to a halt on an isolated balcony overlooking one of Rivendell's many waterfalls.

“Durin's Day?” Fíli repeated, confusion furrowing his brow. Thorin nodded.

“Lord Elrond found moon runes on the map. They had to be read under tonight's moon, as I told you – Midsummer's Eve. According to the hidden writing, the keyhole to the secret door can only be found by the last light of Durin's Day. We must reach the Mountain by then.”

Kíli felt a surge of elation tempered by concern as he counted time in his head. Durin's Day was the beginning of the Dwarven new year, mid-October in the calendar of Men. “Can we make it?”

Thorin sighed. “Balin believes so. As does Gandalf. I think we still have a long way, but if the Company is steadfast and true, we have a good chance.”

Fíli was staring at his uncle with an unreadable light in his eyes. “Thank you for telling us first.”

Thorin turned to face them, a small smile on his stern face as he reached out to clasp their shoulders. “You are my sister-sons, my heirs, no matter how foolishly you might act at times.” Kíli felt his cheeks heat and ducked his head, but Thorin simply chuckled and pulled them in so that all three rested their foreheads together. “I am glad you are both here. I do not say this enough, but I am proud of you – both of you. You are credits to the Line of Durin, and to your own father. Torvi is watching you with pride from the Halls of Waiting.”

Kíli's eyes were closed, and there was a choked feeling in his chest and a small smile on his face as he stood shoulder to shoulder with his brother and uncle. Thorin's hands were pressed to the backs of their necks, holding them tighter than any hug for a long moment before he released them and stepped back, that small, proud smile still on his lips.

“Lord Elrond was not pleased when he realized our intent,” he commented dryly, startling a small laugh from the young archer. “The Wizard believes that the Elves may still try to delay us, so I need you to spread the word to the Company. We leave at first light. Gandalf will join us in the mountains.”

With a final nod, the exiled king turned and left his bemused nephews on the balcony. Fíli stared after him. Kíli looked at his brother, blinking dark eyes in confusion.

“What do you suppose brought that on?”

Fíli shrugged, glancing at him. “He has been closeted with Balin and Dwalin since shortly after we arrived. He has also spoken to Trisk a few times. I think, perhaps, he has been dwelling on lost comrades – Da, Kulvik, Frerin, even Fundin.”

Kíli nodded. “Well, it is good to hear,” he commented quietly.

Fíli nodded and draped an arm over his shoulders. “Yes, it is. Now, we have news for the Company, and I wish to speak to our friend Triskel – not to mention packing for an early departure. No time to rest on his praise.”

Kíli smirked and started back toward the rooms the Dwarves had been given. “There never is, nadad. Thorin never gives praise without new responsibility. I noticed that long ago. I think it is his way of keeping us humble.”
“Then it was clearly not something our grandfather employed for him,” the swordsman agreed softly. Kíli threw back his head and laughed, the sound echoing brightly down the corridor. Fíli joined in after a moment, his lower chuckle blending with the archer’s mirth. Kíli leaned into his brother’s shoulder, relishing the closeness in a time of rest and peace, so like being home in Khagal’abbad.

“So, I will tell the Company, you will round up Trisk for a quick talk,” he decided. “Or do you want to ambush him on the road?”

“Before we leave,” Fíli replied. “While we still have walls and the whole Company need not see that we have pulled him aside. We will talk to him, then finish packing. I’ve not much left, anyway. I thought we might leave soon.”

Kíli delivered the news of their imminent departure to the rest of the Dwarves, sparking a flurry of packing. Viska was dispatched to the Halls of Healing with a list of supplies that Óin was requesting to rebuild his stores, so the princes were able to pull Trisk aside with little effort. He accompanied them to a quiet alcove a good distance away, where they could see anyone approaching. The silversmith seemed a bit edgy and confused, and he froze when Fíli pinned him with a sharp blue gaze.

“Viska told me the truth,” the elder prince declared without preamble. Kíli could see their friend’s shoulders tense and he reached out to clasp one reassuringly.

“Thorin will not hear it from us,” the younger lad asserted quietly. Fíli nodded.

“I just wanted you to know that we know,” he agreed. “I cornered her on it and she admitted the ruse, but she did not say much about the raid.”

Trisk’s shoulders had slumped and the auburn-haired Dwarf sighed heavily. “You want to know more.” He sat in quiet thought for a long moment. “She is not going to be happy that I told you, but I would rather have honesty between us.”

Fíli smiled. “She’ll not be happy that I asked, but I feel the same way.”

“The raid was the truth. Our father died defending our neighbors and friends, but Viska was not trapped in a burning building. She ran into it. Deliberately.”

Kíli winced, reading the pain that the memories still brought to his friend. His brother merely nodded, his gaze sharp but sympathetic as Trisk continued.

“We had heard tales, from the traveling merchant caravans, of settlements raided, their females stolen away by Goblins. Usually villages of Men, but occasionally Dwarrows as well. Viska was prepared, answering the call to arms in lad’s clothes, scarf wrapped about her head. But several Goblins had targeted our neighbor’s lass, a Dwarrowmaid of barely forty, and Viska intervened, drawing their attention. Then she led them into the community gathering hall, which was already aflame....”

He trailed off, his face filled with the echo of remembered horror before he collected himself and continued.

“By the time I found her, she was staggering out of a broken door, her scarf smoldering, her clothing shredded by Goblin claws, her face smeared with blood. The few Goblins that survived, I slew myself.”

There was a fierce light in the young Dwarf’s hazel eyes as he finished his story. Kíli blinked,
dispelling the images conjured from his imagination by the terse explanation. A look of horror
flickered across Fíli’s face.

“The Rangers had arrived and were chasing down the last of the Goblins by then, so I took her to
our healers and found our father already there. He was sorely wounded, barely conscious. I
promised him that I would look after her – I could not bring myself to tell him of her injuries. He
was gone before she woke. Viska never told me exactly what had happened, just that she had
escaped. Her legs were clawed, hair burned, black bruises circled her throat where they had tried to
strangle her with her own scarf, but she had escaped.

“Within a couple of days of our father's death, while she was still recovering, Dwarves we barely
knew started seeking me out, offering to wed her, to 'take her off my hands,' since they thought I
certainly could not provide for both of us. I declined, and they became more insistent.”

Fíli’s face was furious, and Kíli felt shock roar through his system. “But – Bujbû Yasath!”

“Is a tradition of Erebor,” Trisk countered. “Followed by the Exiles, but many of the families in
our village were from the Iron Hills and other settlements, where it is only one tradition among
several. Da always intended for Viska to have her Choice, had even spoken of moving us back to
the Blue Mountains, but he was gone.”

“And they saw you as an easier target,” Fíli guessed grimly. Trisk nodded, an echo of his anger
still on his face. Then he laughed a little.

“So I told her. Names and everything. She made her opinion clear as crystal! And then the
summons arrived from Thorin, calling Da to the quest to retake the Lonely Mountain. Da was
gone, but we were there, and there was nothing to hold us. Amad and Adad’s tombs stand in
Lanzhindîn, but they are in our hearts, and that is enough.”

“Whose idea was it?” Kíli asked curiously, though he had a good idea.

“Hers. But I went along eagerly. I could not leave her behind.”

Fíli arched an eyebrow. “And how did you convince our mother to be party to your deception?”

“Convince?” Trisk looked at him incredulously. “She offered, once she learned who we were. Our
mother was close to Lady Dís during the Exile. Your mother said that Thorin would prate on about
‘willing hearts,’ then leave one behind for lack of – well, for being female.”

Kíli laughed abruptly, imaging Dís in one of rants against her brother. Fíli nodded with a small
smile of his own.

“I was surprised she didn't join us,” he admitted.

“She wanted to,” Trisk commented. “She told Viska so, but Thorin convinced her that he needed
her to take care of those left in Ered Luin, that someone of Durin's blood should stay to lead them.”

“Duty is the only thing that would have held her,” Fíli agreed. They sat in silence for a long
moment, the elder prince meeting the younger's dark-eyed gaze. Kíli shrugged, unable to think of
any other explanations they needed from the silversmith. Finally, Fíli nodded and clasped Trisk's
shoulder.

“As I said, and as I told her, Viska's secret is safe with us. I cannot promise that Thorin will never
find out, but it will not be from us. And we will try to mitigate the consequences if he does.”
“Though don't expect too much,” Kili warned.

“It is our deception. We will take the consequences,” Trisk replied firmly. “We made that decision before ever we left home.”

* X *

Ori, son of Tomri and Nif, trailed slight behind the others as the Company of Thorin Oakenshield slipped out of Rivendell. The sun was barely peeking over the Misty Mountains and a hazy golden glow hung in the air, making him regret that he had not brought any of his colored chalks with which he might do some glimmer of justice to the peaceful beauty of the valley. Instead, he paused at the top of the steep slope and took a moment to gaze out over the Elven stronghold, preserving every detail in his well-trained memory. When the quest was over, and Erebor was won, it would be one of many scenes that he would try to recreate. A soft sigh alerted him to the fact that he was not alone, and he glanced over. He was not surprised to see the Hobbit at his side, a faint shadow of loss on the expressive face. Shyly, the young scribe reached out to rest a friendly hand on the burglar's shoulder, and Bilbo smiled slightly, taking a deep breath.

“I never thought to see Rivendell,” he murmured quietly. “It's not even out of sight, and already it seems a dream. I hope that I shall see it again.”

Ori nodded, taking in a last sight of the waterfalls and graceful columns.

“It's not a Dwarven place,” he replied. “Our style is different, more structured. We would not build like the Elves, but that does not mean that we cannot appreciate what they have created. It has its own beauty.”

“If one isn't too pig-headed to see it,” Bilbo muttered, startling a laugh from the Dwarf. Ori was saved from having to reply by the gruff voice of the king.

“Master Baggins! I suggest you keep up!”

“Ori! What are you doing! Nori, you're supposed to be keeping an eye on him!”

Nori protested and Ori groaned and rolled his eyes as he gave a shrug to settle his pack more comfortably on his shoulders.

“One hundred and thirty-four years old, and he still treats me like I'm only forty,” he grumbled, sharing a look with the Hobbit as they turned to catch up to the Company. Bilbo gave a small laugh, then glanced back for one final look over his shoulder as they followed the path into the wild lands between Imladris and the mountains.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

Aulë – Vala of Crafting and Skill, Maker of the Dwarves, who call him Mahal
Igger, nadad? - Repeat [that], brother? (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
Kud? - What? (Khuzdul)
Mamahdulanakhamrag – The Blessed Green Fest, a spring festival of planting in honor of Kaminzabduna (Yavanna), wife of Mahal
Gabashzudnamrag – Treasures of the Land Feast, the fall harvest festival
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
Tumunzahar – Norgrod, southern Dwarf city of the Blue Mountains
Gabilgathol – Belegost, northern Dwarf city of the Blue Mountains. Both of the Dwarven cities were destroyed in the War of Wrath (the final conflict with Morgoth, master of Sauron) at the end of the First Age.
Zeleg'ubrazul – Golden Stair, the Longbeard citadel in the Grey Mountains. It fell to cold drakes with the deaths of Dain I (father of Thrór) and his middle son Frór.
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Khagal'abbad – Ered Luin, the Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
Bujbu Yasath – Maiden's Choice (literally, choice of the bride), a tradition of Erebor where Dwarf lasses do the choosing for courting and marriage (Khuzdul)
Adad – Father (Khuzdul)
Lanzhindin – Emyn Uial, the Hills of Evendim (Khuzdul)
On the maps, Rivendell appeared to be nestled at the base of the Misty Mountains, but it actually took a week of travel through the foothills before the Company found the twisting paths they sought. The days passed in weary repetition, hiking from early morn to early evening along ridges, through shallow valleys, and over small hills. Conversations were kept low and there were no longer songs around the sheltered campfire, for sounds carried far in the open air and they were wary. Lord Elrond's sons had reported no sign of Orc packs west of Rivendell, but the Dwarves preferred to take no chances. Thorin had even forbidden the smoking of pipes, for fear of the smell drawing their pursuers. They traveled quietly, hid signs of their passage, and set double watches.

Two nights out of Rivendell, Trisk found himself on final watch with Fíli, gazing out into the still hours before dawn as the golden-haired prince sharpened one of his many knives. They sat near where their siblings slept, Viska quiet and still as Kíli fidgeted restlessly. At one point, he shifted violently, kicking his brother in the ankle as he tossed and turned. Fíli paused just long enough to nudge the younger lad's booted foot back under the blanket with a fond smile and shake of his head. Trisk chuckled softly and his friend glanced at him.

“He's always been like this,” the prince commented quietly. “Ever since he was a tiny Dwarfling, never still for more than a moment. Amad always says it exhausts her just watching him. Da said once that it was a good thing that Kíli had a big brother to look out for him, to take some of the burden off of his poor old parents.”

The silversmith sat in thought for a long moment. “How old were you when your father died?”

“Eight,” Fíli responded. “Kíli was three. He doesn't even remember him. I barely do. I try to tell him stories, so he'll at least know him as a father, rather than just the tales of him as a friend and craftsman that Thorin and the others share, but I don't know how much of what I remember is actual memory, and how much a child's interpretation of the world.”

“I don't think it matters,” Trisk answered with a small smile. “I was nine when my mother died. Da never corrected any of the tales I told.”

Fíli nodded silently as he slipped the knife back under his coat collar. They sat in easy silence for several minutes, eyes skimming the surrounding land, alert for any flicker of movement.
“Was he a blacksmith?” Trisk asked eventually. “Your father, I mean.”

Fíli’s mouth quirked in a grin. “A silversmith, actually,” he replied with a chuckle as he reached up to tap the silver beads on his braided mustache. “These were his, crafted by his own hands before he ever met my mother.”

“He wasn't from Erebor?”

The prince cocked an eyebrow at him, then smiled and shook his head, pulling out a small blade and a chunk of soft wood. “I forget that you did not grow up in Thorin's Halls. No. Torvi, son of Khervi, son of Telvi was descended of some of those that went west when Khazâd-dûm originally fell, like Bofur and his kin. Their people were already in Khagal'abbad when Erebor's Exiles arrived. My father was not yet forty when Thrór called for the muster of the Dwarven armies, so he was spared Azanulbizar, though his elder brother went and did not return. He did not meet my mother until he came to Thorin's Halls nearly fifty years later. He and Bofur arrived at the head of a band of refugees, the last survivors of their settlement near the ruins of Tumunzahar....” He trailed off, a look of realization on his face as he shot a glance at the sleeping miner. “Of course. I had forgotten,” he muttered quietly.

“Forgotten what?” Trisk asked, confused. Fíli shook his head and returned his attention to his the carving in his hand.

“In Rivendell, Bofur kept reminding me that there was no shame in seeking healing for my injury, that it was better than waiting for a dangerous infection to set in. I had forgotten that just such pride and stubbornness had cost him his father.”

“Something happened to their settlement?”

“Aye. That's when Bifur got that ax, as well. They were attacked by a pack of Orcs that had crept down from the Northern Waste, best they could tell, seeking easy prey in areas where the Elves did not patrol. They left few survivors, but Bofur and my father gathered up all that they could find and headed for the Halls. Bofur's father died on the way, having hidden his wound until it was festering and feverish. They nearly lost Bifur, as well, and a number of others. Of all his family, Bofur was left with only his cousin and his brother.”

“And Torvi?”

Fíli sighed, brushing wood shavings from his carving. “His father and mother had held the retreat, allowing my father to escape with his younger sister, Gyda. All together, the refugees numbered no more than sixty, from a settlement of nearly two hundred. Thorin and his council welcomed them, helped them get settled and rebuild their lives.” He laughed, blue eyes twinkling in the firelight. “Though, to hear my uncle tell it, he regretted that welcome somewhat when the silversmith with the golden hair met the iron-willed daughter of Thráin.”

Trisk grinned. “Love at first sight, then?”

“Oh, no,” the swordsman replied. “Far from it. They hated each other, or nearly so. Some foolish comment, long-forgotten, set them at one another's throats for two years.”

“What happened?”

The prince's face was sober, a twist of regret to his mouth.

“His sister. She and my mother had become friends, in spite of the animosity. A terrible storm blew
in from the Great Sea, dumping endless rains even in the mountains. There was a mudslide that buried a portion of the Crafting Halls and Gyda did not make it out. In their grief, my parents sought refuge in each other, finding friendship as those who had loved her best. In time, they came to realize that their heightened anger toward one another was actually something very different.”

Trisk shook his head, his heart aching for another silversmith that had lost his beloved sister. He could not truly imagine how it had felt, and he prayed that he never would. His gaze found Viska's face, peaceful in sleep and safe under his watchful presence.

“Within a year, they were wed,” Fíli continued, his voice soft and thoughtful. “Twelve years later, he was gone, killed defending a trade caravan headed to the settlements south of the Gulf of Lune. He was one hundred and six.” He gave a humorless laugh, pain a dark shadow in his eyes. “My mother was widowed after only a dozen years of marriage, when she should have had nearly two hundred, because some greedy Men would rather steal Dwarven goods than buy them.”

The auburn-haired Dwarrow did not reply, for there was no answer for the prince's grief. Instead, he simply rested a hand on the fair-haired swordsman's shoulder and offered silent sympathy. After a long moment, Kíli moved once more, one hand flying out to clip Viska's arm. The Dwarrowlass did not wake, but the grumbling noise that she made was enough to make both older brothers laugh quietly. Fíli reached out and moved the archer's hand back to his side, smiling fondly.

“She didn't want him to come along, you know,” he commented absently. “Amad. She said Kíli was too young.” He grimaced. “In all honesty, she said both of us were too young, but she could not deny my place as Thorin's heir. We tried everything – arguing, pleading, silence. I even threatened to stay home with him at one point. She would not budge.”

Trisk grinned slightly, imagining the fiery Dwarrowdam he had met in Ered Luin engaged in a battle of wills with her stubborn, impetuous offspring. “What changed her mind?”

“Thorin.”

Trisk's eyebrows crept up in surprise and Fíli chuckled.

“It startled us, too. He had stayed out of it for an entire week. Then he and I came home from the forge and walked in on the end of a shouting match. Kíli stormed out to go hunting. I was about to follow when Thorin announced that both of us were going on the expedition. Amad exploded.” The prince's blue eyes held awe at the memory. “Thorin told me to leave, but of course I didn't go far. I couldn't. I had to hear. They spoke quietly – too quietly, for that is when both of them begin to terrify me, when they go quiet and polite. It is intimidating when Thorin bellows, but when his anger is quiet and contained? It is chilling. I only caught bits and pieces, but it was enough. Thorin pointed out that we fight best together, as a unit. Ma said she didn't want to send both of her sons into danger, it would be bad enough to lose one...and that is when he asked what she thought would happen if she parted us and something happened to one while the other was far away. The silence was heartbreaking. He won that point, but it just led into another argument, about her coming along. You know how that one turned out.” He smirked slightly. “Thorin refused to spar with her again before we left. Dwalin agreed. Once.”

* X *

The third night out of Rivendell, the deep hours of the second watch found Viska and Kíli sitting
on a low hill at the edge of the firelight. The younger prince had been rather quiet all day, and the Dwarf lass didn't really expect him to be in the mood for conversation that night, so she was a bit surprised when his low voice broke the easy silence.

“Do you ever regret joining the quest?”

She did not even pause to consider her answer.

_Not for a moment._

“Enjoying the danger?” he teased, though it was clear that his heart was not in it. She shook her head and tossed a pebble at him before answering.

_Emotionally_. I had friends, before, but not many, and none that were very close. We were, perhaps, too tight of a little family, Da, Trisk, and I. We had a good reputation in the village, and Da had earned the respect of many, but we stood somewhat apart. I think it was deliberate, in a way. He always intended that we would return to Erebor.

Kíli nodded and sank back into silence for a long moment before speaking again.

“Do you miss home?”

She sat in thought for a time, mulling over the unexpected question before she answered.

Yes. And no. I miss the idea of home. I miss being there with Da and Trisk. But that home does not exist any longer. Trisk is here, and Da is gone. I do not miss the place.

“Is that why you didn't stay?”

One reason. My place is with Trisk. Perhaps, one day, Erebor will be home.

Kíli nodded, then sighed heavily, a faraway look in his deep eyes. “I miss home. I miss the music – Fí and I playing our fiddles, Thorin on his harp, Amad singing. I miss the elaborate pranks we pulled. Ma scolding us for mischief. I miss visiting Da's tomb, and Fili telling stories that were probably half made up, but it didn't matter. I miss Ma's smile.” He snapped his mouth shut and grinned at her sheepishly. “And now you think I'm completely pathetic.”

She smiled softly behind her scarf and shook her head. No. Never. I miss Da. I miss his voice, his laugh. There is no shame in missing those we love. I know that your mother misses you.

The archer sat up slightly, brightening at the reminder that she and Trisk had been in Thorin's Halls before setting out for the Shire.

“I had forgotten that you met her. Did she speak of us? Was she terribly angry that I left? I know she didn't want me to go, but I couldn't let Fí go without me-”

Viska held up a hand to slow the flood of words, recognizing the very real guilt on the younger Dwarrow's face.

_She spoke of you, a little. Never in anger. In love. She missed you, and you were only two days gone. She said that she always knew you both would go. It was just difficult for her to accept that you must, and that she must remain behind._

She laughed slightly, remembering the princess's concern about her sons finding the Shire in time for the meeting.
She was afraid you would get lost, she added. *Something about having a sense of direction like your uncle's?*

Kíli let out a quiet chuckle. “We've never been as bad as Thorin,” he protested, some of his gloom fading. “We didn't get lost. We just got distracted. Bofur had recommended the ale at one of the inns along the way. We had to see if he was right.”

*The Silver Anvil?* she asked, remembering the miner's insistence on stopping there. The dark-haired prince nodded.

“And then we wanted to compare it to Shire ale, and I thought I had worked out a shortcut that would get us to Bywater early, but it turned out that Hobbits don't like you cutting across their fields, so it wasn't really a very good shortcut,” he added, a faint blush of embarrassment on his cheeks. “We had to double back, and we weren't early, although we were only the third ones to arrive.”

*Short cuts make long delays,* she told him, her fingers dancing as she added the little gesture to assure him she was teasing. He grinned and shrugged.

“The ale Mister Boggins had on hand was quite respectable, though not quite on par with a good Dwarven brew,” he replied mischievously. “And dinner was very impressive.”

*Especially considering that he had no idea that we were going to be there.*

“What?” The archer's dark brows disappeared beneath the fringe of his hair as he stared at her in consternation. “Gandalf told us to meet him there – he suggested the burglar to Thorin a month ahead of time! Why wouldn't he have known we were coming?”

She shook her head, remembering the snippet of conversation that she and her brother had caught when Bilbo and Gandalf had withdrawn from the Company, the Hobbit muttering under his breath and the Wizard placidly ignoring his irritation.

*From what I heard, all he was told was that Gandalf would be coming to dinner, and perhaps bringing some friends. Nothing about how many might be arriving, or the quest, or even that we were Dwarves.*

“No wonder he seemed so confused,” Kíli realized, glancing back to where the Hobbit slept with the rest of the Company. “I feel horribly rude, now. We simply invaded his home, without so much as a by-your-leave, thinking we were expected. My mother would have Fíli's beard and mine if she knew.”

Viska grinned, lowering her eyes to the archer's scruff and raising one eyebrow.

*I rather think yours is safe, what there is of it,* she replied, laughing silently when he gave her a mock glare. *I would not worry, though. It was Gandalf who did not explain, and I doubt that it slipped his mind. Perhaps he thought the shock was exactly what it would take to win our burglar's interest.*

“Perhaps,” he agreed thoughtfully. “Still, if he did not expect us, why did he have so much food on hand? It was a feast!”

She shrugged, but he stared at her with wide eyes. “Do Hobbits eat like that all the time?” he asked, worry clear in his voice. “Mister Baggins has not complained, but he does seem a bit thinner than he was when we met. We have not been on short rations, but they haven't exactly been generous, either. We aren't starving him, are we?”
Shaking her head, Viska motioned for quiet before her friend's rising voice could wake any of the others. She did not doubt his concern was genuine, and it touched her heart that he was so troubled over the idea that their semi-reluctant companion was suffering.

*He seems fine,* she assured him, her hands moving quickly. *Perhaps Hobbits are used to more food – I know little about them, but those we saw in the Shire were clearly well-fed. I'm sure he will let us know if he is in any danger, and I doubt Gandalf will let it get to that point. For all of his clever tricks, he is clearly fond of our burglar.*

She did not comment on the fact that he was finally calling the Hobbit by the correct name – nor that he had been roused from his own dark mood by worry for his friend.

* * *

Second watch was Bilbo's least favorite chore with the Company, but at least this time he was partnered with one of the younger, friendlier Dwarves on this, the fifth night out of Rivendell. Triskel was a pleasant enough companion, and he did not mind the occasional question, although he did not always answer them. For the moment, though, the Hobbit had no questions. He was content to sit in silent company, watching the darkness. He was talking softly to himself before he even realized it.

“I miss the music.”

Trisk glanced at him. “The Elvish music, in Rivendell? It was a bit...placid for me.”

The Halfling chuckled and shook his head. “No accounting for taste, but no, I meant music in general. I understand why we are being quiet, but I miss Bofur's songs in the evenings. Hobbits are very fond of music, though I'm no singer myself. It was quite...comforting.” Bilbo lapsed into silence, unsure how to truly express the peace that filled his heart when the Dwarves were at ease enough to sing and tell their tales. He felt Trisk's eyes on him after a moment, and the young Dwarf cleared his throat.

“You did not seem overly fond of the song we sang while cleaning up after dinner in your *smial,* though.”

Bilbo turned indignantly, but relaxed at the mischievous expression on his companion's face.

“Yes, well, I was a little worried about my dishes!” he responded with a smile.

“I recall. They're over a hundred years old, you said,” Trisk drawled.

“Precisely! Though I doubt that means less to you lot than to a Hobbit – most of you are older than my dishes, according to Fíli and Kíli.”

The silversmith laughed and nodded. “Many of the others are, yes. Still, we had no intention of smashing any of your crockery, Mister Baggins. It was an exercise of sorts, much like the sparring that we have been doing on the journey.”

Bilbo stared at him blankly.

“I'm afraid that I don't understand.”
Trisk smiled and sat forward, tucking away the small carving he had been working on.

“I know it was a bit chaotic, but did you get a chance to watch us during the battle with the Trolls? The way we fought together?”

Bilbo thought back to the battle, fifteen Dwarves against three Trolls, but he could not recall much beyond a confusing scene lit by the large campfire. “Not really, no. It was a bit...overwhelming, and I know little of war.”

“Fair enough,” the Dwarf lad responded. “Dwarrows have an innate gift that is a bit hard to explain, but I will try. We are always aware, though not on a conscious level, of where our companions are. It can be honed and refined, but all of our folk have it. In battle, it means we can toss weapons to those who need them most, or avoid skewering an ally in place of an enemy. In a workplace like a forge or kitchen, it means we can avoid running into someone carrying hot metal, or a heavy platter of food, or a newly-sharpened blade.”

“Or a pile of dirty dishes that reaches his eyebrows?” Bilbo added, recalling watching Ori laboring under just such a load.

“Exactly so,” Trisk agreed with a slight smirk. “A group such as ours will become tighter and more precise as our journey continues, but that night was the first some of us had worked together. It may have started as a bit of mischief to tease you, but ultimately, it served a very important purpose.”

Bilbo nodded absently, this new information running through his mind.

“I have to admit that you did not break a single dish,” he finally said. “But at the time, I thought it no more than an elaborate joke.” He paused and fixed his companion with a narrowed gaze. “If some of you had not worked together before, how did you have the song ready to go?” he demanded. Trisk laughed.

“It is an old drinking song,” he explained cheerfully. “It has about a dozen verses, and I'm not sure what the original name was. It's changed many times over the years, but it had enough space to fit your name in, Mister Baggins. I promise, it was not written just to tease you.”

“I suppose it was a bit arrogant of me to assume just that,” the Hobbit responded with a grin. Trisk smiled back at him, settling back against a large boulder.

“As to our earlier conversation,” he continued, “Dwarves are fond of music, too, as I'm sure you can tell. Perhaps that is one of the unifying threads through the Races. My parents used to sing all the time. My da had a rich, deep voice, almost like Thorin's. I remember when I was very small, they would sing together in the evenings, or Ma would sing while he played his flute.”

The Hobbit glanced over to see that the lad's hazel eyes were staring into a far distance of memory, a small sad smile on his face.

“When Amad died, Da stopped singing, stopped playing. It was like the music died with her. Even my singing seemed to bother him, so I only sang to the baby. My voice isn't the best, but it would always soothe Visk to sleep when he was a Dwarfling. As he got older, we began to sing together. One night, Da came home early from his workshop and heard us singing one of Ma's favorite ballads. We didn't realize he was there. We just heard this rumbling voice join in and we looked up to see him standing in the doorway, tears on his face. The music came back after that. Until he died. Visk brought his flute when we left home – I think it's in his pack.”
“Does he play?” Bilbo asked, fascinated by the idea of the silent lad playing the flute. Trisk shook his head.

“Actually, I do. Visk always sang.”

“Poor lad.” The Hobbit tried to imagine what it would be like to be unable to speak. “I hope his throat improves so he can talk again soon.”

“It's getting better,” the silversmith assured him. “He can whisper now, if he has to, but it starts to hurt after a while.”

Bilbo nodded, musing quietly. “I wish I could understand his sign language,” he lamented absently. “I should like to be able to converse with him, and with Bifur.”

Trisk smiled. “Don't let Thorin hear you say that, Master Burglar,” he murmured. “Iglishmêk is as close to Dwarven hearts as Khuzdul. We never teach either of them to outsiders.”

He looked at the young Dwarf quizzically. “The Dwarf languages are really that big of a secret? But Thorin has spoken Khuzdul in front of me and Gandalf.”

The lad laughed. “I think Gandalf is an exception to a lot of rules, but you'll notice none of us do it often, and only certain words or phrases. Our battle cry is a well-known one, for instance. But Thorin would never teach it to you, nor will any of us. Not unless there are highly unusual circumstances. Our language was crafted for us by Mahal himself, you see, and it has been preserved, unchanging, throughout our history. The languages of Men and Elves are fluid, ever-evolving, but not Khuzdul. Perhaps it is a symbol of our stubborn intractability.”

The burglar smiled. “Or perhaps a sign of respect for your Maker that you choose to preserve his gift.”

He seemed to think for a moment, then nodded. “Perhaps. We use Westron for most things, though. Even our everyday names are taken from the tongues of Men.”

“Everyday names?” Bilbo asked, puzzled. “You have other names?”

“Every Dwarf has a true name in Khuzdul, but it is never recorded, even on our tombs. Names are power, Master Baggins, and Dwarves are protective of all that they have.”

* X *

Trisk found himself on first watch with a slightly-less-pensive Kíli on the seventh night. The Company was hoping to start up the first of the mountain paths the next morning, and spirits were rising with the altitude as they continued to see no sign of pursuit by the Orcs. Trisk had one of his blades out, whittling idly at a block of wood that might hold a small flute. Kíli was chewing on the stem of his unlit pipe, his gaze distant and thoughtful.

“Your father was an old friend of Thorin's from Erebor, right?”

Trisk shook his head. “He was a child in Erebor, yes, but I don't think he actually got to be friends with Thorin until the Exile,” he replied. He shot the young prince a grin. “No new tales of your uncle's childhood here, I'm afraid. Adad was the only survivor of his family and he became close
friends with Thorin, Frerin, Balin, and Dwalin as they traveled.”

“He was at Azanulbizar?”

“He was. He was part of the group that got trapped with their backs to Kheled-zâram.”

Kíli hissed in recognition. “I remember. Balin mentioned that, the night he told Bilbo about the battle. That is where Thorin’s brother fell, my uncle, Frerin.”

The silversmith nodded. “Fundin, too. Da never remembered the entirety of the battle, not clearly. He remembered fighting back to back with Fundin over a wounded Frerin. Then Fundin fell. His next memory, he was crouched over Frerin, trying to protect him beyond death, and Dwalin was pulling him away, carrying him to the healers. He thought he would die – wanted to, for failing. But he didn’t. And Thorin forgave him. But Adad could not forgive himself. He could not settle in Ered Luin, not and be at peace, so he left with some of the survivors from the Iron Hills, seeking a new life.” He chuckled softly. “He never expected Amad to join him, much less Choose him.”

Kíli sat in quiet thought for a long moment, chewing on his pipe. Then he sighed. “The tales always make battle sound so...glorious. But the real stories, from the ones who were there, are very different, aren’t they?”

Trisk shrugged. “If the stories told the truth of war, no one would want to fight. And sometimes, it is necessary to fight to preserve what is good in the world.”

* X *

The long ascent into the Misty Mountains began halfway through the eighth day from Rivendell and added a new level to the Company’s exhaustion that night. Viska was reluctantly roused from sleep for her spot on second watch by a grumpy Kíli, who promptly curled up in his blanket and passed out. The Dwarrowmaiden made her way carefully through the campsite to join the elder prince where he sat watching the night. She settled in next to him, her eyes adjusting quickly to the moonlit darkness in the faint glow of the banked fire. After a long moment, he glanced over at her, his face concerned.

“You seem...preoccupied...since Rivendell,” he commented lightly. “Did something happen with the elves? Or do you just regret leaving, like our burglar?”

She smiled slightly. *I miss the peace of the valley, but I do not regret leaving. I chose the quest, and I will see it through. I will not turn aside willingly.*

He nodded, a question in his eyes. “You mentioned that before, that I was the second to ask if you would stand aside. Who else? Your brother?”

Viska snorted. *Trisk had his answer before we left home. No. It was an Elf lady. A very powerful one. She spoke in my mind.*

Fíli looked at her sharply. “In your mind? Not Lord Elrond’s daughter?”

No. She said her name was Galadriel, of Lórien. She spelled out the unfamiliar names as best she could. *Arwen said she was her grandmother.*
“Lórien?” His eyes widened. “That was the Elven realm east of Khazâd-dûm – the one they say is ruled by a witch! And she spoke in your mind? What did she say?”

The Dwarf lass shook her head, still confused by what she had heard on Midsummer’s Eve. She greeted me by name, and told me that I had a dangerous road ahead, but I could still stand aside. And that my future held both heartbreak and joy. She shrugged. When I told her that I would continue, regardless, she wished me well. Then she was gone.

The prince chuckled dryly. “Well, that’s not disturbing at all. Although, I suppose heartbreak and joy make up everyone’s future, if you think about it.”

This felt more...immediate. As though she knew of something specific. She sighed heavily. I don’t know. It was like she looked into my heart. My soul. It was...

“Unnerving?”

Very.

* X *

Kíli was heartily sick of rain. It had started almost as soon as they got into the higher reaches of the mountains, and the young Dwarf was tired of feeling waterlogged. Warm spring rains or cooling summer showers were fine, freezing torrential downpours that made the rocky mountain path slick and treacherous were another matter entirely. The archer’s blue hood was pulled as far forward as it would go, but it did little good when the wind would throw the rain into his face and make it difficult to see clearly. He had given up trying to watch anything except the path or the back of the Dwarf in front of him – which happened to be Viska. The lass was moving carefully, one hand on the stone wall as she walked.

Kíli hadn't really decided what he thought of the disguised Dwarrowmaid accompanying them. He liked her – she appreciated his jokes and pranks and had a quirky sense of humor herself, and was more than willing to do her share of the camp chores. She had proven herself handy in a fight, and quick to push herself back to fighting shape after her recent injury, and she had improved every day since. There was no doubt that she was an asset to the expedition, and quickly becoming a dear friend. It was just difficult for the young prince to keep in mind that she was both lass and fighter.

It was foolish, he knew – his own mother would laugh in his face if he ever suggested she wasn't capable of fighting at her brother's side. He also knew that Erebor had once boasted an entire regiment of female warriors, but that was long ago. Before Smaug. Before the Exile. Before Durin’s Folk had dwindled so drastically. With only one in three babes born female, and most families never having more than two or three children, their numbers had never recovered from the fall of the Mountain and the slaughter at Khazâd-dûm.

And there was Viska's own horrific experience, as Trisk had told the princes in secret. Mauled and strangled by Goblins that sought not to kill, but to take, to keep...his thoughts shuddered away from the half-formed images in his mind. He was young, but not entirely ignorant – Trisk had not needed to explain why the Goblins had wanted the lass (any lass). Every chivalrous Dwarven protective instinct that Kíli possessed screamed at him to safeguard his spirited young friend. And every ounce of his self-preservation told him that she'd hand him his ears before he knew what was happening if he tried to act on those instincts. So, he would have to settle for watching out for her
the best he could, as he did for everyone. She had her brother to watch her back – and, Kíli was starting to suspect, his brother, as well. Viska's admission of her ruse, and Trisk's more detailed explanation, had not done much to soothe Fíli's preoccupation. He had agreed to keep their secret, agreed that she could take care of herself on the quest, but Kíli still caught his fair-haired brother watching the silent lass with an inscrutable expression on his normally open face and a curious light in his blue eyes. And then there was the humming.

A great clap of thunder echoed through the high mountain pass, jolting Kíli out of his thoughts and startling him so he slipped on the wet stone. A strong hand caught his shoulder as Fíli steadied him and the young archer gave him a wave of thanks, not bothering to take his eyes off of the path. Someone bellowed up ahead, but he could not make out the words. He glanced up as Viska turned, reaching back to press him against the mountainside. He did not resist, dark eyes wide as he watched a boulder the size of a house slam into the mountain above them. Large chunks of rock broke off, showering down on the Company as they huddled on the exposed trail.

Then Balin's voice floated back on the wind, saying something about a thunder battle, and behind Kíli, Bofur was stepping out to stare at something with a look of wonder.

“Giants! Stone giants!”

Kíli looked up and followed the miner's stunned gaze just before whoever was behind Bofur pulled him back from the edge. Down the pass, a massive figure had appeared, looking hewn from the mountain itself. It was humanoid in shape, but the stony face had no features and it looked like something a Dwarfling might cobble together. But there was no doubt that it was alive – as was the second giant, which had appeared behind them. Kíli pressed himself back against the rock, fingers scrabbling for handholds as the cliff on which they stood began to shudder. Then he abruptly found himself staring at a fissure splitting the very ledge beneath his feet. It widened before his eyes and he realized that his brother was on the far side.

“Kíli! Quick! Grab my hand!”

He stared, frozen, for a breathless eternity, watching the mountain carry Fíli away. Then he lunged, reaching for the elder prince's hand, but he had waited too long, and he knew even as he reached that he would never make it. He saw Fíli's eyes widen and the color drain from his face as Kíli lost his balance, skidding on the wet path. Then a hand clamped on his arm and yanked him back, slamming him into the wall hard enough to knock the breath out of his chest.

“What is happening?” he demanded, wheezing for air.

“Giant,” Trisk answered shortly from the other side of his sister. “They're on one.”

And Kíli realized that he was right. Almost half of the now-separated Company stood on a ledge that marked the knee of a third giant as it extracted itself from the side of the mountain and joined in the raging battle. The massive creature took a step and the Dwarves clung desperately to the rock. A flung boulder struck their giant and it staggered, and Kíli watched in horror as another thrown boulder took the giant's head off completely. The body stumbled and only Viska's death grip on his coat kept Kíli from lunging for his brother as the leg holding the rest of the Company passed by them. Fíli, Bofur, Dwalin, Ori, Nori, Bilbo, Bombur, Fíli! A fleeting glimpse of pale faces, and then they were gone. The headless body slammed into the mountainside ahead of him, just beyond the next outcropping, and then it was falling, tumbling into the depths of the pass. There was no sign of the Dwarves.

Kíli was screaming into the wind, and he could hear his uncle's deep voice bellowing in denial as he moved forward, fighting toward where they would have fallen. An icy finger had touched his
heart. Fíli couldn't be dead. He couldn't. Any moment now, his brother would pop around the outcropping, laughing at his splendid joke, and all would be well, because -

“THEY'RE ALIVE!!”

The relieved call filtered back through the Company and Kíli felt his knees nearly give out as he leaned against Viska. The Dwarf lass was patting his arm and it sounded suspiciously like she might be sobbing a little behind her scarf, but he could not tell tears from rain in the storm. He clasped her arm in thanks and nodded at Trisk when the silversmith offered him a small smile. They hurried along after the others, only to pause a moment later when voices were once more raised in alarm. Kíli tensed, but Trisk was listening to the shouts and he shook his head.

“Bilbo. Almost fell. Thorin's got him up, but he's not been polite about it.”

Kíli sighed. Thorin had been impatient with the Hobbit since the day he had joined the Company, and it had only gotten worse when the burglar so clearly enjoyed their time in Rivendell. The young prince rather liked Bilbo, himself, but he was also anxious to get to his brother.

“They've found a cave,” Trisk reported a moment later. Then they were moving forward again, Kíli stepping on Viska's heels in his anxiety to see Fíli for himself. Finally, he rounded the outcropping and Fíli was standing in the rain, waiting for him, alive and whole. Kíli threw himself at his brother with a cry of relief, pressing their foreheads together for a long moment before Trisk grabbed both of them and shoved them into the cave.

The four young Dwarves dropped their gear in the first open area that they found, being the last ones inside. Kíli stripped off his hood and rain cape eagerly, shaking the excess water from his hair, to his companions' irritation. Disappointed by Thorin's refusal to let Glóin start a fire, he dug into his pack for a blanket, hoping that it hadn't gotten soaked. Within a few minutes, he was huddled next to Fíli under both of their blankets, swapping out snacks of dried fruit and salted meat with Trisk and Viska, the latter two also snug beneath their shared blankets. The rest of the Company was doing much the same, sitting in their family groups as they shared heat and tried to dry off as best they could without a fire. Thorin sat in the depths of the cave, talking quietly with Balin, who seemed to be urging him to wait for Gandalf to rejoin them before they moved on. Bilbo sat miserably in a small alcove across from the young Dwarves, digging through his pack for something to eat. He looked up, startled, when Viska crawled over to hand him a handful of dried apple and pat him on the shoulder. He managed a wan smile and nodded to her as she returned to her seat. Trisk offered the Halfling a small smile and tossed him a hard biscuit.

“Thank you for catching my little brother, Visk,” Fíli murmured, reaching up to muss Kíli's damp hair. “He'd be a bit hard to replace.”

Trisk chuckled as Viska signed back briefly. “Maybe the four of us should just take the 'thank yous' as a given,” he commented quietly. “We spend half of our time saving one another's hides.”

* X *

“IBKINÎ!!”

Thorin's bellow had Fíli reaching for a weapon before he was even fully awake, the instinctive response drilled into him over long years of weapon and survival training. In this instance,
however, it was no help, for what good is a weapon when the world drops out from under you? Even as the young Dwarf started to his feet, the floor of the cavern gave way and he was falling into darkness. He could barely see as he slid through a twisting tunnel in the rock – even to Dwarf eyes, there was barely enough light to make out other tumbling bodies around him. His ears were more useful, as none of his companions were quiet as they fell. Thorin and Dwalin were bellowing in rage, and the panicked yelps were probably Ori and Bilbo. Kíli was shouting for him, Trisk for Visk...

…and then the fall was over and he had landed on filthy rags in a massive cave lit with flickering torches. The rest of the Company landed in a pile and Fíli was crushed under half a dozen of his friends, and long, clawed fingers were reaching for them.

* X *

Viska heard Thorin yell, and she felt the ground drop out from beneath her. She fell, she slid, she ended up in a pile of angry Dwarves (and one Hobbit). She struggled to her feet, searching for her brother, her friends – and she saw the Goblins...leering, reaching, grasping...and her mind fled to the safety of oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

Khagal'abbad – Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
Tumunzahar – Norgrod, southern ancient Dwarven city in the Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
smial – Hobbit hole
Adad – Father (Khuzdul)
Ibkinî! – Wake! (Khuzdul)
In Places Deep

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

9

IN PLACES DEEP

Goblins.

The wiry, grotesque monstrosities were everywhere and the Dwarves were outnumbered and overwhelmed. They fought anyway, of course – all save one. Struggling with his own captors, Fíli caught sight of a still figure pressed against the back of the cage into which they had fallen. Leaf green eyes stared without seeing and she resisted without fighting, frozen and unresponsive as the Goblins tried to march her down the walkway.

Goblins. Fíli swore under his breath and redoubled his efforts, trying to reach Viska's side, but then the twisted creatures surrounded him and he couldn't see anyone. Though, if they were able to move him against his will, they had probably gotten her moving as well. He could hear several of the others protesting as they were pushed down a rickety wooden walkway. The caves were a warren of twisting tunnels and crumbling wooden structures, squalid and revolting, but the smell was worse, a thick, cloying cloud of decay that spoke of foul things hidden in the shadows. The Goblins themselves were twisted and wiry creatures, their lean frames concealing a fierce strength. They ranged in size from small, creeping terrors to those slightly taller than the Dwarves themselves. Alone, none would have stood a chance against a trained Dwarf, but Goblins had always found their advantage in numbers. When the Dwarves were finally allowed to stop, they were bunched up on a large wooden platform, surrounded by a constantly-shifting swarm of the revolting creatures as another appeared, this one nearly three times the size of a Dwarf. Thorin and Kíli wore matching glowers, staring at the loathsome being before them from under dark brows. Dwalin had lodged himself in front of both his king and his brother. Fíli tried to work his way up to Kíli's side, but the sharp dagger that was suddenly pressed against his throat discouraged him. The Great Goblin stared at them, a vast being of excess flesh, covered in boils, warts, and filth.

“My, my, my, what have we here?” he crooned. “Where did you find these lovely gifts?”

A sneering sycophant of a Goblin stepped forward. “On the front porch, they was. Made themselves right to home!”

The creature's eyes flickered over them.

“And what would Dwarves be doing in these parts? A bit far North for another attempt to reclaim your precious Moria.”

The Dwarves stared back, silent. The Goblin smiled.

“Good. I had so hoped that you would choose to do this the hard way,” he cackled, rubbing his hands together gleefully. “It has been too long since we had a chance to break Dwarves.”
Dwalin snarled and the Great Goblin turned his oily smile on the big warrior.

“Oh, make no mistake, you will break. In the end, they always break. What do you think, my people? Should we begin with the oldest? The biggest? Oh, I know! Bring out the machines! Bring forth the Mangler and the Bone Breaker! We’ll start with the youngest!”

Fíli lunged for his brother, yanking Kíli behind him as the younger prince growled in protest. He could see Dori and Nori moving to shield Ori from the Goblins’ eyes as well, united in this as in nothing else. Trisk moved slightly to Fíli's shoulder, edging Kíli back even farther, next to the still unresponsive Viska. The Great Goblin's bulging eyes darted from face to face, a smug smile crawling across his own.

“That one,” he finally croaked, extending a blunt, filthy finger to point at Ori. Goblins surged forward, twisted hands reaching for the young scribe. Fíli snarled and knocked them away, joining the lad's older brothers in defending him.

“WAIT!”

Thorin's bellow brought immediate silence as the exiled king stepped out from behind Dwalin. The Arms Master stirred in protest, but Thorin waved him back, steely gaze fixed on the massive Goblin. The creature's leering grin simply got wider.

“Well, well, well, look who it is,” he crooned. “Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, King Under the Mountain.” He gave a mocking bow, then fixed Thorin with his bulbous eyes. “Or should it be King Without a Mountain?” A crafty expression crept across the Great Goblin's face. “I know someone who would pay a pretty price for your head,” he commented softly. “Just your head – nothing need be attached. Perhaps you know of whom I speak? An old enemy of yours? A pale Orc astride a white Warg?”

Fíli's blood turned to ice, and Kíli's hand clamped on his arm painfully. Was it possible? Could the Defiler still live? Was that the explanation for the Orcs hunting them, the pale Orc was still seeking to destroy the line of Durin? Thorin was shaking his head in denial.

“Azog the Defiler was destroyed,” he growled. “I cut him down myself.”

A gurgling, choking sound emerged from the Great Goblin's throat and Fíli realized with revulsion that he was laughing.

“Oh, so you think his defiling days are done, do you?” He turned to a gnarled little creature nearby. “Send word to the pale Orc. Tell him I have found his prize.”

The tiny monstrosity giggled and hurried off, and the grotesque Goblin turned back to the Company.

“In the meantime, I think we'll amuse ourselves with your companions, oh Dwarf king. Your head was the only one requested, but I think that you might, perhaps, be traveling with some that are...precious to you. Blood of your blood, perhaps? Bring that one to me,” he ordered suddenly. Fíli's back stiffened and he braced himself to fight, only to have the Goblins reach past him and grab -

“Kíli! No!”

He launched himself at the creatures, struggling to free his brother. Trisk had his arms wrapped around the archer's shoulders, trying to hold him back, but the Goblins were producing bone-tipped whips and laying about them with vigor. Exposed skin was sliced and blood drawn, and Kíli was
suddenly restrained before the Great Goblin, brown eyes dark with fury as he glared. Fíli's arm was
twisted up behind his back, twinging in warning as he continued to fight. Trisk was on his knees,
head in his hands after a solid blow from the hilt of a heavy sword. Dwalin and Thorin were being
held by five or six Goblins each as the Great Goblin studied the younger prince.

“Oh yes,” he chuckled. “Look at that glower. Definitely one of the heirs. And as for the other....”
he surveyed the remainder of the Company once more, dismissing the older Dwarves and
motioning for the young ones to be brought forward. Fíli could feel Thorin's eyes boring into the
back of his head as he raised his chin defiantly. There was a spike of terror as the Goblin's gaze lit
curiously on Viska, but he moved on to Trisk, then Ori. Then the muddy brown eyes were on Fíli
and he stared back with ice in his gaze.

“And this would be the brother.”

Goblins yanked the elder prince to the side to join the archer, who had renewed his struggles when
Fíli was identified. A whip cracked and the tip lashed across Fíli's face, narrowly missing his eye,
and he hissed in pain. Kíli went still, face stricken, as Thorin roared in protest.

“I am the one with the bounty!” their uncle bellowed, dislodging half of the Goblins holding him
as he lunged forward. “Leave them alone!”

“Now why would I want to do that?” the Great Goblin laughed. “It doesn’t sound like nearly as
much fun. I think we'll start with - “

A Goblin's shriek interrupted his musing and metal clattered on the wooden walkway as one of the
creeping monstrosities threw Orcrist down. The Great Goblin turned, eyes narrowed, then screamed
with rage when he saw the blade, half out of its sheath.

“I know that sword! It is the Goblin Cleaver! The Biter, the blade that sliced a thousand necks!
Cursed blade of the Elves! How dare you bring it here! Lash them, beat them, kill them! Kill them
all! Cut off his head!”

The Goblins went mad, lashing out indiscriminately, slashing at the prisoners with blade and whip,
fist and foot. Fíli lurched toward his brother, trying to shield him from the attack, and a great white
light filled his vision, sending a vibration through the cavern that unbalanced Dwarf and Goblin
alike. Then there was darkness and silence and confusion, until a tall figure with a gleaming sword
appeared.

“FIGHT, YOU FOOLS!”

Gandalf's bellow stirred the Dwarves to action and they began seizing weapons from where the
Goblins had piled them and sharing them out. Fíli grabbed what knives he could find, accepted his
twin falchions from Nori, and then snatched up a familiar slender sword and matching long knife,
which he shoved into Viska's strengthless hands. She was a still spot in a flurry of activity and he
suddenly realized that her eyes were glassy with shock. Taking the knife back, he stowed it hastily
in his own coat, then pressed the young lass's hands firmly around the hilt of her sword. She did not
react. Kíli jostled him as the young archer took out a Goblin aiming for the swordsman's throat, but
Fíli fixed summer blue eyes on Viska's face and leaned in to her ear, hating himself for what he
was about to do, and praying that it would work.

“\textit{Ibkhi' fa imrid, nadanu Kulvik! Ibkhi' fa imrid!} If you will not fight, we will leave you behind!”

Sense flooded back into her eyes, followed by terror, then cold determination. Fíli was knocked
aside as she sprang forward, charging into the fray, sword flashing in the torchlight. Kíli shot her a
surprised look, then fell in beside her, fighting their way through to join the rest of the Company. A
snarl next to him drew Fíli's attention and he glanced over to see Trisk glaring at him in fury, eyes
promising retribution for what had been said to his sister. Fíli nodded in acceptance – he'd gladly
pay the price for the only thing that had motivated her to fight. Now, if they could just get all of
them out of Goblin Town in one piece.

* X *

Behind the green eyes, Viska's mind struggles to break free of the tortured depths of memory even
as her body is driven forward by fear and the instinct for survival. Sight and sound, the presence
of the Goblins tears at her sanity, threatening the delicate balance that she has achieved since the
night of the raid. All that matters is escape, and so she throws herself into battle, lashing out at the
gnarled, clawed hands as they reach toward her. She does not even know if they seek to capture or
merely kill, but she knows that the latter fate is far preferable. Infinitely better to die than to be
their prisoner, their plaything. She will fight, or she will die. And should the time come that she can
no longer fight, she will find a way to die. Every step, every strike, is to the rhythm of the chant in
her head.

I will not be taken.

* X *

In later days, Fíli would not be able to remember much of the flight through the tunnels. His focus
narrowed to the path in front of him, the Goblins at the end of his blades, and the quick glimpses to
keep the rest of the Company in sight. Directly in front of him, Viska and Kíli moved in unison,
their individual blades sweeping through the Goblin ranks in a dance of steel. Kíli's swings were
slightly more powerful and skilled, while Viska's were swifter and more agile – together, they
cleared the path ahead. Behind him, Triskel played rearguard, his mace meeting any foe that crept
up from behind. Fíli himself focused on those crawling up the sides, for the Goblins were able to
climb spider-like, clinging to stone walls. His twin falchions in hand, the golden-haired prince
spun, stabbed, and slashed to keep the enemy off their flanks. His ears were filled with the shrieks
of the Goblins, the clash of steel, the meaty thud of steel cutting flesh, and Kíli's occasional
exhilarated cry of defiance.

Dwarves were not a peaceful race – their history was full of war and conflict, from ancient days to
the battle for Khazâd-dûm. Most of the other races saw their constant preparation for battle as a
preference for it, a constant seeking. Fíli could not deny that there was something freeing in losing
himself to the rhythm of combat, letting his instincts take over and utilizing his hard-won skill with
the blades. He knew his brother felt much the same, though Kíli found his solace with the bow.
But they did not live for the fight, not like some of their folk did. In his heart, Fíli sought peace. He
was willing to fight for it, to defend his friends and kin, take back his people's home, but in the end,
he wanted to help his uncle lead the Dwarves of Erebor into a new age of prosperity. Until then, he
would fight. He would be the consummate warrior, defending his brother, his uncle, and his
companions against whatever foe.

Fíli nearly ran into his brother as Kíli skidded to a halt. They had finally rejoined the rest of the
Company, and he could see Gandalf's tall form ahead, standing defiant before the Great Goblin. Then his sword flashed in the torchlight and the grotesque creature fell, tearing loose the bridge on which they stood. Shoving his swords back in the dual sheath, Fíli lunged for the nearest handhold, wrapping an arm around a broken wooden support. He could see the others doing the same as they plunged into the depths of the Misty Mountains.

* X *

Trisk scrambled free of the wooden debris, eyes searching frantically for Viska. Kíli's urgent digging through the pile quickly uncovered her gray hood, next to the golden braids of the elder prince. Together, the two friends hauled their siblings free of the wreckage. Fíli staggered to his feet, blue eyes turning instantly to the slighter Dwarf as she swayed and tried to focus. Trisk grabbed his sister by the shoulders and peered into her face.

“Visk?”

Finally, she nodded and whispered a quiet response. “I'm alright. Just dizzy.”

He nodded and turned to help the others to their feet. It was Kíli that glanced up and spotted the horde of Goblins swarming down the sides of the cavern.

“Gandalf!”

The wizard shot a quick look up, his face grim.

“We need to get outside. They will not follow us under the sun. Quickly, move!”

Trisk did not need to be told twice. Grabbing Viska by the arm, he started down the tunnels in the direction Gandalf had pointed.

The flight through the Goblin tunnels was a nightmare, and it was not due to the darkness and their pursuers, but because Trisk could not shake the feeling that Viska was not entirely sane. She moved with Kíli, sword ready, but there was a cold light in her eyes that was unlike anything the young Dwarrow had ever seen – especially in his spirited sister.

Her earlier terror had not escaped him. He had been moving to protect her before the clawed hands even reached for them. He hadn't yet known what they faced, but he had known that nothing good could come of trap doors that opened into the bowels of the mountains. Then he had seen the Goblins, and felt her muscles lock into place under his hand. Her eyes had been vacant, as if the mind behind them had fled. He had been the one to make her move, murmuring into her ear, terrified that her continued passive resistance would cause the Goblins to investigate too closely, or simply kill her out of hand. So he had urged her forward, hating himself every step of the way, then had done his best to keep her out of sight and mind of the Great Goblin. He, too, had felt that bolt of terror when they were all pushed forward, and had been about to volunteer himself as the other heir when Fíli was pulled aside.

Cold fury had washed through him when the elder prince threatened her so callously, but he could not deny the result. Viska had been a force of nature as they plowed through the Goblin ranks, she and Kíli an unstoppable team as they cleared the walkway. Never had Trisk seen her fight so
fiercely, or so carelessly. Against more skilled foes, she would have been dead a hundred times over, but the Goblins were cowards, used to overpowering their prisoners quickly, without the need to truly fight, using their overwhelming numbers. Against a Dwarf lass who fought like she had nothing left to lose, and three lads determined to protect her at all costs, they had not stood a chance.

But now there were no more Goblins to fight, and the fell look lingered in the green eyes – a lost, haunted look that made his heart ache. It was so similar to the one that had taken days to fade after the attack in Emyn Uial – he could only hope that she would recover more quickly this time. At least she was moving, keeping pace with the rest of the Company, sword in hand. Kíli remained at her side, brown eyes wary when he glanced at her. Fíli was not so obvious about it, with Trisk glowering at him, but the silversmith could not help but notice that the elder prince only held one of his swords, the other tucked away in the scabbard. Every time Viska stumbled or faltered, a leather-gloved hand was there to steady her and urge her on.

And so the Company of Thorin Oakenshield fled through the Goblin tunnels of the Misty Mountains, following Gandalf the Gray toward the faint hint of fresher air, unaware that they were missing the smallest member of their party. For Bilbo Baggins had slipped even farther into the depths of the mountains, and was having an unsettling adventure of his own.

* X *

Tunnels filled with oozing growths and gnawed bones; a pallid, emaciated figure with lamp-like eyes. Riddles in the dark and too much information given. A mysterious golden ring lost and found. Bilbo did not question his invisibility when the ring slipped on his finger, but simply seized his chance and followed the creeping thing toward the exit, just in time to see the Wizard leading the others to the freedom of the outside world. Gollum was between the Hobbit and the Company, and Bilbo drew his sword, only to find himself overcome with pity as he stared down at the wretched creature. Without really knowing why, he took a running start and leaped from stone to stone until he could jump over the ring's previous owner. He ran down the tunnels after his friends, Gollum's shrieks echoing in his ears.

“Thief!! Baggins! We hates it FOREVER!!”

* X *

Triskel practically shoved Viska out of the Goblin tunnels and down the sloping mountainside after the rest of the Company, the princes just ahead of them. He could see Gandalf's tall form ahead, moving through the trees as he urged the Dwarves out into the sunlight and farther from the loathsome caverns. The group finally began to slow, and the silversmith could hear the wizard counting as they caught up.

“Bifur, Bofur – that's ten. Fíli, Kíli – twelve. Trisk, Visk – fourteen...and Bombur! That makes fifteen Dwarves!” Then his eyes narrowed and he looked around quickly. “But where is Bilbo? Where is our Hobbit?”
Trisk glanced around, suddenly realizing that he did not remember the last time he had seen the burglar. Dwalin swore loudly.

“Curse the Halfling! Now he's lost?”

“I thought he was with Dori,” Glóin spoke up, but the leather-worker shook his head furiously.

“Don't blame me!”

Gandalf sighed. “Well, where did you last see him?”

“I think I saw him slip away when they first collared us,” Nori offered reluctantly. Gandalf focused on the thief.

“But what happened, exactly?” he demanded. “Tell me!”

“I'll tell you what happened!” Thorin broke in, his voice little more than a growl. “Master Baggins saw his chance and he took it. He's thought of nothing but his soft bed and his warm hearth since first he stepped out of his door.”

Trisk stared at the dark-haired leader, knowing that the words made sense, but unable to believe it in his heart. Yes, the burglar had been ill-at-ease for much of their journey (thanks mainly to Thorin himself), but he had seemed to be adjusting recently, settling in. Visk met his eyes with concern, her hands flashing.

He would never make it back alone. How would he escape the tunnels?

Thorin shook his head. “We will not be seeing our Hobbit again. He is long gone.”

“No. He isn't.”

The soft voice dropped into the silence as a small figure approached them from the cover of the trees. Trisk felt his heart unclench, and he saw Visk's face light up. Gandalf had a relieved smile, and Kíli's grin reached from ear to ear.

“Bilbo Baggins,” the old wizard murmured. “I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life.”

“We'd given you up!” the young archer laughed. Fíli's eyes had narrowed in confusion.

“How on earth did you get past the Goblins?”

“How indeed?” Dwalin growled.

Bilbo hesitated, one hand fiddling at the pocket of his waistcoat, and Trisk felt a frisson of fear go down his spine. Something had happened. Something that the Hobbit did not want to share, and that Trisk wasn't sure that he wanted to know. Gandalf seemed to sense it as well, as he cleared his throat to break the tense silence.

“Well, what does it matter?” he asked with slightly forced cheer. “He's back.”

“It matters,” Thorin insisted, fixing intense blue eyes on the burglar. “I want to know. Why did you come back?”

Bilbo stared at him for a long moment before his face relaxed into lines of sympathy and fondness. “Look, I know you doubt me,” he replied softly. “I know you always have. And you're right, I often think of Bag End. I miss my books. And my armchair. And my garden. Because that's where I
belong. That's my home. And that's why I came back...because you don't have one. A home, I mean. It was taken from you.” His eyes flickered around the Company, meeting each gaze in turn. “But I will help you take it back, if I can.”

Trisk felt his chest tighten as Viska stepped closer, leaning into his shoulder. The look in Thorin's eyes was hard to define – a blend of sorrow, awe, and stunned disbelief. Balin's glistened with unshed tears, and even Dwalin looked slightly touched by the Hobbit's words.

And then a feral howl rose behind them and Thorin's head snapped around.

“Out of the frying pan...”

“And into the fire,” Gandalf finished. “RUN!”

But there was nowhere to run. Dashing wildly through the trees, they found themselves trapped on a cliff with sheer edges, dotted with tall pines. Thorin froze, his eyes darting frantically before giving the order.

“Up into the trees, all of you! MOVE!”

They scattered. Kíli swung himself into the closest tree, reaching down to hoist his brother up behind him. Trisk boosted Viska into another, then turned to watch the others climb. Gandalf was at the very edge of the cliff, while Thorin, Balin, and Dwalin perched awkwardly in a nearby tree. Dori and Ori were together, sharing a perch with Bofur, while Nori had ended up following Bifur and the unexpectedly agile Bombur. Glóin helped Óin up quickly, then followed his brother. That left only...

Bilbo.

A bounding Warg had passed the Hobbit, landing between him and the rest of the Company. Kíli yelled a protest and Trisk started back, already knowing he was too late, as the creature lunged for the Halfling. Bilbo's reaction was half instinct, half training as he drew his little sword and held it in front of him, letting the Warg impale itself. Kíli whooped and Trisk relaxed, and the burglar fought to get his sword free of the beast's skull. Then he was moving again, and Trisk watched Dori reach down to haul him to the relative safety of the trees. The Warg pack was approaching, and the silversmith followed his sister up into the branches, staring down at the snapping, snarling creatures and their laughing Orc riders.

* X *

Azog the Defiler was alive.
Thorin Oakenshield stared, unwilling to believe the evidence of his own eyes. How was it possible? He had severed the beast's arm himself, hacking it off at the Battle of Azanulbizar. He had seen the pale Orc dragged away, but had never imagined that his wound would have been tended. Orcs did not behave that way. The injured were weak, and the weak were prey. He had seen them devour their own dead, torture their own wounded. It made no sense for them to have dragged one of their own to safety and tended his wounds.

Yet here he was, blue eyes gleaming in the ash-pale face, body covered with the ritualized scars. He did indeed ride a white Warg, one of the largest the Dwarf had ever seen, and his missing hand had been replaced with a cruel, three-pronged claw of metal that had been jammed into the stump of his arm. The smug sneer on his face was the closest an Orc could manage to a smile, and he was speaking to his underlings in Black Speech, of which Thorin knew only some basic words. Enough to recognize the word for 'fear,' followed by his own name and that of his father. And then the order to kill his companions.

He had been wrong. For so many years, he had believed the Defiler dead, the descendents of Durin safe from his mad vendetta. And now here he stood, alive and eager for blood, and Thorin had brought his heirs, his beloved sister-sons, within the monster's grasp. The one good thing was that Azog seemed to have noticed only him. The Great Goblin might have picked out the lads from their resemblance to him, but the pale Orc was focused on Thorin. So long as he could keep it that way, Fíli and Kíli stood a chance. Even if the Company was overwhelmed, better to die quickly at the hands of the other Orcs than to be revealed to Azog as the heirs of Durin and survive even a day as his prisoners. Though he would prefer to keep them alive – all of them, his steadfast Company. He was hoping that Gandalf might have a trick or two up his sleeve, but the Dwarf king would not rely on the wizard – even the Istari had limits.

Time had slowed to a crawl as Thorin and Azog stared at one another, one in shock, the other in smug triumph. The Wargs were attacking, hurling themselves at the trees, snapping at the branches, trying to knock the Dwarves to the ground. He could see his nephews clinging to the boughs of their tree as it swayed and shook under the impact of a Warg's weight. He heard one of them yell in surprise as the tree began to tilt, borne over by the beast's tireless attacks. His heart lurched in his chest, then resumed its steady beat as two figures, one dark and the other fair, hurled themselves into the nearest tree just before their own crashed to the forest floor. Trisk and Visk were there to catch them, but this tree, too, was beginning to lean, so the four lads were already moving. They split up, leaping into trees farther out on the cliff. But Wargs were at all of the trees, lunging up in the hopes of catching a dangling boot. Thorin and Balin soon had to move as well, the entire Company moving ever closer to the edge – to the proverbial corner where there would be nowhere left to run. And then, they would die. They would fight, but they were sorely outnumbered, exhausted, and injured.

One last leap, and the Dwarf king realized that the Company was together once more, in the tallest tree on the absolute edge of the cliff. Gandalf was summoning fire, passing flaming pine cones down for the Dwarves to hurl. While there was something supremely satisfying about setting fire to a Warg and sending it yelping and screaming with such an innocuous weapon, it would not be enough. At best, it would buy them some time. At worst, they might be roasted alive by their own cleverness. The entire quest was poised to fail and fall.
Translations and Notes:

Ibkhi' fa imrid, nadanul Kulvik! Ibkhi' fa imrid! - Fight or die, child of Kulvik! Fight or die!
Eagle in Eyrie

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

10

EAGLE IN EYRIE

The forest was burning.

Viska clung to the trunk of the massive pine tree with one hand and flung a fiery pine cone with the other. Around her, the rest of the Company cheered and whooped as the snarls turned to yelps of fear and pain and the Orcs tried to control the scorched Wargs. They had sown chaos among their enemies, but the damage was already done. The tree was overloaded with fifteen Dwarves, a Hobbit, and a Wizard, and the grip of its roots on the ground was weakened by the repeated assaults of the fire and their enemies. It groaned, and then it toppled, the roots barely enough to keep it from plummeting over the side of the cliff. Whoops were replaced by startled yells as the Dwarves lost their footing, grabbing desperately for handholds. Viska found herself astride a large branch, clinging for dear life. She had lost track of Trisk since splitting up in the flight from their first roost, but she could see Thorin, Balin, Bilbo, and Fíli, and she could hear Kíli. A sudden panicked cry caught her attention as Ori lost his grip and dropped, just managing to catch hold of Dori's ankles as he fell. His elder brother yelped, scrabbling for purchase as they both slid toward the void.

“Mister Gandalf! Help!”

The Wizard lunged with his staff and Dori seized it, hanging on with all of his considerable strength.

“Thorin! No!”

Balin's cry made Viska's stomach churn with fear and she turned, sweeping her hood back to clear her vision. Thorin had climbed onto the trunk of the fallen tree and was marching toward Azog with unwavering intent. Orcrist shone in one hand, the famous oak shield gripped in the other, sapphire eyes locked on the pale Orc. Dwalin was bellowing in protest, clawing his way up only to have his branch break beneath him and nearly drop him over the side. The Dwarf lass stared in horror as the king charged the Defiler alone, focused only on his foe, as his nephews and oldest friends struggled to follow him.

At the Battle of Azanulbizar, a young Dwarf prince had defied the odds and grievously wounded the gigantic Gundabad Orc. This time, that Orc rode a massive Warg and the Dwarf never stood a chance. The white Warg sent Thorin sprawling before he ever reached Azog, lunging at the king with huge paws and knocking him on his back, where he lay fighting to recover his breath. Viska bit her lip, fighting a scream as the beast clamped powerful jaws around the Dwarf's midsection and shook him like a dead rat before tossing him aside contemptuously. Thorin came to rest close to the cliff's edge, Orcrist skittering from his nerveless fingers. Azog gave an order in Black Speech and one of his minions approached the heir of Durin, grinning. Viska did not understand the
twisted language, but the intent was all too clear.

She scrambled to her feet, reacting without thought or hesitation, every fiber of her being screaming at her to protect her king. She ran forward, boots skidding on the precariously tilted trunk of the tree, slender sword in hand. Just as she reached solid ground, a smaller figure brushed by her and she stared, momentarily frozen in shock as she watched the Hobbit plow into the side of the Orc that loomed over Thorin. Caught by surprise, the beast staggered and fell, scuffling with the burglar on the ground. Viska lunged forward, unsure if she was rushing to the king or the Halfling, but determined that she had to help. Then Bilbo was astride the Orc's chest, his small Elvish blade buried deep in its throat. A hoarse triumphant shout escaped her as he wrenched it free and staggered to his feet, standing over Thorin defensively. The Dwarf lass made it to his side as the Warg riders approached, their mounts snarling viciously and the Orcs drawing cruel, jagged blades.

“DU BEKAR!!”

The Dwarven battle cry rang out over the growls and harsh cries, followed by a fair figure and dark joining the fray. Fíli's twin falchions flashed in the firelight, hamstringing mounts and riders alike as he darted through whatever openings he could find. Kíli's blade swung in deadly arcs, slicing through Warg throats and Orc limbs. Dwalin was right behind the princes, his axes Grasper and Keeper tearing into the nearest enemy. And the auburn-haired figure behind the warrior was Trisk, a two-handed grip on his mace as he threw his weight into a powerful blow that knocked a heavy Orc sprawling. The Warg that it had been riding lunged for Bilbo, jaws gaping, and Viska knocked the Hobbit out of the way. Bracing herself against the weight, she drove her sword into the top of the beast's mouth at an angle, seeking the brain. The Warg yelped, spasmed, and went still, its forward momentum forcing the Dwarf lass to wrench her blade free as she dove clear. Her tumble took her underneath another beast and she seized the opportunity to rake the blade across the soft belly, disemboweling it as she scrambled free. Staggering to her feet, she looked around, trying to get her bearings, and saw the pale Orc advancing on the small group of desperate warriors. Forcing her tired legs to move, she ran to join her brother, back to back with the heirs of Durin as the Orcs closed in. They knew they did not stand a chance – there were simply too many of the Orcs – but they would not sell their lives cheaply.

The piercing cry of a massive bird of prey broke over them and Viska glanced skyward to see the night full of huge golden-brown Eagles, eyes bright with reflected fire. Some were diving and grabbing Orcs and Wargs, tossing them aside or dropping them over the cliffs. Others pushed burning trees down on the attackers, or fanned the flames with huge wings. As the Orcs and Wargs retreated, snarling in frustration and rage, the Eagles changed their focus, swooping low to close gentle talons around members of the Company. Viska stood, mesmerized, as Thorin was carefully scooped from the edge of the cliff, the oak shield slipping from his arm. Seized with a sudden urgency, she lunged for it, snatching the shield up just as claws closed over her shoulders. She swallowed a scream as she was carried high into the air, then released, dropping a short distance to a broad feathered back. Trisk landed just behind her, clamping anxious hands onto the great Eagle's feathers.

* X *

Azog watches them go, blood boiling with fury. Once more, the Line of Durin has slipped his grasp, carried away in the talons of the detested Eagles. This pack of his followers is decimated
and scattered, lost to the Wizard's fire and the birds of prey. But the confrontation has borne some
fruit. Oakenshield has been broken, and his fall has brought out the hidden heirs. Light and dark,
they raced to their king's aid, exposing their ties to him and sealing their fates. Thorin son of
Thrāin is no longer the pale Orc's main target. It will be far more satisfying to let him watch his
kin suffer first.

* X *

Bofur, son of Forbur, had certainly not expected to end this day (or any other, for that matter)
clinging to the back of a Great Eagle, trying to get his cousin to sit down, for Mahal's sake, before
you plummet to your death! But there he was, one hand clapped to his hat to keep it from flying off,
the other buried in golden feathers as he stared wide-eyed at Middle Earth spread out beneath his
feet like an intricate map. Behind him, fire raged on the mountainside, while the air around him
was filled with the Eagles, each carrying one or two members of the Company. He could see his
brother clinging to one, eyes squeezed shut in terror – Bombur had never had much of a head for
heights. Dori and Ori had apparently been rescued when they fell, and Nori was off to his left. Fíli
and Kíli shared a bird, of course, as did Trisk and Visk. The light of the moon illuminated Fíli's
concerned face as the young prince called out to his uncle. Bofur sobered abruptly, remembering
Thorin's still figure on the ground in front of Azog, surrounded by flame, as the burglar stood over
him with his tiny Elven blade. Squinting, the miner could just make out the limp form cradled in an
Eagle's claws far ahead.

Mahal, let him be alive.

* X *

Kíli barely resisted the urge to throw himself from the Eagle's back before it touched down on the
great rock ledge. He could see Thorin lying still on the stone, battered and bloodied, and the dark
prince cursed himself for not going to his uncle's aid sooner. Finally, the great bird landed and he
slid off of its back, his brother on his heels. Gandalf was already crouched over Thorin, one hand
on his forehead, eyes closed as he spoke arcane words under his breath. Bilbo hovered at the
Wizard's side, watching anxiously. The others were being dropped off one by one, reuniting with
family and checking each other over, but eventually all eyes turned to the king.

And, after an eternity, the deep sapphire eyes opened and Durin's heir took a deep, painful breath.
Kíli moved to help him to his feet, Dwalin joining him, but Thorin resisted at first.

“What the Halfling?” he demanded. “Where is he?”
“It's alright,” Gandalf assured him. “Bilbo is here. He is quite safe.”

Only then did Thorin allow them to pull him to his feet, shaking them off once he was standing.
There was a fierce look on his face as he advanced on the bewildered Halfling. The young prince
felt Fíli tense beside him, brows furrowed in confusion, and Trisk was nearly glaring as their leader
strode forward. Viska was still and inscrutable.

“What were you doing?” Thorin demanded, cornering the Hobbit on the edge of the cliff. “You
nearly got yourself killed! Did I not say that you would be a burden? That you would not survive in
the Wild? That you had no place amongst us?”
Poor Bilbo looked as though he wanted to disappear. Kíli was glaring at his uncle, angry over his
treatment of the one who had saved his life, despite being the least suited among the Company to
stand against their enemies. Then Thorin took a final step forward and threw his arms around the
astonished burglar, pulling him into a crushing hug.

“Never have I been so wrong in all my life. I am sorry I doubted you.”

Kíli relaxed and heard his brother chuff in amusement next to him. Bilbo simply smiled.

“No, I would have doubted me, too,” he countered earnestly. “I’m not a hero, or a warrior. Not
even a burglar,” he added, with a sidelong glance at Gandalf. Thorin grinned slightly and the rest of
the Company relaxed and began to pay attention to their surroundings. They were on a massive
ledge on the eastern side of the Misty Mountains, overlooking a wide expanse of open land that
reached out to a river, another plain, then a wide expanse of forest, and beyond....

“Is...is that what I think it is?” Bilbo asked quietly.

Kíli stared at the distant peak, barely visible at the edge of sight. A warm hand clasped his
shoulder and he glanced over to see his brother gazing east.

“Erebor,” Gandalf replied quietly. “The Lonely Mountain. The last of the great Dwarf kingdoms of
Middle Earth.”

Thorin smiled. “Our home.”

“It’s still so far away,” Ori murmured quietly. “Mister Gandalf? Where exactly are we?”

The Wizard smiled.

“You are currently in the eyrie of the Great Eagles, Master Ori. They are led by Gwaihir, the Wind
Lord. They are my friends, and they have no love for Orcs, Wargs, or Goblins, so they were
willing to assist us.”

“Well, we certainly appreciate the rescue,” Balin commented, raising one bushy eyebrow. “But
how exactly are we going to get down from here?”

Gandalf chuckled. “They will carry us a bit further, my dear Balin. In fact, they have offered their
hospitality for the night, so we might rest in safety, if that is quite all right with Thorin. On the
morrow, they will carry us across the Anduin. They will not risk themselves too near the arrows of
Men, but they will save us some walking, and a bit of time.” Thorin nodded in agreement, his eyes
still on the distant Mountain.

“Some dinner would not go amiss,” Bombur contributed quietly.

“Hunger, I believe, can be remedied,” the Wizard told him, then turned to speak softly to a
magnificent bird that had settled nearby. When he returned, the Dwarves were beginning to settle
in comfortably, digging through the few supplies that they had managed to grab and keep through
the tunnels and into the trees. There was very little, save their weapons. Kíli joined his brother, a
little confused when he realized that they were nearly at the far end of the eyrie from their friends.
Trisk had his back to them, but Viska was glancing past him, her eyes flashing as they argued over
something. He looked at Fíli.

“Trisk is angry over what you said in Goblin Town?” he guessed shrewdly. The fair-haired prince
nodded, his face troubled and ashamed.

“Of course he is. Can you blame him? I must set this right, even if they cannot forgive me.”

Sighing, he set down his pack and moved slowly toward the siblings. Viska saw him coming and turned her brother with a hand on his shoulder. Kíli saw the auburn-haired Dwarf tense, but Fíli simply ducked his head.

“Would you spare me a moment, Trisk?” he asked humbly. The silversmith stared at him for a long moment, but finally nodded after Viska touched his arm again.

“You can speak to me. Stay away from Visk.”

Fíli nodded and Viska stepped away from her brother, going to sit with her back to the mountain. Kíli thought about joining her, but did not want to antagonize Trisk any further, so he simply nodded to her with a small smile and turned to help Bombur with the fresh game that one of the Eagles had just deposited on the ledge. Bofur was humming merrily to himself as he assisted his brother, and the dark-haired prince smiled.

“I think we're safe enough to risk a song or two, Bof,” he encouraged. The miner's eyes brightened and he grinned, then launched into a cheery tavern tune that soon had the others joining in.

* X *

Fíli smiled faintly as he heard his brother encouraging Bofur to sing loud enough to protect the coming conversation from prying ears. Then he sighed and turned to meet Trisk's steady glare.

“You threatened to leave her behind,” the other growled.

Fíli nodded. “I did.”

“You used her history with the Goblins against her.”

“It was already working against her. I was trying –”

“What if it hadn't worked?” the silversmith cut in. “Would you really have left her there? Left us there? You know that I would never have abandoned her.”

“I know. And no, we would have carried her out, but then some of us would probably not have made it, and she would have hated herself when she realized what had happened.”

A pained look crossed Trisk's face and he nodded slightly, almost reluctantly. Then he shook his head angrily.

“You could have traumatized her even worse. You could have broken her!”

Fíli closed his eyes and inhaled deeply, nodding. “Yes, I could have, but I had to take that chance, and I would do it again in a heartbeat.”

Trisk took a furious breath and Fíli's eyes snapped open to see his face flushing with fury.

“You would do it again?”
Blue eyes caught hazel and held them without flinching or blinking.

“To save her life? Yes. Without a second thought. But know this, Triskel, son of Kulvik – never have I hated myself more. I had to get her out of her memories and back in the moment, but I hated it. I still hate it. But I would do it again if it would save her life.”

Trisk stared at him, shoulders tense, chest heaving with every breath. It may have been moments, or hours, but finally the hazel eyes dropped and Trisk nodded.

“I have no quarrel with you then, my prince, for how can I quarrel with one who seeks only to protect my remaining family?”

* X *

Thorin was deep in quiet conversation with Balin and Gandalf when the former smiled and nodded at someone just past the king’s shoulder. Thorin turned, his eyes widening in surprise when he saw young Visk standing there holding the oak shield. The leader of the Company had thought the shield lost, left behind when the Eagles bore them away from their enemies, but here it was, in the hands of Kulvik's quiet son. Thorin smiled, his intense gaze searching the lad's eyes as he took the shield.

“Before I lost consciousness, I remember seeing you,” he commented quietly, running his hands over the worn wood. “You stood by the burglar against the Orcs. Balin also tells me that you and your brother stood with my nephews against the Warg riders. And now I find that you have salvaged my oaken shield from the field of battle. Mahal smiled on us to bring Triskel and Viskel into the Company for this quest.”

He set the shield aside and stepped forward to place a hand on Visk's shoulder, meeting the dark green eyes. “With every breath, you honor your father's memory. I thank you for all that you have done, and all that you will undoubtedly do before we see the end of this task.”

* X *

Kíli approached after Trisk moved away, flinching at the sight of the bloody gash on his brother's face. “That mark is my fault. They hit you to control me. I'm sorry, nadad.”

“You are hardly responsible for the actions of Goblins, Kí,” the elder prince replied, shaking his head. “If they'd found me first, it would just have happened the other way 'round.”

Kíli snorted. “And you would be apologizing to me, you know that you would.”

His brother smiled. “I'm the big brother. Protection is my job. Anyway, I'll have an interesting scar.”

“You can make all the lasses weep as they consider how close you came to losing that eye,” the archer chortled. “Fíli One-Eye, future King Under the Mountain!”
“Lalkhîh.”

“The lasses will adore you.” The archer paused, staring at him closely. “Or, perhaps, there's only one lass now? A particular lass?”

Fíli groaned and shook his head.

“Kíli? I love you, nadadith, but I will hurt you.”

“That's what I thought,” Kíli smirked, his eyes dancing with mischief. “Oh, can you give me a matching scar? Seems a waste for you to have the thrilling story and not even be available. You'll break hearts from Erebor to Khagal'abbad. Ow!” he yelped as the elder prince's elbow sank into his side, but Fíli's heart did not seem to be in the lighthearted banter. Kíli stopped, his smile fading, and studied his brother's face. “Fi? What's wrong?”

The golden-haired prince sighed. “Trisk was right. I could have broken her.”

“You meant well.”

“Ah yes, the best of intentions,” Fíli agreed sourly. “And if it hadn't worked? If she had broken, instead of breaking free?”

“Fíli, listen to me,” the dark-haired prince told him earnestly, taking his brother by the shoulders and catching the blue eyes with his own. “Viska is stronger than that, and you know it. That's why you said what you did. You knew it would work, and that it would not destroy her.”

Fíli's eyes were bleak. “Did I? Know it?”

Kíli felt a cheeky grin flit across his face. “Oh, I think you know a lot of things about Viska, daughter of Kulvik,” he replied. “Whether you are conscious of it or not. Now, don't you think it's time you spoke to her?”

* X *

But Fíli did not get the chance to speak to Viska that night. Óin had just finished tending Thorin's extensive injuries and insisted on seeing to the princes next, smearing salves over the whip cuts and tutting at the one that had nearly taken Fíli's eye.

“Well, you'll have a lovely new scar, lad,” he commented as the elder prince hissed with pain and flinched away slightly. “Still, could have been worse, and the lasses like rugged scars.” Kíli sniggered and Fíli swatted at him, then moved to let the healer tend his brother's wounds. Bofur brought them their dinners and Fíli realized how late it had gotten. Most of the others were finishing up their meals and settling in for sleep, taking advantage of the fact that Thorin had decided to let all of them sleep the night through, since the Eagles would be on guard. Viska and Trisk were already stretched out next to the side of the mountain, as far from the edge of the eyrie as possible. The golden prince settled himself near his gear and stared out into the night, dark thoughts tumbling through his mind. Kíli had come through the last two days with minimal injury, though Fíli was well aware that that fact was due mainly to the interruptions provided by the discovery of Orcrist and the arrivals of Gandalf and the Eagles. Who knew what tortures the Great Goblin might have had planned for Thorin's heirs? He shuddered just thinking of it, of being restrained while his little brother suffered under the Goblins' whips and blades. His chest felt tight
and his breath hitched as he tried to block the images that streamed into his mind unbidden.

“Fí? Are you alright?”

He opened his eyes to see deep brown ones staring at him in concern. He nodded, letting out a deep sigh as Kíli stretched out next to him.

“I’m fine, Kí. Just...we came so close today. If Gandalf hadn’t arrived when he did...Mahal! When they dropped you in front of that beast, my heart stopped. I can’t lose you, nadadith.”

Kíli nodded in understanding and leaned in to touch Fíli’s forehead with his own. The elder brother closed his eyes again and reminded himself that they were safe – Kíli, Viska, Thorin, the whole Company was safe and mostly well. He finally felt his tense muscles beginning to relax and Kíli pulled away enough to lay down. Fíli followed suit, his exhaustion finally wearing him down.

Sunrise woke the Company the next morning, the first rays creeping over their faces. They stretched aching muscles as they prepared to face the new day. Meager belongings were bundled into packs, and a sketchy breakfast was scrounged from the previous night's leftovers before the leader of the Eagles returned to bid them good morning. Gandalf spoke quietly with Gwaihir for a few moments, while Bofur reminded his brother that the massive bird had not dropped him the night before and would not this time, either. Then the Wind Lord lifted away and Gandalf finally settled the matter by summoning the hefty cook to clamber onto the back of a strong young Eagle that appeared on the ledge. The others mounted their birds as the Wizard called them over, the Halfling joining him on Gwaihir's back at the last.

The distance that they traveled was not terribly far, as the Eagles fly, but it was quite satisfying for the Dwarves to see the land passing far below without the need to walk each tiring step. They were in good spirits when the great birds dropped them off atop a towering stone pillar on the far side of the Anduin at mid-morning. After a quick bite to eat, they began to make their way down the massive stairs carved into the side of the Carrock (for that was what Gandalf said it was called). The stairs were not proportioned for Dwarves, so it was a long, wearying process to work their way down to the ground. New injuries were gained, and old ones were agitated (Thorin's Warg bite broke open and bled sluggishly), and their earlier high spirits had dropped down around their boots by the time they were safely on the prairie. After consultation with Óin and Gandalf, Thorin decreed that they would go ahead and rest for the night, though it was only the middle of the afternoon.

“I think we can risk a fire, if you are careful with it,” he told Glóin. The merchant nodded, using a knife to carve out a large section of sod for the fire-pit.

“Shall Visk and I hunt? See if we can at least bring back a few rabbits?” Kíli spoke up quickly, eyes sparkling.

Thorin nodded. “Take Fíli with you.”

Kíli nodded and winked at his brother as he dropped his pack. The older prince glanced at Trisk, but the silversmith simply shrugged, apparently willing to let him speak to Viska if she would permit it. Fíli nodded a thanks to the other Dwarf, then turned to join his brother and the silent jeweler as they left the camp.

No sooner were they out of sight and hearing than Kíli turned to the others with a stern look on his face.
“You two need to talk. Now. I'll do the hunting.”

And with that, he disappeared into the trees, moving with the stealth that made him one of the best hunters in Ered Luin. Fíli sighed and met Viska's gaze briefly. The lass had her head cocked curiously, waiting for him to speak, her eyes unreadable. His found the ground as the words tumbled out of his mouth.

“I want to apologize. For how I spoke to you in the Goblin cavern. I just...I didn't know how else to get you to move. You were frozen, terrified. I could see every memory of the raid on your village flashing behind your eyes, but you wouldn't move.” He took a deep breath, closing his eyes for a moment, then opening them again quickly as the memories rose up. “So, I threatened you. I shouldn't have, but everything was happening so fast that I didn't know what else to do. I thought your brother was going to stab me afterward, and maybe he should have. I understand if you cannot forgive me. What I said, what I did, was loathsome. I want to apologize, nonetheless. Just, please, don't leave the Company. Even if you never want to see me again after, you deserve to be with us when we take back Erebor.”

The last sentences were said in a breathless rush, and he had his gaze fixed on his own hands as he toyed idly with one of his many blades, strangely terrified of the judgment he expected to see in her eyes. After an endless moment, a gentle hand clasped his wrist and he looked up into her face. And for the first time, he could actually see her face. The scarf was pulled away, the gray hood pushed back. The angry scar that ran from her forehead to her right cheek had healed over the past weeks and was beginning to fade, as was a burn scar on the left side of her face. Her chestnut hair was not yet long enough to really braid, but it was soft and wavy, with hints of the auburn of her brother's. Silky dark hair was growing back at the edges of her jaw. The dark bruises of the near strangulation that Trisk had described were long faded, but Fíli couldn't keep from looking for them. Her skin was pale, after so long hidden from the sun, contrasting with the darker skin on her exposed hands. Finally, he was able to see the smile that went with the sparkling humor in her eyes. It was a kind smile, a little sad, but compassionate. Fíli opened his mouth to speak, to apologize again, but she shook her head at him, holding up a hand for silence.

“I forgave you before we ever left the Goblins' tunnels,” she told him. His eyes widened at the sound of her voice, rusty with disuse, barely above a whisper. “You're right, I was frozen, paralyzed. All I could see was the Goblins who attacked my home, reaching for me with dirty claws and lewd smiles. But then you were there, and you were raging for me to defend myself, and I realized that I was not alone. I had you, and my brother, and Kíli, and something snapped. Trisk says I went a little berserk, and that is probably true. I don't remember the battle – I don't remember anything until we ran out into the sunlight, and I knew we were safe. Gandalf was there, and we were safe under the sun, and the sky was the exact shade of your eyes.”

Fíli had just been thinking something similar – that her eyes were the precise color of leaves in shade – and he suddenly realized that he had a rather foolish smile on his face. Viska met his gaze and he watched the blush creep up her neck to stain her cheeks with red.

“Trisk told me he spoke to you, that he was so enraged by what you had said. I begged him to leave you alone, because I understood, but he is my brother, and he would not leave it. And he came back after, stunned that you had accepted his every chastisement. 'He hates himself for it, Viska,' he told me, 'and yet he said he would do it again if the circumstance required it, to save your life. I don't think I could ever punish him more than he already does himself.' But I already knew that, for I had seen the grief in your eyes even as you said it, looking as though you were ripping your own heart out.”

He felt his face growing warm and realized that he was probably blushing nearly as much as she
was. The only thing that could make this moment more nerve-wrenching was -

“Is it safe?”

- Kíli. Right on time. Fíli closed his eyes and huffed with embarrassment, then opened them again to stare at Viska when he heard her give a throaty chuckle. She smiled at him and his heart stuttered in his chest.

“How have you two kissed and made up yet?”

And the moment was gone. Kíli charged back into the small clearing clutching two fat pheasants. Fíli shook his head and glanced at his brother. The young archer was glancing between them, his dark eyes narrowed suspiciously.

“I think life would be much easier if I was an only child,” the elder prince grumbled softly. Kíli smiled cheekily.

“But it would not be nearly as much fun! Now, is everything sorted?”

Viska nodded, tucking her scarf back into placed and pulling her hood up.

“All is well,” she murmured, startling Kíli with the sound of her voice. “I was never angry with your brother, he just did not believe it.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
lakhîth – little/young fool (Khuzdul)
nadalîth – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Khagal’abbad – The Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
In Empty Lands

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

11

IN EMPTY LANDS

The small hunting party found a few more pheasants before they returned to camp, where they handed their catch to a grateful Bombur. Fíli and Kíli joined several of their companions telling tales and jokes, while Viska returned to her brother, unsure of his mood. Trisk's temper of the night before seemed to have evaporated, however, and he simply nodded when she told him that the elder prince had apologized.

“You weren't angry with him anyway. Don't look so surprised, Visk, I know your moods,” he commented with a small smile. “It is over and done.”

* X *

Dinner was finished and Viska was nearly dozing as she leaned back against the base of the Carrock. Across the fire, Fíli sat with several of the others, golden braids shining in the flickering glow, silver beads tossing off sparks of light. Blue eyes danced with humor as his kind mouth quirked behind the braided mustache. The smoke rising from his pipe carried a robust, homey smell, and when he threw back his head, the rich, rumbling laugh that erupted from his chest made her smile.

“Visk?”

A concerned voice at her shoulder jolted Viska back to herself and she felt a flush crawling up her neck as she looked at her brother. Amused hazel eyes met green as she fought the impulse to bury her face in her hands. Trisk cocked an eyebrow and cast a look across the fire to where Fíli was joking with his brother and Bofur, then looked back at her. This time, she did bury her face for a moment, trying to disguise it as a need to adjust her scarf and hood.

“How were you in your own little world,” he teased quietly. “Something distracting you?”

Go away.

“Are you sure you don't need any brotherly advice?”

Trisk yelped as she punched him in the side and scrambled to her feet to take their empty bowls over to Glóin. She couldn't help stealing glimpses of the fair-haired prince as she went, and her heart stuttered when he glanced up and caught her eye, smiling broadly.
“Visk! Care to join us?”

She shook her head briefly and hurried back to her seat, settling back against the stone and closing her eyes.

_You're acting like a fool_, she chided herself in the privacy of her own mind. _He is your friend, nothing more. Don't try to make it more, or you will doom what you have. It's an infatuation, and it will wear off soon. Don't embarrass yourself._

* X *

“What'd you do to offend the lad, Fíli?” Bofur asked with a grin as Viska moved away from them through the campsite. The prince shrugged, carefully masking the disappointment that had surged through him when she declined his invitation.

“Maybe he's just tired. Anyway, go on with your story, Bofur.”

The miner needed little encouragement and was soon quietly regaling the group with one of his tall tales. His friend safely occupied, Fíli glanced across the fire.

What little was visible of her face was cast in shadow, only her eyes showing, glinting in the firelight in the moment before she closed them. He had only seen her face the once, but what he did see on a regular basis was engraved in his mind. The deep green eyes, sparkling with humor. The way her eyebrows quirked when she was joking. The scar from the goblin raid that ran from her forehead to her cheek, now healing. The tilt of her head as she listened to him talk. The nimble strength of her hands as they moved through the signs of iglishmêk, or gripped her sword, or dropped a stone into her sling. He had seen her smile now, a sweet curve of lips that lit her entire face, and he treasured that memory even as he hoped to see it again.

“Mahal, brother, you are lost.”

The soft laughter of his dark-haired pest jolted Fíli out of his reverie and he realized that his eyes had drifted closed, and he had been humming softly to himself as he let his imagination recreate Viska’s smile. Most of the Company was still engrossed in Bofur's tale (which sounded like it was drawing to a close), but Kíli's gaze was fixed on his face, a knowing smirk on his lips.

“Who're you thinking about, _nadad_?” he asked teasingly, his voice a bit louder than necessary. “Deka? Or perhaps Nuli? Which Blue Mountains Dwarrowmaid dances in your mind halfway across the world?”

Fíli's brow furrowed. His brother knew that he did not care for either of the mentioned lasses. Then he realized that Kíli was nodding subtly toward where Thorin sat, watching them with a small smile. The elder prince snorted and shook his head.

“As if I would tell you,” he growled. “I still remember how you teased me when I winked at Brís.”

“As I recall, you _kissed_ her.”

He rolled his eyes. “On the cheek. Once. And I was drunk.”

Kíli scoffed. “You'd had two ales, you weren't drunk.”
Dwalin guffawed. “He was forty. After two ales, he was drunk,” he corrected.

Fíli flushed as the rest of his companions roared, but he couldn't help sneaking a glance at Viska. Her eyes were open again, and sparkling, the edges crinkled with mirth.

“All right, time for everyone to get some rest,” Thorin announced, quieting the Company. “Fíli, Kíli, you have first watch.”

Fíli nodded and got to his feet, following his brother as he climbed the small hillock that they had marked out as a good vantage point. They settled in, back to back, and gazed out into the darkness, letting their eyes adjust as the others bedded down. The elder prince could feel his brother fidgeting and knew he would be talking soon. Fíli smiled into the night.

“Thank you for covering with Thorin,” he murmured, feeling the flush rise to the tops of his ears. Kíli snickered.

“Trisk is going to gut you if you keep staring at her like that. Thorin will be the least of your worries.”

Fíli did not respond, and after a moment, his brother sighed.

“You really do have it bad,” he said softly, leaning back against the elder's shoulders. “But it is amusing to watch the two of you watch each other.”

A jolt of surprise went through the heir. “Wait, what?”

Kíli covered a bark of laughter with a cough. “You didn't realize? She watches you as much as you watch her. You're just both very careful not to be caught looking.”

Fíli groaned. “Mahal. Trisk really will gut me. He isn't actively angry, but I'm sure that I am not his favorite person since Goblin Town.”

The younger prince shrugged. “I don't know. I think he'll warm up to you again. But I doubt that he is ready to consider you for the role of brother-by-marriage.”

“Wouldn't be his Choice,” Fíli muttered rebelliously, startling even himself. His brother choked on another laugh.

“Don't get ahead of yourself, Fí. First, you two need to be able to look at one another. You know, at the same time.”

They sat in companionable silence for a while, listening to the snoring chorus of thirteen sleeping Dwarves, a Wizard, and a Hobbit.

“I always kind of thought that I would be first,” Kíli commented eventually, a small laugh in his voice.

“First what?”

“First to get teased about a lass. I figured it would be you teasing me mercilessly over a pretty smile, and I would have to wait years for my revenge.”

“Years?” Fíli asked, a bit indignantly.

“Well, you are the cautious one, the one least likely to let his emotions tell his good sense to take a
hike. I thought I would do something ridiculous, start mooning around after the most unsuitable maiden, and Uncle would lock me in a dungeon for the next hundred years.”

Fíli laughed at the image. “It would not have surprised anyone in the least,” he admitted. “Still wouldn’t.”

His brother chuckled and settled back in place, silent for a long moment.

“For what it is worth, if she will have you, I will be happy for you, Fí.”

Fíli’s reply was half laugh, half sigh. “Thank you, little brother. I think you’re getting a bit ahead of things, but I appreciate the support.”

* X *

Dawn found the Company waking with grumbles and complaints as they stretched sore muscles and checked two-day-old wounds. Ever-mindful of the Orcs that would be hunting them, Thorin gave them little time to make a breakfast of cold pheasant and then shoulder their packs once more. Setting their faces eastward, toward the distant edge of the forest, they continued their journey. Rearguard that morn had fallen to Kíli and Viska, and the two youngsters were on high alert as the group set out. The lass’s throat was feeling better than it had in months, and they were far enough behind their nearest companion (Óin, luckily enough) for her to risk a quiet conversation with the dark-haired prince.

“Kíli?”

“Hmm?” He seemed lost in his own thoughts, but glanced over at the sound of her hesitant voice, concern on his face.

“May I ask a question?”

“Certainly.”

“About Fíli?”

A sparkle lit his dark eyes and he grinned. “Even better! Go ahead.”

Her face flushed behind the scarf as she considered her words. “Does he have a lass back home?” she asked finally, haltingly. “In Ered Luin? Like one of those you mentioned last night?”

Kíli shook his head, eyes darting out over their surroundings. “No. Absolutely not,” he replied firmly. “Nuli is sweet, but she never stops talking. Even worse than me,” he added with a smile as she glanced at him with wide eyes. “She drives him mad. Deka...she has a bit of a mean streak. We’ve never gotten along with her. She’s spiteful and vindictive.”

“And the one he kissed?” she persisted, slightly surprised at the bolt of jealousy that ran through her at the thought. The young archer laughed.

“Bris? That was forty years ago, and he was rather drunk. I think she's wed now.” He grinned. “She is a good bit older than us, and it was a dare,” he confided. Viska nodded, a thousand confusing thoughts and feelings rushing through her.
“So he is unattached?”

“Officially, yes.”

Disappointment choked her and she closed her eyes. “And unofficially?”

Kíli glanced at her, his bright smile fading slightly as he took in the change in her demeanor. He rested a hand on her shoulder, squeezing gently. “Let me ask you something, namadith,” he countered quietly. “Are you unattached?”

She stumbled and shrugged, refusing to meet his gaze. “I’m older than you,” she pointed out irrelevantly. He snorted.

“But shorter, so it stands. Now, answer the question.”

Viska sighed. “Officially, yes.”

“And unofficially?”

Green eyes met brown, then flitted away quickly. “I might find my interest focused on a particular Dwarrow,” she admitted after a long moment. Kíli nodded and released her shoulder, returning his gaze to the surrounding landscape.

“And I’m guessing he is not raven-haired?” he teased quietly. “Blue eyes? A bit on the short side? Rather stubborn, and prone to getting trampled by Wargs?”

“Compassionate, kind, and understanding,” she countered a little indignantly. “Endlessly patient with his annoying little brother.”

“A walking arsenal? And rather enamored of you?”

That stopped her in her tracks.

“What?”

Kíli snickered. “He watches you as much as you watch him. It’s rather adorable, actually. I’d have a splendid time teasing him if we were back home and not trying to keep it a secret that you are a lass. Actually, that might make it even more fun, now that I think of-Ow!”

* X *

The prince’s yelp of pain caught Óin’s attention and the healer glanced back in concern, shaking his head with a small smile when he saw Kíli hopping on one leg while he rubbed at his shin and glared at the young jeweler indignantly. Visk, for his part, looked far too innocent as he returned to his task of keeping an eye and ear out for the hunting Orcs.

* X *
Thorin did not permit a stop at midday, pointing out that they had nearly nothing to eat, anyway. Still wary of the Orcs, the Company only grumbled a little as they continued their eastward trek. Less than an hour later, the first howls rose behind them. Trisk spun in concern, spying Kíli and Viska in the rearguard position. The archer had an arrow nocked, while the lass protected his flank, sword in hand as she scanned the horizon.

“Pull in!” Thorin ordered, summoning the Dwarrows into a defensive huddle on the open plain. The sounds of the pack were still far distant, but all of them held their weapons at the ready as they studied their surroundings.

“We've nowhere to go,” Balin murmured.

“And we won't stand a chance fighting them in the open,” his brother growled. Thorin nodded wearily, deep in thought.

“I know of a house nearby where we might seek refuge,” Gandalf spoke up quietly.

Thorin huffed and pinned the wizard with his stern blue gaze. “And who does it belong to, this house?” he asked. “Are they friend or foe?”

That look was back on the wizard's face – the one that said he knew they were not going to like his reply. “Neither,” he answered with a sigh. “He will help us, or he will kill us.”

“Well, that's encouraging,” Glóin muttered.

“What choice do we have?” the king asked resignedly.

More howls rose behind them, closer, and Gandalf shook his head.

“None.”

Triskel was of the opinion that this expedition had required entirely too much running for a group of heavy-boned Dwarves. Fleeing the Orcs and Wargs in the Angle, the Goblins in the tunnels, Azog's pack on the slopes of the Misty Mountains – it was more than any self-respecting child of Mahal should be expected to suffer. And yet, here they were, pounding through the wide plains east of the Anduin, their goal a house of dubious safety where they might find either succor or death, on the advice of a Wizard. Trisk would have been swearing if he'd had the breath to spare. Since he didn't, he invented new, colorful expletives in his mind as he narrowly avoided a large hummock. He could hear the baying of the Wargs – their trail was discovered, but it sounded like they had won a little space. It would not last, but they could do their best to use it while it did.

* X *

The Orcs caught up to them at dusk.

Their goal was finally in sight – a large, rustic house behind a high, thick hedge with a solid wooden gate. The younger Dwarves were in the lead, just behind the Wizard, Kíli's longer legs carrying him slightly ahead of Fíli, while Viska was close on the golden prince's heels. Trisk and Ori came next, the scribe having passed his older brother (to Nori's surprise). The thief, Bofur, and
Dori hauled Bilbo along with them, with Balin, Óin, and Bombur just behind. Thorin, Glóin, Dwalin, and Bifur brought up the rear, weapons in hand as they ran. Bifur spotted the first Warg riders and called out a warning in Khuzdul that had Thorin and Dwalin cursing. The princes slowed, turning toward their uncle as Kíli reached for his bow and Fíli slipped the throwing axes from their ankle straps. Out of habit, the siblings from Emyn Uial slowed with them, leaving Ori to continue on behind Gandalf.

“GO!” Thorin bellowed, waving them on with Orcrist. “Don't you dare stop!!”

Wrenching her own sword from the sheath on her back, Viska watched the brothers exchange a look, Kíli's brow quirking as Fíli shook his head almost imperceptibly. The dark prince nodded, one hand flitting over his shoulder for an arrow as the first Orcs came within range. The young Dwarf planted his feet and began loosing arrows as fast as he could aim, knocking two Orcs down and wounding a Warg in a few heartbeats. Four more Orcs fell with the small axes buried in their skulls or throats before Fíli took up a position to his brother's left as Viska fell in to the right, both with blades bared.

Then a pale form crested the rise they had just left, and Azog paused to survey the scene before him. The foremost of the pack were closing with Thorin and his warriors as the rest of the Company drove for the house, pushing Ori and Bilbo ahead of them. Gandalf had halted at the gate, waving the Dwarves in as they arrived. Viska's heart chilled in her chest as the pale Orc's gaze flickered over the plain, a sneering smile spreading across his face as it lit on the defiant huddle that was the princes and their companions. The Defiler called out an order in Black Speech and several of his followers spread out to flank the group of older warriors who faced them, circling around toward the youngsters. Thorin, back to back with Dwalin and fighting fiercely against a feral Warg, did not even look around.

“DORI! BOFUR! Get them out of here!! Trisk, Visk, GO! That is an order from your king!”

Viska sheathed her sword, gave Kíli a breath to fire the arrow that he had nocked, and then caught the younger lad's coat collar and pulled him around, practically throwing him to Bofur as the miner reached them. Dori and Trisk grabbed the elder prince's arms and hauled him toward the hedge. Both lads struggled, yelling in protest as they were forced from the field, but their friends ignored the curses and shoved them through the gate just as a roar like thunder broke over them.

The lass risked a glance back – Dwalin, Glóin, Thorin, and Bifur were fighting furiously as a massive furry shape hurtled around the far corner of the hedged fence. Bypassing the Dwarves, it plowed into the Orcs with the unstoppable fury of a landslide, snarling and snapping. Viska froze, terror rooting her to the ground as she battled an insane urge to laugh at the blatant shock on Azog's chalky face. Dimly, she was aware that Thorin and the others had seized the distraction and were running for the gate. Kíli had stopped fighting Bofur and was now pulling at the back of her coat.

“Come on! Move your ass, Visk!”

“Move it, laddie!”

The panic in her friends' voices finally cut through the haze and the Dwarrowmaid spun to follow them. Behind her, the Orcs and Wargs were absorbed in fighting the furred behemoth, shrieks and yelps of pain filling the air. Dwalin was on Viska's heels as she ran for the building, and she heard Gandalf slam the gate shut as the last Dwarf made it through, but they did not stop until they were inside the house, heaving a massive bar into place to secure the door. Only then did they relax, panting, legs quivering with exhaustion.

“What was that?” Ori demanded, his eyes still wide and panicky.
Viska looked back to see Bilbo hastily sheathing his Elvish blade while Gandalf looked rather pleased with himself.

“That is our host,” he replied, smiling slightly at their incredulous reactions. “His name is Beorn, and he is a skin-changer. Sometimes he is a great tall Man, other times he is a huge black bear. The bear is unpredictable, but the Man can be reasoned with.”

“You couldn't have mentioned that a bit earlier?” Dwalin snarled.

“When?” Trisk asked with a bark of laughter. The big warrior glared at him and the silversmith shrugged. “We were a bit busy running,” he pointed out. “And it's not like we had a choice.”

“He has a point, brother,” Balin spoke up, having gotten his breath back. He tipped Trisk a wink and waved off any further grumbling. “We’re here now, and safe for the moment. Gandalf knows what he’s about. It's too late to change our minds, besides.”

Kíli was staring at the door in fascination. “Is he under some enchantment?” he asked curiously.


“He's under no enchantment but his own. He is also not over-fond of Dwarves, but he has a deep hatred for Goblins and Orcs, so I believe he will help us. Get some sleep. You will be safe here tonight.”

Sleep sounded like the best suggestion that had been made in days. Finding the nearest pile of hay, Viska dropped her gear with a groan. Trisk appeared at her elbow, his eyes dark with exhaustion, giving her a worried look. “Are you alright?”

She nodded, plopping down on the hay.

_Tired. I seem to say that a lot._

“Well, it's true,” he sighed. “Every time we get a chance to rest, it's followed by a period of running for our lives.”

“Oof!”

Kíli had dumped his gear and flung himself down on the scattered hay with a dramatic groan. “I can't feel my legs. And I think my stomach is chewing on my spine.”

“You're always hungry, _nadadith._” Fíli commented, letting his pack fall on his brother's midsection so the archer yelped and doubled over, rolling onto his side. “There might be some dried fruit in my bag. Help yourself.”

“Fruit? What am I, an Elf?”

“I'm sorry, I thought you were hungry. If not, I'm sure some of the others are.”

“Oh, all right,” the dark prince pouted. “You're no fun when you're grumpy.”

The swordsman sighed and sank down next to him, leaning into Kíli's shoulder. “Not grumpy so much as tired. Sorry, brother.”

“S’alright. Here, have some dried peaches.”

“Thanks. So kind of you to share my food with me.”
“Fíli! Kíli! Report!”

The brothers sprang to their feet at the sound of Dwalin's barked summons, eyes wide and startled as they glanced at one another in confusion. The big warrior waited with Thorin at the door to a smaller room off to the side of the hall, where a soft glow of lamplight spilled over the threshold from inside the chamber. As they hesitated, the weapons trainer growled impatiently.

“NOW!”

Fíli straightened his back and hurried across the hall, his dark shadow at his heels. Viska watched with concern as they followed the king and the warrior into the room and the big door slammed shut behind them. She glanced at Trisk, who shrugged, worry in his hazel eyes.

“They’ll be fine,” he assured her, sounding only half-convinced himself.

* X *

Thorin stood behind his commander, keeping silent as he watched his nephews' faces in the light of the lantern.

“What did you think you were doing?” Dwalin demanded, fury in his face. The princes stared back at him in shock.

“Fighting,” Kíli replied, incredulous.

“Defending our king!” Fíli retorted.

“Looked to me like you were endangering your king, and everyone else!” the warrior roared. “Your king gave you an order, and you disobeyed it. Is that how you behave in battle? Ignore your commander's orders because they aren't want you want to do? Azog wants to wipe out the Line of Durin – that means Thorin, and that means you! He killed your great-grandfather, and possibly your grandfather. He led the Orcs that killed your uncle Frerin. What part of 'don't you dare stop' sounded like a flamin' request? Visk and Trisk stopped to protect you fools, Dori and Bofur had to go back for you, because you defied orders! That display out there made me regret ever speakin' up for you when your ma said you were too young. Those weren't the actions of soldiers, but of spoiled princelings, sure that their blood will protect them from the consequences of their actions.” Dwalin stopped to take a deep breath, scrubbing at his face with one hand, then shook his head. When he spoke again, his voice was marginally gentler.

“I know you lads are brave, and eager to prove yourselves, but being a good warrior is more than fighting for your king. It's being where he needs you to be, when he needs you to be there – whether it's fighting at his side, or hightailin' it to safety. You didn't just risk your lives out there. You risked your uncle's, because he was distracted when Azog sent his troops for you. You risked mine, and Glóin's, and Bifur's, because we were counting on Thorin to be focused on the battle, watching our backs. You risked Visk's, and Trisk's, because those lads would stand by you before Smaug himself. And you risked Dori's and Bofur's, because they followed orders and came back for your sorry hides!”

Neither lad had uttered a word during the big warrior's diatribe – Kíli's dark eyes had widened with every statement until he looked like a wounded pup, while Fíli's face had paled until he was roughly the color of parchment, the whip wound from the Goblin caves standing out vividly. He
had actually flinched when Dwalin mentioned them risking the lives of the lads from Lanzhindîn with their disobedience, and Thorin nodded. He had hoped that pointing out the danger they had created for their friends might help drive the lesson home.

“Well, have you anything to say for yourselves?”

“No, sir,” Kíli replied softly.

The king and his commander stared at them in surprise. Never could Thorin remember seeing Dís’s sons look so remorseful. Fíli's eyes had a haunted look, and Kíli's shone with tears that the lad refused to shed. As one, they sank to their knees, heads hanging.

“We have shamed our uncle, and our line,” Fíli added hoarsely. “You are right. We disobeyed our king's orders and risked the lives of the Company for our own pride.”

“Arrogance,” Kíli corrected, his voice barely audible. “We were fools. It will not happen again.”

Thorin sighed deeply. “Oh, I daresay it will.” He stepped forward, leaning down to raise their faces with a hand beneath each lad's chin, making them meet his gaze. “You are young – you are allowed your moments of foolish pride from time to time. But not in battle. Not when it risks the lives of your companions. Commanders are in command because they have experience and age to balance their view of the battle.” Offering each of them a hand, he pulled them to their feet and into a tight embrace, resting his forehead against theirs. “You are skilled warriors, none can doubt that, but Azog is old, and crafty, and utterly ruthless. He marked you out on the cliffs when you came to my aid, and he will seek you out again. I cannot lose you.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Lanzhindîn – The Hills of Evendim (Khuzdul)
The rest of the Company was doing their best to ignore the distant thunder of Dwalin's voice in the
next room as they bedded down. Beorn's hall was large and open, lit by carefully tended lanterns in
the raised living area that filled the high ceilings with gathered shadows. The furnishings were
decorated with simple abstract designs and rough representations of wildlife. The other half of the
open space was dedicated to the animals, where sweet-faced goats and placid cattle had settled into
the hay bedding. Most of the Dwarves had their gear spread out on piles of hay, digging through
their packs for any stray provisions they might have missed, as they were unwilling to do any
rummaging in the skin-changer's home without his permission. Trisk found a few flattened travel
biscuits in the bottom of his and shared them out, and a few of the others contributed dried fruits
and packets of jerky. Balin carefully set aside a small portion for each of the four who were
otherwise occupied and the others ate what they had, hoping Gandalf was right in thinking that
Beorn would be willing to help them in the morning.

Most of the Dwarves were already snoring by the time Fíli and Kíli emerged from the room where
they had been closeted with Dwalin and Thorin, the king and the Arms Master following shortly
thereafter. Both princes looked weary and worn, but they managed smiles for Bilbo when the little
Hobbit approached them, looking concerned.

“We're fine,” Kíli assured his friend, accepting the food that Balin pressed into his hands. “Just a
lecture on our inability to follow orders.”

Trisk did not comment as the lads settled in the hay near him and quickly ate their dinners. Viska
was already asleep, curled on her side with her back to the room. The fair-haired prince glanced at
her, his eyes shadowed, before meeting the silversmith's gaze.

“I feel like I spend half of my time needing to apologize to you,” Fíli confessed quietly. “We put
you, and her, in danger tonight, and for that, I am deeply sorry.”

Kíli nodded, his dark eyes awash with regret. “Dwalin was right, we're fools,” he mumbled. “We
could have gotten half of the Company killed.”

Trisk shook his head, smoothing the blanket over his sister's shoulder. “I think your uncle and
Dwalin made their point. Besides, it was our choice to stand with you. We could have kept going.
We disobeyed as much as you did – you just have the bad luck of being princes and primary
targets. You owe us nothing. We are proud to stand with the Line of Durin. Now, get some sleep. I
imagine we will have to meet this skin-changer in the morning.”
Fíli fully expected to fall asleep as soon as he lay down, his head pillowed in hay, his brother and friends already snoring nearby. But instead of dozing off, he found himself staring at the wood beam ceiling, thinking over the recent conversation with Kíli regarding Viska.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw her face as it had been that night after the Carrock – the small smile that teased the corners of her lips, the soft curls of chestnut hair at her temples. He had seen Dwarrowmaids more striking or classically beautiful back home, but there was something about Viska that spoke to his heart. Her wholesome, open face...the challenging green eyes...the gentle, wistful smile. Even the scars seemed simply a part of her, earned in defense of her home and her people.

“You're doing it again.”

An amused whisper broke into his thoughts and his eyes flickered open. Kíli was propped up on an elbow next to him, dark eyes dancing with mischief.

“What?”

“When you think about her, you start humming – this deep sound down in your chest,” the younger prince replied quietly. Fíli threw one arm over his face and groaned in embarrassment.

“How long have I been doing it?” he demanded quietly. Kíli chuckled.

“I don't know. I just noticed it after the Carrock.” He grimaced and corrected himself. “Actually, Thorin noticed, and that brought it to my attention. That's why I made that comment about Deka and Nuli, so they would come to mind if anyone else noticed. It sounds vaguely familiar, but I cannot quite place it. What is it?”

“I'm not even aware that I'm humming, what makes you think that I know what I'm humming?” the elder retorted. Kíli snorted a laugh and hummed a little of the tune. Fíli lowered his arm and stared at him, his brow furrowed in puzzlement as memories crowded his mind....

* X *

Seven-year-old Kíli is fast asleep next to him, but twelve-year-old Fíli has a question to ask – one that has recently started occurring to him. Usually, the familiar tune hummed in his mother's rich voice sends him quickly to sleep, but not always, and he has become aware of late that there are often tears in Amad's eyes when the song is done. The music tugs at something deep in his heart, and the fact that his brave, strong mother is brought to tears by a melody means it is something worth investigating. The only time he can remember seeing Amad weep was in those terrible months after Adad went to the Halls of Waiting.

“Ama?”

Dís starts and dashes the tears away before answering. “Yes, love?”

“What's that song?”

She smiles, a tender, haunted smile that is usually reserved for sad but beloved memories, and
reaches out to brush the unruly golden hair out of his face. “That is the Song of the Mountain, my Fíli. Amad’s adad used to hum it to her and Uncle Thorin and Uncle Frerin when they were very small.”

“What are the words, Ama? You never sing the words.”

“Because there aren’t any, sweeting. It is just a melody.”

This is a new concept to a Dwarfling raised in a heritage rich with songs that tell tales and recount history. “What kind of song doesn’t have words?”

“An old one. Members of our family have hummed this song since the founding of Erebor, our home in the Lonely Mountain.”

He stares at her in awe. “The one in Uncle's stories?”

She nods, a tiny smile teasing the corners of her mouth. “The very one.”

“It's an Erebor song?”

“Yes.”

He frowns, his excitement dimmed by a sudden thought. “Then why doesn't Uncle hum it?”

She sighs and bows her head, taking his tiny hand in hers, calloused and gentle. “Because it makes him sad. He misses Erebor.”

“Don’t you?”

“Yes, and it makes me sad, too.” She is smiling again, but now it is tender and loving. “But it also makes me happy to be able to share the song with you and your brother, like I shared it with Adad. It is a song that the heirs of Durin will always share with those they love most, even if Erebor is forever lost.”

* X *

Fíli shook off the memory and met his brother’s curious gaze. “It’s the Song of the Mountain, the one Amad used to hum to us at bedtime. Don't you remember?”

Kíli's eyes lit up. “Of course! The one that bothered you because it didn't have words. I always loved that song.”

“So did I. And apparently, I still do. Amad told me once that it was a song that Dwarves of Durin's line would always share with those they...cared about.”

Kíli was silent for a long moment, and the elder brother braced himself for the cheeky comments that were no doubt forthcoming. Eventually, though, the archer simply nodded and smiled, with none of his usual sass. “Well, that's food for thought, then.”

“Anyway, I thank you for the cover story,” the swordsman muttered, glancing at him.

Kíli shrugged and settled back into his blanket, closing his eyes. “That's what brothers are for.”
Fili snorted. “When you aren't teasing me yourself, of course.”

“Of course.”

* X *

In the morning light, the hall looked even bigger, the rough beam ceiling high above their heads and the well-worn furniture nearly twice the size of similar pieces in a Dwarven home. Viska stayed asleep for as long as she could, burying her head in the straw when the sound of someone chopping wood began drifting through the window, and pulling her pack over her head when the others began to stir. Finally, a hand clamped on her belt and hoisted her to her feet. Trisk laughed as she glowered at him, picking straw out of her hood and adjusting her scarf.

“You and the burglar are the last ones to wake. Come on, Gandalf says it's time to meet our host.”

The rest of the Company was gathered by the back door, Bofur up on a large chair as he peered out the window.

“We don't want to overwhelm him,” Gandalf was saying, a note of warning in his voice. “The last person to startle him was torn to shreds. So, I'll go first, and Bilbo, you'll come with me.” Viska rolled her eyes as Thorin, Fili, and Kili all but shoved the nervous Hobbit to the front of the group. Big brave heirs of Durin, indeed. “The rest of you, come out in pairs, a few minutes apart, but wait for me to give the signal. Bombur, you count as two, so you'll come out by yourself.”

The big tinker nodded glumly as Bofur gave his arm a sympathetic pat. As soon as Gandalf stepped out the door, Bilbo close behind, the Company sorted themselves out into pairs. The wizard's voice could be heard, though the words weren't clear, and it was soon joined by a deep, rumbling voice that sounded impatient. When Bofur finally spoke up from the window, waving Balin and Dwalin out, Viska took a deep breath and glanced at her brother.

“Nothing to fear, yeah?” Kili muttered quietly behind her. “Just a Man who changes into a bear.”

“And makes Gandalf nervous,” Fili noted, as Glóin and Óin started out the door.

“Did he say that the last person to startle him got torn to shreds?” Trisk asked under his breath. Ori squeaked as Dori propelled him outside.

Viska had encountered Men before – her village had been mostly Dwarves, but some Men had lived there, and there were often traders passing through – but Beorn was unlike anything she had ever seen, towering over even Gandalf. There was an air of untamed wildness to him, though he made no threatening move toward the Dwarves. An edge of amusement seemed to be replacing his irritation by the time she and Trisk went out to join the others, but he still looked fierce enough that she was glad that they were staying well back. The Wizard was giving a summary of their adventures in the Misty Mountains, ending with an apology for leading the Orc pack directly to Beorn’s door. The skin changer dismissed the incident with a shrug, setting his ax aside.

“It has been long since they dared to come so close,” he commented, studying his guests. “And it will be longer before they dare to again. Orc heads and Warg pelts decorate the boundary of my land now, as a warning. Which reminds me.” He nodded toward where several arrows and four
familiar throwing axes lay on the seat of a large chair. “Some among your party have excellent aim. It seemed a shame not to return weapons used so well.”

The princes, nearly the last of the Company to emerge, gave small smiles and ducked their heads in thanks as they retrieved their weapons. Then Thorin stepped out of the cabin, and the fierce eyes focused on the Dwarf king.

“So,” Beorn rumbled. “You are the one they call Oakenshield. It appears that we have much to discuss. Come, inside. There is plenty of food to spare, even for so hungry a group of guests as Dwarves. And perhaps you can tell me why Azog the Defiler is hunting you.”


“The Dwarves are not the only ones to suffer at the hands of the pale Orc,” the skin-changer replied, a look of faraway sorrow in his eyes as he led the group inside. Viska took a seat on a low chest, watching their huge host as he set out milk, bread, and honey for his guests. “My people used to live in those mountains, before the Orcs and Goblins came.”

“There are more like you?” Bilbo asked, intrigued. Beorn sighed heavily.

“Once, there were many.”

“And now?” Bilbo's question was more subdued this time, as though he knew the answer he would receive.

“Now, there is only one. The Orcs killed many of my folk. Others, they imprisoned for sport. It is long since I escaped, but my memory is undimmed.”

A warm weight in her lap startled Viska and she glanced down to see that one of the goats had shoved a furry head at her coat, snuffling curiously at her clothes. Smiling gently, the Dwarf lass scratched behind the nanny's ears and clucked at her affectionately. Beorn glanced at the Dwarrowmaid, then turned his gaze on Thorin.

“You make for the Lonely Mountain. You would take it back from the dragon.” It was a statement, not a question, and the Dwarf king merely nodded.

“We must arrive before Durin's Day,” Gandalf agreed. “The last day of autumn.” Beorn shook his head.

“You are running out of time.”

The wizard sighed and nodded. “That is why we must go through Mirkwood.”

A look of dismay or disgust flitted across the skin-changer's face. “A darkness lies upon that forest. Fell things creep beneath the trees despite everything that the Brown Wizard tries to keep them in check.” He locked eyes with Gandalf and the lass read a warning there, one that she felt certain that the Dwarves were not expected to notice or understand. “There is an alliance between the Orcs of Moria and the Necromancer in Dol Guldur in the southern part of the forest. I would not venture there, except in great need.”

Gandalf nodded, but offered his compromise. “We will take the Elven road. That way is still safe.”

“Safe?” Beorn's thick brows rose. “Safer, perhaps, but not by much. The Wood Elves of Mirkwood are not like their kin. They are less wise, and more dangerous.” He surveyed the Company once more and sighed. “But it matters not.”
Thorin's sharp eyes swept up to his face. “What do you mean?” he demanded, anger in his tone.

“Beyond my boundaries, these lands are crawling with Orcs,” came the somber reply. “Their numbers grow daily. And you are on foot. You would never reach the forest alive. I don't like Dwarves,” he commented, scooping a mouse off of the table that Bofur had been shooing away from his plate. “They're greedy, and blind to the lives of those they consider lesser than themselves. But I hate Orcs more. They are the enemies of all living things.” He looked up, amber eyes meeting sapphire as he stared at Thorin. “What do you need?”

“Ponies to carry us to Mirkwood. Provisions,” the king replied bluntly. He glanced around at the Company. “And a day of rest before we leave, if we are not too much of an inconvenience,” he added, sighing.

“You will need your strength to travel through the wood,” Beorn agreed. “And ponies I have, though you must send them back once you reach the forest. I will not have them passing under those trees. Rest, Durin's folk. I will send you on your way with what aid I can provide on the morrow.”

* X *

Thorin knew that the Company needed to rest before they could continue their journey. They were weary and nearly out of supplies, with healing injuries and strained nerves after the events of the past few days. He himself was still coming to terms with the fact that Azog was alive. All very good reasons to spend a day resting at Beorn's home. But the Durin's Day deadline hung over his head and he itched to be on his way, so he was getting little to none of the benefits of the delay for himself. He could not rest, mentally champing at the bit.

“We need this, Thorin, you as much as anyone. Stop glaring at the world. Ori's half-afraid of you as it is, and I'm not entirely sure about Master Baggins.”

He snorted and turned his glare on Balin, only to have his old friend give him a serene smile in return. Thorin sighed and shook his head, a reluctant grin teasing the corners of his mouth.

“I hate sitting still,” he confessed, turning his gaze back to survey the Company. “I know we need the rest. I know that a delay now to let everyone recover will save time in the long run. I just-”

“I hate sitting still, I know,” his adviser finished for him. “I've known you your entire life, Thorin. I am well aware of your active nature. I cannot believe that you ever wondered where your nephews got their energy. They remind me of you and Frerin as lads. Only you had a larger group of friends to drag into trouble in your wake.”

The king shrugged and gave him a sideways glance. “Made it easier to find someone else to blame it on,” he retorted with a sly smirk. The mention of his sister-sons set off a new line of thought, however, and he glanced over to where dark head and fair were bent close in soft conversation. “Do you think we were too hard on them, Balin?”

“No.” The elder Dwarf shook his head firmly, but there was a fond, affectionate expression on his face when he looked at the lads. “They are young, but this quest is unforgiving of youthful mistakes,” he replied, looking weary beyond measure. “Azog lives, and Smaug may as well. They are brave lads, and skilled, but they need discipline to survive.”
“I always worry that I am being too hard, or not hard enough.” The king spoke softly, thoughtfully. “They are young, but they are Sons of Durin. Skilled, but inexperienced. I want to protect them, but they must stand on their own feet if they are to follow me as leaders of our people.”

The elder Dwarf smiled. “They didn't grow up on the road during the Exile, taking on too much responsibility too early. Wasn't that your goal when you settled us in Khagal'abbad? Letting the young lads and lasses stay Dwarflings? They are not spoiled – you've seen to that. They are young, and inexperienced, and time will see to both. Trust in the training, Thorin, and in their blood, and the spirit they inherited from their mother,” Balin told him gently. “They are your sister-sons, and we four – you, Dís, Dwalin, and I – have taught them everything they could learn without putting the lessons to the test out in the world. I think you were wise to point out that they risked the safety of others, especially Kulvik's lads. They are much like you in putting others before themselves.”

Thorin nodded, glancing at the lads from Emyn Uial, near his heirs as ever. “At least those two had the sense to help drag them to safety.”

“Loyal as their father.”

There was a long silence between the two old friends before Thorin finally spoke again.

“Do you think that we will find it, Balin?”

“The door? Yes, if we get there in time.”

“The Arkenstone.”

Balin sighed. “That, I cannot say. It may be buried beneath tons of gold, much less the dragon himself. You have to admit that the odds were never in our favor. We cannot defeat the dragon without Dáin's armies, but Dáin will not join us unless we retrieve the Arkenstone. We will have to go forward as we can, and make our decisions based on what we find.”

* X *

The Company was scattered through the lands of Beorn's compound as the sun reached its highest point, each relaxing in his (or her) own way. The princes found Bilbo sitting with his pipe under a tree in the bee pastures, a peaceful smile on his face as he blew smoke rings and watched them drift away.

“That looks like a lovely way to spend an afternoon,” Kíli commented with a smile. “Could you spare a pinch of pipeweed?”

“I believe I might,” the Hobbit replied, pulling a pouch from his pocket. He glanced at Fíli and cocked an eyebrow. “Any for you, my lad?”

The crown prince hesitated, then shook his head.

“Not right now, Mister Baggins, though I thank you for the offer. I think I will wander a bit.”

He nodded briefly and hurried off, leaving Bilbo rather surprised. Kíli felt a small smile creep across his face as he settled next to the Halfling and lit his pipe.

“Well, that is unusual. I rarely see you two apart. Is he well?”
The archer nodded. “He just needs to clear his head. And what about you, Mister Boggins?” he added, his dark eyes twinkling with mischief. “How are you finding our friend Beorn's hospitality?”

Ignoring the jibe, the Hobbit leaned back against the trunk of the tree, sighing in contentment. “Lovely, actually,” he admitted. “This place reminds me of the Shire. Though our bees are a bit smaller, of course.”

Kíli nodded, remembering the little he had seen of his friend's homeland. “It seemed a quiet and comfortable place, your Shire. Is it really so peaceful as it appears?”

Bilbo appeared to think for a long moment. “Well, yes. Oh, there is personal drama from time to time – not every Hobbit can get along with every other, of course.” He flushed slightly. “I admit I even have relations that I would rather avoid. But it is a quiet land – a gentle country, focused mainly on its own small doings. I daresay we are rather an insular folk. And there is much emphasis on respectability.”

The younger prince grinned, imagining an entire community of folk like the genteel, proper burglar. “And I imagine that you are quite a respectable Hobbit.”

“Well, I was. Never had any adventures. Until Gandalf showed up at my door, followed by a troop of Dwarves!”

“Hobbits don't like adventures?” Kíli asked curiously.

“Oh, no, certainly not,” Bilbo assured him, laughing a little. “Adventures, quests, journeys, expeditions – all quite frowned upon in respectable Hobbit society.”

“Then how on earth did Gandalf persuade you to come?”

“Ah, well...I'm not from the most respectable line, you see. Or at least, not entirely. My father was a Baggins – quite a stolid, dependable family. But my mother...ah, dear Mother was a Took, and the Tooks are rather like the Brandybucks, in that both of those families are rather infamous for producing adventurers and explorers. They are lucky that they also tend to be wealthy, so certain things can be overlooked.”

The Dwarf lad pondered that thought for a moment. “Or perhaps they are wealthy because they have members who are willing to do a little adventuring?” he offered. Bilbo looked slightly surprised, then shrugged.

“Perhaps.”

“So what convinced you to join us, if your folk dislike adventures so? You are no Dwarf, to be drawn by gold and riches.”

The Hobbit laughed. “Apparently, my Took blood is stronger than I ever imagined. I never thought my life lacking until you lot descended on my cozy smial and turned it upside down.”

“Do you ever regret coming along?”

There was a long pause this time, but the Hobbit finally sighed and shook his head. “Not anymore. I miss home, of course, as Thorin noted, and I will be happy to return when it is all done. But I would not have missed this for the world. The friendships more than the danger, of course. I could have done without the Goblins, and the Wargs, and I hope that Beorn's help will let us get ahead of the Orcs so the worst will be behind us.”
Kíli turned sharp eyes on his smaller friend, not having missed the first part of the answer.

“You said 'not anymore.' So you did regret it, before?”

“Yes,” Bilbo admitted. “I do not think that you lads were awake to hear it, and Bofur has not spoken of it, but I almost left the Company in the Misty Mountains.”

“When? Why?”

“Just after the Stone Giants. In fact, I was saying good-bye to Bofur when he noticed my little sword glowing blue. Then the Goblins' trap was sprung.”

“Because of Thorin?” the archer asked shrewdly, remembering the unpleasant scene that Trisk had described after Bilbo nearly fell off of the mountain path. The Halfling nodded.

“Partly. Mainly because I felt he was right. I did not belong, and I was more hindrance than help. Then came the Goblins, and I thought perhaps I could help you all, once I escaped. Actually prove myself as a member of the Company.” He sighed and gave a defeated little shrug. “But I couldn't even stand up against one Goblin, and then I fell into the tunnels....” He trailed off, shivering slightly in the warm sunshine. Kíli eyed him with concern before speaking again.

“Whatever happened down there, Master Baggins? You never told us.”

Bilbo shook his head and studied his pipe. “A lot of wandering in cold, deep tunnels, thinking that I would never see the light of day again. Perhaps I will tell more later. I know Gandalf wants to hear the story, and Thorin. Perhaps I should just explain it all once and be done with it. After dinner.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
amad – mother (Khuzdul)
adad – father (Khuzdul)
Ama – nickname for mother, like mommy (Khuzdul)
Khagal'abbad – The Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
Fíli left his brother in quiet conversation with Bilbo and went looking for Viska. He had thought he might find her in the soothing presence of Beorn's animals, but she was nowhere to be seen. Finally, he had to approach Triskel and ask where he might find her. Her brother gazed at him steadily for a long moment, eyes narrowed in thought.

"The apple orchard," he finally answered. "With Ori."

Fíli nodded and thanked him, then hurried off. The apple orchard was not far, and the smell of the ripe fruit carried on the afternoon breeze. The prince spotted Ori first, waiting at the bottom of a tree with a basket full of the bright red fruit. Viska was up in the tree, moving from branch to branch with the agility of a squirrel as she selected the best she could find. Ori glanced up and smiled at Fíli's approach, holding up the basket proudly.

"Beorn's apples are already ripe, though it's early for them anywhere else. We thought the Company might like a pie tonight," the young scribe told him brightly. "Bombur agreed to make it if we harvested the apples."

"Sounds like a plan, Ori," Fíli replied with a smile. "I think you might have enough to get some of the others started on peeling and coring, though. Why don't you run the basket back to the house? I'll make sure Visk doesn't break his neck falling out of the tree."

Ori nodded agreeably, glancing up at the other Dwarf. Viska had stopped moving about in the tree as soon as Fíli spoke, and now sat on a large branch, staring down at him inscrutably, green eyes glittering above the scarf. She nodded briefly when Ori asked if the arrangement was acceptable, then returned her gaze to Fíli as the older Dwarf hurried off. Fíli stood under the tree, staring back up at her silently.

"You're not coming down, are you?" he finally asked with a small smile. She shook her head. "Do you mind if I come up, then? I'd rather not shout so the whole Company can hear." Viska shrugged, then waved him up, setting her back against the trunk. She did not offer any assistance as the prince scrambled up, picking his way carefully from branch to branch until he sat quite close. He settled in to a semi-comfortable spot and sat looking at her for a long time before either of them spoke.

"You look troubled, my prince," Viska finally commented softly, loosening her scarf and pushing her hood back to let the breeze tease her chestnut hair. Fíli grimaced and shook his head. "Don't you start, or I'll be calling you 'fair maiden' every time I speak to you in private," he threatened. She chuckled softly.

"Fair enough. Truly, what is bothering you, Fíli?"

He sighed and stared out at the blue sky through the leaves of the tree, memories of actual events
and dreams twisting through his mind.

"I keep having nightmares," he finally admitted. "They make it a bit hard to sleep."

She nodded, her face full of sympathy and understanding. "Me, too. Is it the Goblin caves?"

He shrugged. "Sometimes. Kíli being tortured, or worse. But sometimes..." he trailed off, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath that he held for a moment before letting it out again. "Sometimes, it's the cliff, and Azog. Thorin falls, and Bilbo does not save him, and we are too late. Mahal, if the burglar had not jumped out like that, we would have lost him. My uncle would have died, the quest would have been over." He laughed shakily, realizing how skewed his priorities must sound, but there was no judgment in the Dwarrowmaid's face, only confusion.

"Over? Why? Do we not have two other Sons of Durin?" she asked curiously. "To lose Thorin would be devastating, unthinkable, yes...but you are Thorin's heir and the mantle would pass to you. You would lead the Company to Erebor to retake and restore it."

Fíli shook his head, rejecting the idea immediately. "No. Thorin should be king. I do not want that burden. Not yet. Perhaps not ever. Gandalf seems to think that something is building – some great darkness – and he wants Erebor to help stand against it." He heard her startled intake of breath and glanced at her with a small smile. "What? I do listen, even if the Wizard speaks only to my elders," he chided gently. "He whispers of Dol Guldur, the ancient fortress of the Enemy. If Mordor were to rise again, Gondor and Rohan could not stand alone. If Thorin fell, I would do my best, but I would need the Arkenstone. And even then, would old warriors like Dáin follow me?"

That kind smile spread across her face and she shook her head. "The seven houses are sworn to follow he who holds the Arkenstone. Even I know that. But more, I think you underestimate the loyalty you inspire, Fíli," she commented, her eyes bright. "Not just as Thorin's heir, or a Son of Durin, but as yourself, Fíli, son of Torvi and Dís. You would not be alone. Kíli would be at your side, always. Your cousins as well, Balin, Dwalin, Óin, and Glóin."

"You? And Trisk?"

"Of course, but we have no family connection, no noble blood to strengthen your rule."

"Sometimes friendship is benefit enough," he replied quietly.

"That, we can offer. Friendship and loyalty unto the end of days."

He did not answer, a small voice in the back of his mind reminding him that friendship wasn't exactly the feeling that he had for the lively Dwarrowmaid. Oh, it was a good part of it, but not the strongest part. He cleared his throat, wondering if he dared broach the topic here and now, and glanced at her apprehensively, only to find that Viska wasn't meeting his gaze – her attention seemed to be a bit lower – which was understandable, since he was suddenly unable to keep his eyes off of her soft-looking lips, quirked in a tiny grin. He realized abruptly that her face was extremely close. And it did seem a shame to waste that proximity, not to mention the second time that he had ever gotten to look at her properly. It would only require leaning forward a little bit further...

...her lips were cool, and soft, and pliant, and kissing him back with innocent fervor...

...until he lost his balance and plummeted from the tree, nearly landing on his brother.

"Ouch!"
"Fíli! What on earth were you doing up a tree?"

Fíli shook his head, but his brother was peering up into the branches, where Viska was smiling down at them, looking a bit dazed.

"Oh!"

Fíli groaned at the broad grin that crept across his little brother's face. "Don't say a word, nadadith," he warned darkly. "Just help me up."

The older prince was back on his feet in time to reach up and catch Viska as she made her final descent. Catching her sturdy waist with strong hands, he set her down on the ground and stood staring into her face for a long moment. Mischief entered her sparkling eyes and she reached up and tapped the bead on one of his mustache braids, setting it swinging. He smiled and kissed her gently on the forehead, then stepped back as she tucked her scarf into place and pulled her hood up. Kíli was leaning back against the apple tree, looking very smug for some reason.

"I take it you've been having an interesting conversation?" he asked with a smirk. Viska nodded, the edges of a blush still visible above her scarf, and he reached out to give her a brotherly hug.

"Good. We'll need to be heading back to the house. Bombur appears to be baking a pie, and Thorin wants to leave early tomorrow morning. All we need to do now is get to the Mountain by Durin's Day, open the door, get rid of the dragon, and then we can retake Erebor and get you two married!"

Kíli looked very proud of himself...for about fifteen seconds. That's how long it took Fíli to process exactly what his brother had just said and launch himself at the dark-haired prince, flushing in embarrassment. Viska leaned against the tree and laughed until she could no longer stand, tears streaming down her face. It took a while for the brothers to get sorted out, and a bit longer for her to catch her breath for the walk back to Beorn's home, and they never realized that the last little part of their conversation had been seen, if not heard.

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Ori had intended to come back for more apples, but Bombur had assured him that there were plenty for the pie and to pack into their supplies, so he had decided instead to head back to let Visk know that he could come down out of the tree. He didn't realize that Kíli was there ahead of him until Fíli fell out of the tree and nearly squashed his younger brother. Ori stopped, realizing that he would not need to fetch them after all. Just as he was about to turn and head back to the house, though, Visk appeared, and the young scribe realized that the silent lad's face was uncovered...and he didn't really look like a lad at all. He looked more like a lass. A lass that Fíli reached out and helped from the tree, his hands lingering on her waist a bit longer than necessary. A lass that Fíli gazed at as though she was a dream, and kissed tenderly.

At that point, Ori turned and ran back toward the house, his mind spinning. Visk, a lass? And the young princes knew? He was certain that Thorin did not. There was no way the king would have knowingly allowed a lass on their quest. And Ori certainly wouldn't be the one to tell him. But he had to tell someone. So when he met Nori on the way back, and realized that his sneaky elder brother was the perfect confidante, he blurted out the entire story in a single breath. To his surprise, Nori simply nodded.

"Well, that explains some things," he commented quietly. Then he shot a look at his young brother. "Don't go blabbing to Dori, though. You know he'll tell Thorin. I think we should keep this between ourselves for now. Don't even let the lads know that we know. She's a good fighter, lass or no, and an asset on this mad expedition. There's no need to disturb the balance so close to our goal."
Dinner was fresh fruits, rich mead, and warm bread smeared with honey, with Bombur's apple pie to finish it off, and it appeared that even the Hobbit had enough to eat, as he only had a single small slice of dessert. Afterward, the Company settled themselves in front of Beorn's massive fireplace, smoking their pipes as the skin-changer told tales of the wild lands in which they now found themselves. He had just finished one such, and the Dwarrow were discussing what story of their own that they might offer in return, when Kíli spoke up abruptly, pointing at Bilbo with his pipe.

"Actually, our burglar had said that he might share his tale from when he got lost in the Goblin tunnels," the prince commented quietly. Gandalf sat up straight, looking extremely interested and turning a sharp gaze on the Hobbit. Trisk chuckled to himself as Bilbo suddenly looked a bit discomfited at being the center of attention, but the little fellow finally shrugged and nodded.

"I did say that," he admitted. "I hope you'll forgive me a rather plain telling. I'm not nearly the narrator that Master Beorn is, so it will be simple and to the point." He paused, looking deep in thought, then sighed.

"It was rather a horrible experience, if you must know. I slipped away when the Goblins were capturing you all – I suppose I was small enough not to be noticed, and I thought I might be able to do something to help if I managed to stay free. So, I ducked out of sight, and then tried to follow after. But I ran into a Goblin, and it attacked me. I lost my balance and fell off of the walkway, managing to take the Goblin with me. My sword was glowing, as Gandalf said it would in the presence of Orcs or Goblins. Something broke my fall, obviously, or I would have died. Still, I think I blacked out for a mo-"

"Fainted," Nori whispered loudly. Several of the others laughed quietly and Bilbo only rolled his eyes.

"I blacked out," he continued. "And when I woke, a strange, wizened creature with huge pale eyes was dragging the Goblin away, hissing and muttering to itself. So I followed for a while, using my sword as a bit of light until it guttered out, which I guess meant that the Goblin was dead. Then the creature found me, and I managed to convince it to play a game of riddles. If I won, it was to show me the way out."

"And if it won?" Glóin asked curiously. Bilbo hesitated.

"Well...it was going to eat me, like it was going to do with the Goblin."

"And you agreed?!" Dori demanded. The Hobbit shrugged.

"What choice was there? If I didn't agree, it would have just killed me then and there!"

"True enough," Dwalin granted. "So, you won?"

Bilbo nodded. "Eventually, but by sheer luck. I ran out of riddles faster than I thought that I would-"

"Isn't that always the way?" Bofur sighed.

"...and ended up asking what I had in my pockets. Gollum insisted on three guesses."

"Gollum?" Ori asked in confusion.

"I got the impression that that was what he called himself," Bilbo explained. "Well, that, and
'precious.' So, I gave him three guesses, and he failed, so I won.”

"That wasn't quite a riddle," Bombur pointed out quietly.

"But he had demanded that I 'ask a question,' so it was within the rules," the burglar countered.

"So he showed you the way out?" Fíli asked, looking a bit doubtful.

"Well, no. In fact, he was quite a sore loser, and started ranting and screaming about eating me anyway. So – I hid. And when he went through the tunnels looking for me, I followed him."

"And he did not see you?" Trisk shared Fíli's doubt. Their burglar had proven himself light on his feet, but this Gollum seemed to have been a particularly wily creature. Bilbo glanced at him.

"I was very quiet, and stealthy," he replied evasively. "So, I followed him, and slipped by the Goblins, and rejoined you on the slopes of the mountains."

"Just in time to hear me being most ungracious about your character," Thorin put in dryly. The Hobbit smiled slightly and shrugged.

"Well, you weren't really wrong, and I had been planning to leave...but I meant what I said. I want to help you on your quest, so here I am."

"Hark on Master Boggins having adventures of his own without us! I almost feel left out," Kíli pouted. Balin arched an eyebrow.

"As I recall, while Master Baggins was having his adventure, you and your brother were being dragged before the Great Goblin to be tortured simply because of being blood kin to Thorin. That wasn't exciting enough for you?"

Kíli gulped and shuddered at the memory. "Well, when you put it that way, I could actually do with a bit less excitement," he replied.

Trisk resisted the urge to glance at his sister as flashes from those terrible hours in the darkness below the Misty Mountains danced through his mind. A gentle hand clasped his shoulder and he looked up to meet her understanding gaze. He nodded wordlessly and turned back to the conversation, but Thorin was emptying his pipe and glancing around at the Company.

"We will start early in the morning," he informed them gruffly, "so I would suggest everyone get to sleep soon."

Most of the Company settled down for sleep quite quickly, but the youngest Dwarrow (Ori, the princes, and the siblings from Emyn Uial) were still full of high spirits. Bilbo's tale had inspired them to start dredging up scary stories from their Dwarfling days, and it quickly turned into a competition of who could spook the others...until Bifur threw the end of a loaf of bread and smacked Ori in the back of the head.

"Oi, you lot! Some of us would like to sleep tonight!" Bofur protested irritably.

"Sorry!"

Kíli's apology would probably have sounded more sincere if he hadn't been laughing merrily.

"Thorin, the next time yer nephews try to join us on a quest, I'm sendin' 'em home to yer sis tied in sacks," Dwalin grumbled.
The king-in-exile sighed. "I'll probably help you, old friend."

* X *

Viska could not sleep. She was tired, and she knew that she would regret it the next day if she did not manage to at least doze off, but every time she closed her eyes, she saw Goblins. Sometimes she was in the tunnels under the mountains. Other times, it was the attack on her home. Either way, leering Goblin faces haunted the darkness behind her eyes, and even trying to focus on the afternoon's conversation in the apple orchard failed to drive them away. Finally, she got up and crept over to the door. She had heard Beorn telling Gandalf that he would be ranging farther afield than normal, to try and clear the Company's path for the morning, so she felt certain that she would be safe so long as she stayed close to the house. Edging quietly out the front door, she took a seat on the edge of the porch, pushing her hood back and pulling the scarf down as she stared blindly out into the night. After only a few minutes, she heard the door open and close again, followed by a warm presence settling next to her. They sat in silence for a while, companionably close, before Fili spoke.

"I think that the smell of apples will always remind me of this afternoon in the orchard," he commented quietly. She smiled slightly, but did not reply.

"Nightmares?" he finally asked, a line of concern between his brows.

The Dwarrowlass shook her head, then shrugged. "Didn't even make it that far," she admitted quietly. "I see them when I close my eyes, even before I fall asleep."

"We shouldn't have told those tales," the prince fretted. "Sorry."

Viska chuckled. "Not because of the stories. I see them anyway. Not every night, but often enough. Some nights are just worse than others."

"Ah."

Another few moments of silence, and then he turned slightly to study her profile.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked gently, hesitantly. "You don't have to, but I want you to know that I am here, if you do. If not now, then later."

She nodded noncommittally, still gazing out into the night, a thousand thoughts whirling through her mind. Perhaps it was time. She doubted that telling the full tale would banish the dreams, but it could hardly make things worse. And she had a feeling that she might be able to set his mind a bit at ease, while at the same time unburdening herself just a little. Finally, she adjusted her seat so she could lean against the rail post and met his patient gaze.

"Trisk told you about the raid." It was not a question, merely a statement of fact, and he flinched slightly.

"I know you didn't want me to talk to-"

She raised a hand to cut him off. "No, I understand. What did he tell you?"

Fili looked slightly ill as he thought back over what the silversmith had told him and Kíli. "Enough," he replied grimly. "The Goblins were stealing females from settlements in the area. When your home was attacked, you went out dressed as a lad, but deliberately drew their attention away from a younger lass."
Viska nodded, a small smile stealing across her face. "Tinsa. She was our neighbor, barely twenty-five. I used to watch her when she was tiny."

The prince’s face fell. "Was?"

"Was our neighbor, before we left," the jewelry-maker clarified. "She survived, with only a few injuries."

He smiled. "Thanks to you."

She shrugged uncomfortably. "Only partially. She did not panic, she was just unlucky enough to catch their attention as she fled. She did not even scream, simply ran for the nearest fighter."

"Which happened to be you," he guessed. She nodded. "And you led them to the community hall?"

"There were too many of them, so I distracted them and let Tinsa hide. I knew I could not fight so many. So yes, I went to the hall. It was already alight, but they followed me in. I hoped to be able to bring the roof down on them, but the section that fell only caught some..." She trailed off, lost in the memory, seeing the sneering, vicious faces in her mind. She shuddered and glanced at his intent expression before looking back out at the night, feeling his warm hand close gently over hers. "They were raging, clawing at me," she continued softly. "Shredding my clothing, pulling my hair out in chunks. One caught my scarf and started pulling. I nearly blacked out, but forced myself to lie still so they would think that I was already unconscious. Then, when they let go, I pulled free and cut it loose." Now her back straightened unconsciously and she met his gaze. "Then I emasculated the closest Goblins," she continued, matter-of-fact. "I kicked, bit, stabbed whatever I could reach. The hall was collapsing and I could not breathe. Then I reached the back door and pried it open. Trisk found me. I did not have to speak. He killed the few that made it to the door, then took me to the healers." She fell quiet again, feeling the track of a lone tear as it crept down her cheek. "When I woke, my father was dead."

Fíli was silent for a long moment, holding her hand tightly, the slight tremor in his muscles the only hint of the fury she had seen building in the usually gentle blue eyes. When he spoke, there was no inflection in his voice.

"They tried to rape you."

She nodded, then reached out to touch his cheek briefly, a gesture of comfort and affection. "They tried," she agreed. "And failed. And never will again. We received word a few days later that the Rangers had followed them back to their den and wiped the rest of them out." She sighed and looked back out at the night. "The Rangers found the remains of dozens of females – Dwarf, human, even a few Elves. All brutalized and murdered."

* X *

Trisk woke when Viska slipped back to her bed and was pleasantly surprised when she was able to fall asleep quickly. As soon as he was fairly certain that she was out, he crept quietly from his own bed and slipped out onto the porch. Fíli still sat there, staring out at the night, but he glanced back and raised a brow when he saw who had joined him.

"I actually expected to see Kíli," he commented with a small smile, "but he must actually be out for the night."

Trisk nodded, studying the golden prince for a moment before he sighed and shook his head.

"You both think you are so easy to overlook," he said with a grin. "Did you honestly think that I
wouldn't notice?"

Fíli blinked, looking startled. "Sorry?"

"Subtlety is not your strongest attribute, Fíli," the silversmith replied. "Of course, I doubt that most of the others notice. I am more attuned to attention paid to my sister."

The prince seemed to pale slightly in the moonlight. "I'm sorry, Trisk, I-"

The lad from Emyn Uial held up a hand to halt his stumbling confession. "Do not apologize. I am not angry. Viska is grown, and she knows her own mind."

Fíli cocked his head, his brow furrowed in confusion. "You're not going to warn me away?"

Triskel laughed and shook his head. "Bujbû Yasath. It is not my place." Then he smiled, a cold, humorless smile that Viska had once told him looked disturbing on his usually amiable face. Judging by the prince's reaction, she had been right. "I will promise you, however. Break my sister's heart, and you will have to deal with me."

* X *

The Company woke early the next morning to find breakfast waiting, along with their packs, now filled with provisions of honey, dried and fresh fruits, and cakes that Beorn had provided. The skin-changer himself was nowhere to be seen, but Gandalf assured them that he would be there to see them off.

"He was quite busy last night, making sure that the beginning of our route was clear," the wizard told them with a smile. "I doubt any Orcs linger nearby after seeing the great bear roaming."

"Wish he could come with us," Bofur muttered. "Might come in handy, a powerful beast like that. Be nice to have such on our side for once."

"I don't think that he is entirely on our side," Balin replied. "But our enemies are his enemies, and so he is willing to help us for now, for which we ought to be grateful."

"Oh, I am!" the miner assured him hastily. "Master Beorn's been very kind. Just thinkin' how much easier the road might be."

"Until Kíli annoyed him and Beorn decided to eat him!" Fíli commented with a grin, ignoring his brother's indignant protest as he crammed the last few bites of honey-smeared bread in his mouth and hoisted his pack.

Beorn was indeed waiting for them outside, along with the small herd of ponies that called his land home, a dozen beautiful black and white animals that nuzzled affectionately at the Dwarves' coats and stood patiently as riders and gear were loaded. With only twelve mounts available (plus a large gray horse for Gandalf), the Company loaded extra riders on some, and extra gear on others. Fíli and Kíli shared a mount, while Ori rode behind Nori and Bilbo with Bofur. The skin-changer loaded them down with many more water skins than they were used to carrying, but he glared at Dwalin when the big warrior started to protest.

"There is abundant water between here and the forest, but you must not drink anything that you find once you pass under those trees," he warned them sternly. "You will need these skins. Fill them before you enter the wood, or you may not survive to see the other side. And be sparing with the food, for you dare not leave the path or you will never find it again. Be sure to turn the ponies loose before you enter the forest – they will return home. Fare you well, Dwarves of Erebor, and
know that you have a friend here, if you should pass this way again.”

And so the Company of Thorin Oakenshield left the house of Beorn and rode east, toward the dark gloom of Mirkwood and the dragon-haunted realm of the Lonely Mountain.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
bujbû yasath – Maiden's Choice (literally "choice of the bride"), a tradition of Erebor where Dwarrow lasses do the choosing for courting and marriage (Khuzdul)
Beneath The Trees

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

14

BENEATH THE TREES

They had left the safety of Beorn's boundaries at midday, but remained unmolested, no sign of the Orcs that were surely hunting them. Bilbo Baggins was deep in thought as he rode behind Bofur near the back of the Company, recalling his tale the night before. It had been something of a relief to share the events in the Goblin tunnels, even if only partially. He remembered a saying of his mother's, something along the lines of “a burden is made lighter by the sharing,” and had to agree. Of course, he had not told his friends everything – and he still wasn't sure why not. His hand was once more fidgeting at his jacket pocket, and he frowned, pulling it away and staring at it in frustration. Why did the golden ring fascinate him so?

* X *

As he moves to follow the sneaking creature, a glint of metal catches his attention. Stooping, he finds a plain gold ring, heavy and smooth in his hand. He tucks it absently in a pocket and continues on, forgetting about it within moments. It is only later, as he fumbles desperately for another riddle in this game for his life, that his fretting fingers find the cool metal once more, causing him to blurt out a question, “what have I got in my pocket?” And so the game is won, quite by accident and a twist of the rules, but the danger is not yet over. The creeping Gollum reneges on his part of the bargain and Bilbo flees into the tunnels. Just when he thinks he is cornered (and likely dead), the ring slips onto his finger and the world goes a little dimmer. Gollum passes him by and the Hobbit gradually realizes that he is invisible. The ring has saved his life, and given him a way out, for he follows the creature until he sees sunlight and can follow his friends to freedom. They are surprised, and he finds himself strangely reluctant to explain what has happened, although Gandalf watches him closely. In the end, he offers a vague, evasive answer and reaffirms his commitment to the Company. And they are satisfied, but the burden of the gold ring settles in his mind as much as in his pocket as the journey continues.

* X *

Lost in his reverie, it took the Hobbit a moment to realize that he was watching a massive, dark shape keep pace with the Company at the edge of sight, barely visible as the sun began to set. It was unmistakably Beorn in the form of the bear that they had first encountered, and Bilbo felt a little safer knowing that their new friend ranged nearby.
It took three days of travel to cross the open plains, the looming shadow of Mirkwood growing ever more ominous. When they finally reached the edge, late afternoon on the third day, they found themselves reluctant to enter. Simply looking at the trees put Trisk on edge.

“This forest feels sick,” Bilbo declared flatly, a look of discontent on his face. “Can we not go around? Even Beorn advised against going through.”

“It's too far, and would take too long,” Fíli replied glumly, eying the trees with distrust.

“The forest stretches two hundred miles North, and twice that South,” Gandalf added, though the look on his face made it clear that he did not like the look of the wood any more than the others did. “North would take you close to the Grey Mountains, and they have not been safe for many a long year. South lie the lands of the Necromancer. The lands east of the Misty Mountains are not so gentle as the West, my dear Bilbo. There are no safe paths here.”

“Only a choice between dangers and the length of the road,” Thorin added in a low rumble, resting a hand on Fíli's shoulder. “No, Master Burglar, this is our road if we hope to reach the Mountain by Durin's Day. But you are right. I would take another if I could. We will camp here tonight, by the stream, and enter the wood by morning’s light.”

Trisk turned to help his sister unload gear from their ponies, catching a glimpse of Gandalf walking cautiously along the first part of the Elven path. Something about the wizard's hesitant steps and reluctant posture made the hair on the back of the young Dwarrow's neck stand up and he stopped to watch. Within a few moments, Gandalf strode back out to where the Company was making their camp and setting the ponies loose to rejoin the skin-changer. Nori was just starting on the wizard's horse when Gandalf spoke up.

“Not my horse!” he interrupted anxiously, startling the thief as he grabbed the reins. “I'll need him.”

“What?” Kíli asked, looking confused.

“Gandalf, you aren't leaving us?” Bilbo protested.

“I do not wish to, but I must.” He swung into the saddle, reciting an urgent list of cautions and warnings as he turned the horse's head back the way they had come. “Stay on the path – do not leave it, or you will never find it again. Fill your water skins before you enter the forest. You will find a river, but heed Beorn's warning and do not touch the water. Take the stone bridge. Remember, this is not the Greenwood of old. The very air of the forest is heavy with illusion and will seek to lead you astray. Keep the map and key safe, and I will meet you at the overlook, before the slopes of Erebor. Whatever you do, do not seek to enter the Mountain without me!”

And then he was gone.

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Viska had been under the eaves of Mirkwood, once Greenwood the Great, for less than half a day, and she was already tired of it. Judging by the path, Elves were completely incapable of thinking in straight lines. Didn't they know that they were the shortest distance between two points? Why must the trail wander and meander all over the place, rather than guiding them directly from the gate to the far side of this cursed, gloomy, darksome forest? It was difficult to remember that the sun had been bright in the sky when they entered the trees, that autumn was passing beyond its borders, bringing cooler breezes and brisk nights. Inside the wood, the light was dull and dim, the air thick and heavy. Time did not move, no breeze stirred. All seemed choked to a halt, resenting the intrusion of the Dwarven company, throwing any sound they made back at them like a hateful echo. The Elven path was hard to follow, broken and twisted as it was, and the webs that clung to the trees filled them with unease.

The lass's mind felt clouded, her thoughts thick and slow. She clung ever closer to her brother as they made their way through the forest, nearly treading on his heels until he stepped aside to push her ahead. The Company had started out chatting, telling jokes and tales and singing songs, but before the first night fell, conversation faded away. The dreary atmosphere of the wood stifled even Bofur's upbeat spirits. Dwalin and Glóin were the first to become irritable and snappish, to no one's surprise, but then the others began to follow suit. Soon, Óin was insisting that he could not breathe, and Dori was keeping up a steady litany of complaints as they walked. Nori kept reaching for the hilts of his knives, sharp eyes darting to and fro. Balin did not speak, but seemed to grow wearier with every step, shoulders slumped and head bowed. Bifur started at every new sound, his boar spear a dangerous obstacle to those around him. Bombur muddled along disconsolately at the back of the column, forbidden from snacking as they traveled, since they did not know how long the provisions would need to last.

The first night descended like a black curtain, smothering the Company in oppressive darkness so that even the night vision of the Dwarves was of little help. Glóin had started a fire in the middle of the path as the light failed, and they sat huddled around it as they ate a scanty supper. There was little conversation, for all of them felt the sensation of being observed, and they were loath to talk much beyond what was needful. Viska leaned against Trisk's side, more for comfort than for warmth, blinking owlishly in the firelight as she studied the forest around them. After a long moment, she realized that the forest was staring back – dozens of shining eyes reflected the flames in the dense undergrowth, though nothing more than the eyes could be seen. The Dwarf lass shuddered and shrank back into the comforting presence of her brother and companions.

“You see them, too?”

The soft question in her ear made her start and reminded her that the fair-haired prince sat on her other side, both comfort and distraction. She nodded silently, trying to ignore the way his warm breath on her cheek made her pulse race.

“Oi! Mahal's beard!”

Kíli ducked against his brother, waving his hands wildly as he tried to fend off huge dark moths that were fluttering around his head. Within moments, the air above the Company was filled with the flapping insects, smacking into their faces with hand-sized wingspans and thumping them about the ears with heavy bodies. Then the bats appeared, massive black flying rodents, diving after the moths. Ori yelped as one brushed by his face and Thorin swore loudly.

“Douse the fire! We'll never get any sleep this way!”

Trisk lunged forward, kicking dirt over the small fire to smother it. Darkness engulfed them once
more and the silversmith stumbled back to his seat, settling in on Viska's left.

“Is it even worthwhile to keep watch?” Nori asked quietly. Thorin sighed.

“It will do precious little good,” he admitted, “but still, we’d see any light approaching, or possibly hear something. Glóin, take first watch, then Dori, then Nori. Everyone, get some rest.”

“Aye,” the merchant agreed. Viska heard him moving around and could imagine him setting the large ax near to hand. Yawning, she leaned back into the huddle of warm bodies, smiling as she settled against a broad chest that rumbled with the familiar low humming. A moment later, a strong hand came to rest on hers, giving a reassuring squeeze as she sank into sleep.

* X *

“Easy, Visk, it's alright. Wake up.”

The soft murmurs and a gentle hand on her shoulder brought Viska to full wakefulness, struggling out of a twisted, nerve-wrenching nightmare. The lass blinked in the first glimmers of sunlight, sitting up abruptly. Fíli was at her side, kind eyes fixed on her face. To her other side, Trisk was stirring, while Kíli snored steadily, despite his head having slipped off of Fíli's shoulder to rest on a pack. The Dwarrowmaid caught her breath, tucking her scarf into place automatically.

“Alright, then?” Nori called softly from the far side of the fire. She nodded, shivering more from memory than the light chill in the air.

Nightmare. Sorry if I woke you.

The thief chuckled. “I was awake anyway, so you didn't bother me. And I daresay you weren't fidgeting any more than Kíli usually does, so I'm surprised that Fíli even noticed.”

The elder prince grinned and shook his head. “I didn't, until I got a fist in the gut,” he admitted wryly. “Were you fighting off Goblins? Or bats?”

Spiders, Viska answered with a shiver, glancing up at the thick webs in the trees above them.

“Now there's a lovely thought,” Trisk groaned as he stretched out cramped muscles and got to his feet. “I'd rather avoid the spiders, if at all possible, thanks.”

The rest of the Company was stirring with muttered protests as Fíli stood, offering Viska a hand up. Kíli snored on in determined slumber and the swordsman fixed him with a narrowed gaze before reaching down to slip the pack out from under his brother's head. The dark-haired prince's skull hit the path with a soft thump and one brown eye slitted open to glare reproachfully.

“Not fair, nadad,” the archer grumbled, pushing himself up to a sitting position. “I was sleeping.”

“You were faking,” Fíli corrected with a smile, tossing the pack to him. “Sun's up, time to rise.”

“I should at least get to sleep until Thorin is up,” Kíli retorted. A packet containing one of Beorn's travel biscuits smacked into his lap and the lad turned in surprise to see his uncle smirking at him from across the campsite.

“Thorin is up,” the king commented lightly. “Now, get moving.”
Kíli grinned and Viska found herself smiling behind her scarf. The affectionate exchanges between Thorin and his nephews were few, and oft time buried beneath sass and long-suffering sarcasm, but it was clear to anyone who knew them that they were bound by love. It softened the stern Dwarven king just slightly, and was sometimes enough to make her heart ache with the loss of her own beloved father.

Trisk tossed the lass her pack, then hoisted his own, turning to Nori curiously.

“Did the eyes disappear when the fire was out?” he asked, glancing at the surrounding foliage. The thief shook his head.

“There weren't quite so many when I took watch,” he replied. “But they didn't leave until just before it started getting light. Creepy little buggers. Couldn't identify half of them if I tried.”

The trip through the forest settled into a gloomy monotony and the days passed in depressing darkness. The Elven road was in poor repair, so they had to keep a sharp eye out lest they wander off of it, and the thick canopy filtered the light to a dim murk with never a break. The Company's spirits sank lower and lower as the days passed with no end in sight and their provisions dwindled. The food that Beorn had provided went quickly, despite the Dwarves trying to stretch it out as long as possible. They had no idea how long it would take them to escape the wood, and even then they would need to get to Laketown before they could replenish most of the supplies. The only possible game that they had seen were strange black squirrels, and the one that Kíli had been able to bring down had tasted horrific when they roasted it. They could hear animals, certainly, but everything else was too fleet of foot for even the Hobbit to spy, hiding in the shadows and underbrush, making odd scuffling noises and grunts.

The nights were no better. After a second experience with the moths and bats, they no longer even tried starting a fire, but sat in the deep darkness and dozed as best they could. They traded off keeping watch, for what good it did, staring into blackness where they could barely see their hands in front of their faces. The only things visible after the sun set were the eyes, all shapes and sizes, that watched them from the depths of the forest (and occasionally the trees, which occurrence had Bilbo yelping in dismay and waking half of the Company one night). More than once, Viska dozed off leaning against Trisk's back, only to wake before the first glimmers of dawn to find herself snugged into Fíli's side, her hand enclosed in one of his and tucked to his chest.

They found the enchanted river late on the fifth day, a sluggish, meandering flow of dark water. The stone bridge that Gandalf had described ended abruptly near the apex of its span, a great chunk taken out of the center that was too wide for Dwarf or Hobbit to leap. The Company milled around in agitation on the bank, searching for another way across. Kíli was eying the thick vines and roots that draped between the trees and crossed the waterway, but Viska caught sight of a dark shape on the far shore and pointed it out to her brother.

“There's a boat,” Trisk announced, peering through the gloom. “It's not very big, and I can't tell if it is tied, but we might be able to draw it across.”

“Shoot it, perhaps?” Dori suggested.

Kíli shook his head. “We don't have anything that would be long enough and light enough for an arrow to carry.”
Fíli was eying the boat and calculating the distance in his head. “Does anyone have a metal hook?” he asked quietly, taking a coil of thin rope from his gear. After a moment of rummaging, Nori produced the heavy hook that usually held one of the straps of his pack. The golden-haired prince tied it to the end of his rope and hoisted it thoughtfully. Spinning it several times to get some momentum, he released it and watched the metal arc over the stream, only to splash down just short of the dark shape on the far side.

“Try again,” Bilbo urged. “Just a bit more and you'd have got it. I daresay you'll be safe enough from the enchantment just pulling the rope out of the water.”

Viska saw Fíli eye the Hobbit doubtfully, but then he drew the hook and rope back onto the bank and wiped the metal off on his coat before raising it to spin once more. This time, the hook landed in the boat and he drew the rope back carefully until it caught. He gave a few short tugs to make sure it was secure, then started pulling in earnest. At first, the boat did not move, and Bilbo groaned.

“Perhaps it is tied,” he fretted. “It's hard to see in this gloom.”

“We might still be able to get it,” Kíli replied, stepping up to grab the rope and add his weight to the pull. Dwalin and Dori joined in quickly, and when the boat came loose, it dumped the four of them in an undignified pile on the bank of the stream. The boat was small, but looked sturdy, the broken tie rope dangling from the prow. After a quick consultation with Balin, Thorin decided to have them cross in small groups.

“How exactly are we going to get it across, though?” Bilbo asked. “There are no oars.”

“Kí, give me your rope,” Fíli ordered shortly. “Anyone have another hook?”

Dori gave up one of his this time, and it was tied to the rope, then hurled across the stream into the branches of a tree on the far side. Once it was secure, Fíli handed the end of the rope to his uncle.

Thorin crossed first, with Dwalin pulling the rope to haul them across and Balin holding on to the first hook while Glóin held the end of the rope on the bank. Once they reached the bank, the adviser secured the hook in the wood of the boat and tied the other rope to it so they could draw it back across. Bilbo, Fíli, Kíli, and Óin were in the next load, followed by Dori, Ori, and Glóin.

Nori, Bofur, Trisk, and Viska went next, leaving Bifur and Bombur last, in spite of the large cook's complaints at being last (again). Bifur climbed in with his cousin with no comment beyond a shake of his head and pulled the boat across quickly. As it bumped against the far bank, the toymaker scrambled out and stepped easily from boat to ground. Bombur, however, found himself suddenly unbalanced when his turn came and his step out became a stumble, which ended with him toppling toward the water.

“Bombur! Nadadith!”

Half of the Company lunged to catch the hefty Dwarf, knowing that they might never get him out of the river if he fell in. With their combined efforts, they managed to steady the red-haired tinker...but not before the damage was done. One grasping hand had caught Fíli's coat and pulled the young prince off-balance so that he slipped in the soft earth at the side of the sluggish stream and slid in with a yelp.

“Fí? Fíli!”

The heir scrambled to his feet, standing waist deep in the murky flow, one hand held out in warning. “I'm alright, Kíli, stay back! Toss me a rope, carefully. I don't want you falling in, too!”
Bifur tossed the end of the rope he carried and braced himself as the young Dwarf caught it and started hoisting himself up the bank. After only two steps, Fíli faltered, blinking in confusion and shaking his head as if to clear it.

“Kí? Thorin? I don't....”

He trailed off as his uncle and brother lunged forward, pulling him the rest of the way up the bank and easing him to the ground. He was unconscious by the time they set him down, chin slumped on his chest. Kíli crouched next to him, checking him over frantically as Óin hurried to his side.

“Fíli? Nadad?! Wake up!”

“Easy lad,” the healer cautioned, moving calmly as he checked the young prince's vital signs. “He's breathing, his heartbeat is strong and steady. He is simply asleep.”

“Asleep? Why?”

The archer's eyes were wide with panic, and Viska could feel fear pulsing through her heart. Trisk placed a steadying hand on her shoulder, his gaze fixed on Kíli.

“The water. Gandalf and Beorn both said it was enchanted.” The silversmith's voice was even and calm, an anchor for the two youngest of the group. “Óin says he is sleeping. Perhaps it will wear off, if we give it some time.”

* X *

He wanders in an unfamiliar forest, alone, listening to lilting, musical voices drift through the trees on the sunlight. The path beneath his feet is clear and well-maintained, easy to follow as it winds through the lush green foliage. The cheerful calls of birds drift down from the canopy, and he can see the undergrowth rustle occasionally as small animals dart by on their unending errands of survival. The young Dwarf closes his eyes and inhales deeply, filling his lungs with the scent of fresh air, rich earth, and green growing things...and if there is the faintest hint of other, fouler smells beneath the fair, it is noted only by the deepest part of his enraptured mind.

When he opens his eyes again, it is night. The trills of songbirds have been replaced by the low calls of hunting night birds, and the movements of the nocturnal hunters on the ground are stealthier and harder to see. Moonlight filters down through the leaves, and stars are visible through small gaps in the canopy as branches sway in the night breeze. The musical voices are louder, closer, raised in merriment, and he can see flickering firelight through the trees. Delicious aromas drift through the air, teasing his nose and making his stomach grumble – roasted meats and vegetables, savory stews, freshly baked bread. His mind conjures a brief image of the bread slathered with honey, as it was at Beorn's table, but one of the musical threads worms its way through the thought – Beorn? Who is Beorn? It is certainly not a Dwarvish name – and the vision slips away. The smell of the stew is so thick he can nearly taste it, and it brings another vision, this one of laughing green eyes beneath a gray hood as bowls of stew are eaten around a campfire. But again the unearthly music dances through his mind and drives the image away, and he lets it go.

* X *
“We will camp here tonight,” Thorin decided, his eyes never leaving the slumbering form of his eldest nephew. “Perhaps he will wake in the morning.”

“And if he doesn’t?” Kíli challenged, eyes snapping as he knelt by his brother. The king-in-exile met the younger lad's gaze in understanding and shook his head.

“Then we will carry him, lad, and count ourselves thankful that it is Fíli, and not Bombur, who sleeps. He will not be left behind.”

The archer's posture relaxed and he nodded to his uncle, looking slightly ashamed. “I am sorry, I-”

“You are worried about your brother, I know. Get some rest, Kíli. We will make a litter in the morning, if we must.”

The Company's spirits had been low since entering the forest, but now they sank even lower as they made a sketchy camp on the path and settled in to watch their princes. One slept, oblivious, his thick mane drying in a tangle about his face. The other, dark eyes shadowed with worry, sat beside him, one hand playing restlessly with a loose golden braid. Trisk watched in silence for a long moment before pulling Fíli's pack over and rummaging in it briefly. When he found the worn metal comb, he pressed it into Kíli's hand and closed the younger lad's hand over it. Kíli nodded in thanks and undid the damp braids so he could begin combing the leaves and twigs out of his brother's hair, humming softly under his breath.

* X *

Finally, he has reached the source of the music, the lights, and the mouthwatering aromas. A wide clearing opens before him, filled with torches, a blazing bonfire, and tables laden with dishes both familiar and exotic. Tall, graceful figures move among the tables as though they are dancing, long dark hair falling in shimmering curtains. A regal Elf with flaxen hair and eerie blue eyes sits at the head of the largest table, wearing a carved crown twined with autumn leaves and bright berries. He reclines at his ease, looking languidly arrogant as he watches his subjects, a goblet of wine held loosely between long fingers. The Dwarf lad feels an instinctive shiver of distrust at the sight of the Elven king (for surely it must be he), half-remembering tales of abandonment and betrayal, but the negative emotion does not linger. How could it, in such a place? The king does not acknowledge the arrival of the travel-weary Dwarf, nor do any of the other Elves. Their conversations, dance, and song continue without interruption as he pauses at the edge of the clearing, staring in wonder at the feast that lies before him. How long has it been since he ate enough to fill his belly? A deep, clear part of his mind is screaming for him to approach with caution, to be wary and suspicious, but the hypnotic music soon silences the tiny corner of clarity and he starts to step into the glade.

Another song catches his attention then, and he turns his head, searching for the source. It is a low, rich sound, and it cuts through the lighter, captivating music woven by the Elves. Where their melodies twist sinuous paths through his mind, this new one sings to his heart and soul, resonating in his very bones. It is the sound of home, of family, of cherished memory, of plans for the future. It is a song that he cannot ignore, delivered by the voice of the one who has stood at his side for nearly eighty years. A face appears in his mind, laughing brown eyes above a wide, cheeky grin, and a smile creeps across his own face in response, even as he has to search for a name. At long
last, it comes.

Kíli. That is Kíli. And he is my...brother? Yes, my brother. My little brother. He is Kíli, and I am....

His eyes widen and for the first time, fear creeps into his heart as he struggles to remember the combination of sounds that means him. It is Kíli's voice that helps, for he has heard that voice calling his name every day since the younger lad first spoke.

Fíli! I am Fíli!

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
- nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
- nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
The first creeping light of dawn teased Kíli's eyelids and pulled Dís's younger son from the thin sleep he had managed to find. Sudden memory flashed through his mind and he scrambled up to a sitting position as he turned toward his brother, hoping to see the blue eyes flicker open. But Fíli remained still, chest rising and falling steadily as he snored on in deepest slumber. Kíli's stomach sank and the smile that had already been growing faded immediately as his breath hitched and he closed his eyes against sudden stinging tears.

“Wake up, nadad,” he whispered, an edge of anger and desperation in his voice. “C'mon, Fíli! Wake up!”

“Kíli, easy.”

The soft, rough voice was only vaguely familiar, since its owner spoke so rarely. The dark-haired archer sighed and met Viska's worried, sympathetic gaze as she placed a calming hand on his. It was only then that he realized he had been shaking his brother's shoulders sharply, trying to wake him from the enchanted sleep. Groaning and scrubbing a hand over his face, Kíli slumped back on his heels, straightening Fíli's coat.

“I think we're going to need the litter,” he stated quietly, glancing across his brother to meet the Dwarrowlass's gaze. Her eyes looked slightly bloodshot beneath the hood, and he knew that she felt just as helpless and worried as he did – she just could not be as open with her concern. He got to his feet, then offered her a hand up, using the gesture to conceal a reassuring squeeze of her hand that was returned with a tiny nod. Trisk joined them as the rest of the Company began to stir, grumbling softly as they came completely awake. The three young Dwarves roamed a short way down the path, gathering materials for the litter, and returned to find Óin examining Fíli as the others finished getting ready to leave.

“So far as I can tell, the lad is simply asleep,” the healer finally stated, allowing an eyelid to slip back into place. “An enchanted sleep, but merely sleep. There should be no danger in moving him.”

Thorin nodded absently, his gaze on his nephew's face as Kíli smoothed the golden hair off of Fíli's forehead. Of the two princes, Fíli was the quieter sleeper, but this eerie stillness was beyond even him. Save for breathing, the lad did not move. If Kíli left his brother's hand resting on the broad chest, there it would remain until someone deliberately moved it again. Only Fíli's eyes moved, rolling restlessly behind his lids in dreams, but even that was sporadic rather than constant.

“We have the litter ready,” Dwalin murmured, his dark eyes sympathetic as he watched Thorin and Kíli at the young prince's side. Thorin sighed, then visibly shook himself out of his thoughts,
clasping a strong hand on the archer's shoulder as he raised his eyes to meet his old friend's gaze. The king nodded.

“Get him on it. We will carry him turn and turn about until he wakes. And he will wake,” he added fiercely, his fierce glare daring anyone to gainsay him. None did. Dwalin set the blanket-covered litter down next to the young Dwarf and eased the lad into place gently, tucking his arms in at his sides and smoothing the flyaway wisps of his hair. Kíli settled the scabbard with its twin blades at his brother's feet, then crouched between the handles of the litter. Without a word, Triskel moved to the other end, taking up the handles near Fíli's head, and they lifted the prince's sleeping form. Thorin nodded shortly and moved to the front of the Company, the ever-present Balin at his side as they resumed their journey. Dwalin marched behind his brother, his gaze watchful. Bilbo and Óin came next, with Trisk and Kíli close on their heels with the silent burden. Viska kept pace with Kíli, steering him with a gentle hand on his shoulder when his focus on his brother distracted him from the path. Ori was just behind them, his gentle face creased with concern as he watched the two move like mourners at a funeral. Nori and Dori flanked their youngest brother as though they expected him to be the next victim of the forest, but no one could blame them. Bombur trundled along looking deeply depressed, still blaming himself for the previous day's misadventure. His brother and cousin offered occasional quiet comments, or reassuring signs, but the rotund tinker rarely replied. Glóin brought up the rear, scowling suspiciously at every rustle of sound in the underbrush, a firm grip on his ax.

* X *

He stands at the edge of the clearing, fingers buried in his hair, feeling the neatly woven braids, his brother's voice drowning out the enchanting song of the Elves.

Fíli. I am Fíli! But who is Fíli? Kíli's brother?

Brother to Kíli, certainly. He knows that. It is an immutable part of his soul. But who else? What else? Son? Son of...

Dís! And Torvi.

He can see a dark-haired Dwarrowdam with a sad smile, her blue eyes shining with love, and a fair, bearded Dwarrow with Kíli's warm brown eyes. Dís and Torvi. Another part of the foundation of Fíli. He concentrates again. There is another tie, different...sister-son.

Sister-son of Thorin.

Another dark-haired Dwarrow, stern and proud. Thorin. And from there the memories trickle back a little more easily.

Son of Durin, Thorin's heir. This is me, this is Fíli. Crown-Prince-in-Exile. Erebor. Erebor is home. We are going home. We go to face Smaug. Fíli, Kíli, Thorin...Torvi? No, Adad is gone, dead over seventy years. Dís? Amad is back in Ered Luin, our home-in-exile.

Other faces fill his mind, some familiar as family, others newly-met.

Baggins, of the Shire! We are going to meet him. Or have we already?

*There is still confusion in his mind, and there is something else, another name teasing his memory...someone tied closely to his heart, but the bond is so new that the enchantment has blurred his sense of it. Green eyes, a gentle smile, an impression of defiant strength, and a low voice. The face will not form, but his soul knows this other and weeps for what is lost.*

* X *

After a few hours, Dori and Nori took over carrying the litter, although Kíli was reluctant to give up his place. He finally agreed to walk to the side instead, fingers twisted into the sleeve of Fíli's coat as he alternated humming that haunting, wordless song and talking quietly to his brother of everything and nothing. Trisk and Viska walked on the other side of the litter, the latter occasionally reaching out to steady it unnecessarily, never noticing the sympathetic looks that Nori cast her way.

The midday break was the quietest since they had entered the forest, the small group of younger Dwarrow not even trying to liven the atmosphere without their leader. Kíli fretted by his brother's sleeping form and ate little. Thorin sat by his nephew, a rare occurrence, and spoke to him in a deep rumble of patient reassurance. Óin checked on the golden prince before they started off again, but could report no change, beyond the fact that he seemed to be dreaming steadily now, his eyes roving behind his lids, though he was otherwise still.

Bofur and Viska took up the burden of the litter after lunch, then Dwalin and Bifur for the final shift of the day. When they stopped for the night, they settled the unresponsive lad in the middle of the path and made their sketchy camp close by. Again, Kíli ate little and promptly made his bed next to the pallet, draping a blanket over Fíli and tucking it in carefully. Trisk and Viska joined him in silence as Bilbo, Bofur, and Ori huddled nearby.

Kíli stretched out on the ground, his head pillowed on his sleeping brother's shoulder, as the light faded from the forest. He appreciated Trisk and Viska's quiet support – the more so because they were not actively trying to cheer him up. Instead, Viska was a constant presence, seeking and offering comfort in equal measure. Trisk was there for both of them, talking quietly of the past, the quest, the future – anything to fill the silence with a deep hum of conversation. Thorin joined him as the others drifted off to sleep and the heirs of Durin began to hum once more, the old lullaby a constant thrum in their minds as they struggled to reach their lost kin, to pull him back from the distant shore where he walked in dreams.

* X *

The feast has faded, the Elves are gone. Only the fierce-eyed king remains, and some of the hauteur has faded from his face. He suddenly looks weary, as though mourning an ancient loss, as he stares at the goblet in his hand, swirling the dregs of the wine. Fíli watches him silently for a long moment, knowing that he cannot be seen, but unsure whether the Elf might be able to detect him through other means. Is either of them actually here? Or is this simply a vision?
The king stands abruptly, and the icy, regal air settles on him like a cloak. Here is a pride to rival Thorin's, and the young prince hopes never to see their wills clash. The Song of the Mountain rumbles once more, voiced this time by both brother and uncle, and Fíli blinks in surprise. The Elf king is gone. He is alone in a forest clearing, the light and colors swiftly fading, and memories tease the edge of his mind. The Shire, the Trolls, the Orcs' pursuit, Rivendell – surely there is more, but he cannot grasp it, not quite. But he knows Kíli is there, just out of sight, and he and Kíli have always been stronger together than apart. So he reaches into his soul and takes hold of the bond that ties them together. There are many bonds there, many souls tied to his. Kinship, friendship, and one that is infinitely precious, but too new, too fragile, to bear the burden of his struggling memories. The bond of brother to brother is seventy-seven years strong, reverberating with the Song of the Mountain and the sound of his true name, his Khuzdul name, and so he seizes it like a rope and begins hauling himself back to the world, hand over hand, inch by painful inch.

* X *

Triskel had the final watch of the night, and the first light of the morning was tiptoeing through the forest when the young fair-haired Dwarf stirred for the first time, blue eyes blinking in confusion as he shifted on the litter. Trisk got to his feet and stepped over to help Fíli to a sitting position, nudging Kíli as he did so. Kíli woke with a start.

“Kí?!”

“Fíli! You're awake!”

Trisk had barely gotten the older prince sitting up before the younger dove into his brother's arms, laughing with relief. The joyous sound roused the rest of the camp, and Thorin lunged for the lads, pulling them into a tight embrace. The members of the little family clung to one another for several long minutes, the rumble of Thorin's voice meshing with Kíli's excited murmurs and Fíli's soft questions. The rest of the Company watched their royal family with expressions ranging from relief to broad grins and the occasional happy tear. Soon, Fíli was waving his uncle and brother off with a small laugh, saying that he needed space to breathe.

“Actually, I think I need to stand,” he added, looking pained. “I feel like I haven't moved properly in an Age.”

“Only a day and two nights, nadad,” Kíli corrected with a grin, giving him a hand up. The others crowded around as soon as the young Dwarrow was on his feet, clapping him on the back as he smiled and greeted each of them.

* X *

A single glimpse of those leaf-green eyes, and the final memories fall into place with a snap. Viska. The newest bond on his soul, the missing piece of his past, present, and future. The force of the knowledge makes him physically stagger, drawing concerned looks from his uncle and brother, and he has to take a deep breath to regain his composure. His memories are complete once more.
Four days after the crossing of the enchanted river, Viska sat on the twisted root of a gnarled tree, watching the Hobbit scramble awkwardly into the canopy. She wished she could be the one climbing toward the sky, but the highest branches would be too thin for even the lightest of Dwarves, so she was denied the possibility of a breath of fresh air, or glimpse of the sun. Instead, she huddled in the dim gloom of Mirkwood and watched her companions bicker. Thorin stood apart, staring out into the tangled reaches of the forest. Óin had his head buried in his hands and was grumbling softly to himself as Glóin glared around at their surroundings, ax in hand. Balin was leaning against a tree, looking half asleep, while Dwalin looked positively murderous, his dark gaze falling on everyone indiscriminately. Bombur was pouting quietly, while Bifur was arguing with Bofur in Khuzdul, their voices too low for the lass to catch the words, but even the cheerful miner was snappish and short-tempered as he replied to his cousin. Dori's amiable expression had become one of irritation, and Nori was glowering at the ground as he toyed with one of his knives. Ori looked miserable.

"We're lost, aren't we?" the little scribe moaned. "We can't even tell which direction we're going. We'll never get out of here!"

"Would you shut it for once?" Kíli snapped abruptly, shoving the other Dwarf out of his way as he stalked by to rejoin Fíli. "This place is gloomy enough without your whining!"

Ori stumbled and sat down on the ground as Nori turned on the dark-haired archer, Dori right behind him.

"Oi, who d'you think you're shoving?" Nori yelled, lunging forward. Fíli intercepted him, pushing him back.

"Watch yourself, thief!" the golden prince snarled, eyes flashing. "That's my brother!"

"Maybe that Elfling you call 'brother' should be a little more respectful-"

Kíli's fist connected with the thief's jaw, and then Trisk and Viska were wading in to try and separate the two sets of brothers. Insults flew in Khuzdul and Westron, and Trisk growled at Fíli and Nori, snatch the knife away from the latter. Kíli's elbow caught Viska in the eye as she pulled him away from a recovered Ori, then Dori's hand clamped on her arm to yank her to the side. She lashed out instinctively at the older Dwarf.

"QUIET!!"

Every member of the Company froze as Thorin's command cut through the thick air. They turned bewildered faces to their leader, blinking as some of the confusing haze lifted from their minds. Orcrist was in the king's hand, and his gaze searched the forest as he hissed a warning.

"We are being watched."

"X"

Fresh air washed over Bilbo's face in a soft, cool breeze and the Hobbit closed his eyes to breathe it in with a small smile. The sun was warm above the forest, although the air carried the crisp chill of
Autumn. For several long moments, the Hobbit was still, basking in the sunshine and letting the wind tease his curls. When he finally opened his eyes, he was greeted by a seemingly unending ocean of trees that reached out to the horizon in all directions. He frowned in disappointment, straining to see any landmark beyond the forest, and finally found a winding line where no trees stood that might indicate the Forest River. Following the line of the possible river, his eyes widened as he made out the distinctive shape of the Lonely Mountain in the distance, beyond a wide expanse of lake and heath. A small whoop of delight escaped him and he shouted down through the branches to the Company far below.

“I can see the Long Lake and the Lonely Mountain! We got a bit turned around, but I know where to go now!” He cocked his head, listening for a response, but no reply came from the Dwarves on the ground. “Thorin?” he called, slightly concerned as he moved down from the top branches and tried to peer down toward his friends. “Balin? Bofur?” He held his breath, but no answering call came back, though he could hear shuffling movement far below. A spike of alarm ran through the burglar and he clamped his mouth shut on any further calls, concentrating instead on making his way down the tree as quickly and as quietly as he could manage.

The small clearing where he had left the Dwarves was empty, the thin grass flattened and the ground torn up in several places. A glint of metal turned out to be Visk's slender sword, and the sight of it lying discarded on the forest floor sent a chill down Bilbo's spine. Several of Kíli’s arrows lay nearby, as though they had been dropped from his quiver, and a curved knife that he thought might belong to Nori was embedded in the trunk of a tree. The Hobbit drew his Elvish blade without thought, spinning in panic at the sound of something moving through the trees. The great brown bulk of an unidentifiable animal was barely visible, moving away from him, dragging a smaller white bundle behind it. Hesitating for only a moment, Bilbo jammed the golden ring from the Goblin tunnels onto his finger and hurried after the unknown creature, a silent shadow slipping through the forest.

Spiders. Bilbo hated spiders – even the smallest variations of the eight-legged crawlers. He happily left them alone outside, but any that he found in his Hobbit hole usually met quick ends. These spiders, however, had bodies the size of Wargs, and legs twice as long as he was tall. And they were talking. He huddled behind a tree, watching the spider that he had followed as it hoisted the bundle it had been dragging and hung it in a clump of similar white packages. Bilbo's eyes narrowed and his heart lurched as he realized what he was seeing. Wrapped in spider silk, fifteen Dwarves hung from a cluster of branches, still and unmoving. Dozens of spiders surrounded them, arguing in scratchy voices about which of the captives to eat first. Several had gathered around the largest cocoon, obviously Bombur, and the Dwarf inside was beginning to move, wriggling and struggling weakly. The Hobbit swallowed as his mind raced. Gandalf was not here, and all of his companions were trapped. Help would have to come from him – from the semi-reluctant adventurer who still missed his quiet hole in the Shire. He wanted to protest, to run and never look back, and perhaps make his way to safety through the dismal forest. But that would mean abandoning the Dwarves to certain death – proud Thorin, kind Balin, cheerful Bofur – and that could not be borne. Bagginses were not adventurers, but they were loyal, and the Took side of him would not even contemplate leaving his companions. Instead, he checked that the ring was secure on his finger, sheathed his Elvish blade, and reached out to fill his pockets with stones. Then he raced off to put some distance between himself and the spiders before he started chucking the stones about madly, shouting nonsense as he went. Behind him, he heard a great stir of bulky bodies and agitated voices as the spiders reacted. As soon as he had used all of the stones, Bilbo went silent and hurried back toward the lair, avoided the arachnids as they darted to investigate his noise and their damaged webs. Scrambling up a tall tree for the second time in that long day, the Hobbit removed the ring, drew his sword, and started cutting the thick ropes of silk that held the
nearest wrapped Dwarves. Fortunately, the layers of webbing that clung to the branches slowed the speed of the cocoons' descent – he did not think he would have the time or strength to cut each down and lower them carefully to a branch. Instead, he focused on cutting loose as many as possible as quickly as possible. He could hear them grumbling and moving around as they hit the ground, so at least the impact was waking them. Just as he cut the last Dwarf loose, a great shape lunged out at him and he lashed out with his blade, scoring the spider across the mass of its eyes. The beast fell back, screeching in pain.

“It stings!! It stings!!”

Bilbo swung again, hearing a satisfying crunch as he cut through the creature's head and it toppled. He turned a satisfied look on the weapon that Balin had once called a letter opener.

“Sting. I think that will make a fine name.”

Then another spider lunged out of the tree and he scrambled to defend himself.

* X *

The sensation of falling woke Viska from a thick, troubled doze, and she found herself bound in a mass of strong, sticky fibers. She struggled and cursed softly, trying to hear if anyone else was nearby. After a moment, a familiar voice spoke in her ear, and the binding started to loosen as it was cut away.

“Easy, Visk. One second. There you go!” The sticky mess was pulled away and she struggled to her feet, picking great clumps of web off of her clothing as Trisk steadied her. Around her, the rest of her companions were doing the same, looking groggy and cloudy-headed. The Dwarf lass's mind felt unfocused, and she stared at her brother for a long moment.

“Spiders.” He answered the question that she had not been able to form, pointing up at the thick webs overhead. “They attacked us, stung us to knock us out, and wrapped us up for dinner.”

She shuddered, reaching for her sword as she searched the surrounding forest, but her hand met an empty scabbard. Dropped it, she remembered with a pang. Instead, she drew the hunting knife strapped to her thigh as a familiar yelp of fear sounded in the trees above them.

“Bilbo!” Bofur yelled, hefting his mattock and staring around for the Hobbit.

“Spiders!” Fíli called in warning, drawing his blades as he moved to cover his brother. Kíli threw down his bow in disgust when he realized that his quiver was empty, drawing his sword as the first arachnid charged out of the trees. Dwalin charged one with his war hammer already in mid-swing, as Orcrist flashed in Thorin's hands. Óin's staff whirled over his head, Trisk's mace smashed a spider aside before it could reach Bofur, and Bifur had his spear jammed into a mass of eyes. Faintly, over the battle cries and sounds of the fight, new voices rose in the thick forest air, light and fluid, speaking a language that sounded like water over smooth stones. Then Viska tripped over a rope of webbing and stumbled. Before she could regain her feet, something clamped onto her ankle and began dragging her swiftly over the forest floor. Twisting frantically, she managed a look over her shoulder to see that she had been captured in the pincers of one of the great spiders. She screamed involuntarily, struggling to reach a weapon. Her sword was gone, dropped in the initial attack. She had buried her hunting knife in a spider's head shortly before being grabbed. She was
down to the tiny blade she had taken from the Troll hole, snugged into a sheath in her boot, and she could not reach it.

“Visk!!”

“Kíli!!”

The archer was charging after her, his hands empty of sword or bow, and she could hear the others shouting for them further away, but they did not come. Kíli lunged and caught her reaching arm, planting his feet to try and yank her free of the giant arachnid’s grip. Viska yelped as she was pulled between the two like a child’s tug-rope, but she wrapped her hand around Kíli’s arm and held on, kicking at the spider with her free foot. Just as she connected, an arrow lodged in the creature’s face and it let go abruptly, sending both of the Dwarves tumbling. A tall she-Elf with fiery red hair stood behind them, her bow slung back on her shoulder, hands full of twin hunting knives as she fought another spider. Kíli pulled Viska to her feet quickly, the Dwarf lass yelling a warning as she glanced over his shoulder and spotted yet another spider advancing on them. He turned, keeping her behind him.

“Give me a blade!” he demanded, shooting a look at the Elf. She ignored him, intent on her battle. Viska finally managed to snag her Troll blade and backed up to get a running start as the dark-haired prince snapped at the Elf. “Hurry!”

“If you think I’m giving you a weapon, Dwarf,” she sneered, “you’re mis-”

“Ki!” Viska cut in, running toward him, “Toss me!”

He dropped to one knee automatically, hands locked in front of him in the pose that Trisk had taught him and his brother. Launching herself from the ground, Viska stepped into his hands so he could give her that extra boost of momentum, sending her over his head to bring her tiny blade down on the spider’s mass of eyes with all of her strength. The blade crunched through the creature’s carapace as the many legs collapsed beneath it. The young jeweler stayed in place as it sank to the ground, both hands still wrapped around the hilt of her dagger, her breath coming in ragged gasps. Then Kíli was there, strong hands on her shoulders, then coaxing her fingers loose.

“Easy, little sister. You got it. Let go, Viska, it’s over.”

A pale, long-fingered hand came into view retrieving the blade from the spider’s corpse. Viska turned to protest, only to find the fire-haired she-Elf staring at her with an inscrutable expression.

“Come with me.”

Moving warily through the tangled undergrowth, the two Dwarves found themselves back with the rest of their group – who were surrounded by armed, angry-looking Elves. A tall male with intense blue eyes appeared to be in charge, snapping orders in their fluid tongue as the others began divesting the Company of their weapons. Fíli and Triskel were the only ones being actively restrained, but they calmed slightly as their younger siblings came into view. The she-Elf shoved the two youngest Dwarrow back into the group and turned to talk to the leader. Viska staggered slightly on her bruised ankle, leaning on her brother for a bare moment to catch her balance. Nearby, an increasingly frustrated Elf was divesting Fíli of his extensive arsenal.

“So far, they’ve told us we were trespassing, threatened our lives, and accused Thorin of stealing Orcrist,” Trisk murmured. “And I thought Dwarves were supposed to be the rude ones.”

Viska snorted a laugh, then froze as the she-Elf’s gaze landed on her. The Dwarrowlass tensed as
the redhead said something to the flaxen-haired leader, causing his eyes to narrow as they focused on Viska's face. He snapped something to the guard closest to her and she suddenly found herself being pushed through the crowd to stand before him. Protests from behind her made it clear that her brother, Fíli, and now Kíli were being held back by their captors. The Elf stared her for a long moment, then reached down and pulled the scarf from her face, prompting a round of shouts from most of the Company that only ended when Thorin bellowed at them in Khuzdul. Viska glared at the Elf steadily as he studied her face. Finally, he raised an eyebrow at Thorin.

“I was not aware that Dwarves took their women into battle since the fall of Erebor,” he commented dryly. Viska felt every muscle in her body tense and she shut her eyes as despair flooded through her.

“We do not.”

“And yet here one stands,” the Elf smirked, seizing Viska by the shoulder and turning her to face the Company. She risked only a quick glance before keeping her eyes fixed on her boots. The sheer fury on Thorin's face was terrifying. Her brother was pale with fear, restrained by an Elf with a wicked-looking blade. Kíli was also pale, staring at his uncle with wide eyes. Fíli's face was completely still, eyes squeezed shut and face drawn.

The explosion, when it came, was carefully controlled and all the more frightening for that, because she could hear the icy fury behind his words.

“She is no part of this Company. Nor is her lying brother,” Thorin growled, shooting a look over his shoulder. Trisk did not react, his attention on her, but several of the other Dwarves blanched. Viska choked and Fíli's eyes flew open to latch onto her face, his hands moving almost imperceptibly.

Trust me .

Then Thorin was glaring at her in disgust and she could not meet that stone gaze for long. Finally the Elven leader sighed and turned her over to the she-Elf to be searched.

“Take them to the dungeons, and separate them,” he ordered. “Except for the leader. He will face the king.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
 nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
 adad – father (Khuzdul)
 amad – mother (Khuzdul)
Bilbo had gotten separated from his friends once he freed them, being busy dodging the giant arachnids himself. Running through the forest was not conducive to keeping the best track of the locations of the Dwarves, and it was only once the spiders had been driven off that he was able to spare time to wonder where he had left them. Creeping back through the trees, his ring firmly back in place, the Hobbit was rather surprised to find the entire Company the prisoners of Elves. As Beorn had warned them, these were not the gracious, mild-tempered folk of Rivendell. The Woodland Elves seemed fiercer as they escorted the Dwarves through the forest at a pace that was punishing for those who had gone long with little food and water. Bilbo was forced to follow along the trail behind them, as the thick undergrowth to the sides was too thick for him to keep up without crashing through with all the subtlety of a charging oliphaunt. So the Hobbit jogged along behind the last of the Elven scouting party, trying to breathe silently. He was starting to believe that he would not make it to their destination when the next turn in the path revealed the end of the trees and a wide clearing split by the rush of the Forest River. A graceful bridge arched over the expanse of the river, drawing the eye along the well-maintained path (and of course it was maintained here) to the looming gates of the Hall of the Woodland Realm. A row of trees rose like columns along the front, and Bilbo stopped in his tracks to stare in wonder. So caught was he in awe that he almost lost his opportunity to slip through the doors behind the Elves – and who knows how things might have turned out.

But he did not miss his chance. Moving on feather-light Hobbit feet, he ghosted along behind the large group as they moved into the vast cavern that housed the king's hall. There, the little burglar was momentarily at a loss, for his friends were being split up. The Elf leader moved off in one direction, with two guards escorting Thorin along behind him, while the rest of the Dwarves were ushered in another. Bilbo was surprised by the lack of protest as their king was led away by hostile forces, but then he caught a flash of motion as Thorin's hands moved in the subtle gestures of that mysterious Dwarven sign language, and he understood. They wanted to protest (Dwalin fairly vibrated with the effort to restrain himself), but their leader had ordered them to cooperate for the
moment, and so they begrudgingly allowed themselves to be led away. The Hobbit hesitated, torn between the two groups, then finally decided to follow Thorin. If he was being taken to see the Elf king, he would probably rejoin the rest of the Company afterward...and the presence of an unexpected, invisible ally might prove beneficial.

* X *

Balin sat in his cell, shoulders drooping in resignation. This was it, then, the end of their quest. There would be no triumphant return to Erebor, no rebuilding of their home. They would simply vanish—no word would be sent to Ered Luin, so their people would never know what had become of them. Bombur's wife, and Glóin's, would raise their Dwarflings alone, while Dís held Durin's Folk together as best she could. She was the last adult of the line in the Blue Mountains, the last outside of the Iron Hills, where Thorin's cousin Dáin ruled as Lord. And she would have to bear the burden alone, bereft of brother and sons. But he knew Dís, and he knew that she would stand and lead her people with all of the pride and strength in her blood. He sighed. Pride and strength were indeed the legacy of the blood of Durin, sometimes leaning too strongly toward the pride. He did not know Thranduil, but he knew of him, and knew that he was as proud and stubborn as any Dwarf. He would offer Thorin a deal, some bargain for their freedom. Balin did, however, know Thorin, and he knew that his king would not take it. His hatred of the Woodland King ran too deep to be easily swayed. Two great pillars of pride and stubborn will, they would dance around one another and clash in a shower of sparks, but neither would bend.

* X *

Thorin struggled to compose himself as the leader of the Elven hunting party led him through the twisting halls of the Woodland Realm. He wanted to be as calm as possible when he was brought before the Elven king, which meant burying his anger at Kulvik's children. The corridors inside Thranduil's halls were as roundabout as the forest path outside, and the trip seemed to last forever, but finally he stood before the carved wooden throne. A rack of antlers from what must surely have been the Father of All Elk surmounted the king's seat, which itself was set several feet above the floor. The Dwarf wondered idly what the Elf might be compensating for, and felt a smirk flicker across his lips. The small group came to a halt, the two guards stepped aside after brief bows and a languid wave of dismissal from the form on the throne. The leader murmured something in their fluid tongue, then strode from the hall after merely giving a polite inclination of his head. That, as much as the resemblance between the two, was enough to give the Dwarf lord the identity of his captor. Dismissing the princeling from his thoughts, Thorin focused his gaze on the king.

The last time that he had seen Thranduil had been the day that he and his father had come before him to seek aid for the Dwarven survivors, the day the Elf king had turned them away with barely a thought.

* X *
The Dwarf prince enters the Great Hall of the Woodland Realm with his back straight and head held high, walking at his father's right shoulder. They are weary and filthy, Thráin still reeking of the smoke from the fires within the Mountain. Thorin is reluctant to let his siblings out of his sight, but he is heir, and his presence is required, so he leaves them in the care of his cousins' mothers – Tíla, wife of Fundin, and Srôfa, wife of Gróin. Frerin gravely assures his elder brother that he will watch over little Dís. For her part, and to her brothers' dismay, the lass is completely engrossed with the Elves, staring wide-eyed at their surroundings.

Now, he walks the length of the hall, feeling very young and ill-at-ease among the age-old eyes in ageless faces. This realm was old before his ancestors set foot in Erebor, before Thráin I led their people from the horror that had befallen Khazâd-dûm, and the lad feels the weight of every year on his young shoulders as he approaches the throne. Unearthly blue eyes seem to gaze into his soul, and he barely holds himself from a flinch as he follows his father's example and bows. Not too low – just a courtesy from the princes of one kingdom to the king of another, but oh, how it rankles his pride! Thranduil inclines his head incrementally, his smooth face expressionless. When he speaks, his voice is cool, without emotion or inflection.

“Thráin, son of Thrór, and Thorin, your heir. I would bid you welcome to my halls, but I do not want to give you a false impression. What do you seek?”

Thorin tenses at the insult, sapphire eyes sparking, but his father's hand on his arm warns him back.

“We seek your help, my lord Thranduil,” Thráin replies bluntly. The Elf king's direct question has set the tone, and the Crown Prince will not waste time with flowery words and political maneuvering when his people are hungry and hurting. “Our people are driven from Erebor by a great fire drake, and we have no supplies – no food or medicines. We have ill and wounded, aged and children. We seek a place to rest and tend our kin before we move on from your lands and find a place to rebuild our lives.”

“And what payment do you offer for this help?”

Thráin stiffens in shock, his hand tightening its grip on his son's arm. A tiny smug smile teases the corners of Thranduil's lips as he watches them.

“What payment do you offer?” he repeats, as though they are dense pupils in a schoolroom. “An heirloom of my house was held in your Mountain – have you brought it out with you? And where is your king? Surely such aid as you seek should be discussed between kings.”

“My father is indisposed.”

That, Thorin thinks in the privacy of his own mind, is one way to put it. The king alternates between near-catatonia and raging demands to be allowed to return to the Mountain, as he has since Thráin dragged him out. The last Thorin saw of his grandfather, Thrór was heavily drugged to prevent him injuring himself or others.

The Elf smirks.

“I see. Unfortunately, I can offer you nothing.”
first time that Thorin sees his father looking truly broken. Even when he realized that Princess Ara was among those lost in the Mountain, the Crown Prince remained strong for his children and his people. Now, his dark blue eyes are hollow and haunted as he speaks to his cousins.

“He will not help us. We are to leave these lands in the morning. He will not even grant us passage through the wood to the Great River.”

“We never should have come here,” Fundin growls. Gróin, ever the even-tempered brother, shakes his head.

“Where else could we have gone, nadad? Dale is destroyed, and Esgaroth can barely help the survivors from the city, much less the Mountain.”

“We should have turned straight for the Iron Hills. Náin would have helped us.”

Thráin nods heavily. “Perhaps we should have, but we have many injured and little food. I had hoped...but no matter. It is too late to head for the Iron Hills. The dragon holds the lands between us and safety in that direction. No, we must go South, toward the lands of Men, and seek work and aid. Perhaps eventually, we will turn West. The Blue Mountains still hold some of our folk. Will our wounded be able to travel, Gróin?”

“They'll have to, won't they?” The healer sounds more resigned than angry, shaking his head in despair. “Those who can will help. We may – no, we will lose some. We'll just have to see that we lose as few as possible.”

Fundin's steady gaze is on Thráin's face.

“The king will not be pleased.”

The string of Khuzdul curses that come in reply tell the lad just how angry the elder prince really is. No, Thrór will not be pleased. But nothing pleases the king any more, and the survival of their people is more important than the obsessions of a king who is slipping ever further into madness.

* X *

Long years had passed since then, years that had left their mark on the Dwarf – body, heart, and soul. The Elf, however, had not changed. Of course, he was immortal, but Thorin had half-hoped to see some sign of time, or perhaps of guilt, on that ageless face. Surely there should be some sign of the suffering inflicted upon the Dwarves of Erebor. But there was nothing. He sat on his throne looking just the same as he had that day over a hundred years ago. The ember of fury in the Dwarf's breast burst into new flame and he stifled it with difficulty, meeting those unearthly blue eyes with a steady glower. Thranduil returned his gaze, face expressionless.

“I am told that you were found wandering my lands without leave,” the Elf king commented with a raised eyebrow. “What exactly were you doing in the forest, Dwarf?”

“Starving, Elf,” Thorin replied shortly. The elegant brow dropped and the eyes darkened almost imperceptibly as Thranduil rose to his feet and descended from the raised throne.

“But why were you in the forest in the first place?” he asked, cocking his head minutely as he studied the Dwarf's face. The king-in-exile met his stare, but did not speak. After a long moment, a
tiny smirk crept across the Elf king's face.

“You think I do not know who you are, Thorin, son of Thráin?” he commented, an edge of anger in his otherwise even tone as he paced around the prisoner. “You think I don't know why you are here? Oh, no doubt some would imagine that a noble quest is at hand – a quest to reclaim a homeland and slay a dragon.” Contempt dripped from every syllable and Thorin bit his tongue, determined not to react to the discourtesy. “I, myself, suspect a more...prosaic motive. Attempted burglary, or something of that ilk.”

Thorin refused to react, waiting for the Elf to get to the point. Thranduil studied him, eyes narrowing.

“You have found a way in,” he guessed shrewdly. “You seek that which would bestow upon you the right to rule, the right to command the armies of the Dwarves against the dragon. You would steal the King's Jewel. The Arkenstone.”

“Is it stealing to recover what is mine?” the Dwarf lord snarled in response, wishing he could knock that smirk off of the Elven king's face. “I seek to take Erebor back from the dragon that slaughtered my people. To do that, I need the Arkenstone to raise the armies of the Seven Families.”

“Of course, and that is the only reason that you seek the stone.” Thorin growled low in his chest and Thranduil held up a hand to forestall any further protests. “It is precious to you – I understand that,” he stated, his voice placating. Then he met the Dwarf's gaze and his face took on a new intensity, his eyes burning. “There are jewels in that Mountain that I, too, desire,” he explained. “White gems, of pure starlight.

Ah, and now we come to it, Thorin thought with a wry smile. A memory teased the back of his mind – his father disturbed by an uncomfortable exchange between the King of Mirkwood and the King Under the Mountain over the gold owed for the repair of a magnificent mithril piece with just such jewels. Thrór had raised the price after the work was done, keeping gems and all when Thranduil refused. Thráin had murmured of bad blood, but his father had not listened.

“I know the gems of which you speak,” he whispered. The Elf nodded sharply.

“I will let you go, if you but return what is mine.”

The Dwarf raised an eyebrow. “A favor for a favor?” Politics. Mahal, how he hated politics.

“I give you my word,” Thranduil replied. “One king to another.”

Thorin barked a laugh as those phrases brought his temper raging back to full fury. He turned on his heel abruptly, taking several steps away from the Elf king before he halted, staring out over the depths of the halls.

“You word?” he mused, a dangerous edge to his voice. “Your word?” He laughed again, a loud, hateful sound, and turned back to the Elf's shocked face. “I would not trust Thranduil, the great king, to honor his word should the End of Days be upon us!” he spat, all of the despair and anger of the past years welling up within him. “Not if the Valar themselves vouched for your truth! You lack all honor! I have seen how you treat those you call 'friends'! We came to you, starving and homeless, with women, children, and wounded. And you turned your back. You turned away from the suffering of my people, and the inferno that destroyed us! Would that he had destroyed your forest with dragon fire!”
Thranduil had frozen in place after the first sentence, his face paling with shock, but at the last comment, anger flushed his features and flashed in his eyes as he advanced on the Dwarf.

“Do not speak to me of dragon fire,” he growled, his face bare inches from Thorin's own. “I know its wrath and ruin. I have faced the great serpents of the North!”

And before Thorin's startled gaze, the glamour of Thranduil's flawless features faded away, revealing melted flesh and raw tendons. The image was gone as quickly as it had come, and the Elf straightened and turned on his heel. That contemptuous expression was back on his face as he climbed the stairs to his throne.

“I warned your grandfather of what his greed would summon, what the siren call of the Arkenstone would bring upon his kingdom. He would not listen. You are just like him.” He waved a languid hand and the guards seized the Dwarf. “Stay here, if you choose, and rot. A hundred years is a mere blink of the eye to an Elf. Perhaps another will slay the dragon, or the next fool to claim kingship Under the Mountain will be more amenable to cooperation. I am patient. I can wait.”

* X *

Nori was feeling rather amused, having realized that he felt at home for the first time since leaving Ered Luin. Bilbo's smial had been welcoming and comfortable of course, but a residence clearly made by a race other than Dwarf, a wood-lined hole rather than one carved of stone. Rivendell had been even worse – spacious and airy, with the influence of the natural world in every architectural detail. Goblin Town had been ramshackle and squalid, made up of tumbledown shacks and rickety walkways, and Beorn's massive home had been on scale with his large size. Prison cells, however, seemed to be much the same between Dwarf and Elf, and the thief had been in enough of those to find a strange sense of the routine in his current situation. Oh, the lines of the walls were a bit wrong, and there was no semi-friendly guard to chat with to pass the time, but the sensation of being locked behind a barred metal door was familiar.

The difference was that his brothers and companions were also imprisoned this time, and that did not set well with him. There had been times in the past when he had wished Dori into just such a cell, mostly to get his older brother off of his back about the activities that helped put food on the table, but not Ori. Never Ori. His youngest brother was too gentle to spend his days this way. The two elder Dwarrow had always intended for Ori to have a better life, an easier life, than theirs. He would be a scholar and historian, earning the respect of their people and winning himself a place among the elite of the kingdom. And he had used that against them in the end, asking what better way there was to earn his place than to be the one who could write of the quest to reclaim their homeland? Nori had excused himself from that conversation early on, unwilling to take either side since he could see both points of view. He had probably been more surprised than Ori when their eldest brother finally capitulated. And this was where their quest had ended, in the depths of the dungeons of the Woodland Realm. Sighing, Nori glanced at his lockpick kit and considered giving it another try. After a long moment, he shook his head. His kit was no good for Elven cells apparently – he had already broken three of his picks and made no progress on the lock. His particular skill set was not going to get them out of this predicament. With a shake of his head, he tucked the kit back into its hiding place and settled in to wait.

* X *
Bilbo found the Elven dungeons by following the guard who took Thorin down after his disastrous interview with the Elf king. As soon as the guard had walked away, the Hobbit removed the gold ring and crept up to the Dwarf king's cell. “Ah, Thorin?”

“Master Baggins. You do seem to show up most unexpectedly,” the Dwarf commented, looking angry and weary at the same time. “Where is the rest of the Company?”

Bilbo shook his head. “You're the first I've found, but I heard the Elf say to separate you. I'll starting locating the others, then I'll see what I can do to get you out,” he promised. Thorin nodded wordlessly and the Hobbit started away, only to stop a moment later when the Dwarf whispered harshly to him.

“Master Baggins! Triskel and Visk – there is no need to find them! They are no longer a part of the Company. They can stay here until they rot.”

Bilbo only nodded, not voicing the dozen or so questions running through his head. He had missed a good portion of the confrontation in the forest, so he had no idea why the leader of the Company was so angry with the two young Dwarves. He certainly didn't plan to leave them behind without getting the story from someone a bit calmer.

* X *

The entire situation troubled Tauriel. The Dwarves had been trespassing on her king's lands, but she did not see why it had been necessary to cast them into the dungeons for an indeterminate length of time. Would it not have been easier simply to deposit them on the borders with a warning and let them be on their way? But one did not question Thranduil of Mirkwood, especially when one was Captain of his Guard, a mere Silvan Elf of much lower rank and birth. So she obeyed his orders, as relayed by his son Legolas, scattering the Dwarves through the levels of cells, separating them to prevent plans and plotting, much less any ill-advised escape attempts. Not that any such would have gotten very far – the cells of Mirkwood had held worse than Aulë's folk, and were built to withstand greater strength than any single Dwarf could bring to bear. Even the gruff, bald bear of a warrior that glared at her so balefully when she made her rounds would make no impression on the doors of the Elven cells.

And, after the first night, they mostly stopped trying. The bald one still glared, muscles flexing with tension as he watched the Elven guards pass by. Their leader, Oakenshield, glowered from beneath lowered brows and was silent when she passed, evidently unaware that she could hear his rants from several halls away. The one with the odd hat sang strange, poignant songs occasionally, his voice a rich baritone that filled the halls near his cell. The wildest-looking of the party, who appeared to have the remains of an Orcish ax lodged in the front of his skull (and how had he survived that?), preferred to make his displeasure known with hand gestures. Tauriel had been aware that the Dwarves had a sign language that surpassed basic battle commands and scouting communications, but she had never realized that it was quite so extensive...and there was no doubt in her mind that most of what the wild-eyed prisoner was saying was rude at best, so she merely arched a brow at him and continued on her way.

The young ones bothered her the most. The lass, the scarred auburn-haired warrior who had carried the mace, the braidless youth, and the fair-haired one with the braided mustache. They all brooded
deeply. The last paced his cell ceaselessly, a tension around his eyes that made the Elf want to ease his worry for his friends. But the open face shuttered at her approach, and he leaned against the wall of his cell, meeting her gaze with a steely look, all sign of vulnerability gone. Unsure why a defiant look from a Dwarf would make her feel guilty and uncomfortable, Tauriel hesitated, but finally spoke.

“Your friends are well.”

She offered the information as a gesture of peace, but it hung in the air between them for a long moment before he nodded briefly in acknowledgment. He did not speak, and she did not know what else to say, so she simply returned the nod and hurried on.

* X *

This was a quest best left to younger Dwarves, and Óin had known it before ever leaving Ered Luin, but that had not stopped him. Thorin was his king, crowned or not, and the healer had never even considered standing aside from the attempt to reclaim their home. He was the one who had recognized the portents, after all, despite scoffs and disbelief from the others. Thorin had come to him for advice after encountering Gandalf in Bree, asking if the spiritual realm held any answers, and he had been surprised to be able to answer in the affirmative. All of the signs had pointed to the time being right for the expedition, though he had warned from the beginning that it would be perilous, and there would be few willing to follow. So the summons had been sent, and the loyal had answered, including nearly the entirety of the Line of Durin. Óin had told them that he was going along as healer, and to keep his younger brother in line, but the truth was that he would not have missed it for the world. A chance to see Erebor once more, to hear the Mountain sing, was not something to be lightly cast aside. And so he had joined the Company, tending their wounds and treating their ills (fewer than he had expected so far, though more than he would have liked), and they drew ever closer to the Lonely Mountain. Only to be waylaid by Elves. The healer sighed and rested his head back against the wall of the cell. The future was yet to be determined, and there were no portents to be read in the depths of the Woodland Realm, so he would simply wait, and hope, and try to remember that the potential prize was worth the long, weary journey.

* X *

Kiõli hated being confined. He didn't mind caves and stone – he was a Dwarf, after all – but he preferred to able to move about as he pleased. The food was plentiful, but he was bored, and he had too much time to think. The Elves had separated them so that he only occasionally caught the distant echo of a familiar-sounding voice. He thought he had heard Bofur singing a while ago – one of his sadder ballads, as though captivity was wearing on the miner's cheerful spirit. And Thorin had definitely been bellowing at some point, but he hadn't been able to make out what was said. There had been nothing for a while now. The young prince was sitting on the bench in his cell, running his fingertips over the carved runes on a smooth stone when he suddenly realized that he was being watched. Glancing up, he saw the fire-haired Elf from the forest – the one who had saved him and Viska, then revealed Viska's secret to the entire Company. He frowned at her in irritation, clenching his fist around the stone.
“What do you have there?” she asked, her face impassive.

He shrugged. “Nothing you need take,” he replied numbly. “Just a talisman, from home. My mother gave it to me so I'd remember my promise.”

“What promise?”

“That I'd come back to her.” He stared at the runestone, suddenly feeling very young, and very far away from home. Then he remembered he was being watched, by an Elf, and shrugged the feeling away, throwing her a cocky smirk. “She thinks I'm reckless.”

One arched eyebrow lifted. “And are you?”

“Nah...well, maybe. A little.” He sighed and pocketed the stone again, standing and moving toward the cell door. “Can you at least tell me if my kin are all right? My brother, the golden-haired one with all of the knives? The lass?”

“All of the prisoners are well,” she replied, looking a little insulted that he would think otherwise – which probably meant that she was extremely insulted, given how much emotion most Elves seemed to show. “They are mostly quiet, but...Oakenshield rages. Against my king, and against those he calls traitors and liars?”

Kíli sighed and rested his forehead against the bars. Obviously, Thorin was not going to let this go. “The lass and her brother. She started out with us claiming to be a lad. My brother and I figured it out a while ago, but we had Thorin fooled until you opened your big mouth.”

* X *

Dori, son of Tomri, was less concerned about being locked up by Elves, and more concerned with the fact that he had no idea where his brothers had been taken. The entire Company had been split up, so far as he could tell, taken off down branching passageways one and two at a time. Fíli and Kíli had struggled viciously when their guards moved toward different corridors – from the way the elder prince had worked one hand carefully toward his boot, the leather-worker suspected that he had managed to keep at least one of his blades from detection. The Elves had had to knock Trisk out when the red-haired she-Elf disappeared with his sister – and for all his disapproval of their charade and her mere presence, Dori could only shudder with sympathy at the panicked look in the silversmith's hazel eyes as she was taken away. He had lost track of Nori early on, but Ori had been at his side until the young scribe and Óin were pushed down a branching corridor. He had tried shouting for his brother, but either Ori was too far away to hear, or he could not shout loud enough to make his replies heard. For the first time, the straitlaced dwarf found himself hoping that his middle brother had been able to hold on to the lockpick set that he knew Nori carried (promise or no).

As the eldest of the three sons of Tomri and Nif, Dori had been looking out for his brothers for their entire lives. Their father had been a hunter, a job that kept him from his family for days at a time even before Erebor had fallen. During the Exile, he and the other hunters had spent long weeks ranging far afield, trying to find game enough to feed their starving people. Even during the time in Dunland, they had seen little of him as he devoted himself to the service of his king. He had survived Azanulbizar, only to die in a rockslide two years after they finally settled in Thorin's Halls in the southern Blue Mountains. Ori had been born a month later. As the only constant in their
young lives (save their mother, and she was busy working to keep her sons fed), Dori had become the primary caregiver and worrier. Then Nif had died, when Ori was only forty-one. Having recently completed his apprenticeship, Dori had been able to start work on his own, but they had struggled for years, and he could not really blame Nori for turning so quickly to shadier dealings. He just wished his brother could have straightened himself out once the worst was over. At least he knew that the thief would defend Ori to his last breath – in the depths of his heart, he had never doubted that fact. But now, he had no idea where either of them was, the thief or the scribe. He had failed them, and it made him want to rage or scream or weep. But he did none of those things. Instead, he sat quietly on the floor of his cell, humming softly to himself, a wordless ancient melody from the distant past.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
Dungeons Deep

Chapter Notes

So, apparently, a holiday for me translates to a bonus chapter for you! Multiple POVs ahead again.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

17

DUNGEONS DEEP

Triskel opened his eyes to dim darkness. For a moment, he thought that he was still in the forest, waking to the gloom of early morning, but the surface beneath his head was stone and he was surrounded in cool silence. There was no rustle of activity as the rest of the Company stirred toward wakefulness, no murmur of conversation or complaint at the sad state of their food stores. He was alone, and his mind struggled to remember as he eased himself to a sitting position and settled his back against the stone wall. The capture by Woodland Elves, Viska's secret revealed, Thorin's anger...the memories gradually seeped back into his mind, but none of them brought him up to waking on the floor of a prison cell. Then his probing fingers found the lump behind his ear and he realized what had happened. He had a vague recollection of the one of the guards shoving Viska away from the rest of the group, forcing her to follow the fire-haired Elf maiden down a winding corridor. He had fought, struggling to reach his sister, until a blinding pain erupted in his head and the world went black. The pointy-eared bastards must have knocked him out. And now he was locked away in the depths of the Elf king's dungeons, with no sign of his kin or companions.

The young silversmith prowled the confines of his cell, a dozen different emotions swirling through him. Fear for his sister, frustration at his imprisonment, concern for his companions, anger at the Elves who had revealed Viska's secret so carelessly, apprehension about Thorin's reaction. The Dwarf king had kept his fury contained in front of their captors, but Trisk did not doubt that he had more to say.

A light step alerted him that he was not alone, and he spun on his heel, instinctively reaching for a knife he no longer had. The red-haired Elf maid from the forest stood in front of his cell, cool green eyes regarding him steadily from that elegant, ageless face.

“Did you want something? Or did you just come to stare?” he grumbled. “What have you done with my sister? With my friends?”

“The Dwarf maid is safe,” she replied. “You are in the dungeons of the Woodland Realm, and my prince bade me keep you scattered, but I would not have you troubled about the well-being of your folk. All fifteen of you are safe and being treated well.”

“For prisoners,” he spat.
“For prisoners,” she agreed calmly.

He stared at her in silence for a long moment, wondering why she had brought him news, why she was speaking to him at all. “If you are here for information, you might as well go,” he said at last. “I have nothing to tell you.”

“I merely thought to ease your mind,” she replied softly. “I will tell your sister that you are well. I apologize for the blow to the head. We are used to...rouger...prisoners, and my lieutenant may have overreacted.”

He nodded brusquely and watched her walk away before allowing a small smile to spread across his scarred face. Fifteen. She had said that all fifteen of the companions were locked away. Without Gandalf, they were sixteen. The Elves had not found Bilbo.

* X *

Dwalin was angry. Angry with the Elves, for interfering in the quest and for taking the Dwarves prisoner over something so petty as trespassing, rather than simply escorting them through that Mahal-cursed wood and simply telling them not to come back. Angry with Thorin, for ordering him to stand down instead of fighting their captors, no matter that he stood no chance. Angry with himself, for allowing his king and kin to be captured in the first place (though how he could have stopped it, he wasn't certain). And tucked in the back of his mind, a less-pressing matter at the moment, was the ball of emotion that was his anger, shock, and grudging respect for the children of Kulvik. He wasn't certain where the respect had come from, but he could not deny that it was there, so he simply pushed it aside until he could examine it further. If the Company never escaped the cells of Mirkwood, how he felt about the lad and lass would not matter...and nor would anything else. So, rather than dwelling on emotions that he might or might not have to act on later, he concentrated on trying to think of a way to get out.

* X *

Rivendell had been an endless delight for Bilbo, full of art, sculptures, books, history, and endlessly patient Elves willing to answer his every question. Mirkwood was an entirely different experience. Of course, he and the Company had been Lord Elrond's honored guests in Rivendell, while here, the Dwarves were imprisoned and the Hobbit an invisible presence haunting the passageways. By the second afternoon of his stay, he was feeling frustrated and confined, trapped in the endless halls of the Woodland Realm. He did not dare try to sneak outside, terrified of not being able to get back in. He had managed to scrounge some food from the kitchens, but not enough to make a proper meal (and he was beginning to forget what one of those even looked like), and he still had not found all of the Dwarves. He was still missing the four youngest – Fili, Kili, Trisk, and Visk – but he did have one more section of the dungeons to search, so he hoped he would find them all there. He also hoped that one of them would have an explanation as to why Thorin was so angry with the lads from Emyn Uial. Bilbo had been so preoccupied with finding everyone that he had quite forgotten to ask any of the others about the king's irritation, and none had volunteered anything, being more concerned with finding out if he had found their own kin and asking how they fared.
So far, they were all in slightly better shape physically than when they had been captured, finding little opportunity to do anything but eat and rest in the confines of their cells. They were all angry with the Elves, of course, and gloomy at the prospect of an overlong confinement, not to mention the deadline looming over their heads for the finding of the secret door. Bombur sat in glum silence and ate little, while Bofur's rich voice raised in sorrowful song had made him easy to find. Bifur's spirits had seemed higher than most, although he could not communicate with the Hobbit very well. The fierce toymaker seemed confident in Bilbo's ability to find them a way out. Dori, Nori, and Ori all fretted about one another, which surprised the burglar a bit, since he was used to the three brothers irritating and harassing one another on the journey. Dwalin was angry, which was to be expected by any who knew him, and Balin was calm and patient, again as expected. The only flare of temper that the Hobbit had seen from the elder Dwarf was when Bilbo had described the conversation between Thorin and the Elf king. Balin had sighed and shaken his head, muttering about Durin pride. Bilbo had not tried talking to Óin, preferring not to alert any of the sharp-eared guards, simply making himself known to the healer with an encouraging smile. Glóin was steaming over the disrespect that they had been shown, but had at least spared the burglar a smile and a few words of support before he had to hurry away.

Sighing, Bilbo watched yet another Elven guard stride purposefully down the hallway before he could dart quietly into the last section of the dungeons that he had located, but not yet searched. Turning right at the first branching, he followed the sound of low humming until he could see a light-haired figure sitting in the back of a cell. Slipping the ring from his finger, he stepped to the door.

* X *

Thorin was surrounded by liars. Not traitors – he could not believe that, no matter what he said as his fury burned and he vented his anger in rants that were a mixture of Westron and Khuzdul. No, not traitors, but liars. Trisk and his oh-so-clever sister. He was not certain what part of the deception angered him the most – the initial lie, the fact that he had so quickly come to trust the two youngsters, or the fact that joining the quest had put the young Dwarrowmaid needlessly into danger. He knew that Durin's daughters had their own strengths (his own sister was proof of that), but since Erebor and Khazâd-dûm, their people were too few to risk the safety of their precious mothers and wives. Dwarrowmaids were protected, treasured, not because they could not take care of themselves, but because they were the only ones who could give life, the only hope for the future of their people. Simply thinking of the number of dangers the expedition had encountered, the number of times the precious lass in their midst (and not just any lass, but the daughter of his old comrade, deserving of every protection) might have been killed, make him feel ill.

And then there were the other conspirators. The king-in-exile had not missed the reactions of other members of the Company to the Elf prince's revelation. Or rather, their lack of reaction. His own nephews, last of his bloodline, his heirs, had conspired to help keep her secret. After all of his lessons on their responsibility to their people, how could they have been so foolish?

* X *

Glóin was, quite frankly, irritated about the delay in the expedition. How could they have been
trespassing when there was nothing to warn off intruders on the borders of the Elf king's lands? And if the lands were claimed by the king, wasn't it his responsibility to deal with such dangers as the great spiders? No Dwarf clan would have let such a threat grow so close to the borders of their territory, and they certainly would not have been so inhospitable to innocent travels who fell afoul of such terrible beasts. Not that Dwarves went out of their way to welcome outsiders to their communities, but they did not treat them so shabbily. But then, when had the Woodland Elves shown common courtesy to any but their own? He had been young when Erebor fell, but he remembered the long years of the Exile after Thranduil had refused them aid. They seemed to thrive on causing problems for Durin's folk, and Glóin knew he would never trust any Elf one whit more than he would an Orc.

Letting his head fall back against the wall, the red-bearded merchant closed his eyes and sought refuge in thoughts of his beloved Fla, safe in the Blue Mountains. She had been fierce in her support of his decision to join Thorin, just as their son had been fierce in his disappointment that he could not accompany them. At only sixty-two, Gimli was thirteen years short of his majority, and even his impassioned pleas had not changed Thorin's mind. He had not spoken to Fíli and Kíli for nearly two weeks when he learned that they were to be included – only breaking his self-imposed isolation when the brothers kidnapped him from weapons training and dragged him out for an evening of food and ale several days before their departure. Glóin had sighed with relief when they returned him the next morning – hungover and slightly green, but free of the resentment that had clouded his eyes.

* X *

Triskel wasn't the only one of the Company whose thoughts had turned toward Bilbo. Viska hated not having anything to do. She had explored her cell thoroughly, inventoried the contents of her coat pockets, and combed out her hair. It was still dreadfully short for any self-respecting Dwarrowmaid, but shoulder-length wasn't bad considering how much of it had been burned, cut, and yanked out only a few months before. It could stand to be washed, of course, and she would have given a lot for a simple bucket of warm water and bar of rough soap, but she did the best that she could. At least the greasy locks were tied back out of her face. She had pulled her hood back up and sat on her bench, her back tucked into the corner and her legs pulled up toward her chest as she fretted over the whereabouts and safety of the Hobbit. So far as she knew, there had been no sign of him after he had freed the Company from the spider webs – just that yelp of alarm in the trees before the great spiders had descended once more. She hated to think of the little burglar lost alone in the forest, possibly hurt. He had shown great resilience so far on the journey, but the entire expedition had nearly come to a gruesome end in Mirkwood and she shuddered at the thought of him taking his chances on his own. But while her head worried, her heart waited with a sense of anticipation. Bilbo had proven more than resilient – the little Hobbit was also good at thinking on his feet, and seemed to be possessed of an extraordinary amount of luck. Something told her that he would be the key to any possibility of the Dwarves escaping their cells.

Thought of the Company, however, sent her spirits plummeting once more. She and Trisk were no longer part of the group – Thorin had made that abundantly clear. The anger in his eyes and voice had matched every tale her father had ever told of the legendary tempers of the royal family, and she felt a creeping guilt at having been the one to have raised it. Even if they could escape, nothing would be the same. The siblings would have to return to Emyn Uial, the only place where they were known and might have a chance of putting their lives back together. More guilt stabbed at her
heart. She should have stayed home, or in Ered Luin when Lady Dís had offered her a place. She should not have been so stubborn, so determined to stay at her brother’s side. All that she had accomplished was to anger the Dwarf who would be King Under the Mountain, and destroy Trisk’s chances of earning an honored place in the renewed kingdom.

*Not to mention falling half in love with his nephew...with his heir,* a tiny voice whispered in the back of her mind. Her breath hitched and she closed her eyes tightly against the tears that threatened. That brief joy was over. Her lie was exposed, and Thorin would send them on their way, never to be welcome in the halls of Erebor. The king would find a more suitable match for his heir, and she would never see Fíli again. At that thought, her heart clenched and she choked, suddenly realizing that maybe she wasn’t half in love with the prince, after all.

* X *

Bifur felt a little guilty for some of the things he had said to the Elf captain, even though she could not actually understand what he was signing. He thought that the general meaning had gotten through. It wasn’t fair, and he knew it. She was following the orders of her king, and the scruffy toymaker could read the compassion in her eyes as she made her rounds. There was something in the situation that she did not like, and so she had taken it upon herself to check on the prisoners several times a day. Midway through the second day (as judged by the timing of the meals since they had arrived), he stopped signing at her as she passed, mustering what he hoped was a gentle smile instead. It certainly caught her attention, eyes widening as she halted in front of his cell.

Trying to convey a sense of concern and curiosity, he traced out the shape of Bofur’s hat in the air, then puffed out his cheeks and traced out a much larger stomach in imitation of Bombur. A tiny smile flickered across her face and she nodded.

“They are both well, though gloomy in their confinement. The Dwarf with the hat sings. The other eats little, but we keep an eye on him. He will not starve.”

Bifur nodded. It was rare that Bombur was depressed enough not to eat, but it would not hurt his heavy cousin to go a few more days on light rations. And Bofur always sang, though if his mood was low, his songs would be sorrowful ballads rather than cheeky tavern tunes. The toymaker thought for a moment, wondering how to ask about the young lass without being crude. Finally, he pointed at the she-Elf, then held out a hand at Dwarf-height, pulling his coat up across his face to represent the scarf Visk had worn. The Elf lass looked confused for a moment, tipping her head to the side.

“The Dwarf maiden?” she hazarded. He nodded quickly and she sighed. “She is well, but she has withdrawn into herself. Is it true that most of you did not know she was female?”

The toymaker laughed and nodded, mimicking the scarf again and pointing to his own bulky layers of clothing. The Elf nodded thoughtfully, then glanced down the hall.

“I must continue my rounds,” she told him quietly. “I do not know how long my king will keep you and your companions here, but I will do my best to see you are treated well. Especially since you are no longer signing at me so rudely.”

She offered him a tiny smile as he chuckled ruefully, signing an apology that she could not understand. Still, she nodded as though it had been accepted, then strode off down the passageway.
“Bilbo! Have you seen Kíli? Viska? Thorin?”

The Hobbit paused and blinked before answering, surprised by the order of the names as the swordsman lunged for the cell door, hands closing on the bars. No one would ever expect Fíli not to ask about his brother first, but Thorin would usually be second. And who was ‘Viska?’ The golden-haired prince read the confusion on his face and shook his head.

“That's right – you weren't there. Viskel is a lass. Her real name is Viska. Have you found her?”

Bilbo closed his mouth with a snap. “Ah, no, actually. Nor Kíli or Trisk. You four are the last. Visk is a lass, you say? What about Trisk?”

Fíli huffed a tiny laugh, leaning his forehead against the door. “Triskel is her brother.”

“Is that why Thorin wants them left behind?”

The Hobbit flinched back as the young Dwarf's head snapped up, blue eyes blazing. “What?!”

“Th-Thorin,” Bilbo stammered. “When I told him I was going to find the rest of the Company and work on a way to get everyone out, he said Triskel and Visk could stay and rot.”

Fíli stared at him in silence for a moment, then shook his head violently. “No. He didn't mean it. I don't doubt that he said it, but he did not mean it. He is angry, and he is proud. He will change his mind. Bilbo, find them, and Kíli, and once you have a plan, come back to me. We are not leaving them behind. I know Thorin. He will regret what he has said in anger.”

Bilbo nodded, suddenly realizing just how much the young prince resembled his uncle. Stepping out of Fíli's line of sight, he slipped the ring on again and padded off in search of the last three Dwarves, and inspiration on how to get his friends out of the Elven dungeon.

* X *

In spite of his angry words to the Elf-maid, Kíli blamed himself for Thorin learning Viska’s secret. He was the one who had revealed it, after all, calling her ‘sister.’ It had seemed right at the time, but so had many of the more foolish decisions in his life. He rubbed his thumb morosely over the runestone. The symbols had been newly carved and sharp edged when his mother had pressed it into his hand all those months ago. Now the edges were worn smooth by restless fingers, a touchstone for the darkest watches of the night, when the quest seemed to be the only reality. Innikh dë. Return to me. A command, and a promise. Fíli had never told him what argument Thorin had finally used to convince their mother to let him join the expedition, but Kíli could make a shrewd guess. Only one thing could have persuaded Dís to let her younger son leave, and it was his own secret terror – that something might happen to Fíli while they were so far apart.

“*My blood spilled before his, my life laid down for his.*”
Kíli had made that promise more than twenty years before, on the day he had realized the burden that his brother carried as Thorin's heir. No one had heard it, and his family would have protested if they had, but it was carved into his heart. He knew it would be a difficult one to keep – Fíli's protective streak made it hard to make sure that he was the one being protected. There was also the fact that the younger prince knew that his death would gut his brother, just as it would destroy him if the reverse occurred. But now, Fíli had Viska, and for the first time, Kíli believed that his brother might survive without him, damaged but unbroken, and so now he added to his vow.

“My life before hers, to protect my brother’s One to my last breath and beyond.”

* X *

Ori was lonely, and that surprised him. Given the situation, he would have expected his prevalent emotion to have been fear, but perhaps he just didn’t find the Elves quite so threatening after spending the last several weeks fleeing from Orcs, Wargs, and Goblins. Or maybe he was just too tired to be afraid. Most of the Company had found it hard to sleep in Mirkwood, and he was no exception. He slept, and then he ate (waking just in time to save his breakfast from being removed in favor of his lunch, so he managed a double meal), and then he opened the one piece of his gear that had been left to him. The red-haired she-Elf had let him keep his journal and sketch book, though not without a thorough search of his waterproof satchel, so he had something to do to pass the time. Still, he would have preferred to have company if he had to be locked up. Even Dori’s constant fussing would have been better than endless hours alone.

* X *

Viska was halfway through her meal when a small figure approached outside her cell and cleared its throat. The lass glanced up into the nervous eyes of the Company's burglar and felt a smile creep across her face.

“Master Baggins!” she said quietly, standing and going to the door. “It is good to see you free!”

The Hobbit returned her smile, looking a little stunned, and she suddenly realized that he was seeing her for the first time as a lass. She felt her face fall, wondering if she had lost his friendship as well.

“Ah...yes. You missed our capture in the forest.” She stared at her boots uncomfortably. “I am sorry for the deception, but it was necessary. I understand if you no longer wish to speak to me.”

“What? Oh, no! No, my friend, I am not angry,” he assured her. “Fíli warned me about your...um...secret.” Color crept up his face and he fidgeted nervously. “It’s just that...I was wondering how the Elf knew,” he admitted finally. “I never suspected, and even now, able to see your face...Dwarf women have beards?” he finished in bewilderment. She chuckled.

“More like extended sideburns, not full beards,” she replied. “Normally, they would be braided or beaded, but mine are just growing back after the...burns. Do not feel bad, Master Hobbit. Most non-Dwarves have difficulty recognizing Dwarrowdams. The Elf heard Kíli call me ‘sister,’ else she would not have guessed.”
“Sister?” Bilbo blinked.

“A term of affection,” she laughed. “Trisk is my brother by blood, but Kíli seems to have adopted me.”

The Hobbit cocked his head curiously. “And Fíli?”

Viska shrugged, fighting the blush she could feel creeping up her face. “I believe Fíli sees me...a bit differently,” she answered, then hurriedly changed the subject. “How are the others?”

He sighed. “Well. Angry and worried, but well. You are all scattered throughout the dungeons. It has taken me two days to find all of you. You are the last. And I must say, it's nice to actually be able to speak with you,” he added with a smile.

A low gurgling sound caught her ear, and she raised an eyebrow at him. “Is that your stomach grumbling, Master Baggins?”

“I do wish you would call me Bilbo, Mast – Mistress Viska.”

“Only if you call me Viska,” she retorted. “Now, was that your stomach grumbling, Bilbo?”

“Well, yes. The Elves feed prisoners, but hidden burglars must fend for themselves.”

She picked up her plate and shoved it out under the edge of the bars. “Here. I am quite full. Take the rest of mine. I doubt you can plan our escape on an empty stomach.”

* X *

“Barrels.”

Fíli blinked, staring at the burglar in confusion. Two more days had passed in the depths of Mirkwood, and he wondered if the confinement was starting to affect his hearing. Or his mind.

“Barrels?”

A small smile flickered across Bilbo’s smudged face and he nodded. “The Elves get some of their supplies from Laketown, shipped up the Forest River in barrels. I found a pile of empties in the cellars, soon to be dropped in the river to float back down to the lake. They'll fit a Dwarf each.”

“Barrels?” Fíli was still trying to process the idea. “You want us to float down the river in barrels?”

“The kitchens are in an uproar – there's to be a great festival tonight, so they have been using supplies at an alarming rate. There should be enough for everyone.”

Fíli nodded as Bilbo explained the rest of his plan, trusting the little burglar's instincts. Their quest would have ended several times already without the intervention of the Hobbit (or the Wizard, but Gandalf was far away), and the young swordsman was a firm believer in Bilbo's luck. He nodded in agreement.

“Tell Thorin and make your plans, Master Burglar. I would wait until you have everyone out before you tell them how we are escaping, however. It will be harder for them to argue with you when they are halfway to the cellars. And Bilbo...thank you, my friend.”
The Hobbit smiled and nodded, then hurried away. Fíli waited until he had vanished again (and how did he do that so easily?) before letting out a relieved sigh and sliding down to sit in a slump against the wall of his cell. Bilbo had found a way out. The burglar had offered his idea with some hesitation, obviously not certain that the Dwarf prince would agree to it, but this was their fourth day in the dungeons of the Woodland Realm, and time was slipping away from them, so he was not inclined to argue. Every day brought them closer to missing the deadline for finding the secret door, and every night brought an uneasy slumber as he slept alone – no Kíli to lean against in brotherly comfort, no Viska tucked against his shoulder where he could protect her from the world.

*B X*

Bilbo hurried silently through the halls, refining the plan in his mind as he went. He had presented it to Thorin (minus the little details that the king did not need to hear), and now he was headed to the cellars to pinch the keys to the cells. The last time he had seen the Keeper of the Keys, the Elf had been indulging in a rather excessive amount of fine wine, well on his way to inebriation, so it should be a relatively easy task.

*From respectable Hobbit of the Shire to planning a jailbreak in the space of a few months,* he thought with a small smile. *Why, Bilbo Baggins, I do believe that these Dwarves are a bad influence on you!*

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Innikh dē – Return to me (Khuzdul)
Kíli grinned when the burglar unlocked his cell, stepping out with a shiver of relief. “Bilbo, you brilliant Hobbit!” he cheered quietly.

“Kíli!”

Turning, he found his brother waiting a few steps away and lunged to hug him, pounding his back joyfully. It was only then that he realized that the three of them were alone.

“Where are the others?” he demanded, panic surging through him as he peered down the hallway. “We cannot leave without them!”

Fíli’s eyes hardened to chips of ice and his face became grim. “We aren't, but Bilbo is getting the four of us down to this exit he has found first. Then he'll go back for the others.”

“Four of us?”

Bilbo gave him an apologetic look. “I wanted to get you two, Triskel, and Viska safely stowed before I let Thorin out. He ordered me to leave them behind, you see.”

“Leave them behind?” Kíli stared at the little burglar in shock as Fíli nodded.

“Ah, here we are!” Bilbo brightened as he approached another cell. Triskel was waiting anxiously at the door to this one, and he glared at the brothers as the Hobbit let him out.

“Bilbo warned you?”

Kíli nodded tightly as Fíli growled an affirmative. Triskel did not move for a long moment, however, studying each of them.

“You realize that you are defying your uncle, your king. Are you certain that you want to do this?”

Kíli snorted and grabbed the other Dwarf by the shoulder, pulling him out of the cell. “Let’s see, you jumped on a Warg to save my brother, your sister nearly fell off a mountain saving me, you tried to take on Azog to protect my hard-headed uncle...oh, and I think your sister might be my brother's One. So yes, we're certain.”

“Kíli!”

He ignored his brother's outraged whisper and glanced at Bilbo. “I believe we have one more Dwarf to rescue before you go release the rest of the Company, yes? Lead on, Master Burglar!”
Viska was huddled on the bench in her cell, knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs. She had rearranged her scarf to hide her hair, but had left her face uncovered. She looked oddly vulnerable as she raised her head upon hearing the key in the lock. Her eyes widened in shock as she jumped to her feet and started for the door.

“Bilbo! I knew you'd think of something!” Then her gaze flickered over his companions and she frowned. “I thought you were getting me and Trisk out, then going back for the Company. Why are the princes here?”

Bilbo cleared his throat nervously and Kíli took pity on the Hobbit.

“We're here because we aren't leaving you two, or letting you slip out and go your own way. You're coming with the Company.”

She backed away, shaking her head. “Thorin doesn't want us, he made that very clear. He won't let us go with you.”

Fíli sighed and stepped into the cell, pulling the lass to him for a warm embrace, pressing his forehead to hers. “Thorin won't know you're there until it's too late,” he promised. “I'll change his mind, somehow. He is stubborn, but he is not cruel. But first, we have to get out of here. Bilbo still has to get us packed up so he can go back for the others. So come on, lass. Time is wasting.”

“So, when you said Bilbo was going to 'pack us up,' you meant quite literally,” Kíli muttered to his brother a few minutes later. The little group stood in the cellar, eying a pile of empty barrels that were stacked on their sides, set to be dumped out of a trapdoor into the river. Bilbo had left them with a brief explanation of what was needed, then hurried off to liberate the rest of the dwarves.

Fíli grinned and nodded. “All right, Viska, let's get you secured. Kíli, help Trisk.”

“Of course, brother. I wouldn't dream of assisting the pretty lass when I can help her big lug of a brother instead.” Kíli shot a cheeky grin at his friends and chuckled when Viska blushed. Fíli rolled his eyes and kicked at him, but the raven-haired Dwarf dodged easily and turned to help Triskel into one of the bottom barrels. He packed straw in around the grumbling Dwarf, then replaced the lid, securing it as best he could. Fíli finished getting Viska settled, then leaned in to plant a soft kiss on the top of her head before closing her barrel.

“Hold tight, tablāna,” he murmured. “You'll be going into the river again, but at least this time it's intentional.”

“Right, then. Shall we, brother?” Kíli eyed the barrels dubiously. The burglar's idea had merit, but he was not sure about riding down the river in one of the things.

“Go ahead and get in, Kíli. I'll pack you up, then get one of the others to help me,” Fíli replied. He
stepped closer and lowered his voice. “I'd rather be on my feet if it comes to arguing with Thorin,” he confided. “Hopefully, we can get him packed in before he notices them.”

Kíli nodded and clambered into one of the top barrels, patting straw into place beneath him, then pulling more in around him as Fíli passed him great handfuls. He was just settling in when footsteps and muttering on the stairs alerted them to the arrival of the rest of the Company.

“Ah, there's Fíli!” Bofur exclaimed genially. “Bilbo explained that you and Kíli were closest to the cellars, so he sent you down first to get everything started,” the miner commented with a broad wink. Then he rubbed his hands together in anticipation. “So, which one's mine, lad?”

It took a great deal of grumbling, and more than a few irritated orders from Thorin, before the entire Company was snugged into barrels. Bombur was already complaining, until Bifur kicked his barrel, but finally they were all packed in, except for Bilbo, who was busily replacing lids. Kíli peeked out of his barrel abruptly.

“What about you?”

“Ah, no worry,” the Hobbit assured him airily. “I'll be along and climb into one of the empties.”

* X *

Two hours later, Fíli was miserable. He had never been at ease in boats, and being sealed in a barrel with no fresh air was worse than any boating excursion on lake or river. He was fairly certain that they had gone over two small waterfalls, as the sickening sense of weightlessness was hard to mistake. The barrel was cramped and leaking water, his stomach was gnawing on his backbone (when it wasn't trying to empty its nonexistent contents), and his nose was filled with the smell of apples. He had chosen the barrel because the crisp scent reminded him of Beorn's orchard and the conversation with Viska – her gentle lips on his and the mischief in her eyes. As the interminable voyage progressed, however, the smell of food was contributing to the roiling nausea in his gut. He could only be thankful that the closed barrels would save him from Kíli seeing his discomfort.

And that was the other disturbing part of his journey. Another barrel would occasionally bump against his, but he could not call out to his companions, or even be certain that they were still accompanying him down the river. What if they had been recaptured? Perhaps they were even now being led back into Mirkwood in chains to face the ire of the Elven King. Surely even Bilbo would have been caught this time, for where would he hide? Or the Orcs? What if Azog's forces had finally found the Company and hauled the Dwarves from the river? Dark scenarios chased each other through his overly-vivid imagination until exhaustion pulled him down into a restless sleep haunted by terror-filled green eyes and his brother's voice crying out in pain.

Deliberate knocking on the side of the barrel roused the young Dwarf from a brain-clouded half-doze and he rapped back eagerly. A moment later, he realized how dangerous his response might have been, but then the lid was being pried off and he inhaled a chestful of fresh air before standing and retching painfully over the side. A bracing hand fell on his shoulder.

“Bad as a boat?”

That Kíli's voice held sympathy rather than amusement told Fíli that he must present a truly
pathetic sight. He groaned and wiped his mouth on his sleeve before raising his head. “Worse. I don't think I'll ever eat another apple. My barrel was full of the smell, and I'm starving, but sick. I'll never be able to smell another apple.”

Kíli grimaced, then offered a hand to assist him in clambering out of the barrel. “Bilbo's been knocking on barrels, but he's only gotten five responses besides us. Thorin's half drowned, Bifur and Bofur aren't much better. Balin is ill, and Dwalin is with him. Think you could help me find the others?”

Fíli took a deep breath and held it for a long moment before nodding. “I think I've convinced my stomach we're on dry land. So long as I don't have to sprint any time soon, I should be alright.”

“Thorin thinks we've lost the Orcs, between Mirkwood and the river,” his brother commented, working loose the lid on the nearest barrel. He peered in and grinned. “Ah, Trisk, awake and breathing! Need any help getting out?”

The silversmith shook his head and hoisted himself out of the barrel, glancing around anxiously. “Viska?”

“Here,” Fíli replied, having just opened another barrel to reveal a familiar dark gray hood. Viska was in decent shape as well, and with the siblings' help, Bilbo, Fíli, and Kíli were able to locate and free the rest of the Company in good time. They were in various states of distress, but only Bombur was unconscious, and Óin soon declared that he would be fine after some rest. Thorin had been deep in conversation with Balin, looking over the battered map, and they seemed to have reached a decision. Triskel and Viska visibly braced themselves when his gaze landed on them and anger flashed across the stern features.

“Master Burglar-”

“Told me, Bilbo interrupted frantically. “I'm sorry, I just-”

Fíli stepped in front of the Hobbit, face carefully expressionless. “I took the keys and let them out. I thought Bilbo was mistaken. Thorin Oakenshield would never leave his companions in the hands of Elves.”

Thorin's expression darkened further, and Fíli felt his brother step to his side, braced and defiant, the scowl on his face nearly a match for their uncle's. Thorin's eyes flicked between his younger heir and Viska's stony expression, and he sighed, shaking his head. Before he could speak, however, Balin was at his side, a calming hand on the king's arm.

“What's done is done. The lads meant no harm. We should send a delegation to Laketown to get some aid for our companions.”

Thorin stood in silence for a long moment, then nodded and turned on his heel. “Fíli, Kíli, with me. You too, Master Baggins, and Balin. Dwalin, keep an eye out. We will see about getting help from the Men of the Lake.”

* X *

Viska stood in the chill air of the autumn evening and watched Fíli hurry away after his uncle. The fair-haired prince glanced back once and gave her a tiny encouraging smile. She returned it faintly,
leaning in to her brother's side as Trisk wrapped an arm around her shoulders and squeezed tightly. She closed her eyes for a moment, allowing herself to draw comfort from his presence. Then she straightened, shaking off her fatigue as she looked around at her companions. She glanced at Dwalin first. The big warrior was leaning against a boulder, massive arms crossed over his chest as he watched the siblings.

“Do you hate us as well?” she asked quietly. He studied her for a long moment, then sighed.

“No, lass. You're still part of this Company, and Thorin doesn't hate you either. He is just...concerned, angry, worried. Too much going on in that head of his, as ever. Just...why, lass? Why the deception?”

She met his gaze steadily. “Would Thorin have let me come along without it? Would you?”

“Of course not.”

“Well, then. That is why.”

She offered him a small smile, then turned to survey the Company. Glóin hovered by his brother, shooting her distrustful glances, while Óin kept an eye on a stirring Bombur. Bofur sat next to his brother, chin in his hands, but he did catch her eye with a small smile and a twinkle in his dark eyes. Bifur was staring out at the river, oblivious to his surroundings. Dori studiously ignored her, but Ori smiled bashfully up from where he sat near Nori, dumping water out of his sodden boots. She moved over to sit next to him, Trisk at her side.

“At least you don't seem angry,” she commented lightly.

Ori blushed. “I already knew,” he admitted, his voice barely a whisper as he glanced sideways at his eldest brother. Viska stared at him in shock.

“Since when?” Trisk demanded. The little scribe coughed.

“Beorn's. The apple orchard.”

Viska felt a blush creep her face and ducked away when her brother turned to look at her quizzically.

“What happened in the apple orchard?”

“Fíli and I were talking. I had my hood down,” she replied evasively. “I thought Ori had gone back to the house.”

“I had,” he assured her earnestly. “I wasn't trying to spy. But I came back to let you know that Bombur didn't need any more apples, and I saw you...talking.”

Now Trisk looked really suspicious. “Just talking?”

Viska sighed in exasperation. “Just talking, nadad. Kíli was there, too. He can vouch, if Thorin ever lets him speak to us again.” She smiled at Ori and his blush spread to the tips of his ears. “Thank you for your discretion, Ori. Thank you for keeping my secret.”

The scribe cleared his throat awkwardly. “Well, in all honesty, I did tell someone. Nori knew, too.”

Trisk groaned and shook his head. “I'm beginning to doubt that we fooled anyone but Thorin and Dwalin, namadith.”
Viska would have laughed, but the memory of Glóin's glare and Dori's turned back stifled her amusement. Ori seemed to understand, because he shot a look at his eldest brother.

“He will come around. Dori is bossy, but he cares about everyone. Even Nori, though he won't admit it.”

* X *

Bilbo and Balin soon fell behind, allowing a gap to grow between them and where Thorin walked with his heirs. This was partly due to Balin's exhaustion, and partly to Thorin's design. He wanted a few moments of relative privacy with his sister-sons to discuss their...rebellion.

“You knew about their deception,” he stated abruptly, catching Kíli's stumble as the younger prince shot him a wide-eyed look. Fíli, however, simply nodded.

“I knew Viska was a lass, yes,” he admitted calmly. Thorin growled and clenched his jaw.

“How long?”

“All her life, I would imagine,” his elder nephew retorted. Now Kíli stopped, staring at his brother, and Thorin himself was slightly stunned by the tone of the reply. Then his anger reasserted itself.

“How long have you known?” he snarled, turning on his heel and planting himself in Fíli's way.

“Since Rivendell. I started to suspect after the river incident,” Fíli finally replied.

“And you never thought to tell me?”

“No, Uncle, because I knew how you would overreact.”

“Overreact? How is it an overreaction to strive to protect a Dwarrowmaid? It is our responsibility!”

“It is, but this particular Dwarrowmaid can take care of herself.”

“So can your mother, but Dís did not tag along!” Thorin roared.

“Only because you convinced her not to.” That muttered reply came from Kíli, who had clearly not meant for it to be heard.

“Amad knew,” Fíli interjected before Thorin could turn on his younger nephew. The older Dwarf stopped, mid-snarl, staring at his heir.

“What?”

“Trisk told you they traveled to Ered Luin first, and Ma told them where to meet us. She was friends with their mother. They told her the truth – all of it – and asked for her advice. Ma offered to let Viska stay with her until we returned, but she also told her that she would go, if she had the chance. Ma even taught her a few of her sparring tricks before they left. That is part of what gave her away in Rivendell. Amad thought she deserved to go.”

“It is not Dís's decision or responsibility,” Thorin countered with a growl. “This quest is no place for a lass.”
Kíli flushed and his fists clenched. “You mean the lass who has held her own since we left the Shire?” he demanded angrily. “The lass who helped save Fíli from a Warg? Who kept me from falling off of the mountain? Who killed one of the Mirkwood spiders with a dagger the length of her hand, hilt and all? That lass?”

Thorin studied his younger nephew. Kíli had always been the more impetuous of the brothers – quick to form attachments and loathe to let them go, and there was a strange intensity to his defense of Kulvik's daughter. The exiled king suddenly realized what must be behind the youth's hostility.

“Mahal, Kíli, tell me you don't think you're in love with the lass,” he sighed.

“What?” To Thorin's relief, Kíli looked genuinely stunned by the idea. “No, Uncle! She is a dear friend, like a sister.”

“Then why this passionate argument? Why hide her secret for so long?”

“Because she is a dear friend, Uncle,” Fíli said. There was a pleading look in his eyes now that tore at Thorin's heart. Never had the golden-haired lad looked so much like his dark-haired mother – Dís's gentle blue eyes had been able to tug at her brother's heart since childhood. “Have they not shown the qualities you claimed to seek? Loyalty. Honor. A willing heart,” the elder quoted to him, face set in stubborn lines.

Thorin shook his head, unable to shake the sense of betrayal that had settled into his heart the first moment he had seen Viska clearly. To have had the truth delivered by an Elf (and the smirking son of Mirkwood's arrogant king, no less), made it even worse. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew he was being unfair, could almost hear Balin's mild reasoning tone, Dís's incredulous argument. But his pride raged against the deception and made his blue eyes icy and his voice unyielding.

“They will travel with us to Laketown. No further.”

With a last glower, he strode off once more in the direction of the town, moving quickly enough to discourage conversation, but slowly enough not to leave Balin and the burglar completely behind. After a few steps, he realized that his nephews had fallen back with the others, jaws clenched and eyes shadowed.

* X *

Unnoticed in the hidden depths of the Dwarf's mind, a shimmering tendril of enchantment begins to uncoil. After being buried and dormant for more than a century, it moves slowly, but its power has not waned. If anything, it is stronger, and ever y step brings it closer to its source.

* X *

Balin raised an eyebrow as the two lads fell back to keep pace with him and the Hobbit. The older Dwarf had heard most of the argument and could guess at the rest, but he did not say anything, waiting instead to see which of the princes would speak. Fíli walked in silence, staring into the
distance, barely aware of his surroundings. Kíli was a bit more animated, dark eyes darting to his brother's face, to Thorin's back, to the ground, to Laketown in the distance. Bilbo glanced back and forth between the lads, confusion on his face. After a few moments, Kíli caught the look and offered the Hobbit a small reassuring smile. Then he caught Balin's eye and nodded toward his brother.

"Thorin has it wrong, you know. She is his One, not mine," he commented quietly. Balin stared at him in consternation, then looked at the elder prince. Fíli did not react, beyond tensing slightly as he strode silently along. The old adviser glanced back at the archer.

"What makes you say that?"

Kíli shrugged, his face solemn and thoughtful. "I feel it. I see it in their eyes. It has been growing since Rivendell. I see how they are constantly aware of one another."

Balin shot another look at Fíli, but he was still ignoring the conversation determinedly. "Fíli?" he asked gently. The fair-haired prince stiffened, then sighed.

"I do not know," he replied softly. "I feel...something. But how do you know? I am always aware of her – what she is doing, what she needs. I want to protect her, but I also want to challenge her. I want to have her at my side always, but I know that she can stand on her own...." he trailed off, looking frustrated at his inability to express himself. "I do not know," he finished quietly. Kíli sighed.

"Well, I do," he stated firmly. "And she is."

Balin was saved from having to comment by the looming gate that barred the bridge to Laketown. Thorin had halted, looking impatient as the others caught up, then turned to hail the guardsmen inside the gatehouse. The tall Men came out with wide eyes and the old Dwarf was reminded that it had been long indeed for Men since Durin's folk dwelt in the Mountain. Fíli and Kíli moved up to flank their uncle, offering nods of respect.

"How might I assist you, Master Dwarf?" the older of the Men asked genially, trying to mask his shock behind politeness.

"We need to speak to whoever is in charge of this town," Thorin replied gravely.

"The Master is at dinner," the guard replied dubiously, "but I can send a message to him, if it is urgent."

"It is. I am Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór, once King Under the Mountain. I would speak to the Master of Laketown to see if he would share in the wealth when Erebor is reclaimed."

* X *

It was not long before the runner that the guards sent into town returned, accompanied by a skittering, unsavory-looking Man who bore more than a passing resemblance to a rodent. He introduced himself as Alfrid and invited the Dwarves to accompany him, all the while bowing and smiling ingratiatingly as he dry-washed his hands. Only the smallest glimmer of disgust flickered across Thorin's face, and the princes kept their reactions to a brief exchange of glances. Balin merely watched closely, and Bilbo hovered at the rear of the group, uncertain and uncomfortable.
“If you will follow me, Sire, I will lead your retinue to the Master,” Alfrid sniveled. Thorin nodded graciously and motioned for the Man to lead the way, following with back straight and head high, a challenge in his eyes. Fíli and Kíli moved with him, the elder prince falling into his usual confident swagger as his brother's keen gaze swept their surroundings. Balin and Bilbo fell in behind, the Hobbit feeling rather bemused at the idea of being part of a king's retinue. He supposed it sounded a bit better than “Company Burglar.”

“I rather feel that I missed an important part of that conversation earlier,” he murmured quietly to the councilor as the group started across the bridge. A hint of a smile crossed Balin's face.

“Now might not be the best time to explain,” he replied quietly, with a nod toward the back of Thorin's head. “Ask the lads later, if you get a chance. Kíli, preferably. I'm not sure Fíli will answer.”

* X *

The Master of Laketown was indeed at dinner – or at feast, more accurately. He sat in a great dining room in the largest building in the ramshackle town, presiding over a small crowd, looking greasy and pleased with himself. He stood when the Dwarves entered, the brothers flanking their uncle, Balin and the Hobbit a little behind them. The Master bowed extravagantly.

“Welcome, Thorin, son of Thráin, come to reclaim the Kingdom Under the Mountain!” he declaimed. “Please, will you and your folk join us? You look weary.”

Thorin nodded politely in acknowledgment. “First, we would ask that you send aid to the rest of our companions. They wait a little way up the river. Master Baggins can guide your Men.”

The Hobbit sighed disconsolately and nodded as the Master assigned a group of soldiers to accompany him back to the rest of the Dwarves. Kíli stirred and spoke before Fíli could restrain him.

“I can go. Bilbo is exhausted.”

“I’m sure Master Baggins will not object to leading help to our kin,” Thorin growled. “You and your brother will remain with me.” He waited until the rescue party had been gathered and dispatched, then turned once more to the Master. “I thank you for your hospitality. As you were told, I am Thorin, son of Thráin, son ofThrór, once King Under the Mountain. These are my heirs, sons of my father's daughter, Fíli and Kíli. And my kinsman and councilor, Balin, son of Fundin.”

* X *

Tauriel stood on the bank of the Forest River, a small smile teasing her lips as she stared at the scene before her. Here was the answer to the riddle of the Dwarven company's escape from her king's halls, though she had not yet discovered how they had gotten out of their cells in the first place.

The suspicion had first begun to grow in her mind when, in the midst of leading a determined
search of the halls for the missing prisoners, she had heard a comment from one of the butlers about the empty barrels destined for Laketown being dropped early the afternoon before. None of the king's household recalled having done it, although there had been enough of Thranduil's preferred Dorwinion wine flowing at the feast that it was perfectly reasonable for memories to be fuzzy. The beginnings of an idea had blossomed in her mind, however, and it had not been long before she slipped out on her own to follow the course of the river and see what sign she might find of the escaped Dwarves. Now she stood where the river met the Long Lake, where a number of the barrels from the king's cellars (fifteen, to be exact) had been pulled up on the bank, their lids removed and the ground disturbed by many booted feet.

A movement at the edge of the forest had her spinning in place, an arrow nocked, though she knew already that it was one of her own. No Orc could have crept so close without a sound. She met the fierce blue eyes of the prince as a tiny smile flickered across his usually solemn face and was gone. Legolas nodded, his gaze darting to the barrels strewn behind her as she returned her arrow to the quiver.

“What are you doing out here, Tauriel?”

She frowned slightly, then remembered that he had been out on patrol through the night. She indicated the barrels with a nod.

“The Dwarves have escaped,” she replied quietly. “I do not know how they got out of their cells, but it is clear that this is how they escaped the halls. And you? You are outside of the normal bounds that we patrol.”

Legolas nodded, grimacing as he glanced back at the forest he had just left. “Orcs crossed through the wood in the night. I was tracking them.”

Tauriel's eyes widened, and she looked more closely at the tracks on the river bank. Her heart sank as she recognized the signs of Orc boots mixed among the Dwarven prints.

“And they were following the Dwarves,” she commented quietly, pointing to the tracks. The golden-haired prince studied them for a moment, then nodded. To her surprise, he turned back toward the forest, as though he intended to leave off following the foul creatures. “Legolas?”

He glanced at her quickly. “They have left our lands,” he replied dismissively. “They are no longer our concern.”

“That is your father talking.” The angry retort had left her mouth before she could think better of it, and she froze, wondering how he would react. He stiffened, his eyes widening slightly as he stared at her in surprise.

“Why do you care so much about these Dwarves?” he asked finally. Some of the tension left her body and she turned to let her gaze drift out across the lake, toward the distant Mountain that the Dwarves had once called home.

“Because they are everything that we are not,” she answered quietly, her mind roaming back over the last few days of watching over the prisoners. “They are fiery emotion and fierce protectiveness, innocent determination and passionate dedication. They-”

“They are fools,” Legolas interrupted incredulously. “They think to take the Lonely Mountain back from the dragon!”

She turned back to him, fire flashing in her green eyes. “Is it not their home?” she countered.
“Would you not do the same if Smaug had taken the Greenwood? Would you not risk everything to reclaim it?”

The prince snorted dismissively and shook his head. “We would not have drawn his attention in the first place,” he retorted. “We did not exhume the Arkenstone. That was Dwarven greed.”

Tauriel nodded, accepting his point. “True, but is it fair to hold the mistakes of the forbears against the descendants?” she asked. “These Dwarves are not those who ruled Erebor when the Mountain fell, but the children that our king refused to aid when they were homeless and starving. Some don’t even appear to be that old, but were more likely born after they went into Exile. We did not stand with them against the dragon, we did not aid them when they were forced to flee...I can stand aside no longer, no matter my king’s command.”

She met the gaze of her prince, her friend, pleading in her eyes, willing him to understand the certainty that she felt in the depths of her soul. “We cannot limit our efforts to our own lands and pretend that nothing that happens in the outside world will affect us. We cannot shut ourselves away from the light, from the world, and expect to be left alone. Evil will not respect our borders! It will always seek a way in.” She sighed, the brief flare of fierce intent leaving her feeling drained and weary. She could not read the expression on Legolas's face. “If we do not stand with the rest of the world, it will fall and fade away, and there will be no one left to stand with us when the darkness is at our gates,” she concluded. “Please, mellon-nin...I cannot ask you to help, but please do not hinder me. My heart cries out in warning against letting the filth cross our land unchecked.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
tablûna – apple lady (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
Triskel distrusted the Master of Laketown on sight. Perhaps it was exhaustion, or the strain of wondering when Thorin would finally have his say about the siblings' deception...or perhaps it was simply the Man himself. His ingratiating manner seemed a skim of civility over a depth of calculated self-interest and scheming greed. Whatever the reason, merely being the same room with the Man set the young silversmith’s nerves on edge. He would never have been able to follow such a preening, amoral personage, no matter the lineage, and he wondered that the Men of the town seemed to have no reluctance to grovel before the one they called “Master.”

Gradually, the experience of a lifetime of training his observational skills under his father’s dedicated tutelage won through the stress of the past weeks, and he was able to actually look at those who sat at feast with the Master of Laketown. Understanding came quickly after that. The town through which the Company had been escorted had been rickety and dilapidated, saved from squalor only by the clear indications that repairs were made where possible. The people who had peered from windows appeared much the same – beaten down and aged by endless work for simple survival. The Master, on the other hand, had an air of wealth (though not health, for he had a look of pallid illness), and the others in the chamber were much the same. These, then, were those who had found favor with their leader, those who enjoyed his special indulgence rather than bearing the burden of his rule. The fact that it was so easy to see the difference between these Men and the disheartened folk who had watched from the shadows made the back of Trisk's neck prickle with unease. He did not like the idea of Thorin seeking aid from such a Man, nor did he relish the idea of the Company being at the Master's mercy, and he edged protectively closer to his sister as they awkwardly took seats at one of the low tables. Viska was sagging with weariness, the walk from the shore of the river having drained her last reserves of energy, and he devoted several minutes to making sure that she at least attempted to eat some of the food that was offered to them. The others of the Company were in similar condition – even Bombur stared at his plate for a long moment, blinking, before he lifted the first morsel to his lips. As soon as Viska had taken her first few bites, however, Trisk turned his attention back to the hall, hazel eyes skimming the press of bodies. Across the table, Dwalin was doing the same, and the older warrior offered a nod of acknowledgment when their gazes met. At the high table, Thorin and Balin seemed to be in deep discussion with the Master, while the two princes watched the room warily. Fíli's brow furrowed when his eyes lit on Viska, and Trisk shook his head, flashing a series of subtle signs to let him know that she was only tired. The golden head nodded, the solemn blue gaze moving on to the rest of the Company before he turned to murmur something to Balin. The old councilor nodded quickly, then spoke to Thorin, who frowned slightly before turning to the obsequious Man. A few words were exchanged, then Fíli and Kíli were on their feet, hurrying through the crowd of tall bodies to join their companions.

“The Master of Laketown has offered us a house of our own to stay in,” the elder prince announced.
as they approached. “One of the guards is going to show us the way. Thorin and Balin will be a bit longer if you want to stay, Dwalin,” he added before the bald warrior could speak. Dwalin gave a small grin at the anticipation of his concern, then nodded and marched up to join his brother and their king at the high table. The rest of the Company got to their feet with varying levels of difficulty, anxious to finally rest with some sense of security. Fíli was at Viska's side as she rose, one unobtrusive hand ready to support her, and Trisk shook his head in amusement at the exasperated look that flashed across her face.

“No arguments, namadith,” he told her quietly, heading off any protests that she was fine. “You're as exhausted as the rest of us. Let him help you if you need it. I think all of us might need it before we get where we're going.”

A sigh answered him and the Dwarrowmaid shook her head in resignation before leaning slightly into Fíli's shoulder. A young, kind-faced Man wearing the deep burgundy of the Master's guards approached them with a small smile, offering a bow to Fíli and Kíli.

“If you would follow me, I will show you to the house that the Master has offered,” he stated pleasantly. “Baths have been prepared, and I would imagine you are ready to rest. It is not far.”

Fíli nodded as Viska straightened, though Trisk noticed that the prince's hand remained on her arm, and she did not pull away.

“Lead on, Master Guard,” Kíli replied cheerily, though his eyes looked as dull with weariness as any of the others'. “Otherwise, we might just sleep here for the night.”

* X *

Once again, Fíli found himself staring up at a wooden ceiling, unable to calm his thoughts enough to give in to much-needed sleep. On the pallet next to his, Kíli snored lightly, moving restlessly with his dreams. Across the room, Balín moved less, but his snores echoed in the small room, and Bilbo sniffled fretfully in the corner. The Hobbit seemed to be coming down with a cold after his dunk in the river, and had glared rather balefully at Thorin during the time he had been at dinner. Dori grumbled in his sleep, a detail that the young swordsman did not recall ever noting before, and Nori’s snores had an irritating whistle to them. Ori’s, however, were the loudest, a direct contrast to how quiet the scribe was when awake. Fainter sounds of snoring could be heard through the thin walls as the rest of the Company slept. Thorin had his own room across the hall, and Dwalin had dragged his pallet into the passageway between the two, standing guard over his kin. The room next door held the rest of the Company, with Glóin and Bifur undoubtedly closest to the door.

The golden-haired prince sighed gustily and folded his arms behind his head, staring up at the warped wood of the ceiling, Kíli’s insistence that Viska was his One running through his head. He had never considered himself superstitious. Oh, he believed in the Valar, and he honored the stories of the Dwarves' creation at the hands of Mahal, but he was not one for signs and portents. He left that to Óin, with the healer's talk of the ravens, or his mother, with her stories of the Mountain singing. He had never given much thought to the concept of his One. He knew that Dwarves only loved once – he had countless representations of the truth of that assertion – but the idea that Mahal had crafted someone especially for him? His soul's match? It seemed almost arrogant.

And yet...he thought of the wedded pairs that he knew back in Ered Luin. Glóin and Fla, Bombur
and Eira, Brís and Banrer, even the distant memories of his parents before his father's death. All
couples so perfectly suited that it was hard to imagine that they had ever been individuals – love,
respect, and strength to support one another through all of the challenges of life. And he could not
deny the way that Viska pulled at his heart, especially after his experience with the enchanted
river. Could she be his One? Yes, he realized abruptly. If such a thing existed, she was it. And if it
did not, well, she was still tied to his soul, irrevocably so.

A soft groan sounded from the pallet next to him and he glanced over as Kíli flopped onto his
stomach and glared through the curtain of his dark hair.

“If you don't stop that humming, *nadad*, I'm going to smother you with your own pillow,” the
archer promised fervently. “I know that you love her, her *brother* knows that you love her, and I'm
pretty certain that *she* knows that you love her, so just admit it to yourself and go to sleep!”

* X *

Despite their late night, the Company woke early the next morning, eating a light breakfast and
dressing quickly in the oversized spare clothing that had been donated by the wealthier folk of
Laketown. The Man-sized shirts and child-sized trousers were mismatched and uncomfortable, but
it was only a temporary measure. Dori and his brothers quickly took charge of the laundry,
collecting everyone's gear so Nori and Ori could wash while Dori and Óin mended. The young
scribe had just hung the last piece of clothing to dry when the rising noise of a crowd gathering
outside drew the Dwarves' attention. Dwalin glanced quickly out the front door, then consulted
with Thorin before they led the way out onto the porch, where the Master stood surrounded by his
guards. The greasy Man greeted Thorin theatrically, smiling as the rest of the Dwarves (and one
congested Hobbit) took up positions surrounding and supporting their leader before he turned to the
press of gaping people of the town with a flourish.

“My dear friends! Rumors have been flying since our guests arrived last night, so I wish to make an
announcement!” he proclaimed. “As I am sure many of you have heard, a party of Dwarves is
currently in our humble Esgaroth, and I am pleased to be able to tell you that they are led by none
other than the rightful King Under the Mountain, Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór! These brave
folk are on their way to Erebor to reclaim their kingdom from Smaug the Terrible! Please join me
in welcoming our noble guests as they prepare for the final stage of their long journey. Soon, the
Mountain will once more send riches flowing through the land!”

“Death is what they'll bring us if they wake that dragon!” a voice called out from the crowd. There
was a stir and the throng of people parted to let a tall, grim-faced Man stride forward, his dark eyes
snapping as he turned to face his fellow townsfolk. “Do none of you remember the tales of the
firestorm? The people of Dale dead beneath a layer of ash when Smaug descended on the
Mountain? You think the dragon will not finish what he started all those years ago if these
Dwarves wake him? Is the potential for prosperity worth the lives of your children?”

A nervous muttering ran through the gathering as parents clutched their young ones close and
turned to the Master with fear in their faces. He was glaring at the Man, but recovered himself
quickly, a sneer crossing his smug face.

“Of course Bard the Bargeman would speak out against our new friends,” he countered nastily.
“Bard the *Bowman*, descended of Girion, the Lord of Dale whose aim faltered, he who failed to
slay the dragon as it burned his people! If any should be blamed for the beast's continued existence,
it is your ancestor! Would you now ask me to deny aid to those who come to free us from his lurking shadow? Is your pride worth the lives of your children?”

Viska felt Trisk stir at her side, his eyes narrowing sharply. “That sounded like a threat.”

“Aye,” Bofur agreed, glancing sidelong at his cousin. Bifur's hand was moving restlessly, as though reaching for his lost weapon, and several of the others of the Company had fixed hard looks on the leader of Laketown.

Bard had turned to the Master and was shaking his head. “I am not my ancestor, nor do I hold Thorin, son of Thráin, responsible for his grandfather's deeds. I only ask that you, both of you, consider what consequences might befall these people as a result of your actions.” Now he fixed Thorin with a dark gaze. “You have no right to enter that mountain.”

Thorin met his eyes, steel for steel.

“I have the only right.”

“And we will see that right upheld!” the Master cried. “Welcome to Laketown, Dwarves of Erebor! Rest and restore yourselves, so you may return to your quest renewed in body and spirit!”

The gathered people cheered wildly, surging around Bard to crowd the stairs at the front of the house, the Master's guardsmen holding them back so the Dwarves could retreat inside. The Master had a few more grandiose words with Thorin, then departed with his armed escort, shoving their way through the small crowd that remained outside.

* X *

As soon as the Master left, the Company scattered to their own pursuits. Óin dosed Bilbo with one of his foul-tasting concoctions and sent the suffering Hobbit back to bed, while Ori took a seat in a fall of autumn sunlight and dug out his sketchbook. Dori returned to the mending, accompanied by a resigned Nori, as Bombur picked through the remains of breakfast and his brother and cousin conversed quietly. Balin and Dwalin had pulled the princes aside, to Fíli’s obvious frustration, and were talking in low voices as Thorin started for the hallway. The king glanced briefly over his shoulder.

“Triskel. Viska. A word.”

The siblings exchanged a look, then followed Thorin into the room he was using as a study, closing the door behind them on Fíli’s startled, concerned gaze. The king moved to gaze out the window, over the wide expanse of the Long Lake. The silversmith and the jeweler stood in silence for a long moment before the Company's leader turned to look at them.

“I did order Master Baggins to leave you behind in Mirkwood,” he admitted frankly. “Though I am glad that my sister-son intervened. Even in your deception, you have been true members of the Company and deserve better than to rot in Thranduil's dungeons.” He sighed, then fixed Triskel with that sapphire stare. “But the fact remains that you did deceive me. You knew that Viska would not be permitted to join the quest, and so you lied. If she could not remain in Lanzhindîn, you should have delivered her to my halls – my sister would have welcomed her. And do not tell me that Dís encouraged your scheme – she is not the leader of this expedition, and it was still your decision.”
Trisk met Thorin's eyes steadily and nodded.

“I take full responsibility for my actions, and I do not seek to excuse them,” he replied proudly.

“We both take responsibility,” Viska interrupted. “We are both at fault, nadad.”

Trisk offered her a tiny smile and the king’s eyes seemed to spark with pride before he shook his head and studied the two young Dwarves.

“Several members of the Company have urged me to be lenient, but this is the best that I can do,” he finally continued. “Once Erebor is retaken, you will be welcome there. Your father's memory and your own deeds have earned you that much. There will be much to do for the restoration, and the trades that you follow will certainly be needed in the future. You will still receive your shares of the treasure, as well. However,” he met each of their gazes in turn, his face set and serious. “When we leave for Erebor, you will remain behind. We may yet face a dragon, and I will not risk you, lass. Nor would I ask your brother to leave you here alone. I will speak to the Master. He need not know why, only that two of our number must remain behind until the dragon is settled. He will see to it that you have a place to stay.”

Viska stared at him in confusion. “Risk me? What do you mean? Have I not shown that I can take care of myself?” she demanded, her voice rising with frustration and outrage. “I am no wilting noble Dwarrowmaid who needs to be coddled and hidden from the world!”

Trisk stirred and opened his mouth to speak, but Thorin raised a quelling hand and shook his head. When his eyes met hers, his expression was kinder than she ever remembered seeing for any but his nephews. Stepping around the desk, he placed a hand on each of her shoulders and looked down into her face.

“You mistake me, daughter of Kulvik,” he stated quietly, his voice filled with compassion. “I know that you are a fighter, that you have done your share and more since we left the Shire. But we may yet have to face a dragon – the beast that nearly destroyed our people. I do not know if any of us will survive. Those who would not join us thought this would end in death for all, and perhaps they were right. I do not doubt your heart, zagrûna, or your courage. I seek only to protect the beloved daughter of my lost comrade. You are a lass, and we have few enough of those, but beyond that you are Viska, daughter of Kulvik, and it would be a poor repayment for your father's friendship if I were to risk your life needlessly. If all goes well, we will return to Laketown to await the arrival of Dáin's armies. Then, you and Trisk will join us in Erebor when the dragon is dead.”

Viska stared at her king as he stepped away, her gut churning with conflicting emotions. She glanced at her brother, then turned back to Thorin, taking a deep breath to brace herself.

“And if it does not go well?”

His eyes flicked to her face and he nodded silently, producing a sealed letter written on a page from Ori's journal. Viska stared at it until her brother took it and tucked it into his coat. Thrór's son kept his gaze on her. “Then I would ask you to travel to the Iron Hills and let Dáin know of what has happened. Ask him to help you return to Khagal'abbad and bear the news to my sister. Dis will deserve to hear it from someone who cared about her sons.”

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Fíli had lost any remaining interest in the conversation that he was having with Balin, Dwalin, and his brother when he heard Viska's voice raised behind the door to Thorin's “study.” He was moving without conscious thought, every protective instinct on high alert when Dwalin clamped a hand on his forearm.

“Easy, lad. She's in no danger,” the warrior assured him, his voice a low rumble as Kíli bounced on the balls of his feet, ready to follow his brother if needed. Fíli glanced at his weapons trainer, one of his uncle's oldest friends, and saw sympathy in the dark eyes. The prince relaxed slightly, but could not help another glance at the closed door.

“He's not letting them come with us, is he?” he asked finally, seeking Balin's gentle gaze. The old councilor shook his head and Fíli closed his eyes, taking a deep breath as relief and anxiety battled in his gut.

“It's for her own safety, laddie,” Balin assured him.

“And ours,” Dwalin added. “Half of the Company would risk themselves for that lass, whether she wanted it or no, and endanger themselves in the process. It will be better if she stays here, and her brother will stay with her. She'll not be left alone.”

“But she'll not be with me.” That was what hurt. He understood, in his head, that it was safer for her to remain behind, but some small, selfish part of him wanted her at his side. He heard Kíli sigh gustily and he opened his eyes to glance at his brother, surprised that he was not arguing. The raven-haired archer met his gaze and shrugged.

“I want to argue, as much as you do,” he answered the unspoken question. “But they are right. As much as it pains me to admit it,” he added with a sly sidelong look at the older warriors. Dwalin smirked and let go of Fíli's arm as the door opened and the siblings from Evendim emerged unscathed. Green eyes sought him out and a tiny smile flickered across Viska's face as he moved to embrace her warmly.

“I am sorry, tablūna,” he murmured quietly. “I know you deserve to stand beside us.”

She nodded, then pressed her forehead to his in silent understanding. “We will wait for you to return, our burglar triumphant,” she replied with a small smile before stepping back. “Thorin wants to speak to the four of you,” she continued, her gaze taking in Fíli, Kíli, Balin, and Dwalin. “Trisk and I will be out in Laketown for a bit, with Bifur, if he will join us.”

The golden-haired prince nodded, but hesitated as the others went into the study. He gave her a final smile and squeezed her hand before letting go.

“Stay out of trouble, if you can,” he warned with a glint of humor, glancing at Trisk with a warning in his eyes. The auburn-haired Dwarrow nodded and gave him a tiny bow. “Stay away from the Master. I do not trust him.”

“No more do I,” Trisk replied grimly. “We are only going to the market. Thorin wants to know more about the actual people of Laketown. Any that choose to rebuild Dale will be our neighbors and allies, and the king would know as much about them as he can...from more trusted sources than our friend the Master.”

Fíli nodded tightly, then signed briefly to Bifur before hurrying after Balin. Before he closed the door, he saw the wild-haired toymaker joined the siblings with a smile, looking more disreputable than ever in his mismatched donated clothing. He grinned cheerily at the youngsters, hands moving quickly.
Out for a bit of exploring?

Viska smiled. “Yes, my friend, if you'll join us. Are you up for a bit of intelligence-gathering in a village of Men?”

Bifur's grin became slightly more predatory.

Always.

* X *

A life spent in a predominantly Dwarven settlement had not prepared Viska for the realities of a crowded town of Men, where her companions could disappear behind the taller forms in a heartbeat. There was no overt aggression from the people of Esgaroth – most of them tended toward a hopeful curiosity, while dull suspicion and distrust were the worst greetings that they encountered. They avoided the guardsmen where possible, but did not fail to note the arrogant attitude that many of them displayed toward the common folk of the town. Trisk shook his head disapprovingly as one with an ornate helmet shoved his way through a small gathering, nearly knocking an elderly Man to the walkway.

How can they allow it? The Darrowmaid's hands flew through the iglishmêk signs indignantly, eyes bright behind her concealing scarf. Bifur smiled at her sadly.

It is what they know.

There is tension here, Trisk added, his eyes narrowing as he watched the people around them, the small hints of rebellion carefully enacted behind the backs of the guardsmen. It will not stand much longer. They are nearly ready to rise up. The timing of our arrival may be perfect.

Viska nodded without replying, taking mental notes as they edged their way through the bustling crowd of Men. They had been in the market for most of the afternoon when she turned from a display of herbs and nearly trod on a wide-eyed girl child with a sweet face. The little girl was a bit taller than the Dwarrowmaid, with curly dark hair and huge hazel eyes, and she stared at them in innocent curiosity, a bright smile of wonder on her face.

“Are you really Dwarves?” she asked excitedly, “You look like a child. Why do you cover your face? Do all Dwarves do that?”

Viska held up a hand to slow the flow of questions and the girl's eyes widened further.

“You are a Dwarf!” she exclaimed breathlessly, holding up her own slender hand to compare to the Dwarf lass's. Viska chuckled and nodded, kicking Trisk in the shin to get his attention. He turned and the girl shrank back a little, looking nervous.

“I'm sorry, Mister Dwarf. I just never met a stone man before.”

Trisk smiled and shot a confused look at Viska, who shrugged.

“No worries, little lass,” he told her with a small bow. “We are indeed Dwarves. I am Trisk, and this is Visk. Our friend back there is Bifur. He's a toymaker.”
She peered at their escort dubiously and Bifur bowed, gifting her with one of his gentle smiles. She smiled back tentatively.

“Til! What are you doing? I told you to stay-oh!”

A taller girl with similar features had rounded the corner and stopped abruptly as she spotted the child talking to the Dwarves. Trisk bowed to her as well, looking like he hoped he wasn't about to have a pair of hysterical daughters of Men on his hands.

“Sigrid, I met Dwarves!” the younger sang out, pointing to each of them in turn. “Mister Trisk, Mister Visk, and Mister Bifur! He makes toys!” The last was delivered in a loud, incredulous whisper that made Viska laugh quietly. Sigrid rolled her eyes at her sister's behavior, then seemed to remember herself and gave a sketchy curtsy.

“My apologies if she was bothering you,” she murmured. “She was supposed to be staying close to me.”

“No bother,” Trisk assured her with a smile. “As she said, I am Trisk, this is Visk, and our companion is Bifur. He does not speak Westron, but he does understand it.”

“Sigrid,” the girl replied, ducking her head in acknowledgment. “And my sister, Tilda. She's usually a bit better behaved.”

Trisk laughed. “Oh, I understand the frustrations of a younger sibling,” he assured her, deliberately ignoring the dirty look he was getting from his own. Tilda, for her part, was giving Sigrid a rather indignant frown, but the elder ignored it, studying the Dwarves with shy curiosity.

“You are with the king?” she asked after a moment. “The Dwarves of Erebor?”

“We are with the Company,” he confirmed, “but we are not among the royalty. We are simple folk. I am a silversmith, in fact. Or, I was. I hope to be able to do it again one day. Visk is a jewelry-maker.”

“Not warriors? But I thought...aren't you going to face the dragon?” she asked in confusion. “Surely that would take an army, or at least a few great warriors?”

“Ah...we hope to be a bit more clever and sneaky than that,” he replied. “But yes, all of us can fight, and some are chiefly warriors. More than that, though, we are pilgrims who seek to reclaim our home.”

Sigrid stared at him, her face unreadable, except for her eyes, which shone with compassion.

“Then I wish you the best of luck, Master Trisk,” she told him, sincerity ringing in her gentle voice.

“Sig! Tilda! C'mon, Da's waiting!”

Sigrid turned and waved to a curly-haired boy, then caught Tilda's hand with a final smile for the Dwarves. “That's my brother, Bain,” she explained quickly. “We'll need to go. It was nice to meet you!”

Tilda waved enthusiastically as the girls hurried away, and the Dwarves waved back, smiling. Viska laughed quietly as she watched them go, then glanced at the sky and frowned. Bifur followed her gaze and nodded, arching a brow at Trisk.

Getting late.
The silversmith nodded. “We'd best return,” he agreed. “Before Fíli sends out a search party for Viska.”

He didn't move fast enough to avoid her elbow in his ribs, and Bifur was no help, simply laughing uproariously as they hurried back through the walkways of Laketown.

* X *

Tauriel and Legolas watched from the cover of Mirkwood as darkness settled across the Long Lake. The small band of Orcs had camped just at the edge of the woods, where they could observe Laketown but would still be able to disappear into the forest if spotted by the Men. They had not yet realized that they were being followed by Elves – or they did not care. They were only two, after all, and the twisted creatures had no way of knowing that the Captain of the Guard and the Crown Prince were more formidable foes than they appeared. For now, however, the Elves were content to watch, and wait.

“Are they afraid to enter the town?” Legolas murmured quietly, blue eyes glinting in the moonlight. “I doubt such a poor town of Men would be able to stand against even that small pack.”

Tauriel shook her head. “No. They know the Dwarves are there, and they know that when they leave, they will head directly for the Mountain. I think they are waiting for orders, or for Oakenshield to lead his folk out of the town.”

“Which means more might be on their way. Tauriel, we should return and bear this news to my father.”

“You are free to do so, mellon-nin” she told him gently, reluctant to hold him against his will. She was surprised that he had followed her at all. “But I cannot leave the Dwarves to their tender mercies. We disarmed them when we took them prisoner – do you think Esgaroth can offer them much in the way of weapons? They will be next to helpless if the Orcs seek to take them on the road to Erebor.”

“They should have thought of that before they escaped,” the golden-haired prince muttered softly. Tauriel shot him an amused glance and he sighed. “Very well. We will wait.”

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It is in sleep that he is most vulnerable, the time when the conscious protections of his mind are weakest, and it is in sleep that it reaches out to him to continue its work. The foundation was laid long ago, the seed planted before even the great fire drake descended to claim the treasure horde of his people. The beguiling song works its way deep into the darkest portions of his self, where he has sought to bury his flaws and failings, and there the power takes root.

Chapter End Notes
Translations and Notes:
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
Lanzhindîn – Hills of Evendim (Khuzdul)
zagrûna – lady of the sword (Khuzdul)
Khagal'abbad – Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
tablûna – apple lady (Khuzdul)
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
His senses are filled with gold. He is surrounded by it, a glimmering ocean of coins and precious objects that stretches as far as his eyes can see, cool and smooth beneath his hands. The slide and clink of endless shifting is in his ears, while the metallic tang in the air teases his nose and tingles on his tongue. It is everywhere, and it is everything. It is his, and no one will prevent him from reclaiming it....

* X *

He woke with a start, barely realizing that a dark form loomed over his bed before he was reacting with battle-honed reflexes, one hand lunging for the attacker's throat as the other snatched at blankets to bind and blind.

“Bâha!”

Thorin froze, the Khuzdul word for 'friend' easing his sleep-hazed mind even before he registered the familiar voice. The first light of dawn filtering in through the curtains faintly illuminated the blunt features as Dwalin stepped back, hands held up to show that he was unarmed.

“You were snarling in your sleep, Thorin. I just came in to be sure all was well.”

The king swung his legs out to sit on the edge of the bed, scrubbing both hands over his face.

“A nightmare, old friend,” he admitted quietly. “Or...something. I am not quite certain.”

Keen dark eyes studied him with concern as a hand came to rest on his shoulder.

“Still have that pain in your head? Want me to fetch Óin?”

Thorin sighed and dropped his hands, focusing on the throbbing feeling inside his skull. It was not so sharp as it had been the night before, when it had felt as though some craftsman was boring a hole above his eye, and the faint ghost of a melody that had plagued him was silent. Finally, he shook his head. “It is there, but it is duller now, more distant. I will be fine.” The warrior continued to glower at him and he smiled slightly. “If it gets worse again, I will ask Óin for something, cousin. Will that satisfy you?”

Dwalin snorted and gave a small nod before removing his hand and stepping back. “I suppose it
will have to, won't it?” he asked rhetorically. “Mind you, I'll keep an eye on you all the same.”

“Of course you will. I would expect nothing less.”

The Dwarf lord slid out of the oversized bed and dressed quickly, glancing at his cousin as he stamped his boots into place.

“How is our burglar?”

“Still sleeping, last I saw. Óin said it was normal, he gave him some strong medicine for that cold of his, trying to clear it out before we leave for the Mountain.”

“Everyone else is awake, then?”

“Aye. Dori and his brothers are finishing the last of the mending and altering the larger clothes to replace what canna be fixed. Balin is finalizing the supply list to send to the Master, and Bombur, Bofur, and Óin will take it over before midday. Glóin and I will going out to see what kind of weapons these Lakefolk have to offer.”

Thorin nodded absently. “Take Fíli and Kíli with you,” he commented. “Hopefully, you will need the help carrying back what we can use.”

The bald warrior nodded. “Bifur will be going out with Trisk and the lass again, if you still want them watching the townsfolk.”

“I do. I know you think it is just busywork, Dwalin, and in a way it is. It is kinder to give them something to do while preparations are made. But they brought back some interesting information last evening.”

“That they did,” he conceded. “Just...they'll need some time with the lads before we go, Thorin.”

“I know.”

He watched the warrior precede him out of the room, trying to focus his thoughts on preparations for the next several days. He was certain of the course he had chosen, especially in regard to the siblings from Emyn UIAL. He would not risk the lass, and he would not leave her behind alone. He just wished there wasn't something teasing the edge of his mind about her relationship with his nephews. They were close, he could see that much, but Kíli called her 'sister,' rather than 'love,' so what was it that he was missing?

Could it be... Fíli?

The thought hit him like a bolt of lightning and he froze in the doorway, eyes unseeing as he considered it. He remembered the elder lad being frequently lost in thought, especially since the Carrock, the Song of the Mountain a deep rumble in his chest. It had reminded him of Dís in the days when she was realizing her interest in Torvi, but Kíli had mentioned a lass in Ered Luin, hadn't he?

But that was when they were helping her hide, he realized. Of course Kíli would offer an easily-accepted explanation for his brother's distraction. If the golden-haired prince was thinking of a lass from home, he might receive gentle teasing, but no real questions would be asked. With this new possibility resounding in his mind, the Dwarf lord sorted through his memories of the journey since the Carrock and was amazed by the many tiny gestures that he had glimpsed but not registered. He had not been looking for them, of course. He had no reason to do so, until now. It was Fíli. It had always been Fíli. The calm, responsible eldest, so much like his even-tempered
father, who had in turn been the perfect foil to Dís's spitfire temper.

In the common room of the house, the lass was talking quietly with her brother and the princes, throwing her head back to laugh at one of Kíli's jokes. No longer the silent enigma behind the hood and scarf, she was free within these walls to be the spirited lass who had faced down Goblins in a fiery building. His gaze went to his heir, noting the love that shone in Fíli's eyes as he laughed with her. How had he missed it?

Thorin turned quickly, before the young Dwarves realized that he was watching them, and strode over to the table, where Balin had set aside a portion of breakfast for him. A tiny smile teased the king's lips as he sat next to his cousin, and Balin raised one bushy white eyebrow.

“You're in a pleasant mood, for one my brother roused from a snarling nightmare,” he commented softly.

“Let us say that I have had a glimpse of the future, cousin,” Thorin replied quietly, “and it is brighter than I had realized.”

Balin nodded with a puzzled look on his face, but did not inquire further, simply returning to his own meal. Thorin took a few bites before resuming the conversation that had been interrupted by his headache the night before, concerning the supplies they would need for the last part of their journey. Finally able to concentrate, he did not notice when the dull throb at his temples began to grow once more, or when the faint strains of the eerie melody began to weave their magic.

* X *

The other groups had already left on their various errands before Trisk, Viska, and Bifur headed out to wander Laketown for the second day. They felt comfortable once more, with their gear clean and mended (or replaced by donated clothing that had been altered by Dori's talented needle), and Bifur hummed tunelessly to himself as his hand fidgeted restlessly with a carved wooden toy in his pocket. Viska was quiet, but seemed thoughtful rather than brooding, so Trisk simply nudged her shoulder affectionately and let her walk in silence. For his part, he exchanged friendly greetings with folk he had met the day before and sent reassuring smiles toward several shy children that watched the Dwarves curiously, but did not approach. Except for one.

“Mister Trisk! Mister Visk! Mister Bif!”

Trisk chuckled as he turned toward the voice, then laughed outright as he watched Sigrid roll her eyes and lunge after her little sister. Tilda, however, seemed to have anticipated her sister's reaction, and ducked nimbly out of the way so she could dart over to her new friends. All three Dwarves offered bows as the girls approached, and Sigrid dropped a slight curtsy that Tilda tried to emulate before launching into three questions at once.

“Are you exploring? D'you want me to show you the best places? Would you come to tea?”

“Til! What has Da told you?” Sigrid scolded gently, pulling the younger girl out of the middle of the walkway so they would not hinder those passing. Tilda sighed.

“Slow down. Breathe. One question at a time,” she recited dutifully. She grinned at Bifur. “Da says I ask too many questions,” she confided. The toymaker shook his head firmly and produced the small carved figure that he had been carrying, speaking quietly in Khuzdul as he glanced at
“Bifur says there's no such thing as too many questions, for how else are you to learn?” the silversmith translated with a smile. “Though perhaps one at a time would make it easier for others to answer them for you.”

Tilda giggled, her eye caught by the toy in Bifur's hands. “What is that?”

The wild-haired Dwarf smiled and reached out to take her hand gently, pressing the gift into it. “Zarsmuznat,” he stated firmly. Then he pointed at the girl herself. “Zarsmuznatith,” he added with a nod.

“A squirrel,” Trisk supplied. “For a little squirrel. He says your curiosity and eagerness for answers reminds him of a squirrel.”

Bifur nodded and tapped Tilda's shoulder. “Zarsmuznatith,” he repeated.

“I think you have earned a nickname,” Trisk told her with a smile. Eyes shining, Tilda glanced at her sister, her smile widening when Sigrid nodded.

“Thank you, Mister Bifur!” Handing the toy to her sister for a moment, Tilda threw herself at the fierce-looking Dwarf and hugged him tightly. Bifur returned it gently, mindful of her tiny frame, and smiled even more widely when she broke away and collected the toy from Sigrid so she could study every detail of the lifelike carving. The older girl watched her fondly, then nodded to Bifur, something shining in her eyes that belied her youth.

“Thank you, Mister Bifur. The toy is lovely. You captured Tilda's spirit perfectly after knowing her only a few moments!”

Bifur nodded to her, then reached out to pat her arm. “Amdith,” he murmured softly, offering a smile. Her brow wrinkled and she glanced at Trisk for help.

“It means 'little mother,’” Viska spoke up gruffly. “He is impressed by the way you care for your sister. You lost your mother?”

Sigrid nodded, her eyes bright with unshed tears. “Ma died shortly after Til's birth,” she replied softly. “I have looked after her and Bain since then. So yes, I guess 'little mother' describes me as well as 'little squirrel' describes her.” Turning back to Bifur, she offered a slightly unsteady curtsy. “Thank you again, Mister Bifur. It was nice to see you again, Mister Trisk, Mister Visk,” she added. “But we need to be heading home. I have laundry to finish, then it'll be time to start dinner. Perhaps we will see you again before you leave for the mountain?”

“Perhaps,” Trisk replied. “Be well, Miss Sigrid, Miss Tilda.”

Without the distracting company of the two girls, the rest of the afternoon passed slowly as the three Dwarves wandered the walkways of Laketown. Rather than staying in the market, they broadened their area a bit, visiting some of the permanent shops and simply watching the people as they interacted with one another and with the representatives of the Master, whether guard or the weasel-like Alfrid, who they had managed to dodge twice. They gathered some information for Thorin, but none of what they saw altered Trisk's opinion of the previous day. The peace in Laketown was a thin veneer, the calm before a storm. The people were reaching the end of their tolerance of the Master, and the silversmith could only wonder how unaware the selfish Man really was.
Something was different...wrong. Viska could tell as soon as they entered the house that evening that something had happened to alter the mood of the Company, and not for the better. The atmosphere was thick with tension, and she noticed Dori and Glóin giving her dark looks like they had just after the escape from Mirkwood. Neither Dwarf had spoken to her since, but they had been involved enough in the planning and preparations for the journey not to trouble with her, until now. Exchanging concerned looks with her brother, she quickly collected a plate of food from the common table and took a seat away from the others where she could eat and watch quietly. Trisk joined her immediately, and it was only a few moments before Fíli and Kíli excused themselves from the larger group and came over. The older prince had lines of strain around his eyes, and his brother seemed troubled.

“What's happened?” she asked as Fíli sat next to her, leaning back against the wall with a sigh. He groaned.

“We went to see what kind of weapons the Men could give us,” Kíli answered quietly. “The options were...less than ideal.”

“They were pathetic,” Fíli corrected. “We didn't expect Dwarven craftsmanship, nor Dwarven size, which was going to make it awkward enough. But whoever the Master's smith is, he should never have made it past Journeyman, even among Men.”

“Good thing you aren't planning to have to use them, then,” Trisk offered with half a smile. “Is that why everyone is so tense?”

“Partly,” Kíli replied, glancing over his shoulder at the rest of the Company. “Bilbo is starting to get over his illness, so he should be back in shape by Durin's Day. The main thing, though, is...” he trailed off, looking unsure how to continue.

“It's Thorin,” Fíli finished, keeping his voice barely above a whisper. “His mood has...darkened since this morning.”

“Is the pain in his head back?” Viska asked, a jolt of concern going through her. The king had begun complaining of the headache during the previous evening's meal, snapping impatiently at all and sundry before Óin had sent him off with a dose of medicine and orders to rest. Fíli nodded, the same worry in his blue eyes.

“Worse than last night, he says, and now he's hearing music.”

“Music?”

“A faint melody, just on the edge of hearing, is how he describes it,” Kíli told them. “Óin gave him something for the headache, and Thorin said he didn't hear the music any more, but I don't know if that's the truth or what he wants us to believe.”

“His temper is deteriorating, as well.” Fíli put in grimly. “Dori and Glóin blame you two, for some reason, even though it was clear this morning that Thorin had lost most of his anger toward you.”

“We've been gone most of the day,” Trisk pointed out. “What could we have done to anger him when we were out at his request?”
“Exactly,” Kíli replied with a small laugh.

Viska sighed quietly, setting down her empty plate and leaning slightly into Fíli's shoulder. “Perhaps he is just tired,” she offered with a small shrug. “And anxious. Durin's Day is so close, and he has worked toward this goal for so long. The hopes of all of the Exiles are at stake, the future of our people. That is a heavy burden, even for a king.”

“Perhaps.”

The four young Dwarrow sat in heavy silence for a long moment, each lost in his or her own thoughts of the past and future. Viska's were a whirling maelstrom of conflicting emotions. She dreaded the Company's departure in two days' time, but she was also eager for their return from the Lonely Mountain, a summons safely sent to Dáin so that he could begin the mustering of the Dwarven armies. So much still to do, and yet it all felt so close. And it would truly begin with Durin's Day, now only a few days away.

* X *

In the depths of the night, his mind clouded by the medicine that Óin had given him for his cold, Bilbo Baggins revisited a memory, a conversation overheard on the far side of the Misty Mountains.

It is nearly midnight, almost Midsummer Morn, and the gardens of Rivendell are filled with quiet song as Bilbo wanders in silent contemplation. The Dwarves are exchanging loud tales and raucous jokes around a bright fire pit, having prepared for an early morning departure, but the Hobbit simply wants to spend these last hours storing memories of the enchanted valley. He is paying little attention to the path he follows, and is surprised when he hears Lord Elrond's voice, followed quickly by Gandalf's. A glance shows that the Wizard and the venerable Elf lord are not actually close by – they merely follow a nearby path that leads to an isolated open building encircled by a flowing stream. They are far enough away not to notice him, but some trick of the valley carries their words to his ears with crystal clarity.

“Do you truly think this wise? That dragon has slept for sixty years – would it not be better to let him lie?”

Lord Elrond's voice is smooth and calm, but the words are enough to send a chill down Bilbo's spine. If the Lord of Rivendell doubts the wisdom of their venture, the Hobbit will be the first to cast his vote for canceling the entire expedition. Then Gandalf speaks, and the Wizard sounds very different from the affable, slightly eccentric persona that he has worn thus far. Instead, there is solemnity, and wisdom, and deep concern in his voice as he counters the opinion of one of the most powerful Elves in Middle Earth.

“What makes you think that he will continue to sleep?” he asks quietly. “No matter what we do, or don’t do, Smaug will eventually wake. Would it not be better for it to happen at a time of our choosing? When we have the united armies of the Dwarves, and the Wood Elves, if I can manage it, ready to face him? Allies in Erebor would strengthen the defenses of the East, and the Dwarves deserve the chance to reclaim their homeland. That throne is Thorin's birthright.”
Elrond does not speak for a long moment, but even at a distance, the Hobbit can tell that the warning has struck a chord. Finally, the Elf meets the Wizard's gaze.

“And the Arkenstone?”

Gandalf shakes his head. “The Arkenstone should hold no power over Thorin,” he replies confidently. “When Thrór's sanity began to crumble, I warned Thráin never to let his kin lay hands on the Stone. Thorin was little more than a child when Erebor fell – he would not have touched it. Any lure that it might have should be easily countered by the Mountain.” The Wizard's head lowers, his chin sinking into his chest as he stands for several long minutes in contemplation and memory before meeting Elrond's steady gaze once more. “Thrór's grief made him vulnerable, but his son was more wary, and I will make sure that his grandson is warier still. Bilbo will bring out the Stone, and I will have warned Thorin long before then to let the Hobbit bear it until the armies stand ready. Then, once Smaug is dead, we will return it to its deep tomb. Unlike Durin's Bane, it cannot climb out again on its own.”

Elrond nods, his face filled with compassion. “You would see Thráin's son free of the burdens of the past.”

Gandalf sighs. “I would see the entirety of the Line of Durin so unburdened, untainted by that cursed jewel, free to lead the Seven Families as a united front. They are good folk.”

The Elf lord smiles and turns to continue along the stone bridge. “Ever the Dwarves stood against our ancient Enemy. I hold no anger for Durin's folk, Mithrandir, you know this. But it is not up to us to redraw the map of Middle Earth. We are not its only guardians.”

The Wizard turns a shrewd gaze on him. “Who has come to you, mellon-nin?”

“Curunír has called a meeting of the White Council, my old friend.”

Gray eyebrows climb toward the brim of the tall gray hat. “Saruman is here? And the Lady?”

“We go to join them now.”

Gandalf nods and strides forward with renewed determination. “Very well. Perhaps it is for the best. I have further news for them, and you – news that may put Thorin Oakenshield's quest into perspective.”

The dream faded away with the ending of the memory and the Hobbit turned in his sleep, settling in once more as he found a more comfortable position. The dream and memory would fade in the morning light, leaving only the faintest wisp of knowledge in the deepest part of his subconscious mind.

* X *

Across the hall, Thorin tossed and turned in his own dream-memory, though his was much older, of a time more than a century gone.
The prince knows that he is playing with fire, but he is young and proud, and it is too late to back down now. His brother is pale with terror, Frerin's light blue eyes wide beneath the neat copper braids. The other lads are caught between fear and awe. They never expected the Prince Under the Mountain to take the dare, and young Dwalin looks like he is beginning to regret ever opening his mouth. But the challenge has been issued and accepted, and Thorin will not be dissuaded. Steeling himself, he ignores the nervous churning in his gut and the warning screaming in his head. It is such a small thing, just a quick dash into the Throne Room to touch that shimmering gem that sparks above the throne. His grandfather will be livid if he is caught, but more than that, his father will be disappointed. To Thrór, the Arkenstone is precious beyond imagination and he guards it jealously. Thráin, however, views it with concern and suspicion and has forbidden his children to touch it. That is what drags at the heir's heart and slows his steps – his father's troubled eyes, not his grandfather's expression of greedy rapture.

“Thor, you don't have to,” Frerin murmurs, keeping his voice low and glancing sideways at their cousins and companions. Thorin smiles, finding amusement in the fact that it is his mischievous younger brother advising caution for once.

“It'll be fine, Frer,” he responds, his eyes flickering around the empty throne room. “Just keep an eye out, nadadith.” The younger lad sighs and shakes his head.

“I don't want to be heir, Thorin,” he warns finally. “If you get caught, and Thrór kills you, I will come drag you out of the Halls of Waiting before I'll take that throne.”

The elder chuckles. “I would expect nothing less, brother.”

He steps forward, just short of the side door that leads into the echoing cavern that serves as the Throne Room. The throne itself stands at the intersection of the three marble walkways, an imposing seat carved from the marble of the Lonely Mountain itself. Taking a deep breath, the prince shoots one last look at the great doors, closed and unmoving, and then he is dashing forward. His boots make far too much noise on the stone floor as he jogs forward, and he winces but does not slow. Finally, one foot is on the step at the base of the throne, his left hand on the arm as he jumps up. Then the other foot is on the seat, and the reaching fingers of his right hand brush the glowing surface of the Arkenstone oh-so-briefly. He can hear the collective gasp and he smiles, but he does not stop moving. A moment later, he is back on the floor, racing for the safety of side chamber. Then he is through the door, gasping for breath as his heart rate slows, a disbelieving grin on his face that is returned by his friends.

He has done it. He has crept into the Throne Room of Erebor and touched the Arkenstone, the King's Jewel. His hand tingles still and he laughs breathlessly, amazed at his own daring. Then the others are crowding around him, laughing in awe, and they hurry down through the halls toward the training arena. Thorin leads the way, unaware that he has sown the seed of future sorrow. The alluring call of the Stone is not audible to the underage prince, so he will not yet be plagued by the headaches and phantom music that disturb his father. But he has touched the Stone, and it has touched him, as well. He has given it access to the deepest recesses of his mind, where now a kernel of its power takes root.

* X *

The next morning, Thorin was choking down willow bark tea in his study and talking quietly with Balin when a tentative knock on the open door alerted him to the presence of his nephews.
Grimacing, he set the tea aside and waved the lads in, raising an eyebrow when Kíli closed the door quietly behind them.

“How is your head?” Fíli asked quietly, concern shining in those kind eyes that were so like Frerin’s.

“It has been better,” the king answered shortly, regretting it when the lad winced at the implied rebuke. He sighed. “It makes me short-tempered, as you can tell, so take my gruffness as a symptom rather than a reaction to you. Did you want to talk to me about something?”

The fair-haired prince glanced at his brother and Thorin watched in puzzlement as the archer shrugged and nodded before Fíli turned to face him once more.

“It's about tomorrow.”

The elder Dwarf sighed, closing his eyes as he massaged the bridge of his nose to ease the sudden surge of pain in his head.

“If you are here to change my mind about leaving Triskel and Viska, save your breath,” he warned quietly. “They will await the Company's return with the Arkenstone.”

Fíli nodded shortly. “Kíli and I would like to stay, as well.”

Thorin froze, his hand dropping from his face as he stared at his heir. Something dark began churning in his gut, some deep rage that he did not recognize, and when he spoke, his voice was a growl.

“You would throw aside this quest, the chance to free your homeland, for a lass?”

Fíli actually flinched and Kíli stepped to his brother's side, supportive as always.

“It's not like you need us,” the raven-haired prince argued. “Bilbo is the only really important one. He'll be going in to fetch the Arkenstone. Gandalf said we shouldn't even go in, since Smaug would recognize the smell of Dwarf!”

“Do not use Gandalf's words as an excuse for your desertion,” the king snarled, anger bubbling through him. “I have raised you on tales of the Mountain, you both begged to be allowed to accompany me on this quest, and now you would turn aside, cast it all away, for a-”

“Thorin!” Balin, silent until now, stared at him in shock.

“Do not finish that sentence, Thorin,” Filì rumbled, his eyes darkening with storm clouds. “If you are angry with me, take it out on me. Do not cast aspersions on Viska. She has nothing to do with this.”

“Except being the reason you would turn your back on your people!” Thorin spat. “There will be no discussion. You are Rayyud Durinul. You will enter Erebor at my side, or not at all.”

There was silence for a long moment, then the brothers glanced at one another and drew themselves up stiffly.

“As you say, Your Majesty,” Fíli murmured, offering a deep bow. Kíli matched it, his dark eyes smoldering with anger and his jaw clenched. They turned for the door in unison, their posture screaming outrage and fury.
Balin watched Fíli and Kíli strode from the room, backs straight and heads high, the younger prince casting one last bewildered and angry look back at their uncle before closing the door rather harder than was strictly necessary. Heaving a sigh, the old warrior shook his head and raised one bushy white eyebrow at his cousin.

“There was no need to snap at the lads like that, Thorin,” he commented mildly, a sense of unease stirring in him as he noted the distant look in the king's eyes. The dark glower was becoming almost permanent, smiles nearly nonexistent. While the mood of the rest of the Company seemed to lighten as they gathered supplies for the last leg of the journey, their leader's darkened until he was short and ill-tempered with even his young heirs. Balin was troubled – the kind of concern that he would have shared with Gandalf if the wizard had been with them. But he was gone, on an urgent errand that he had not shared, and they could only hope that he would rejoin them before they entered Erebor. “You have been distracted and preoccupied since we arrived in Laketown,” he added after a long moment, watching Thorin's reaction carefully, “and it grows worse by the day. What is wrong?”

Thorin's head swung toward him, eyes blazing, and he seemed about to give a harsh reply, but then a wave of frustration and regret swept across his face and he sighed, scrubbing at his eyes with one hand. “I do not know,” he admitted finally. “There is...something...I do not...” He seemed to search for a way to put it into words before shaking his head dismissively. And just like that, an expressionless mask slid into place. “It is nothing. I am simply focused on our goal.”

“The Mountain,” Balin agreed.


The adviser's eyes widened and the churning in his gut intensified.

“Aye,” he agreed cautiously, “but the Stone is only the means to the end, cousin, and the end is to reclaim the Mountain for our people, is it not?”

Again, that dark look, as though he had angered Thorin, before it melted away. This time, however, the expression that took its place was cool and calculating, and all the more terrifying.

“Of course,” the king confirmed smoothly, rising from his chair and never meeting Balin's eyes. “But first, we must have the Stone.”

He turned and strode from the room, leaving the old councilor staring after him in concern and shock.

“As you say.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
bâha – friend (Khuzdul)
zarsmuzmnat – squirrel (Khuzdul)
zarsmuzmnatith – little/young squirrel (Khuzdul)
amdith – little/young mother (Khuzdul)
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
Curunír – The Elves' name for Saruman
nadadith – little/younger brother
Rayyud Durinul – Heirs of Durin (Khuzdul)
Now Comes the Day

Chapter Notes

A/N: A huge thank you for the kudos. It's always lovely to realize that someone is reading and enjoying something that I am having such fun writing!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

21

NOW COMES THE DAY

After hearing Thorin's thunderous growl from the closed room, Dwalin was not surprised to see Fíli and Kíli storm out a few minutes later, nearly slamming the door behind them. Their jaws were set, and while Kíli looked hurt and bewildered, blue fire flashed in Fíli's eyes. The elder prince's gaze darted around the room, flicking across each member of the Company dismissively until it lit on the two that had just come out of the hallway. The change that came over the lad's face then caused a lump to rise in the bald warrior's throat, and it told him more than any words about what had grown between the prince and the lass from Emyn Uial. Fíli's expression eased when he saw the Dwarrowmaid, the anger in his eyes banking to fierce affection as he strode to her side, his dark-haired shadow only a step behind. Viska glanced up with a smile, but something in his face gave her pause and those intelligent green eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Care for some company in Laketown?” the prince asked with slightly forced cheer. Trisk cocked his head curiously, looking from his sister to Fíli and back again.

“Bifur not coming?” he asked quietly. The golden-haired lad hesitated and Dwalin spoke up, knowing Thorin probably would not be best pleased with his assisting this little rebellion, but unable to bring himself to care.

“Actually, I'd appreciate Bifur's help with my own project, if he doesn't mind,” he commented, signing surreptitiously to the toymaker. Bifur responded with a wide grin and eager nod, then turned to the quartet, making shooing motions with his hands. Trisk shrugged and strode toward the door, Fíli and Viska just behind him as the lass tucked her scarf into place around her face. Kíli brought up the rear, tipping Dwalin a wink and a grateful smile.

The front door had barely closed behind the four young Dwarrow when the door to Thorin's study opened once more and the king himself strode out, his face set in an icy impassivity that was completely foreign to those who knew him. He did not pause, or even look around the common area, simply headed for his room as he barked a demand for Óin's personal blend of feverfew, which told Dwalin that the headache was back in full force. Grimacing, the warrior hurried into the study to find his brother standing silently near the window, his expression a neutral mask that might have fooled anyone else. Balin's pale blue eyes flickered toward the younger Dwarf and he could not conceal the worry they held. Dwalin grunted and leaned against the wall, crossing his arms over his broad chest.
“What happened, nadad? I saw the lads. What was that about?”

Balin sighed and passed a hand over his face.

“They asked to stay behind in Laketown, rather than go to the Mountain.”

“Ah.” It surprised him, in a way, and yet it didn't. Not after what he had seen in Fíli's face in the common room.

“They argued that we did not all need to go, if the plan is merely for Bilbo to slip in and find the Arkenstone.”

“They have a point,” Dwalin commented quietly. “But I'm guessing Thorin didna' go for it?”

Balin met his gaze, his eyes deeply troubled. “It was not his refusal that troubled me, brother, but the manner of it. He insulted the lass, threatened the lads. Nadadith, he as much as said that he would disinherit them if they were not at his side when he entered Erebor.”

The warrior's brow furrowed in angry confusion. “But I thought he liked the lass? You said-”

“I know what I said,” the councilor snapped in irritation, waving a dismissive hand. “And it was what he said, but that was yesterday. Today...something is changing, brother. He was angry, then unsure, then cold. He speaks of the Stone, rather than the Mountain.”

Dwalin nodded, his thoughts racing furiously. “He asked Óin for feverfew,” he offered quietly.

“So his head is still bothering him....” Balin trailed off, a look of worried contemplation on his face. Dwalin stared at him.

“What is it, brother?” he finally asked. “You look as though you have remembered something.”

“Headaches...phantom music...there is something familiar about those complaints,” the older Dwarrow murmured thoughtfully. “Something I overheard, a conversation between our father and his brother. But I cannot remember more than that.”

The big warrior reached out to clasp his brother's shoulder. “Then you will think on it, and we shall keep watchful eyes on our king,” he replied gently.

* X *

Viska was surprised, but pleased, when Fíli and Kíli decided to join her and Trisk on their daily expedition into Laketown. The knowledge that the Company would be leaving for the Lonely Mountain with the next sunrise weighed heavily on the Dwarrowmaid's heart, and she had feared that preparations would keep them too busy for her to spend a few final hours with her two dear friends. She knew even before they left the house, however, that something was wrong. She had heard the rumble of Thorin's anger, and had caught Kíli's tense posture when she and Trisk had first entered the main room. The fact that Dwalin had stepped in to make it easier for the heirs to escape the confines of the house told her that he, too, had sensed the wild energy in the princes and judged it best to get them out of their uncle's way for the moment. Trisk also seemed to have caught a hint of the mood, judging from the sidelong glances he was casting at their companions, but he was the more patient of her father's children, and he waited until he had led them down a
dead end walkway to a quiet area that they had discovered the previous day. There he took up a deceptively relaxed position leaning against a wall, eyes flicking between the two young Dwarves.

“So, what exactly happened back there?” he asked casually.

Kíli sighed and threw himself down on a large shipping crate with a groan. “We asked if we could stay behind.”


“Why not?” Fíli countered with a shrug. “So far as I know, the plan is for Bilbo to slip in and get the Arkenstone, then everyone is to come back here to wait for Dáin. Why would that require all of us?”

The lass stared at him in consternation, her thoughts whirling. “But you are his heirs! Erebor is your home! You should be at his side! What were you thinking?”

She started as a heavy hand landed on her shoulder, gripping tightly, and turned to meet Trisk's gentle eyes.

“He was thinking of you, namadith, and not wanting to leave you behind.”

She stared at him for a long moment, then turned to stare at the golden-haired prince. Fíli met her gaze steadily and her shoulders sagged as the anger crumbled away.

“I take it Thorin is not in favor of that plan?” Trisk continued, looking at the princes. Kíli snorted and Fíli sighed and shook his head.

“It was more than that. He was angry – angrier than he should have been. There is something...different...about him, something wrong.”

“He threatened to disinherit us,” Kíli mumbled, his eyes wide with disbelief. Viska's brows rose incredulously.

“Surely not!”

“No, he's right,” Fíli replied, his eyes dark with the memory. “Thorin said that we would enter Erebor at his side, or not at all.”

“Amdâru Mahal....”

Kíli sighed explosively and got to his feet. “It's the Mountain.”

“What do you mean?” his brother asked quietly. The younger prince's dark eyes flashed with frustration.

“Thorin's mood has grown darker, the closer we have gotten to the Mountain. That is what I mean, nadad. We grew up on Uncle's tales of the Mountain, Fíli, but we also grew up with Ma and Balin's tales of Thrór's madness. Tales that became more frequent as the quest grew in Thorin's mind. Did you think that happenstance?”

Fíli stared at him intently for a long moment before he shook his head and threw an arm around the younger lad's shoulders, pulling him into a tight hug.

“No,” he replied gently, mussing the archer's hair until he yelped and tried to pull away. “But I might not believe that my little brother is quite as thoughtless as he appears any longer.”
Kíli pried himself free, an oddly solemn expression on his face as he looked at his brother and shook his head. “You never thought that, Fí. You are one of the few.”

The implications of the conversation were making Viska's stomach churn with fear. She looked from one prince to the other. “Do you think Thorin will be corrupted by the gold sickness?” she demanded, remember the old tales of Thrór's madness. Brown eyes met blue in serious thought. Eventually, Fíli shook his head.

“No,” he stated firmly. “He is strong, and he is honorable. If any of Durin's line can resist it, it will be Thorin Oakenshield.”

* X *

The market of Laketown was more crowded than Kíli was expecting, though it was probably more a matter of limited space than excessive numbers of Men. Several vendors greeted them with smiles and small talk, having met and spoken with Trisk and 'Visk' during their previous visits. They were perfectly willing to extend that familiarity to the two new faces with only the briefest introduction and the young prince soon found himself answering hesitant questions about the craftsmanship of his gear.

“Mister Trisk! Mister Visk!”

The raven-haired prince turned to see a curly-haired girl child weaving her way toward the small group of Dwarves, her face alight with glee. He blinked in surprise as she came to a halt in front of the burly silversmith with a broad smile and made a clumsy curtsy that had Trisk chuckling and offering a small bow in return. The princes exchanged a bemused look and glanced at the siblings.

“Care to introduce us to your charming young friend?” Kíli asked with a small smile. The girl's eyes flickered to his face and she looked disappointed.

“You're not Mister Bifur,” she accused with a slight pout. The younger prince gaped and looked to his friends for help. Trisk laughed, shaking his head.

“Bifur is busy today, so two of our other companions came with us instead,” he explained. “My friends, may I present Miss Tilda of Esgaroth. And Miss Sigrid,” he added as an older girl joined them. Kíli grinned and glanced at his brother. Fíli rolled his eyes, but nodded and smiled at the girls.

“Fíli...”

“...and Kíli...”

“...at your service!”

Tilda laughed brightly as they rose from their synchronized bow, and even Sigrid gave a quiet chuckle.

“Tilda is fascinated with Mister Bifur,” the older girl explained apologetically. “She has been talking about him for two days.”

“He's a toymaker. He made my squirrel,” Tilda informed them eagerly, showing the little toy off.
“He called me zars...zarsmun...um....”


“It means 'little squirrel.' And he's nice, even though he looks kind of scary.”

“Yes, he is a very kind soul,” Fíli agreed gravely. “And I am fairly certain that most of the toys that Kíli and I had as Dwarflings were made by Bifur. Our favorites were, I know.”

Kíli nodded, a mischievous smile on his face. “Like the little articulated horse that Amad took away because we wouldn't stop fighting over it?”

“Precisely. And that was mine, by the way.”

The archer frowned at him. “I distinctly remember Bifur giving it to me, big brother.”

Fíli shrugged and shook his head. “Well, your memory never was that impressive, little brother.”

“You wound me!” the younger lad protested, widening his eyes and clutching his chest dramatically. “Can you believe such callous words, Miss Tilda? And from my own beloved elder brother?”

Sigrid and Tilda were giggling madly as Viska chuckled behind her scarf and Trisk snorted a laugh. Fíli groaned, burying his face in his hands. They didn't notice the commotion that was a contingent of the Master's guard coming through the market until the Men were practically on top of them, shoving people out of the way indiscriminately.

“Here, you, out of the way! The Master's coming through!”

The guards' rude shoves had little effect on the Dwarves, but Tilda was much lighter and Viska lunged frantically as the girl toppled from the walkway toward the surface of the frigid lake. The child gave a short shriek, hands flailing as she splashed into the water.

“Tilda!”

Sigrid screamed her sister's name, trying to lurch past Trisk to the water, but he held her back, having already seen the golden-haired prince in motion. Kíli yelped at the sound of another, larger splash.

“Fíli!”

His elder brother was already in the lake, pulling the frightened child to him and treading water as he coaxed her into putting her arms around his neck. Once she was secure, he swam quickly to the edge of the walkway and handed the shivering girl up to Viska, then accepted assistance from Kíli and Trisk to haul himself out of the lake. Fíli shrugged out of his coat, accepting Trisk's with a grateful nod. The archer stripped off his own to wrap around the child and Sigrid scooped her up.

“You'll need to get her home, lass,” Trisk told her. Sigrid nodded, then glanced at the soaked Dwarf prince.

“Please, all of you come with me. Our house is closer than where you are staying.”

The four Dwarrow glanced at one another for only a moment before Kíli nodded.

“Lead on.”
They hurried along after the anxious girl, her longer legs making her swift even on the uneven wooden walkway. Luckily it was not far – only around the corner and up a flight of stairs to the door of a small, neat home. Sigrid shouldered the door open, calling for her father, only to be met by a familiar, dark-haired Man. The Dwarves froze, unsure what to do, as the grim bargeman stared at his daughter in concern.

“Sigrid? What-?” His gaze fell on the younger girl, shivering in Kíli's worn blue coat, and he strode forward to scoop her up. “Tilda! What happened? Bain, grab a blanket for your sister!”

“And one for the Dwarf, please, Da,” Sigrid interjected, turning to usher in her hesitant guests. “He rescued Til. The Master's guards knocked her into the lake – she didn't move out of the way fast enough.”

“To be fair, I'm not sure that it was deliberate,” Trisk murmured as the tall, curly-haired boy that they had seen the first day hurried into the room, blankets in hand. Sigrid grabbed one and bundled Tilda into it. Kíli held the other as his brother skinned out of Trisk's coat before accepting it gratefully. The girl's father sighed, a hint of anger in his face.

“It never is.” He turned to offer a small bow to Fíli. “Thank you, Master Dwarf, for helping my little one.”

Fíli nodded back graciously. “You are most welcome, Master Bard.”

A tiny smile quirked the corner of the Man's mouth.

“Ah, you recognize me, then.”

The golden prince arched an eyebrow. “Well, you did make an impression.”

Bard nodded, a slightly worried look on his face. “It was not meant personally.”

Fíli smiled. “I understand. Please, excuse my rudeness. I am Fíli, this is my brother, Kíli, and these are my friends, Trisk and Visk.”

Bard smiled and offered another small bow. “The brothers that my girls have been chattering about for the past two days. It is nice to finally meet you.” He turned, motioning them toward the fireplace. “Please, all of you, come get warm.”

“I'll make some tea,” Sigrid offered quickly. “Bain, fetch yesterday's bread, please.”

Her brother nodded, taking his wide-eyed gaze off of the Dwarves for the first time since he had entered the room, and hurried to the kitchen area to get the remains of a loaf of bread and a knife as Sigrid hung a kettle of water on the fire. The Dwarves gathered at the fireplace, carefully moving Tilda to the warmest spot. Bard took a seat in a worn chair and pulled the girl into his lap, rubbing her arms briskly and snuggling her into his shoulder. His dark eyes studied his guests closely and Kíli felt like one of the bugs that Ori would stare at for hours as he sketched every detail. Finally, he raised a challenging eyebrow and met the bargeman's gaze. Bard smiled faintly.

“You look a lot like Thorin, son of Thráin,” he commented quietly. “Enough to be his son, perhaps?” He turned toward Fíli, cocking his head curiously. “And you said you are brothers?”

Fíli met his gaze, then glanced at Kíli. The archer shrugged, leaving the decision to his elder brother, and the swordsman sighed.

“You look a lot like Thorin, son of Thráin,” he commented quietly. “Enough to be his son, perhaps?” He turned toward Fíli, cocking his head curiously. “And you said you are brothers?”

Fíli met his gaze, then glanced at Kíli. The archer shrugged, leaving the decision to his elder brother, and the swordsman sighed.

“Not his sons, but his sister-sons,” the fair-haired Dwarrow corrected. “Our mother is Thorin's
younger sister. He has no sons.’’

“So, sons or sister-sons, you are his heirs?”
“We are.”

The Man stared at him in silence, long fingers carding through Tilda’s drying hair as the girl blinked sleepily. “You agree with his quest, or you would not be here,’’ he stated finally. “Is the gold so important to you?’’

Kíli stirred restlessly, but remained quiet when his brother shot him a quelling look. Trisk was watching the bargeman closely, while Viska silently helped Sigrid with the tea. Fíli met Bard’s gaze with eyes the blue of a forge fire.

“Reclaiming our people’s home is so important to us. Our folk have been in Exile for over a hundred years, while a dragon slept in the halls of our fathers. The same dragon that slew their kith and kin.’’

“He slew many in Dale, as well,’’ the Man countered. “And if he wakes, it is not your folk who will suffer his wrath.’’

Kíli flinched, but his brother did not.

“You think Smaug will sleep forever?’’ he asked, sounding genuinely curious. “That he will remain forever content with what he has within the Mountain?’’

“He has not been seen for sixty years,’’ Bard replied, sounding slightly less sure of himself. The elder prince nodded.

“Thorin says the same. He even says that the beast might be dead. But the stories say that dragons live practically forever, unless they are killed. If the dragon does wake, would you rather it happened when the folk of Esgaroth are the only ones to stand against him?’’

Bard did not answer for a long moment, his dark eyes studying each of the Dwarves in turn.

“You really think you can kill him?’’ he asked finally. “Your small band?’’

Kíli glanced at his brother, and saw a warning to silence in Fíli’s eyes. The Crown Prince shrugged slightly.

“Thorin has a plan,’’ he replied carefully. “If it is successful, the people of Laketown should have plenty of warning to get to safety. If it is not, we will do whatever we can to protect your people.’’

Bard searched his face before finally nodding. “I will trust in your intentions,’’ he said softly. “I believe that you will do what you can for my people. I still do not entirely approve of what your folk seek to do, but I understand your motivations for it.’’

*B X *

Bilbo staggered out into the common room of the house, yawning hugely and stretching the kinks out of his arms as he looked around. Ori glanced up from his drawing, his face brightening at the sight of the Hobbit.
“Feeling better, Bilbo?” he asked quietly, setting his sketchpad to the side as he got to his feet and headed for the kitchen area. “Óin said you should wake up soon, and that you would be hungry as a bear when you did.” He pulled a large cloth-covered tray from the counter and brought it out with a smile. “We saved you something to eat.”

Bilbo nodded appreciatively at the little scribe and took the tray, his stomach growling ferociously at the tempting smells coming from beneath the cloth. Taking a seat at the table, he uncovered a veritable feast (compared to recent meals) and tucked in, asking questions in between bites.

“Where are the others?”

“Getting the last of the supplies together,” Ori replied, returning to his pile of gear and his drawing, studying the picture critically. “Foodstuff, weapons. I think Balin and Thorin are speaking with the Master. Fíli and Kíli went out with Trisk and Viska to explore Laketown. Nori's out on the porch. No one trusts him to go into town, and Dori didn't want to leave me here alone while you were asleep, so…” he shrugged, rolling his eyes at his eldest brother's overprotective nature. Bilbo smiled.

“Well, I'm very sorry that you had to stay here and babysit me,” he apologized. Ori laughed. “Oh, no...I'd much rather be here sketching or writing,” he assured the Hobbit. “I've caught up my journal, and I want to finish this picture before we leave, so I can give it to Viska.” He looked suddenly thoughtful, even a bit bashful, before he held up his latest piece of art. Bilbo blinked. He had known Ori was talented with his sketches of plants and animals that they had encountered on the journey, and he had even drawn detailed pictures of their companions, and those they had met (the way he had captured the bottomless compassion of Beorn's eyes had stunned the Halfling), but this was a masterpiece, so much so that Bilbo felt he was intruding on a private moment simply by looking at the portrait.

Fíli stood beneath a tree, gazing at the Dwarrowlass before him with utter adoration in his eyes, his hands resting lightly on her waist. Viska's eyes were on his face, a smile teasing her lips as she tapped one finger against a bead on his mustache braid. The Hobbit had never seen either of the young Dwarves so unguarded, and he blinked against the sudden sting of tears in his eyes.

“That's wonderful, Ori,” he assured his young friend, swallowing hard. Ori's eyes brightened and he glanced at the picture with a hint of pride.

“D'you think she'll like it?” he asked anxiously. “I want to give it to her before we leave, since she and Trisk will be staying in Laketown until we return.”

“Oh, I think I can safely say that she will love it,” Bilbo stated with conviction. “You have outdone yourself, my friend.”

*X*

The sun was sinking toward the West as the four young Dwarrow made their way through the wooden maze of Laketown. Trisk and Kíli led the way, chatting quietly. Fíli and Viska hung back slightly, the golden-haired prince carrying his still-damp coat over one shoulder and stealing occasional peeks at his shorter companion as they walked. Even with her hood pulled up and the scarf concealing her face, she fascinated him. He wanted to commit every gesture to memory, learn
every expression that crossed her face. She glanced at him a couple of times, then shook her head.

“If you have a something to say, do so,” she commented finally, rolling her eyes. “It's disconcerting to be stared at so fiercely.”

“I didn't realize that I was staring fiercely,” he replied with a small laugh. “I thought I was just enjoying the view.” He gave a startled grunt as a determined fist buried itself under his ribs and Trisk snorted a laugh as he glanced back at them.

“She bites and kicks, too,” the silversmith warned with a half-smile. “Fought dirty since we were small.”

The emerald eyes glinted dangerously and Fíli could imagine the deceptively sweet smile hidden beneath the scarf. “You were bigger,” she countered with a shrug.

“So you were meaner,” her brother agreed. “I just thought Fíli deserved a warning, namadith.”

“Mind your own business, beloved brother,” she murmured. Kíli glanced at her face beneath the hood, then his brother's, before turning to Trisk.

“Maybe we should give them a bit of time?” he asked, jerking his head in the direction of the house. Trisk hesitated for a moment, then nodded. He gave Fíli one last level look before striding off after the archer, leaving the fair-haired prince and the quiet Dwarrowlass alone on the walkway. Fíli blinked, staring after their departing brothers, then glanced at his companion.

“What was that?” Viska asked, tugging her scarf down a little to reveal a rather startled expression. He shrugged.

“I guess they thought we needed some time to talk?” he offered, starting after them at a slower pace. She fell in next to him, their shoulders touching as they walked.

“What would you like to talk about?” she asked finally, a small laugh in her voice. "Besides your overwhelming urge to go swimming in every body of water that we encounter?" Fíli thought for a long moment.

“Actually, there is something that I've wondered since Rivendell. Nothing urgent, obviously, just a...curiosity.”

“Ask, then.”

“Your name.”

She turned to look at him, one brow raised quizzically. “You know my name.”

“Most parents in the Blue Mountains don't follow the rhyming pattern for girls' names,” he clarified.

“Ah.” She walked in silence for a minute before she replied. “They don't in Emyn Uial, either,” she admitted. “It was kind of an accident.”

“An accident?”

She gave him a sad smile. “Amad and Adad never expected to have a daughter, so they did not pick a name for one. They had chosen Viskel to go along with Triskel. And suddenly, Da was being told that he had a wee lass, and what would he like to name her? And Ma was gone, so there was
no one to talk to about it. So he just adjusted the name he already had to the situation."

Fíli watched the emotions play across her face before he spoke again.

“What was he like? Your Da?”

Her smile brightened, but her eyes filled with tears. “Kind,” she answered promptly. “Sad, proud, but always kind. Fierce in defense of his people, and so determined to raise us to be strong.”

“He succeeded.”

She nodded gratefully, then gave him a considering look. “He would have liked you, I think,” she decided. “Though he would have glared most ferociously, so you would not know it. He always told me that no Dwarrow would ever be good enough for his nâtha, but that he would not stand against any that I chose, so long as they were willing to stand up for me.”

The prince smiled as he stepped up onto the low porch that ran along the front of the house where the Dwarves were staying. Light glowed in the windows, and they could hear the merry conversation of the Company inside, but he merely draped his coat on the railing and stepped into a dark corner to take a seat on a low bench. She joined him, leaning comfortably into his shoulder as wrapped a warm arm around her. Fíli sat quietly for several long minutes, simply enjoying her presence, lost in the soft sounds of her breathing. When he finally spoke, he broke the silence reluctantly.

“Durin's Day is two days from tomorrow.”

Her breath hitched slightly, but her voice was steady when she replied. “Yes.”

“We leave in the morning, and Thorin will not change his mind.”

“No.”

He hissed in frustration, tightening his grip on her shoulder and burying his face in the side of her hood. “Mahal, I hate this!” His words came out muffled with the fabric and his own emotions. “You have every right to be there, you and Trisk!”

She took his free hand and pulled it up to her face, planting a kiss on his palm. “Fíli, please, leave it alone,” she murmured, her voice a low thrum. “Thorin has his reasons, and I understand them, even if I hate being left behind. We are not being sent away. We will be safer than you, should the dragon wake.”

He groaned softly, raising his head. “Hopefully, it won't come to that. If Bilbo can get in, get the Arkenstone, and get out, Thorin will be able to send for Dáin.”

She turned to study him, eyes sparking in the firelight that shone through the windows.

“Will an army, even one from the Iron Hills, stand a chance against Smaug?” she asked seriously. He opened his mouth to reassure her, but the words would not come. He could never lie to her. Instead, he opted for hope. “It won't be just the Iron Hills. With the blood of Durin, our Eldest line, and the Arkenstone in hand, Thorin can call on all seven clans. They swore to follow he who holds that stone. And remember, Erebor of old was unprepared for Smaug's attack. They had no warning.”

She nodded, her eyes distant with thought. “Still, I am glad that Thorin plans to bring the Company back, rather than linger at the Mountain. The longer you are there, the more chance of waking that
beast before the armies arrive.”

He nodded absently, his concerns more immediate for the moment, and turned her face to hers so he could meet her eyes. He knew his voice was low and rough with worry, and he wondered again if he could truly do this, truly leave for Erebor with the sunrise, leaving her behind.

“Viska...kurdê...will you do me one favor? I do not know if the Master will do as he agreed, but I do not trust him. I would see you safe. I know you will be here, in town, but still...this is the world of Men, and Men do not think highly of Dwarves, no matter how their Master speechifies and promises. Of all the Men that we have met here, the only one I trust is Bard. At least he is open with his objections.”

“And you saved his daughter,” she pointed out with a small smile. He barked a sarcastic laugh.

“I wouldn't trust the Master if I'd saved him, but Bard seems honorable. If he would have you, would you and Trisk stay with him?”

She looked at him curiously, then finally nodded. “Kun,” she replied with a small smile. “We will ask. We can help out, or Trisk still has some money.”

He relaxed slightly, letting out a relieved sigh. “I will feel much better with you there.”

She smiled at him, an odd glint in her eye and a mischievous set to her lips. “You do know that I am capable of looking out for myself?” she commented quietly. “And that Trisk has been my big brother for seventy-nine years?”

Fili coughed. “I'm not trying to be your big brother-” he protested, fumbling for words to explain.

“Thank Mahal, because the feelings I have for you are not remotely sisterly.”

“I am being someone who cares about you a great deal....” he trailed off, so intent on his explanation that he had almost missed her quiet confession. He stared at her, watching a flush creep up over her cheeks before he spoke again. “...and I think that is the most forward thing that a lass has ever said to me. And I love that you are blushing like fire, but you said it anyway.” He pulled her closer, resting his chin on her head. “My brave, impetuous lass.”

She snorted and pulled away, giving him a playful glare. “You like that I am embarrassed?”

He smiled, refusing to be baited, determined to make his meaning clear. “I like that you were embarrassed, but still spoke your mind,” he told her firmly. “And I love your courage, your loyalty, your determination to help others.” He placed a gently hand under her chin and tilted her face up so he could gaze into it, his chest tight with emotion. “I'm fascinated by the depths of those green eyes, and the red highlights in your chestnut hair, and that wistful smile that lights up your face.”

“Very sweet words, my prince,” she whispered, her eyes gentle as one hand came up to tug on a mustache braid. He smiled and pressed his forehead to hers.

“And I mean every one of them, tablûna,” he promised.

He fully intended to kiss her. Only the briefest, sweetest of kisses, hopefully ending better than the one in Beorn's orchard, but his brother's timing was impeccable as ever. Just as he closed his eyes, the door to the house opened, spilling light across the porch, and Kili's bright voice preceded the archer's arrival.

“Fî, Viska, are you hungry? Bombur's going to-oh! Sorry!”
Fíli’s eyes flew open as Viska scooted away abruptly and he turned to see his brother frantically backpedaling, only to plow into Bofur as the miner tried to follow him out the door. Kíli tripped, Bofur reached out to steady him, and a soft thump followed by a yip of pain announced that Viska had accidentally scooted right off the end of the bench. The swordsman lurched to his feet, fighting to bury his amusement until he had made sure she wasn’t hurt, but she was already laughing herself, her face buried in her arms. Kíli was bright red with embarrassment, Bofur shortliring as he pushed by the young prince and bent to offer the lass a hand up. She accepted, but she was laughing so hard that she lost her grip and ended up right back on the wooden boards. Fíli slumped next to her, while Kíli pulled the door closed before the noise could draw anyone else, his blush fading as he stared at his brother and the lass.

“I have the worst timing in the world,” he muttered, shaking his head.

“Or the best,” Bofur countered, a wide grin on his merry face. “Back in Ered Luin, this'd be blackmail material for months.”

“Oi!” Fíli protested, glaring at the miner. “No giving my brother ideas, Bof! He has plenty enough of his own!”

Viska had calmed and was watching their companion with an unreadable look on her face.

“You already knew, didn’t you Bofur?” she asked quietly. “How long?”

Fíli gave her a startled glance. “How?”

Bofur offered her a hand once more, and this time succeeded in pulling her to her feet, then did the same for the golden-haired prince. “Well, 'how' is that I'm not as dim as I look,” he replied with a grin. “Common mistake, that. 'How long' is since the pointy-eared princeling showed us what was in front of our own eyes for several blind months. Hard to miss the way the lad watches ya since, and you've worn your heart on yer face, lass, for any that have the eyes to see it.” He wrapped an arm around each young Dwarf's shoulders and gave them a quick hug, his dark eyes sparkling with humor. “Now, as young Kíli was about to tell ya, m'brother is going to eat your shares of dinner if ya don't get to the table. Oh, and Dwalin asked me to tell ya that Thorin's mood isn't quite so dark, so it's safe to come in.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
Amdâru Mahal – Mahal's mercy (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
Adad – Father (Khuzdul)
nâtha – daughter (Khuzdul)
kurdê – my heart (Khuzdul)
Kun – Yes (in response to a positive question) (Khuzdul)
tablûna – apple lady (Khuzdul)
Tauriel waited at the edge of the trees in the lightening darkness, listening to the quiet conversation behind her. Legolas had been sending messages back to the king by way of various scouting parties since he had sent the first word of his delay three days before. This group, however, had orders from Thranduil to return with his son and the errant Captain of the Guard, and Legolas was talking in low tones with their leader. The flame-haired she-Elf listened, but did not speak. She had run out of arguments as the days passed without the Dwarves emerging from Laketown, or the Orcs moving from their camp. She would not return – not yet, not when the warning in her heart was still so strong – but she would not hinder her friend if he chose to obey his father's summons, either. The rest of Cevendir's patrol group was doing much the same as she, listening without listening, watching the town, or the distant Orcs, or the still horizon, hands on weapons as they extended their senses warily. Few of the Wood Elves spent much time outside of the bounds of Mirkwood, Thranduil's isolationist preferences having spread among his people, and they were ill at ease on the lake shore.

A blare of horns cut off the conversation behind her, and Tauriel swiveled to stare out across the Long Lake. Laketown. Something was happening, She spared a glance at Legolas as the flaxen-haired prince joined her, then her gaze darted to the Orc camp they had been watching. It was a hive of frantic activity and she arched a brow at her companion.

“Oakenshield's Company departs for the Mountain,” he agreed grimly.

“The Orcs will cut them off if we do nothing,” she warned, watching his eyes. After six hundred years, she could read his intentions there as easily as she might read the body language of a Man. He was hesitating, so she made one last play. “The Men of Laketown are considered our allies,” she pointed out carefully. “If they are helping the Dwarves, some of their folk might be caught in the attack.”

“That is their own concern, if they are aiding our enemies,” Cevendir pointed out sharply, joining them. Legolas turned a withering gaze on the young Silvan Elf and the guard stepped back slightly under its intensity.

“The treaties between our peoples do not put conditions on our aid,” the prince replied with a hint of anger. “Nor are the Dwarves of Erebor our enemies. We were allies once, and my father has expressed irritation with them, but has not declared us at war. The Orcs, however, are the enemies of all, and poor allies or friends we would be if we stood by and let them murder at will.”

Tauriel let a hint of a smile flare before controlling her expression once more. She had never gotten along well with Cevendir, for he was one who followed orders blindly, without thought, and did not deviate even when the situation changed. His rank was equal with hers, so he had no obligation
to follow her orders, but Legolas had invoked Thranduil as his father, which meant he was speaking as Crown Prince, and that put him in charge. The glimmer of shock on Cevendir's expression told her that the other Captain had worked out that much for himself, and he stared at the royal Sindarin Elf for a moment before hastily regaining control of his features and offering a bow.

“Your orders, my prince?” he asked hesitantly. “Would you have us attack the Orcs?”

“I hardly think that necessary,” the prince replied. “Tauriel and I know the patrol schedules as well as you, Cevendir. There should be at least two patrols within hearing of your horn now. We few might not be enough to make the filth reconsider, but they won't know how many will respond to your summons. Especially if you encourage our reinforcements to make haste rather than stealth.”

Understanding flickered in the dark eyes and the patrol leader nodded quickly, unfastening the horn that hung at his belt and raising it to his lips. The notes rang out clear and Tauriel picked out the sequence requesting aid, followed by an identification of Orcs, and then the staccato finale that urged those who heard to approach openly and at speed. Legolas nodded with satisfaction as Cevendir returned the horn to his belt. The rest of the patrol had already gathered with them, weapons drawn and eyes on the Orc camp, where activity had come to a standstill. The twisted creatures were staring toward the Elves and several of them seemed to be arguing.

The stand-off lasted only the length of time that it took the first patrol to arrive, crashing deliberately through the undergrowth and sounding like twice their number. A chestnut-haired she-Elf named Suilrien led this group, and she joined the other leaders quickly, eyes sparking with anger at the sight of the Orcs. The Elves nearly matched their foe for numbers, and the argument in the camp had gotten more heated. One or two Orcs had already fled, and more looked similarly inclined – and their nerve broke when the sound of the third patrol's approach drifted through the forest. Snarling and casting angry looks at both the Elves and the distant town of Men, the Orcs retreated. Legolas nodded with satisfaction and glanced at Tauriel.

“That should give them the time they need,” he commented quietly. “And no blood spilled. Cevendir, Suilrien, Harndaer, you have my thanks for your cooperation and quick arrivals,” he added, inclining his head politely to the leaders of the patrols. “You may return to your duties. Keep an eye out for the Orcs, but only engage if you must. Give the king your report when you return to his halls.”

Suilrien and Harndaer nodded quickly and turned to their groups, ordering them back into Mirkwood with quiet voices. Cevendir hesitated, looking from Legolas to Tauriel and back again.

“Will you return with us, my prince?” he asked finally. “The king's order-”

Legolas shook his head, raising a hand to cut him off. “Not just yet, Captain. Tauriel and I will remain a bit longer, to make certain that the Orcs do not attack Laketown when they realize that the Dwarves have escaped their grasp. Then we will return, and I will give a full report to the king. For now, let him know that I am abiding by the terms of the treaties between Elves and Men and will return when the threat to our allies has passed.”

The Silvan Elf hesitated a moment longer, then nodded and summoned his patrol with a sharp order. They melted back into the foliage of Mirkwood. Tauriel did not speak until they were gone.

“Thank you,” she murmured, smiling slightly at her old friend. Legolas responded with a similar hint of a smile and shook his head.

“One of these days, I will learn to ignore your arguments, mellon-nin,” he replied ruefully. “My
father will not be pleased.”

“Losing trade with the Men of Laketown because it was destroyed by Orcs would not please him, either,” she pointed out. He sighed and nodded.

“No, it would not,” he agreed. Then he fixed her with a keen blue gaze. “I meant what I told Cevendir,” he warned. “We will stay until it appears that Esgaroth is out of danger, then we return to the Woodland Realm. We are not here to help Thorin Oakenshield reclaim Erebor.”

* X *

Triskel stood on the dock and watched the boat move out across the Long Lake. He had a hand clamped on Viska's arm and could feel the tension thrumming through her muscles until she fairly vibrated. On the boat, he could see Kíli hovering by his brother in much the same way, Fíli's fists clenched helplessly as the bargemen pushed them farther out. Thorin did not seem to have noticed his nephews' preoccupation with the Dwarves he had left behind, but Balin kept a cautious eye on them. Ori had given Viska a rolled, tied parchment that Trisk now held, the little scribe blushing fiercely as he bid them farewell. Bombur had given them several sympathetic glances, and Bofur had stopped to clap Trisk on the back and give Viska a one-armed hug before leaving, but now most of the Company had turned their minds toward Erebor and the dragon.

Finally, the boat was far enough away that Trisk could no longer make out individuals, save the golden-haired figure at the closest edge, and he glanced at his sister. She was pale, and he could read the concern in her eyes as she tucked something into her pocket, but their father's strength shone in her face and she met his look with a small smile and a nod as she pulled the scarf back across her face. Trisk stared down at her for a long moment, then sighed and pressed his forehead against hers.

“Well, we've made a right mess of things, haven't we, namad? I'm not sure if Da would laugh himself sick, or box our ears.”

She chuckled and gave him an affectionate headbutt. “Probably both,” she admitted wryly. Her eyes flickered to his hand and narrowed curiously. “What was it that Ori gave me?” she asked, reaching for it. He shrugged and handed it to her.

“I haven't looked.”

Untying the cord that held it closed, the Dwarrowlass unrolled the parchment carefully, a smile spreading across her face, even as tears glinted in her eyes. Trisk could not blame her. He had known Ori was talented with those inks of his, but the young scribe had captured Viska with rare skill, a gentle smile at odds with the mischief in her eyes. The look of reverence on the golden prince's face would have convinced the young silversmith even if he had never seen for himself the respect and affection with which Fíli treated her. He smiled and tapped the tree in the background of the portrait, arching a brow at his sister.

“That's Beorn's orchard,” he noted quietly. “Only talking, were you?”

A hint of color swept through her cheeks and she glanced away, rolling the parchment carefully before retying the cord.

“Nothing untoward,” she retorted with a shrug. “Just...talking...mostly.”
He laughed and slung an arm around her shoulders, hugging her tightly.

“They will return safely, sister,” he murmured. “We are almost home.”

She nodded and hugged him back, then glanced up at him with worried eyes.

“Should I have spoken?” she whispered. “Should I have asked?”

Trisk sighed and stepped away, starting down the wooden walkway that would take them back to the main market of Laketown. They had spent several minutes in iglishmêk conversation the night before on this very topic, carefully secluded from curious eyes.

“You know what I think,” he replied quietly as she fell in beside him. “I urged you to speak up last night.”

She nodded, her shoulders slumping, and he clamped a hand on her arm before he continued.

“However, I understood your reasoning. His loyalties were already divided, his heart torn, and you did not want to strain him further.” He sighed again and glanced at her, remembering their farewell on the Laketown dock. “I just think that you failed to realize how torn he was already, namadith,” he finally told her. “His own heart's doing, not yours.”

She met his eyes, finally showing a hint of the fear that he knew was filling her soul. “And so he goes to face a dragon – distracted.”

“Thorin believes Smaug is dead.”

“Thorin hopes Smaug is dead,” she retorted bitterly. “Thorin wants to believe he can just walk in, collect the Arkenstone, and rally the Dwarves to his banner. Bilbo will do his best, I'm sure, but even Gandalf said his task would be dangerous.”

“Apparently not dangerous enough for him to stay with us until journey's end,” Trisk grumbled. He quieted when she fixed him with a glare.

“Do not be a fool, nadad. Gandalf wants Smaug dead, but even Kíli has noted something else weighing on the wizard's mind. Something made him anxious when he left us in Mirkwood. And if Tharkûn is concerned, it can be no small thing.”

“Mister Trisk?”

The quiet question caught Trisk's attention and he turned to find Tilda, the girl's gray eyes confused and concerned as she stared at the two Dwarves.

“Why are you still here? We thought you left for the Mountain with the others.”

“Tilda, who are you – oh, Master Trisk, Visk, hello!” Bain, Bard's son, had just caught up to his sister, looking surprised to see them. “You didn't go to the Mountain?”

Trisk sighed. He really didn't want to share the awkward explanation of Dwarven protectiveness with a half-grown Man, but he also didn't want to alienate the few friends they had in Laketown. Viska tapped his arm and signed a brief prompt. His mind cleared and he nodded at her briefly.

“Actually, Bain, we were just planning on coming to speak to your father. Do you know if he's at home?”

The boy nodded. “Should be. He said he was getting a late start today. Is all well?”
“Well enough, we would just like to speak to Bard, if we could.”

Bain turned to smile at his sister. “What do you think, Til? Shall we take these ruffians back to Da?”

Tilda giggled and glanced at the two Dwarves. “Yes! I like them, and Da does too.”

“All right then. But if he's angry, I'll just tell him it's your fault,” Bain warned playfully.

“C'mon, Mister Trisk! Mister Visk!”

The little girl waved encouragingly and started weaving her way through the bustle of people on the walkway, peering back every few minutes to make sure they were following her. Trisk smiled and glanced up at Bain.

“Does she always have this much energy?”

Bain laughed. “That's our Til. She exhausts Da sometimes, but then he'll chuckle and tell her how much she reminds him of Mum.”

* X *

For Bilbo, the previous few days had passed in a foggy blur, thanks to Óin's medicines. He did not remember much between that first dinner with the Master and the previous afternoon, when he had spoken with Ori in the common room.

“I feel as though I have lost several days,” he muttered crossly, huddling into the oversized coat that Dori had altered to fit him a bit better. He sat on a low crate in the barge, between Bofur and Nori, staring toward the front. Thorin had not moved since they had left the dock, his gaze fixed on the Lonely Mountain, leaning forward slightly as though that would help them arrive faster. In truth, most of the Company seemed transfixed by the sight of their looming destination, so he was slightly surprised when Bofur answered him with a chuckle.

“You have, but you didn't miss much of interest,” the miner assured him. “Mostly packin' and mendin', and Thorin gettin' grumpier by the day. Just hope he hasn't scared the lass off of courtin' young Fíli.”

The Hobbit blinked, wondering if he had heard correctly.

“Courtin'?”

Bofur tilted his head curiously. “Didn't you notice the way the youngsters acted?” he asked, looking surprised. “Or don't Hobbits court?”

Bilbo gaped at him and shook his head. “No – I mean, yes, of course Hobbits court, I just – wouldn't that be his choice? To court, I mean?”

“Ah.” Understanding dawned in the dark eyes and his friend shook his head with a smile. “Not among Dwarrow, my friend. At least, not among those descended from Durin's folk of Khazâd-dûm. I'm not sure when or why the tradition started, but it's as good as set in stone after all this time. The lass has the choosing, whether the lad's apprentice to a smith or heir to the throne. He
can say aye or nay, o' course, but 'tis usually the lass that gets the stone rollin', so to speak."

“I see. And Viska hasn't chosen? They seem quite close.”

“Aye, they are, but she hasn't made it official yet.”

“How do you know?”

Nori laughed. “The braids, Master Baggins,” he put in with a smile. “They mayn't tell the tales of our lives, like some Men seem to think, but they do have meaning. Once a lass and lad start courting, they'll each wear a braid to announce it to the world. No braid, so no official courtship.”

Bofur glanced toward the front of the barge. “Not that I blame her, with the way Thorin's moods have been,” the miner said in a low voice.

“Would that affect her feelings for Fíli?” Bilbo asked, surprised. Bofur shook his head vehemently.

“Of course not, but it might make her hesitate to do anythin' that might draw our king's attention,” he explained.

“He is focused on the Mountain,” Nori added. “Anything that distracts him is viewed with anger and suspicion.” The thief met Bilbo's disbelieving stare. “You've been ill, my friend, so you have missed some changes over the past few days. Even Balin and Dwalin walk carefully around Thorin lately, and the lads barely speak to him.”

“He seemed normal enough this morning,” Bilbo managed, shooting careful looks at their leader. Thorin's face was set, his eyes intent on the nearing bulk of the Mountain.

“That is because we are moving toward his goal, Master Burglar,” a new voice put in, making the Hobbit start with surprise. Balin sounded weary and sorrowful, and there were new lines around the Dwarf's eyes that spoke of worry and sleepless nights. Bilbo glanced from the councilor's exhausted face to Dwalin's stoic features, wondering what he had missed that would shake the brothers' solid confidence in their king. Turning to peer over his shoulder, the Hobbit caught sight of the princes, standing as far from their uncle as they had been able to manage in the limited space on the barge. Fíli's face was expressionless, while Kíli's was tight with concern for his brother. Bilbo sighed and turned back around, pulling his coat tighter against the bite of the wind. Before them, the Lonely Mountain drew ever closer.

* X *

Bain and Trisk followed Tilda, chatting quietly. Viska followed a step behind, one hand holding the portrait that Ori had given her, while the other was clenched in her pocket. She shadowed her brother half by instinct, her eyes seeing the past rather than the present...

The princes lag behind as the rest of the Company clambers into the barge that has been provided by the Master of Laketown, and Fíli pulls Viska aside for a few precious moments. She already holds a rolled piece of parchment that Ori handed to her, ducking his head bashfully and murmuring farewell. Now, the golden-haired prince is pressing the cool metal hilt of a dagger into her palm. The Dwarrowlass glances down, startled to see his royal sigil on the pommel-nut. He
gives her a small, smug grin.

“Managed to hide one,” he explains with a wink.

“Fíli, you are the one about to be sneaking around a dragon-infested mountain,” she protests, trying to hand it back. He holds his hands up and shakes his head firmly.

“I have a couple of blades that the Master's smith gave us. They aren't the best quality, but they will serve. I would rather you have this one.”

She wants to object further, but she can read the unspoken emotions in those blue eyes, so she simply nods and tucks the blade into her coat. He smiles, relief clear on his face, and hands something else to her, closing her hand around a delicate clasp. He leans in to press their foreheads together and she inhales deeply, taking a last bit of comfort in the smells of tobacco and cedar that are so essentially Fíli.

“Strength, amrâlimê...endure just a bit longer, and we will not be separated again.”

(An older Dwarf would know that making such a vow is like throwing a challenge to Fate, but Fíli is young. He will learn.)

He takes a deep breath. “I know about the letter,” he whispers, eyes closed and hands tight on hers. “If you do have to use it, show this to my mother. She will understand. And tell her...tell her I am sorry that I broke my promise.”

And then they are out of time. Kíli is at his side, tugging urgently at his sleeve, dark eyes full of regret, and the brothers are stepping on to the boat. She steps forward impulsively, but Trisk catches her arm, holding her back gently. He relieves her of the rolled paper before she can crush it, but the bite of the edges of the clasp in her hand is almost comforting. She does not hear the Master's pompous speech of farewell and good luck, or Thorin's curt but polite response. Trisk's voice fills her ears with a low rumble, and she knows what she must do. Drawing herself up and lifting her chin, she meets Fíli's eyes as he turns back. All fear and doubt are buried in her heart, and she gives him a confident smile, her hands flashing in iglishmêk, the signs slightly altered to express certainty.

I will see you soon. We will await the armies of the Dwarves together.

His answering smile is full of pride and gratitude, and he nods regally as he straightens his spine. Beside him, Kíli gives her a good approximation of his usual cheeky grin as the barge begins to move.

Their arrival at Bard's home brought the Dwarrowlass back to the present just as Trisk looked back at her with concern. Smiling slightly, she nodded to reassure him, following the others up the stairs.

Bard had not yet left when they entered the small house, but he did look surprised to see the two Dwarves following his children. At Trisk's request for a private word, he sent Tilda off to help her sister with the housework and sent Bain on the errands that he had been about to do. Then he led his two unexpected guests to a small bedroom and took a seat, fixing his gaze on them.

“You know that I do not approve of your leader's errand. What favor have you to ask of me?”
Trisk glanced at his sister. “First, Master Bard, we would be completely honest with you. There is a reason that we were left behind when the Company departed this morning.”

Viska reached up and tugged off her scarf, then pulled her hood back to reveal her shoulder-length hair, exposing her healing scars and the soft downy fuzz where her sideburns were beginning to grow back. Bard looked a little confused and she smiled.

“Perhaps you cannot tell – I have heard the other races have trouble telling us apart – but I am a lass. My name is Viska, and I am Triskel's younger sister.” Her voice was low and rough still, but the tone was gentle. “I lost much of my hair in a fire some months ago, before Thorin's expedition set out, the same night our father died in a Goblin raid on our home. Trisk and I chose to join the Company, but we knew Thorin would not accept a lass. So I lied.”

“He found out.” Bard's quiet statement was not a question, but she nodded.

“In Mirkwood. He tried to leave us behind then, but Master Baggins interceded and brought us out.” She thought it best to leave out any hint that the king's own nephews had disagreed with his decision. “Thorin allowed us to tag along to Laketown, but-”

“He drew the line at allowing us to join them in entering Erebor,” Trisk finished for her. “He said we can return once the Mountain is his, for he was a comrade of our father long ago, and we have been of some assistance on the journey. For now, however, we find ourselves adrift in a town of Men, with few trustworthy faces. We would ask for shelter, just for a few days. If no word comes from our folk after ten days, we will depart and leave you in peace.”

Bard sat in silent contemplation, studying each of them in turn.

“We can pay,” Viska spoke up after a moment. “And we're willing to help out with any chores or labor that you might have. I doubt our trades are in much demand here, but no Dwarf, lad or lass, is afraid of hard work.”

“And if your Thorin wakes the dragon?”

Trisk raised an eyebrow, but met his gaze levelly. “That, we cannot stop. But I will say this – we will defend and protect your kin to the best of our ability. To the death, if necessary. I don't know what good we would be against a rampaging dragon, but we will help get your family out of here, and do whatever we can to ensure their safety.”

Finally, Bard nodded and stood. “A little money would be appreciated, but the help even more so. You do not seem as driven as your leader, and that may be a good thing. I will keep your secret, Mistress Viska, if that is your wish.”

Viska smiled. “I would prefer not to spread it among the town, but I have no objections to being able to be a lass within the walls of your home. It has been long since I could be myself, and longer still since I had female friends. Your daughters are delightful, and I would love to be able to talk freely with them.”

Bard's eyes crinkled in a weary smile. “I think they'd like that. Sigrid has friends in town, but not many. It will be good for her to have another sensible lass to talk to.”

Trisk laughed incredulously, ignoring his sister's glare. “Sensible? You did hear our story, did you not?”

Viska drew herself up and turned her back on her brother. “I'll just go and reintroduce myself to to
the girls now, shall I?"

Trisk stared after her for a long moment as the door closed, lost in thought.

"You know, many Men see little of Dwarves, beyond the stubbornness and love of gold," Bard commented finally. "Your Thorin certainly has those traits to spare."

"Most of us do," Trisk admitted wryly, watching the tall bargeman. "I'll not deny how much I long to set foot in Erebor, see the home of my fathers, the vast treasury of Thrór."

"And yet you risked your place in the Company for your sister. And I watched your folk while they were here. Even in the greater whole of the Company, it was clear that there were stronger relationships among certain small groups. You and Viska, Thorin's nephews, the hefty Dwarf, the one with the ax in his head, and the one with the hat. Another family?"

"There are some family ties there," Trisk replied cautiously, unwilling to discuss anyone's personal life with the Man. Bard merely shrugged.

"I'll take that as a 'yes' and not ask you to reveal more than you wish. I've never heard anyone accuse Dwarves of being overly dedicated to family, but I am starting to believe that might be due to the isolation and secretive nature of your folk." He nodded to the young Dwarf and moved toward the door. "It is good to see that we have some things in common – that perhaps our peoples are not so different."

Trisk sighed and turned to follow. "I think, Master Bard, that if you had the chance to get to know individuals of any of the Free Peoples of Middle Earth, you would find that there are some things we all hold in common," he stated quietly. "The races have their distinctive characteristics, but there are individuals of greater or lesser honor, compassion, and spirit. I'm sure there are kind and cruel Men, petty and gracious Elves, selfish and generous Hobbits, and Dwarves both greedy and charitable."

* X *

Watching the Laketown dock recede in the distance had been one of the hardest things that Fíli had ever done. Kíli's hand on his arm was the only thing that had kept him anchored on the boat as it moved out across the lake toward the Lonely Mountain. He wanted to see Erebor, could not wait to walk into his uncle's kingdom with his kin, but it felt wrong not to have Viska at his side.

"Look at it this way, Fí. She'll be safer in Laketown, if Smaug is still alive," Kíli said quietly, trying to raise his brother's spirits. Fíli nodded a little, his gaze locked on the Mountain. The Company had reached the bank of the Long Lake in the early evening and disembarked with the supplies and gear contributed by the folk of Laketown. The Men eyed the Mountain distrustfully and pushed off quickly as soon as the last of the supplies were unloaded, leaving the group of adventurers shouldering their packs and exchanging eager looks. A sense of solemn excitement filled the air as they prepared for the last leg of their journey, Thorin's sapphire eyes burning with intensity as he waited impatiently for everyone to be ready. As the last pack was being swung into place, he was already moving, Dwalin only a step behind. The fair-haired prince felt his brother fall in next to him.

"Hard to believe that we are really here," Kíli murmured. "We have reached Erebor!"
“Not quite,” Bilbo commented, coming up beside them and casting a dark look up the long, sloping way ahead. The archer grinned at him.

“We won't make the Mountain tonight,” Kíli conceded. He was chatting agreeably with their friend, but Fíli could see the concerned glances that were being thrown his way from the dark eyes, and offered a small smile to reassure his brother. “Though Thorin wants to use the light to get as close as possible,” Kíli continued. He pointed ahead to a low hill about a third of the way up the slope. “That is our goal for tonight, Master Baggins. Tomorrow, the Mountain. Then, we'll have to find the hidden door before the moon rises on Durin's Day.”

“And when exactly is that?” the Hobbit asked cautiously. A flicker of uncertainty crossed the raven-haired prince's face and a choked laugh escaped from Fíli.

“The day after tomorrow,” the elder replied. “Two days to reach the Mountain and find the door. Then the Stone. Then we return to Laketown and await Dáin.”

* X *

Viska wasn't sure which of Bard's daughters was more excited by the revelation of their Dwarf friend's identity. Sigrid seemed happy to find a female friend who appeared to be close to her own age, while Tilda was caught up in the secrecy. The little girl promised earnestly never to reveal Viska's gender, all the while squeezing a furry bundle in her lap until it yipped reproachfully and wriggled free. The Dwarrowmaid gaped at the flat-faced little dog that scrambled to where she sat on the floor, curled tail wagging furiously as the pup planted its front paws on her shoulders and began licking her face. Recovering quickly, the lass laughed and scratched her new friend gently behind the ears, settling it down and cuddling it into her lap as Tilda giggled.

“You have an uzbud-kunb?” Viska asked incredulously, glancing at the girls. “I did not see her yesterday!”

Sigrid smiled. “She's not actually ours. She lives next door, but Tilda sneaks her treats, so she thinks she belongs here, too.”

“What's a uz-nab-kun?” Tilda asked curiously, mangling the Khuzdul. The Dwarf lass grinned.

“It means king-dog,” she explained, grinning. “Among Dwarves, these little flat-faced dears are considered the companions of royalty. They are also called pig-dogs, because of the way they snort and grumble, but that's not nearly as dignified a name. I always preferred the other.”

“Her name is Walnut,” Tilda offered, petting her furry friend with a smile. “I play with her when Miss Nia is busy, because she says dogs need lots of attention.”

“That they do,” Viska agreed, setting the small dog down on the floor. Walnut promptly sniffed her displeasure before racing off to grab a small stuffed toy that lay nearby and flopping down to chew on it industriously. “King-dogs are used to being the center of attention, so they need even more of it. I am glad to see that some of the breed survived Erebor's fall. I had always hoped to see one – Da's bedtime stories often mentioned them.”

Getting to her feet, the Dwarrowlass washed her hands quickly in the basin that Sigrid kept full for that purpose, then turned to her young hostess. Hopefully, keeping busy would help keep her mind off of the Company, the Mountain, and Fíli.
“Now, what can I do to help you out, Sigrid? I'll warn you, I can cook, but Trisk is better at mending, so think on that before you make chore assignments.”

* X *

* In the depths of the Lonely Mountain, the Arkenstone waits as its servant draws ever closer. This one is not so susceptible as the Dwarf that it seized upon being freed from its prison so long ago, but the seed of power has been steeping in the corners of his heart and mind for much longer. But there is another power drawing near, as well – a greater power, a darker power, bearing the signature of a fallen Maiar... .

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
namad – sister (Khuzdul)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
Tharkûn – Dwarven name for Gandalf
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
uzbad-kunb – king-dog (Dwarven name for a pug) (Khuzdul)
By the time the Company reached the foot of the Lonely Mountain, Bilbo was beginning to understand the new caution shown by his companions in regards to their leader. The Hobbit had always found Thorin rather intimidating – the Dwarf lord carried himself with a fierce, grim pride that could easily be interpreted as arrogance, focused on his goal with an intensity that could be a bit overwhelming. Over time (and goodness, had it really been five months since he had left Bag End?), Bilbo had gotten used to his moods, and had seen his interactions with his companions, most especially his nephews. He was not given to overt displays of emotion, but the subtle, quiet moments were there for those who noticed detail – and that had always been one of Bilbo's talents. Thorin had been a king in bearing as much as name, a leader who motivated and inspired those who followed him, drawing more from them than they were even aware that they were able to give, but always giving of himself in return. In only a few short days, things had changed.

The initial stage of the climb up from the lake shore had been brief, the group reaching Kíli's hill just as evening fell, quickly setting up a sketchy camp and settling in to rest. There was little conversation, most of it quiet exchanges of necessary information, or murmurs of thanks for food handed around, and the Hobbit only noted that Thorin seemed more withdrawn than usual. As the depleted expedition continued their hike the next morning, however, the burglar gradually became aware of a great shift in the exiled king’s mood and behavior. Where once he had encouraged his weary companions when they faltered, now he drove them on with little patience. The Company was well-rested from Laketown, but the walk up from the shore of the lake was a long and taxing one, weighed down as they were, with loose stones underfoot that could shift at any moment. When Bombur tripped and slid, Thorin glared. When Ori fell, he bellowed at him, drawing hostile looks from the scribe's elder brothers as they helped him to his feet. When Kíli turned his ankle on a large rock, the king snarled, dragging the lad upright and shoving him forward before Fíli could assist his brother. After that, the Dwarves huddled into their family groups, helping one another scramble over the desolate landscape, hurrying to keep up with the cruel pace that their leader set. Thorin strode on ahead alone, casting only rare looks over his shoulder. Bilbo, slightly steadier on his feet with no heavy boots between him and the treacherous ground, found himself falling in with Fíli and Kíli at the back of the group, with Bifur and his cousins just ahead of them. Conversation was minimal, each of the Dwarves saving his breath for the climb. Kíli was limping slightly, but refused Fíli's offered arm, his face set in grim, mutinous lines. The Hobbit wisely refrained from commenting on the lad's resemblance to his uncle, exchanging an exasperated look with the golden-haired prince instead. Ahead of them, Bombur huffed with exertion. The heavy Dwarf had toughened over the course of the journey, but the steep, steady incline was wearing him down, though unlike the archer, he was not too proud to accept assistance from his kin.

It was early afternoon when they reached the base of the Mountain's southern spur, surmounted by the remains of a watchtower. There, Thorin was persuaded to allow them a short break. He
remained on his feet as the others sank down gratefully on the cold stone. Balin took a seat on a large boulder, staring up at the height with eyes full of memory, then turned to the princes and the Hobbit as they sat nearby.

“Bâha-zunsh-hund.” He indicated the tower high above, his voice a low murmur. “Ravenhill. We used to sneak out to the watchtower as Dwarflings because you can see for miles. That is where the ravens of Erebor would bring their news to the Ravenspeakers, whether messages from allies or their own scouting reports.”

Bilbo gave him a quizzical look as Fíli and Kíli gazed up at this first glimpse of the works of their forefathers' hands. “Ravenspeakers?” he asked quietly. Balin nodded.

“You remember Óin's talk of the sûd, the portents? That when the birds of yore returned, the reign of the beast would end? The birds of yore are the ravens, friends to the Dwarves since time out of mind. Messengers and scouts, they served us well in exchange for bright baubles and tidbits of food. Most Dwarves can understand them, but those with the greatest talent were trained as Ravenspeakers, earning honor and respect in Erebor. The gift is strongest in the line of Durin, but not unheard-of among other families. I was well into my training when Smaug attacked – a lad nearing fifty, eager to learn, eager to serve.” The elder Dwarf had a sad smile of remembrance on his face. “My father and I were on Ravenhill when the hot wind swept down from the North and the ravens came screeching in with their warning. They saved our lives that day.” He pointed toward a recessed area where Ravenhill met the Mountain's spur. “There is a door there, not secret, but tucked away from prying eyes. Behind it is a staircase that accesses the storage rooms and goes all the way up into the watchtower. That is how we escaped when the dragon came.”

Kíli seemed lost in his own thoughts, staring up at the crumbling structure, but Fíli turned to Balin curiously.

“I thought you were outside with Thorin that day,” he commented. “He doesn't speak of it often, but he has mentioned that he was outside with several companions when the dragon came.”

The adviser shook his head. “Thorin was outside, but he was with Dwalin and some others. They were younger, still in the early days of their training, and their class had been out overnight with their survival instructor, learning to live off of the land. They were on their way back, on the far western side of the Mountain, when Smaug descended. Fundin and I were there, on Ravenhill, while Óin and Gróin were on their way to the Healing Halls, for Óin had just begun his healer training. Thrór and Thráin, from what I can recall, were in the Throne Room. I believe now that they escaped through the hidden door that we seek, for no one remembered seeing them until they were among us, small a crowd as we were.”


“They were deep in the Mountain,” he replied. “Frer was not yet forty, Dis only twenty-nine. She had persuaded him to play Seek in Nibgînu Uzbâd, the Gallery of Kings, where they were not supposed to venture, save for ceremonies and feast days. Even then, your mother had her brothers wrapped firmly around her little finger, and Frerin could deny her nothing.” He sighed, his face lined with sorrow. “They emerged with the last wave of survivors, the lass terrified and the lad grief-stricken, begging forgiveness for not being able to find his mother.”

The Hobbit did not realize that some of the others had joined them until Ori spoke, his voice small and hesitant.

“Our mother was inside the Mountain, too...with Dori and Nori,” he stated, glancing at his brothers. Nori nodded, his eyes distant, and Dori managed a small smile.
“I was very young, and Nori was only three,” he said softly. “Adad was a hunter, while Amad was a serving lady to the princess and her ladies-in-waiting. She often took us with her when she worked. Lady Tīla and Lady Srōfa never minded.” He laughed, glancing at Balin. “Lady Tīla often gave me sweets,” he admitted. “Amad was the one that heard the warning that day, and they believed her without question. Princess Ara was not with them at the time, and my mother was wracked with guilt for years afterward, wishing she had gone looking for her before fleeing, but the ladies assured her that there was nothing that she could have done. The princess was on the far side of the Mountain, visiting with her kin, and none could have reached her in time.”

Bilbo shuddered, turning to look up at the looming Mountain as Dori's voice trailed away. He had known that the Dwarves had been driven from their home by the dragon's arrival, but never had he paused to actually think on what exactly that had entailed. “How many lived in Erebor, before the dragon came?” he asked, meeting the faded blue eyes. Balin shook his head. “I do not know, laddie. Ten thousand, perhaps more? I was but a lad at the time myself. My father would have known, but I do not.”

“And how many escaped?”

Brown eyes and sharp blue swung around to stare at their old teacher as Balin sighed. “One thousand, nine hundred, and seventy-three Dwarrow met under the eaves of the eastern border of Mirkwood before the sun set that night,” he replied with the grim certainty of one who had carved the number in his soul. “Of those, thirty-one were gone before the next morning, dying of their injuries, or fire-lung. Another four hundred and thirteen died before we passed the Misty Mountains, of wounds, illness, and the dangers of the road. Fewer than forty babes were born during the Wandering, and only about half survived.”

The Hobbit was working the numbers in his head when he heard Fíli give the answer he sought. “One thousand, five hundred and twenty-nine.” The fair-haired prince met his brother's horrified gaze with a stricken look on his face. “Barely fifteen hundred reached the Blue Mountains, out of more than ten thousand.”

“We learned later that others escaped and went North,” the white-haired Dwarf added. “Another thousand or so found new homes in the Iron Hills, and some of those joined us later, after Azanulbizar.”

Bilbo could feel silent tears tracking down his face as he stared up at the Mountain. So much of the Company's planning and anticipation had focused on the dragon, the treasure, and reclaiming their homeland. Never had he paused to consider the fact that his companions represented such a small number of survivors from Smaug's initial attack. Most of Erebor's inhabitants had never made it into Exile, whether consumed by the beast or dying in the chaos and destruction. He turned to Balin, to find his friend watching him with compassion. The elder Dwarf nodded when the Hobbit met his gaze. “They will be entombed properly before the real work of the reconstruction begins,” came the calm assurance. “That has always been the plan, and Dáin's folk would be summoned for that even if we find the dragon dead on a mountain of gold when we enter. This is not Azanulbizar, where the dead had to be burned to save them from the despoiling hands of Orcs and Goblins. All those within the Mountain will be given back to the stone, as Mahal intended, so that their spirits may rest easy in the Halls of Waiting.”
Once, Thorin would have been at Balin’s side, a strong presence for the youngest members of the Company as they realize that the home they sought to enter is in fact a tomb. Once, he would have gazed with pride on his sister-sons as they vow to help honor the dead in the halls of Erebor. Once, he would have grieved with his kin who had been at his side in the Wandering, remembering those who never made it out of the Mountain as well as those that had died along the way. Once, he was Thorin, son of Thráin – uncle, cousin, and friend. Now, however, he is Thorin, rightful King Under the Mountain, and he has more important concerns than sorrow for those long dead. The song has been growing in his mind since the near edge of Mirkwood, growing ever stronger as they draw closer to the Mountain. It is a haunting, seductive melody, so unlike the deep rhythm of his childhood. It speaks of riches, rather than home; glory rather than safety. It is reaching, and yearning, and the lure of what is just out of his grasp. It is possession, and hunger, and the knowledge that there is no such thing as enough.

The day after the Dwarves’ departure from Erebor, Tauriel and Legolas still lingered under the eaves of the forest, keeping a wary watch on Laketown. The Orcs had begun returning to their abandoned camp, trickling back in small groups. There were not quite so many as before, but there were still enough to give two Elves a stiff battle if it were needed, and they were loathe to leave the town of Men undefended until the filthy creatures had departed the area. So, they watched, taking it in turns to spend time in the quiet meditation that served to give them rest. The Orcs paid them no mind, but seemed to be waiting once more, whether for some action on the part of the Elves or for some orders from their own leaders was unclear.

“Surely they will leave soon.” Legolas glared at their enemies through narrowed eyes. “There is nothing here for them. The Dwarves are gone, well on their way to the Mountain.”

The fire-haired she-Elf shrugged slightly. “I do not know. Perhaps they were told to wait there until given further orders.”

The flaxen-haired prince nodded slightly and glanced at the setting sun. “Another full day,” he decided. “If they have made no move by dawn on the first day of Winter, we will return to my father’s halls.”

Within Laketown, the Orcs were all but forgotten by the two young Dwarrows that had remained behind. Over the past two days, Triskel and Viska had spent long hours helping Bard and his children with long-delayed repairs to home and tools, developing an easy friendship with the youngsters and a slightly more reserved one with the bargeman. Trisk was endlessly patient with Bain, answering the young Man’s eager inquiries about the quest while still maintaining Dwarven secrecy regarding their plans and goals. It was after dinner the first night, after Tilda had gone to
bed, that the young Dwarf realized that the boy was fascinated by the tales of the battles that they had fought, hanging on every word with a bright gleam in his eyes. Exchanging a worried glance with his sister, Trisk subtly altered the tone of his stories, focusing on the fear for his friends, the brutality of their foes, the confusion and turmoil of the battlefield. Gratitude lit Bard's face as they emphasized the idea of fighting because they must, rather than seeking conflict for glory or excitement, but it took a while for Bain's enthusiasm to fade. It was not until the second night that he seemed to truly understand. That was the night that Viska told the tale of the Goblin raid on Emyn Uial, the scars they both wore giving brutal emphasis to the narration. She spared them nothing of her experience, relating how she had deliberately drawn the Goblins' attention away from a younger lass, how they had attacked her with vile intent even as the building burned around them, how they had choked, clawed, and raged when she fought back. The Dwarrowlass even pulled up a leg of her trousers to show the ragged scars, and Bain's face paled to a sickly hue as he turned to stare at his father. Bard nodded, one hand tight on Sigrid's shoulder as the young woman sat with her hands over her mouth, a horrified look on her face.

“Battle is not glory, son,” the bargeman murmured. “You fight to preserve what is good and precious, because you must, but not everyone returns from the field, and nothing can restore the lives that are lost.”

Viska felt slightly guilty, watching the innocent fervor fade from the boy's face, but Trisk caught her eye and shook his head, hands moving in subtle gestures.

Better to learn it now than on the battlefield. Bard wanted him to learn this way. Adad would have preferred for us to learn this way.

Still, once the tale was done (tears of sympathy in Sigrid's eyes when Viska spoke of her father's death, and Bain flinching at this confirmation of Bard's words), the lass switched to more traditional tales, lightening the mood as best she could before everyone retired for the night. Bard paused to clasp a comforting hand on her shoulder on his way by, looking down into her face with dark eyes full of compassion.

“I do not know what your brother said to you earlier, when he was using that gesture-language of yours,” he stated gently, “but I hope that he was telling you not to feel ashamed for telling them the truth of combat. It is not a glorious adventure, as you know, and I would prefer that he have no illusions, should he be forced to fight.”

The Dwarrowmaid nodded and thanked him quietly before going out to the main area of the house to lay out her bedroll next to Trisk's. Her brother watched her carefully, concern in his eyes, until she met his gaze and managed a small smile.

“I am alright, nadad.” She settled on her pallet, slipping out of her coat and running her fingers through her hair. “I am worried about the others, and I cannot deny that there is an icy shard of fear in my heart, but I am alright.”

The silversmith watched her for another long moment before giving her a smile and a nod and producing a comb from his pack.

“Come here, namadith, and let me comb out your hair. It is past time it was braided once more, and I have a gift for you.”

She cocked a brow curiously as she shifted over to sit with her back to him, feeling tension ease from her muscles as he ran the comb gently through her chestnut locks. Her eyes drifted closed, listening to him hum softly. The song was an old ballad that their father had loved and she soon found herself humming along with him, pulling the silver clasp from her pocket to run her fingers...
over it.

“What is that?” Trisk asked, turning her head gently so that he could partition her hair for the first of her braids. “I saw him hand you the knife, but I did not see what else he gave you.”

Viska smiled, her eyes flickering open so she could study each detail of the hair clip that she held. It was worn, and had been slightly tarnished before she had polished it carefully, but it was instantly recognizable as the clasp that had held Fíli's hair restrained, twin to the only ornament that Kíli wore in his untamed raven mop, and only slightly different from those worn by the other descendants of Durin's blood. A leather thong now bound that golden mane, rather than the silver piece embossed with the sigil of Durin's house. Trisk's fingers stilled as he got a clear look at it, then resumed their careful work, a small smile visible behind his auburn beard.

“A courting gift?” There was a slightly teasing tone to his voice as he slipped a bead into place on the first braid. Viska made a face at him, but did not resist when he urged her to turn her head the other way and began on the second.

“An expression of interest,” she corrected, a tiny smile dancing on her lips. Trisk gave an inelegant snort.

“As if you did not already know that he was interested.”

The lass laughed, then sobered as she remembered the prince's words as he pressed it into her hand. “He knew about the letter than Thorin gave us for Lady Dís. This is a message for her, if the Company does not return. He said that she would know what it meant.”

Trisk nodded, hazel eyes fixed on his task. “It is his way of telling her that you are his beloved, asking her to accept you as agnât-nâtha,” he murmured, never pausing as he wove the intricate pattern in her hair. “It is the best gift he could give you, mim-mushzith.”

Viska smiled at the old nickname, glancing at her brother. “It is rare you call me that these days.” He grinned at her, snugging the second bead into place.

“It is long since the name fit. You were fierce from the time you could pick up a blade, no longer the shy little mouse who hid behind her big brother when Da's friends came to visit.” He sat back and studied her braids critically before finally nodded in satisfaction. “Now you look like a proper Dwarrowmaid again,” he said, tucking the comb back into his pack. She smiled and gave her head a little shake, setting the braids to swinging before she thought to glance at the beads.

“These aren't my old beads,” she commented, catching the end of a braid to study it closer. Her eyes widened at the emblem marked in the silver, then her gaze traveled further, to the unfamiliar intricacy of the braid itself. Rather than the simple twin plaits tucked behind her ears, these were more complex, starting as two braids on each side near her temple and merging into a single weave.

“They were Amad's,” he replied, his voice low. “Da kept them for you, so you could wear them when you were ready to think about courting. These are the beads that he gave her when they wed.”

“And Mababnulzanâtu Sanzadkh?” she teased, holding up the new braid. “So eager to be rid of me, nadad?”

He smiled and brushed a stray hair off of her forehead. “You cannot formally begin a courtship without them,” he retorted. “Da taught you the traditions of Erebor. Fíli would be scandalized if
you offered him a bead without them in place.”

She snorted, turning away to stretch out on her pallet. “Fíli would not care.”

“Probably not.” He nodded, extinguishing the candle and settling onto his own bedroll, his voice heavy with fatigue. “But Balin might, and Thorin, not to mention Dori. Remember, mim-mushzith, Fíli is no merchant or craftsman, but an heir of Durin, who will be Crown Prince of Erebor once it is retaken. There are proprieties to be observed, traditions to be upheld.”

Weary from the day's work, he drifted off quickly, his snores soon rumbling through the room. Viska lay awake for much longer, listening to the comfortingly familiar sound as her agitated mind dwelt on what he had said. She had always known Fíli's status, how could she not? He was Thorin's nephew and heir, descended of Durin's eldest line. Somehow, she had never really stopped to think about what that meant for her as their relationship grew.

_He will be King Under the Mountain_, she realized abruptly, something like panic seizing her heart. _Years from now, when Thorin goes to the Halls of Waiting, Fíli will rule. And I...I would be his queen._

It was a terrifying prospect for a simple lass from Emyn Uial, untutored in the ways of royalty. She lay awake in the darkness of the night for several long hours before she was finally able to drift off into a restless sleep, roaming the land of dreams under U'rakh's gentle guardianship.

* X *

The Company spent that night, the eve of Durin's Day, camped near the western base of the Lonely Mountain, near where the map showed the hidden door. They reached the sheltered valley in the early evening, Thorin sending his nephews and the Hobbit out to do a preliminary search in the fading light while the others set up camp. They returned as darkness fell, with no news of the door, but Balin was able to soothe the king's anger, pointing out that it was undoubtedly high above them.

“Tomorrow, we will search for a way up,” the white-haired elder assured him. “Thrór and Thráin came from this general area when they joined the refugees, and the map clearly shows that it is nearby. We have all day tomorrow to find it, Thorin, and find it we shall.”

Thráin's son gave grudging agreement and accepted a portion of food from their stores as he settled in to rest. Kíli sat next to his brother, noting the way that Fíli's gaze turned often in the direction of Laketown, far behind them and barely visible. Pressing a packet of dried fruit into the golden prince's hand, the archer gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

“She will be fine, nadad.”

Fíli nodded heavily, though a shadow still lingered behind his eyes, and he returned the smile. “I know she is safer there, should Smaug still live, but it was hard to leave her behind.”

The dark-haired prince grimaced in agreement and clasped his brother's shoulder tightly. “Another day, possibly two, and we can return,” he promised. “Bilbo will retrieve the Arkenstone and Thorin will send for Dáin, and we will go to Esgaroth to await the army of the Iron Hills. And perhaps your lass will finally add another braid to that mane of yours.”
Durin's Day dawned clear and cold over the town on the Long Lake, and Viska woke filled with equal measures of anxiety and anticipation. She spent the morning as active as she could manage, trying to keep her mind busy so she could not dwell on her worry for a certain golden prince, his broad smile punctuated by deep dimples beneath his beard. Sigrid watched her in bemused confusion as Tilda played with Walnut, the little dog’s grumbles and growls making the child laugh with delight. Bain and Trisk had gone out to help Bard with repairs to his barge. The Dwarrowlass did not even realize that she was playing absently with her new braids until Sigrid’s gentle chuckle brought her up short.

“What do they mean?”

Viska turned to meet her gray eyes, puzzled by the question.

“What do what mean?”

“The braids,” the bargeman's daughter replied with a smile. “They seem to make you nervous, or happy, I am not certain which.”

“A little of both.” The lass felt her face warming with embarrassment. “They are called Maiden’s Braids, and they mean that I am thinking of courting,”

“Ah.” Sigrid did not say anything else for a long moment, the silence punctuated by Walnut's playful yip as Tilda held up a favorite toy. Finally, the girl turned back to her baking, the next question tossed idly over her shoulder. “I assume you have a specific Dwarf lad in mind, then? Perhaps one of the brothers that came with you before they left? Fíli and Kíli?” She glanced back, mischief dancing in her eyes as Viska stared at her, a fiery blush spreading over the Dwarrowmaid’s cheeks. Clearly delighted by the reaction she was getting, Sigrid grinned and continued to muse aloud. “They were quite handsome. Funny, and kind. Very heroic, as well, the way the fair-haired one jumped into the lake after Til.” The girl paused then, an unreadable expression flitting across her face before she fixed her gaze on Viska once more. “They said they were the king's heirs,” she murmured, awed even at the memory. “If you wed one of them, you will be a princess!”

Viska sighed and nodded, laughing when Sigrid gave a shrill squeal of delight and darted over to hug her tightly.

“That is the only negative aspect,” the lass admitted ruefully. “The prospect of being queen terrifies me.”

Sigrid's eyes widened, sympathy filling her face, and she appeared to consider her next words carefully. “I do not know you well, my friend, but what I do know makes me think that you would be an honest and capable queen, especially at the side of such a king. Da was most impressed with his passion and dedication to his people when they spoke that day.”
The Company had spent Durin's Day searching for the way up to the hidden door, and Kíli was starting to worry as the afternoon wore on. He was searching with his brother and the burglar, determined to find the path before any of the others, when the Hobbit's clear voice rang out in the crisp air.

“Kíli, do you see that? Does that look like a staircase to you? Or at least a few steps?”

The younger prince came around a great boulder and followed Bilbo's pointing finger. A wide grin spread across his face and he nodded.

“It does, Mister Boggins!” he agreed, laughing when the burglar rolled his eyes at the old joke. “Fíli! Call Thorin and the others! Bilbo's found the way up!”

The elder prince jogged over to look for himself, smiling as Kíli pounded the Hobbit gently on the back. “Well done, Master Burglar!” He glanced at his brother. “Do you want to check it out first? Just to be sure?”

Kíli exchanged a glance with Bilbo and the Hobbit shrugged, glancing at the sky before he replied.

“It's mid-afternoon now, and it might take a bit to find the door. Why don't you lads start up, and I'll go get Thorin.”

The princes nodded, grinning at one another, then Fíli made a mocking bow and waved Fíli ahead of him.

“Age before beauty, dear brother.”

The swordsman snorted and swatted at him, but took the lead. Kíli followed, excitement building in his heart. The hidden door, their way into Erebor, lay somewhere ahead, and he would be one of the first to see it. It took a few moments for him to realize that Fíli's eagerness had faded somewhat and his steps had slowed. Peering up, the archer saw his brother's shoulders had slumped as he walked. Taking the rough stairs two at a time, Kíli caught up to him and rested a hand on his shoulder.

“We've found the door, nadad,” he murmured encouragingly. “You will see her again soon.”

Fíli gave a small shake of his head and a sideways grin, glancing briefly at him. “It is disconcerting when you read my mind like that, you know.”

“It's what brothers are for.”

“It's not just Viska, though,” the older prince continued. “As important as she is to me, there are other concerns that weigh on my mind, Kíli. There is still a dragon to consider, and Thorin's recent moods. The worried way that Balin watches his king when he thinks he is unobserved.”

The archer sighed and nodded. “I know. It is just easier to reassure you about her than any of the other burdens that you bear.” He grimaced and offered his brother a one-armed shrug. “Perhaps because the other things trouble me, as well. Back in Khagal'abbad, it was all so far away, even when we were preparing to leave. Erebor is our birthright, and it has always meant so much to Thorin. Of course we would join him when he set out to reclaim it. It is ours, and Durin's Folk have already lost so much....” He trailed off as he stared up the mountainside, aware that his brother had halted next to him and was watching him closely. “I reassure you about Viska because I can,” he said eventually. “The two of you are the one thing that feels real and certain. The other concerns, we will face when we must, and do what we must.”
He jolted slightly in surprise when his brother clapped a warm hand to his shoulder and he turned to see a proud little smile on Fíli's face. “That we will, nadadith. Together.”

“Stronger together than apart.”

With a last grin, the younger prince started forward once more. The stairs beneath their feet turned into a rough path, which faded out occasionally so that they had to scan the ground to find it again. Kíli was in his element, sharp eyes picking out remnants of the track as they moved up the side of the Mountain. It wound back and forth as it reached ever higher, finally ending in a deep ledge, carpeted in fading fall grass, with a sheer blank wall at the far end. Kíli stared at it in dismay.

“All that for nothing?” he demanded incredulously. “Thorin is going to kill us!”

“Wait, kandith,” Fíli waved him forward, approaching the flat stone wall. “Does this wall look natural to you?”

Kíli glanced at his brother, then studied the area more closely. It was too smooth, compared to the rough sides of the Mountain. A grin spread across his face and he hurried back along the path a few steps, to where he could hear Thorin and the others following.

“We've found it!” he called down, all youthful ebullience. “Bilbo found the path, and Fíli's found the door! Hurry up, slowpokes!”

The rumble of their retorts wasn't quite close or loud enough to make out clearly, but he could imagine what they were saying and he laughed. Fíli just sighed and shook his head with a small smile. He leaned back against the side of the Mountain, face up to the sky, eyes closed, letting the late autumn sun warm his face. For the first time since leaving Viska behind in Esgaroth, he looked peaceful and relaxed.

Footsteps on the path alerted the dark-haired prince to the arrival of the rest of the Company and he turned to greet them, giving a small teasing bow as Thorin entered the little bay. His uncle did not seem to notice, deep sapphire eyes finding the smooth surface of the door immediately. He strode over purposefully, barely acknowledging the elder prince as Fíli stepped out of the way. Balin spared each of the lads a small smile as he followed the king, and Bilbo moved over to stand with them as the rest of their companions waited in a bunch near the top of the path.

“The last light of Durin's Day,” Thorin muttered to himself, turning to glance at the setting sun as he pulled the key from under his tunic. The red orb was sinking behind a thick band of clouds and Kíli tensed anxiously, staring at the wall, begging silently for something to happen, for some clue to present itself. The last moon of Autumn hung in the sky as well, and the ledge on the side of the Mountain was silent, without even the sound of breathing. Then, as the sun was about to disappear, a thin shaft of light pierced the clouds, focusing on a small point on the wall. A resounding crack echoed 'round the bay and a large piece of the rock fell, revealing the keyhole.

Kíli stared, only barely aware that he had clamped a hand on his brother's arm in a painfully tight grip. Fíli's eyes were fixed on their uncle, and Bilbo almost looked ready to snatch the key from Thorin's hand and open the door himself. Balin appeared to be holding his breath as the king-in-exile stepped forward to fit the old iron key into the keyhole. Thorin's eyes flickered shut and his lips moved in a silent prayer as he turned it carefully. The aged mechanism seemed to resist at first, but then a snap could be heard deep within the stone. Placing both hands on the smooth expanse of the wall, Thorin Oakenshield pushed open the hidden door, the secret entrance to Erebor.

Chapter End Notes
Translations and Notes:
Bâha-zunsh-hund – Ravenhill, literally Hill of the Ravens (Khuzdul)
sûd – portents (Khuzdul)
Nibgînu Uzbâd – Gallery of Kings (Khuzdul)
Adad – Father (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
agnât-nâtha – daughter by marriage (Khuzdul)
mim-mushzith – little/young mouse (Khuzdul)
Mababnulzanâtu Sanzadkh – Maiden's Braids (literally braids of the virgin) (Khuzdul)
U'rakh – Khuzdul name for Irmo, Vala of Dreams and Visions
Khagal'abbad – The Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/young brother (Khuzdul)
kandith – little/young wolf (Khuzdul)
“Halls of green marble filled with golden light, precious gems like stars in the darkness, seams of gold running like rivers through stone....”

Fíli had grown up hearing Thorin's tales of their lost home, the city of Erebor within the Lonely Mountain. He had seen the sorrow his mother's eyes during Lomilu Zul, the determination in his uncle's face as he spoke of retaking what had been stolen. Never had he doubted the older Dwarf's ability to do exactly that – nor had he doubted that he would be there to see it done. He was Thorin's heir, after all, raised to the responsibilities of the Line of Durin, the burden of his people's expectations and needs. He would be among the first to stand once more in the Mountain's shadow, to gaze upon the halls of his forefathers. Most of his young life had been dedicated to preparation for the journey that lay ahead, his brother by his side in all things.

Now the journey was over. Not the quest, since they might yet have to face the dragon, but they had reached the Mountain and stood upon the threshold, gazing into the dark stillness of the secret entrance. And despite everything – his concerns regarding the dragon, Thorin's unpredictable mood, even the dull ache of guilt over Viska's absence – he was filled with a fierce anticipation. They were home!

“Glóin, a light.”

Thorin's curt command cut through the silence and Fíli saw several of the others startle slightly. The burly merchant nodded and dug out his tinderbox as Nori pulled a prepared torch loose from a strap on his pack. Once it was lit, Glóin handed it over with a small bow. Thorin took it with a nod of acknowledgment, then turned and approached the entrance, Balin at his side. The king's face softened slightly as he looked at his old friend, then he took a deep breath and stepped through the door. Fíli found himself moving forward, Kíli at his side, as Balin followed Thorin into the Mountain. The king had stopped a few steps in, one reverent hand on the wall as he pressed his forehead to the green marble, his voice a low murmur.

“I know this stone. I know these walls. This is home.”

The door was narrow and the princes could not enter side by side, but Kíli offered a small grin and fell back slightly. Fíli accepted the gesture with a nod and stepped through the stone doorway, his brother close at his shoulder. It was clearly a secret tunnel – plain, narrow, dark – but there was still a feeling of awe as he stepped over the threshold and set foot in Erebor. This was the kingdom that his great-grandfather had ruled, the Mountain where his uncles and mother had been born, where thousands of their people had died when Smaug descended in fire and smoke. He turned to find Kíli gazing about him with wonder on his face and reached out to grasp the younger prince's shoulder tightly, pulling him out of the way as the others began to crowd in behind them. Glancing
at his uncle, the heir saw that Thorin still leaned into the stone of the wall, looking for all the world as though he was communing with the very Mountain. After several long moments, he pulled away and turned to them, a small smile on his face for the first time that Fíli could remember since they had encountered the spiders of Mirkwood.

“Welcome, my sister-sons, to Erebor, though this is but the darkest corner.”

The swordsman nodded, an answering smile creeping across his face in response to his uncle's quiet joy. At his side, Kíli was gazing up at a carving over the door – an ornate chair topped by an etched stone. Bilbo, too, was staring at it curiously, and Balin nodded knowingly.

“The throne of the king.”

“What is that above it?” Hobbit's voice was slightly hesitant, as though he knew the answer that he would receive.

“The Arkenstone.”

The reply came from Fíli, and Bilbo glanced at him in confusion. Then Thorin spoke.

“That, Master Burglar, is why you are here.”

“The Arkenstone is the king's jewel.” Thorin's heir gave the explanation, remembering the tales that had shaped his life. “It is a magnificent white gem the size of your fist that glows with its own inner light. The armies of the Dwarf kingdoms are bound by oath to answer the summons of the one who holds the stone. Once Thorin has the Arkenstone, our kin in the Iron Hills will come and help us with the dragon.”

“If it isn't already dead,” Kíli added optimistically.

“I wouldn't hold my breath for that, laddie,” Balin countered. “Still, I guess we can hope.”

Bilbo was looking a little pale and wild-eyed, and Fíli suddenly found himself wondering if the Hobbit had ever truly understood what was expected of him. It had been made quite clear that the Company was in need of a burglar – the prince remembered that conversation clearly. But had they ever really explained why?

“So...you want me to try and steal this Arkenstone from under the nose of the dragon?” Bilbo squeaked.

That would be a 'no,' then. The golden prince saw Óin staring at the burglar in concern, as if afraid he might faint again. Which didn't seem like such an unlikely possibility, come to think of it.

“Exactly,” Thorin rumbled. Bilbo sighed and visibly swallowed, then nodded.

“Very well, then. I did sign the contract, after all. I'll need to go alone, I imagine?”

“I'll go with you a little way.” Balin volunteered with a sympathetic smile, a reassuring hand on their small companion's shoulder. “I still remember the secrets of the Mountain, so I can give you a bit of direction.” The Hobbit nodded, his hand drifting to his pocket, as it had so often since the Misty Mountains. Kíli clapped him gently on the back and offered him an encouraging smile.

“Best of luck, and be careful, my friend.”

Fíli echoed the sentiments, handing over a fresh torch as the others chimed in, crowding around to
wish him well in quiet voices. As they stood back to watch the two figures move down the corridor, the elder prince flicked a glance at Thorin.

“Should we move outside?” he asked quietly. “We don't want the dragon smelling us if he is still down there.”

Thorin merely nodded, still watching the tunnel, and the princes led the rest of the Company back out into the little sheltered bay on the side of the Mountain. They set up a sketchy camp, but did not start a fire. Instead, they sat on their bedrolls and ate dry travel rations, keeping their voices low. Thorin and Balin joined them after a short time, propping the hidden door with a large rock so it would not close them out. And so they settled in to await the return of their burglar.

* X *

The moon was beginning its descent when Tauriel returned from a quick foraging expedition under the eaves of the forest. She had heard the voice of the prince long before, so she was not surprised to find him engaged in frustrated conversation with an apologetic Suilrien. The chestnut-haired guard was a dear friend to both of the defiant Elves, and Thranduil had probably thought her the most likely to sway them.

“The king is most insistent, my prince,” she murmured with a shrug. “Cevendir gave him your message, but he deems a threat to Laketown unlikely, as the Orcs are focused on the Dwarves.”

“And when have Orcs ever left others in peace?” The Sindarin Elf's retort was sharp, his eyes narrowed with irritation. “I remember when our policy was to slay such filth on sight. Now we capture and imprison Aulë's folk, but let Morgoth's creations travel uncontested through our forest, to threaten our allies?” There was an edge of bitterness in his voice now, and it tore at Tauriel's heart to hear her friend's pain. “How long have I been blind to my father's folly, Suilrien? How long since he exchanged honor for cowardice and isolation, the lives of others for those of our people?”

Suilrien shook her head, her dark gaze drifting to meet Tauriel's, unsure whether they should answer their prince's plea. Then something else caught her eye, and she froze, staring over the flame-haired Elf's shoulder. Tauriel cursed and spun, dropping the late berries that she had found in the forest as she drew her hunting knives.

The Orcs were on the move. Worse, they had clearly been on the move for several moments, unremarked by the distracted watchers. A small group was crossing the bridge into Laketown, the guards at the gate certainly dead. The rest of them were not immediately visible, but Tauriel did not doubt that they were nearby. She was already moving, alert for any sign of the remaining Orcs, as Legolas gave Suilrien curt orders to return to the king's halls for aid. A moment later, he was at her side, matching her strides as they raced for the town of Men where the inhabitants lay on the edge of sleep, unaware of death stalking the streets.

* X *

Bard, Triskel, and Bain had returned in the late afternoon, the barge repaired, and everyone having worked up a good appetite for the evening meal. Afterward, Bard disappeared once more, alone
this time, after a murmured word with his eldest. Trisk exchanged a worried look with his sister, seeing the concern in Sigrid's eyes as the girl nodded and watched her father leave. Clearing the table, the young silversmith joined their hostess at the sink as she began to wash the dishes, Bain drying them as she went.

“Trouble?” The Dwarf kept his voice low as he slid a plate into the water. Sigrid shook her head and shot a quick glance at Tilda. The younger girl was engaged in a spirited game of tug-rope with Walnut, the little dog's playful growls nearly as loud as her giggling, and her sister smiled as she watched them, then looked back to Trisk.

“Nothing specific.” She gave a shrug, but her face was troubled. “It's just that there is unrest in town, and Da and some of the other men are trying to keep everyone settled. The Master made another unpopular declaration today, and they have gone to soothe the people if they can. Da doesn't like the Master, but he likes the idea of the people making hasty decisions in anger even less.”

“Understandable.” He grimaced in sympathy. “Judging by the undercurrents we've seen in town just since our arrival, though, something to needs to change soon. The people will not stand for many more of his policies and declarations.”

“No, they will not.” Bain's voice was tight with nerves as he dried the dishes with vicious swipes of the towel. “Da and the others want it to be a peaceful change of leadership, but—”

The boy broke off as Sigrid shushed him, her head swiveling toward the door. Trisk froze, darting a look at his sister as he listened intently, trying to hear whatever had alerted the girl. After a moment, the bargeman's daughter relaxed minutely and shook her head, apologizing.

“I thought I heard someone on the stairs. Da's not due back for hours, so I feared—”

“Shh!”

This time, Viska did the hushing, green eyes fixed on the front door as Walnut erupted into a flurry of barking. Trisk had heard it too, and he was already reaching for the nearest kitchen knife as his sister moved toward the door. Scooping Walnut up on her way, the Dwarrowmaid tucked the dog gently into Tilda's arms and whispered something in the girl's ear. Wide-eyed, the child hurried toward her siblings, squeezing her little furry friend tightly. Sigrid pulled her close and Trisk saw Bain moving slightly in front of his sisters as the silversmith positioned himself between the children and the threat. Viska had Fíli's blade already drawn as she reached for the latch.

What happened next was a confusion of noise and movement, sending terror surging up into his throat. The door burst open just as Viska's hand touched it, sending the Dwarrowmaid sprawling. The massive form of an Orc loomed in the doorway, a twisted smirk on its face as it entered the little house. Walnut was barking, furious yaps of anger and defiance somewhat smothered by Sigrid's dress as the girl huddled protectively over her sister. Tilda was screaming, sharp and shrill, and Bain was yelling hoarsely as he tried to shove the girls to safety. Trisk simply moved, kitchen knife forgotten as he hurled himself at the Orc, catching it off guard and slamming it into the wall. A sudden scraffling noise on the roof told him that there were more of the filth above them, and he felt his stomach fill with acidic fear even as he tried desperately to reach one of the Orc's weapons and use it against his enemy. The window at the front of the house exploded in a shower of broken wood and thick glass shards just as his hand closed on the haft of a serrated dagger. Yanking it free of its sheath, he planted it in the Orc's gut and put all of his weight into dragging it sideways. Black blood erupted from the rent in the thick hide as the young Dwarrow spun to face the threat behind him, but the other Orc's blow never fell. A cry of “Khazâd ai-mênu!” rang through the room and Viska threw herself forward, the hunting knife flashing in her hand before
she buried it hilt-deep in the Orc's ribs, digging toward the heart.

Trisk stared at his sister for a heartbeat, relieved to see her whole and conscious, before an ominous cracking sound overhead drew his attention. Hazel eyes darted around the room without thought, absently storing knowledge as he moved, the black-stained serrated blade still in his hand. Tilda was crouched beneath the table with the dog as Bain stood over her, hoisting a heavy skillet. Sigrid was next to him, gripping a knife in one trembling hand, but even as the silversmith turned away, her gaze lit on something else and she dropped the blade, lunging for the bundles of dried herbs that hung over her head.

That was when the roof gave out under the weight of the Orcs above them, dropping the beasts into the center of the room. Moving to hamstring the nearest, the young Dwarf caught a flicker of movement as the bargeman's daughter yanked something dark and metallic from near the ceiling. He bellowed a warning as one of the Orcs turned toward the children, but something fierce had flared into life on Sigrid's gentle face, and she stepped forward, bringing the metal shaft up with all of her strength, driving the point into the underside of the Orc's chin and up into the brain. It cut through with surprising ease and she stumbled back as the beast crumpled, shock painted on its twisted features. Trisk gaped, leaving his guard open for that moment too long, and a filthy sword swung for his face faster than he could dodge.

Thunk

An Elvish arrow stood in the Orc's eye, and suddenly two tall, slender forms were moving through the chaos, one flame-haired and the other pale gold. They did not fight so much as dance, a deadly choreography of anticipation, deflection, and reaction with the ease of long-trusted partners. In the space of a few heartbeats, the last of the Orcs had fallen and the two young Dwarrow stood staring in bewilderment at the Woodland Elves. One was the leader of the patrol that had captured them in the Mirkwood, while the other was the she-Elf that had saved Kíli and Viska from the spiders. Silence rang through the tiny house, broken only by the harsh breathing of the combatants and the soft whimpers from the furry little bundle under the table. The children and the Dwarves stared at the Elves, while the male Elf stared at the Dwarves and the female stared at the long metal shaft that was buried in the Orc that Sigrid had killed.

Tilda broke the frozen tableau, releasing Walnut and scrambling out to bury her face in Sigrid's skirts. The elder girl sank down and pulled the little one to her, cuddling her close and rocking her gently, murmuring reassuringly. Bain collapsed next to his sisters, absently scrubbing at the pup's ears when Walnut burrowed into his lap. The male Elf raised one regal golden eyebrow at the Dwarves, as though waiting for them to speak and Trisk grimaced when Viska found her voice first.

“What are you doing here?” She sounded equal parts incredulous and furious as she stalked toward the fair-haired Elf. Trisk felt a fleeting sense of relief that she had not yet retrieved the hunting knife from her fallen foe. The Elf merely stared at her, the look in his blue eyes as close to incredulous as the Dwarf had ever seen in one of the Firstborn. “Did you follow us? Did you follow them?” Here, her hand flew out to indicate the dead Orcs scattered through the room, their black blood seeping into the worn wood. “Is there a reason that you allowed Orcs to creep unhindered into Laketown? I thought you were allies!” She stopped in front of him, deep disgust on her face as she shook her head, her voice sinking to a growl. “But then, so also you served the Dwarves when our people were your allies. You had no qualms about leaving the children of Erebor to the tender attentions of the dragon, or the perils of the road as they went into Exile. Why would you show concern for the children of Laketown? The Elves of the Mirkwood care for no one but themselves!”
“And the Dwarves of Erebor care for nothing but their treasure!” he snapped back at her, fire flashing in his eyes. “Where are your companions now, but seeking a way into the Lonely Mountain, sure to rouse the dragon and bring destruction on the Men of Laketown? Did you slow them on their journey, Dwarf, that they left you behind?”

Groaning quietly, Trisk stepped to his sister's side, even as the fire-haired female Elf dropped a hand to her companion's shoulder.

“They saved our lives, and those of Bard's children, namadith,” the silversmith hissed, pulling her back a step. “Let them speak and you may have an answer. Goad them unnecessarily, and do not be surprised if your anger is returned to you.”

The Elves were conversing hurriedly in their fluid tongue before the fair-haired one cast one last irritated look at the Dwarves and left quickly. The she-Elf watched him go, then turned to the children. Bain and his sisters were still huddled together on the far side of the room, watching the exchange with wide eyes, although Sigrid had Tilda's face pulled into her shoulder, trying to shield the girl from the sight of the dead Orcs.

“My name is Tauriel,” the Dwarves' former captor announced gently. “I am a Captain of the Guard in Mirkwood, and I have some small skill in healing, if any of you are injured.” She glanced briefly at the Dwarrow, including them in the offer, but no one spoke for a long moment.

“We are well.” Sigrid offered a slightly shaky smile. She glanced down at her sister and her mouth twisted as she amended her statement. “Physically, at least. Bain?”

“No injuries,” he answered quickly, shaking his head. Trisk peered at each of them in turn before finally nodding and turning to offer a shallow bow to the Captain as he made introductions.

“The young ones before you are Sigrid, Bain, and little Tilda, children of Bard of Laketown. I am Triskel, son of Kulvik, late of Emyn Uial, and this is my sister, Viska. I apologize for her temper. I fear her blood is still hot from the battle.”

Viska sighed and gave a reluctant nod when Tauriel smiled slightly.

“I understand words spoken in haste.” The Elf's reply was calm and free of judgment. “I do not begrudge your suspicion. We were following the Orcs, Legolas and I, and we hoped to prevent anything like this. Unfortunately, we were distracted by a messenger from our king, and did not see the Orcs creeping into town until they were well on their way.” The tall maiden turned and offered a low bow to the children. “For that, I apologize. You should never have been in such danger. We failed you, and my heart grieves at what might have happened here tonight.”

Viska's hands moved in unconscious gestures of frustration and Trisk hid a smile as his sister sighed once more before meeting the Elf-maid's gaze.

“My brother has the right of it,” she admitted. “You saved our lives, and we owe you thanks, not accusations. My apologies, Lady Tauriel, and my gratitude. I fear our presence is what endangered the children in the first place, so thank you. I will offer the same to your companion if I see him again.”

Tauriel nodded graciously, then knelt by the nearest Orc corpse, pulling the hunting knife free. She studied it for a moment before offering it to Viska, a knowing glint in her green eyes, though her face was carefully neutral.

“The emblem on that pommel-nut matches that on several other weapons we confiscated from your
companions. From one in particular, if I recall correctly. I am impressed that he managed to conceal that one from us.” Viska did not reply, but a small smile teased her lips as she accepted it with a nod when Tauriel handed it to her, only to be replaced by a puzzled frown when the she-Elf produced another, smaller blade, this one also familiar. “I believe that this is yours as well,” she murmured, handing over the knife that the Dwarrowlass had found in the Troll-hoard so long ago.

“Sig, what is that?”

Trisk glanced over to see Bain staring at the Orc that his sister had killed, his face a mixture of disgust and curiosity. Sigrid glanced up from soothing Tilda and shrugged, blushing.

“Da’s had it hidden ever since I can remember. Though how he expected me not to notice when I do the cooking and dry the herbs, I do not know. Still, he seemed to think it better concealed, so I left it alone.”

Now that it had been mentioned, Trisk could not take his eyes off of the thick metal shaft that the girl had driven into the Orc’s throat, and he heard Tauriel give a gasp of recognition.

“A black arrow! How came he by a black arrow? Only a few were ever forged, and they were in the hands of Girion of Dale, lost when the city fell!”

The red-haired Dwarrow shared a look with his sister.

“Bard is descended of Girion,” he said slowly, remembering the scene in front of the Dwarves’ borrowed house that first morning in Laketown. “Could he have kept one all this time?”

“It appears so.”

Tauriel knelt by the corpse, pulling the arrow free and wiping the black blood from its length, wonder and hope in her eyes. Bain was watching her closely, but made no protest when the precious heirloom was taken into reverent hands.

“The story says that Girion fired nearly all of the black arrows that day.” The boy looked a little dazed to see one of the legendary weapons in his own home. “The last he released knocked loose a scale on the dragon’s breast, and if he’d had only one more shot, he might have taken the beast down. But the tower that he was on collapsed, and he barely escaped with his life. He must have had the last arrow in his hand when it fell, and carried it with him out of the destruction.”

Trisk laughed, relief in his voice as he turned to hug his sister and press his forehead to hers.

“We have a chance!” he muttered hoarsely. “Even with Dáin’s army, I doubted, but with a black arrow? Even a single arrow gives me more hope than I had before.”

“But it is not just the arrow.” Tauriel spoke up then, some of the hope fading from her face. “Even a black arrow needs the power of a Dwarven wind lance to find its mark. Perhaps one survives in Erebor?”

“There’s one here.” Sigrid spoke up, drawing all eyes to her once more. She glanced at Bain, who was nodding eagerly. “In the middle of town, atop the tallest tower of the Master’s house.”

Two Dwarves and an Elf stared at one another, a single thought passing unspoken between them.

_We have a chance._
Bilbo blamed his Took blood for getting him into this mess. It was the only explanation for a respectable Baggins leaving the Shire in the company of fifteen Dwarves and a Wizard on a mad quest to reclaim a Mountain from a fire breathing dragon. Only, now that it came down to it, the Wizard was gone who-knows-where doing who-knows-what, and the Dwarves were waiting on the doorstep while he, Bilbo Baggins, crept alone down the endless paths of Erebor toward the dragon's hoard. Balin had been with him for the first few turns, of course. The elder Dwarf had pointed out the clever signposts that were incorporated into the intricate carvings on the walls, guiding the way to the public areas of the Mountain. Once the burglar could pick out the pattern for the Great Hall, Balin had nodded and bid him farewell.

“From there, you'll be able to find him, I'm sure,” the white-haired councilor stated quietly, concern on his lined face. “The treasury is quite nearby, and I would imagine that the beast will be difficult to miss. Just...if the dragon *is* alive...try not to wake it.”

Bilbo nodded, staring down the dark corridor ahead. “How will I know the Arkenstone?” he asked, a bit desperately. “Fíli said it was a glowing white gem? How does it glow?”

Balin shook his head. “No one knows, laddie, but you will recognize it when you see it. There is no gem like it, save in legend.” He stopped, meeting Bilbo's anxious gaze. Finally, he sighed and rested one hand on the Hobbit's shoulder. “You do not have to do this, Bilbo.” Bilbo opened his mouth to argue and was waved to silence. “I know, you signed a contract, but this – this is beyond what anyone should expect of a burglar, much less a friend. You have already saved this Company twice over.”

Bilbo gave a weak chuckle. “With the mood that Thorin is in, do you think that wise? He is set on that Stone, Balin.”

His friend grimaced. “That he is, and that is one reason that I hesitate to send you for it. I do not like or trust this fixation that has been growing in him of late. Still, I will handle Thorin if I must. This is *your* decision, Bilbo.”

The Hobbit stared at him, his mind working furiously. He blamed his Took blood for initially running out of the door of his *smial*, but hadn't he been given opportunities to turn back? Elrond had offered to let him stay in Rivendell, and he had almost left just before the debacle with the Goblins in the Misty Mountains. Once he had found the ring – that strange, magical ring that grew heavier in his pocket with every mile – could he not have made his way back alone? Instead, he had stepped forward and promised Thorin his aid. Beorn would probably have let him stay, if asked, and had he not considered abandoning the Company in Mirkwood? Rivendell, Goblin Town, Beorn's, Mirkwood – the entire journey had been a series of opportunities for the Baggins blood to reassert its good sense and turn him toward home – opportunities that had gone unheeded or rejected. The words that he had spoken to the entire Company after Goblin Town echoed in his memory and he smiled gently at his companion.

“Then, if you leave it up to me, I will go forward.” He kept his voice firm, ignoring the little frisson of fear that curled up his spine. “I said I would do it, and I must at least try. I did not journey halfway across Middle Earth to turn my back on my friends with their goal, their *home*, nearly within reach.”

For the second time that evening, he watched Balin's eyes fill with tears.
“Gandalf assured us that Hobbits were made of sturdier stuff than they looked.” The Dwarf’s grip on the burglar’s shoulder tightened briefly before it dropped away. “But I am not certain that even he realized the depth of strength in you, Master Baggins. He will not recognize you when this is over.”

Bilbo mustered a final smile as he turned away. “Let us hope that it is not because there is little left of me to identify,” he muttered half to himself. Balin laughed, his final words drifting after the Hobbit on the breath of a whisper.

“Mukhuh bekhazu Mahal tamrakhi astû, bâha-ê.”

And so Bilbo was alone, creeping invisible on silent feet through a vast kingdom of ghosts, until finally he stood in a doorway and gazed into the Great Treasury of Erebor. It had been easy to find, once he had reached the Great Hall, for the gold shone even in the darkness of the Dwarf kingdom. It seemed lit by an eerie red-gold glow that came from the depths of the massive chamber, a glow like, and yet unlike, the flicker of flames.

*It is the fire of the dragon,* some buried instinct in the Hobbit's mind spoke up, sending ice through his veins. *Such beasts burn so long as they live, and Smaug is alive, indeed. He sleeps, else I would already be a pile of ash.*

Setting the torch aside and playing absently with the golden ring (ignoring the seductive, sibilant whispers that slithered through his mind in the thing’s very presence of late), the little burglar stared at the vast wealth before him, wondering how he would ever find even an enchanted, glowing gem. For the Hoard of Thrór was nothing like he had expected. His family was wealthy, as things were reckoned in the Shire, but Hobbits were not given to accumulating large amounts of gold, and the vast lake of coin and gems that stretched out before him was beyond anything he could have imagined.

The entire floor of the Treasury was covered, nearly to the depth of the landing where he stood. Judging by the regular intervals of the stairs he had so far traversed, that meant that it would be roughly to his waist, if he were able to actually stand on the stone floor, and there were drifts of greater height throughout the chamber. Gold and silver made up the greater part of what lay before him, in the form of coins and statues, with gems scattered here and there like stars in a metallic sky. Even in the dim light, it was breathtaking.

And the source of the fiery glow lay in the very center of the room, a vast, scaled bulk coiled within a nest hollowed from a great mound of the treasure. Smaug slept, the great fires of his belly banked in rest, though smoke streamed from his nostrils with every breath. Bilbo choked back a whimper as he stared at the great beast, hidden from its sight by his own treasure (and when had the ring gotten so very heavy?).

*It is asleep. The dragon sleeps. Never again will you have so clear a chance as this, Bilbo Baggins,* he told himself silently, digging deep for the tiny core of courage that had served him well before. *You have argued with Trolls, riddled with a twisted, gangrel creature in the depths of the Misty Mountains, charged an Orc with only your tiny sword. You have made friends with Dwarves, Elves, Eagles, a Wizard, and a skin-changer, and now the Dwarves need your help. One gem, that is all that they ask. Recover a single, precious jewel from this vast hoard, and they will be able to reclaim their homeland.*

Closing his eyes, he took a deep breath and sent a brief prayer to any of the Valar that might be listening. When he opened his eyes again, there was a steely glint in the burglar’s gaze and a firm
set to his shoulders. Resettling the ring on his finger, he descended the last few steps to the surface of the gold and moved carefully out across the lake of treasure.

He was nearly to the middle when the dragon woke.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Lomilu Zul - Night of Memory, a yearly remembrance of those lost in the Sack of Erebor (Khuzdul)
Khazâd ai-mênu! – The Dwarves are upon you! (Khuzdul, a battle cry)
namadith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
Mukhu bekhazu Mahal tamrakhi astû, bâha-ê – May Mahal's hammer shield you, my friend (Khudzul)
The moon had set, leaving the sky above the Lonely Mountain lit only by the stars, diamonds scattered on the velvet curtain of darkness. Kíli sat on a blanket on the hidden ledge, his arms wrapped loosely about his bent knees as he stared out into the night. Unlike the warm embrace of the sun, or the soothing glow of the moon, the stars had always been remote pinpricks of light, cold and utterly removed from the solid reality of the world around him. Still, he and Fíli had spent long hours as Dwarflings gazing up at them, picking out the patterns and competing to make up new tales to go with the old legends. It had been a comfort through the months of the journey to see that the familiar figures traveled with them, even if they had shifted somewhat from their accustomed places as he moved ever east and north. By this time, the thatār bunūhu had changed their places rather significantly, and it took him a moment to orient himself. He grinned when the first he found was the Mountain Home, a pattern that was rarely visible in Ered Luin, and his eyes darted across the expanse to find the others. The Hunter ran with his faithful Hound, the Hammer hovered above the Anvil, and the Eagle taunted the Great Cat. When he glimpsed the Drake hovering low over the Long Lake, an unpleasant chill crept down his spine, shaking him out of his reverie and making him aware of the sound that had filled the air around him.

Their voices were low, vibrating deep in their chests as the descendents of Durin stood clustered near the door, each with a hand on the stone of the Mountain. Thorin, Balin, Dwalin, Óin, Glóin, and even Dori seemed almost froze in place, heads lowered and eyes closed as if in deep thought. Bifur and his cousins had withdrawn slightly, giving the returned Exiles a respectful distance, while Nori and Ori watched closely with a mix of awe and confusion. Fíli alone paid no mind, lost in his own thoughts as he gazed out over the lake toward Esgaroth. Signing a quick question to Nori, Kíli got a reply that brought him to his feet, reaching for his brother's shoulder.

“Fí?”

The golden-haired swordsman startled under his hand, Fíli's eyes taking a moment to focus on Kíli's face.

“Kíli? What's wrong?”

The younger prince hesitated, then shrugged slightly.
“I don’t think anything is wrong, really, but I do not know what is happening....” His explanation trailed off and he stepped back so his brother could see their kin, offering a hand as Fíli scrambled to his feet.

“Are they bespelled?”

Nori was shaking his head sharply, making calming motions toward the princes, and Kíli gave the thief a quick nod of acknowledgment as he caught Fíli’s arm.

“Easy, Fí. Hold a moment. Nori says all is well. He says that the Mountain is welcoming them home.”

The brothers exchanged a glance, remembering childhood tales from their mother, and how Thorin had leaned into contact with the Mountain after opening the hidden door. Fíli’s brow furrowed as he watched their cousins and uncle, his eyes suddenly widening in recognition.

“The Song.” His voice was barely a whisper. “They’re humming the Song of the Mountain.”

The deep tones and steady rhythms were unmistakable, resonating in the younger Dwarves' very bones. Blue eyes met brown and thoughts flew between the two without word or gesture as they turned as one, stripping off their gloves to reach out, putting flesh to stone.

The skin of the Mountain was cool under Kíli’s hand, thrumming with an energy that seemed to pulse like a heartbeat, a fleeting warm wash of sensation that was recognition and welcome. He heard Fíli hiss with surprise, saw the hand next to his flatten against the stone as a strong sense of “home” swept over him. He turned to his brother, only to find the golden prince already gazing at him, his eyes slightly unfocused.

“Do you feel it, Kí?”

Kíli nodded and turned back to stare at the stone in wonder. “It's like....”

“Like the Mountain is welcoming us home,” Fíli murmured. “Like Amad’s tales. D’you remember? She used to say that Erebor always greeted the heirs of Durin.”

The archer was trying desperately to calm his thoughts, his mind a whirlwind of memory and emotion.

“I always thought it was just a story that her brothers had told her,” he whispered. “Or something she imagined. She was little more than a child when the dragon came.”

“So did I, but this is real, nadadith.”

Kíli closed his eyes, savoring the waves of belonging that swept through him. When he opened them again, he smiled at his brother. “This is home. Our home. I never truly believed it, never felt it, until now. I wanted to help with the quest, to regain our people’s homeland, for Amad, and Thorin, and the rest of the Exiles. But this...I never expected this.”

Fíli was still, a look of deep concentration on his face as he focused on the impressions he was receiving from the stone. “She has been so alone.” His voice was a whisper as he brought his other palm to the surface almost absently. “It is as though she mourns those lost when Smaug came....”

Kíli stared at his brother as tears trickled down Fíli’s face, sorrow for those dead before they were born. The younger prince felt a dim echo of the Mountain's grief, but Fíli seemed awash in it. The archer reached for the swordsman with his free hand, closing it over the nearest wrist. The
sensations swept over him, stronger and more immediate, but the solid presence of the Crown Prince held him steady.

“Fíli?”

“Isn’t it amazing, Kí? Can you feel it?”

Kíli nodded, sorting through the impressions that he was receiving.

“She sings. The Line of Durin is returned, and Erebor sings with joy!” Fíli smiled through his tears, laughing shakily. Kíli grinned, then gasped as new information filled his mind.

“Bilbo has reached the treasury.” He turned to his brother as the elder prince went pale. “Smaug lives.”

A gentle hand on Kíli’s shoulder tugged him out of his communion with the stone and he turned to see Balin shaking his head with a small rueful smile.

“Could not wait, could you, lads?” the elder Dwarf asked rhetorically. “We were going to explain before you jumped in feet first, but no harm done, I suppose. The Mountain was never overly concerned with ceremony – she almost seemed amused with the pomp and solemnity of the Presentations when we were Dwarflings.” He studied them closely for a long moment, then nodded. “So, now you know the secret of the Mountain. She has welcomed you, and you have felt the echoes of her sorrow. So it is always with the Sons of Durin. She will always welcome you home, and she will always be your strength when other sources fail. The Lonely Mountain sings for the Line of Durin.”

“Why now?” Fíli asked. “We touched the stone of the Mountain almost constantly during the climb, why is she only now singing?”

“She is waking, lad,” Balin replied. “She has been asleep all these long years, with no company but Smaug. It did not begin until Thorin opened the door. So it was when Thrór led our folk back from Zelg’ubrazulin the Grey Mountains, after his father and brother fell to the cold drake. My great-grandfather Borin, Thrór’s uncle, wrote that Erebor woke to greet them when the King Under the Mountain opened the Great Gate and returned to his rightful place.” Faded blue eyes turned to Thorin, who had returned to his silent vigil at the hidden door. “And so has the king returned once more.”

* X *

In the depths of the Lonely Mountain, far from the chill breeze and starlit heights, Bilbo trembled under the fiery gaze of the dragon. He still wore his ring, the gold band hiding him from the creature’s sight, but he felt exposed and vulnerable nonetheless. Smaug was massive, awe-inspiring and terrifying, and the Hobbit was not certain that he would ever be able to move. He was frozen with terror as the great head lifted and swung side-to-side, the nostrils flaring with every breath.

“I know you are there, thief.”

Bilbo closed his eyes and stifled a pitiful moan. It spoke. No one had ever warned him that the dragon could speak. The serpent’s voice was a throaty rasp with a hint of a hiss, arrogant and
strangely beguiling.

“Why do you hide? A strange mixture of boldness and timidity, even for a thief. You walk into my home while I am in residence, but you will not show your face? I was aware of you the moment you set foot on my gold, hidden burglar...but then, I was expecting you.”

“Expecting me?”

The Hobbit couldn't help himself – the question tumbled from his lips without conscious thought, ending with an embarrassing squeak. Smaug's head swung toward him and he darted behind a mounded pile of treasure.

“Well, I was expecting Oakenshield.” The dragon's tone was both smug and contemptuous. “But I should have known that the coward would send someone else in to do his dirty work.” The nostrils flared again and a note of puzzlement entered the beast's voice. “What are you, exactly, thief in the shadows? I know the smell of Dwarf, Man, and Elf, but you are none of these. Who, and what, are you, who seeks to enter my home and steal my treasure?”

Bilbo hesitated, his thoughts whirling furiously. The longer he could keep the dragon talking, the longer he could put off being incinerated, but he knew it would be foolish to give his name. This was no mere beast, but a creature of evil cunning and Smaug's knowledge of Thorin's quest was deeply disturbing. He was beginning to feel that Gandalf had not been the only greater power guiding the events of the past few months. The urge to return to his companions with a warning was nearly overpowering.

“I am a race apart,” he replied, the words coming into his head unbidden. “I am the hidden ally, the fly that stings the spider, Riddle-Maker, and Barrel-Rider. My home is under hill, and I have traveled far and faced many dangers to bear witness to the majesty that is Smaug the Terrible. I doubted the tales, you see. Surely they were exaggeration – for no beast, not even a dragon, could possibly be so splendid, so magnificent, so terrifying. I had to see for myself, and so I crossed the wild lands of Middle Earth to do so.”

“And what have you learned, now that you have seen me?” The beast was almost purring, rising to settle on his haunches and stretch proudly. “Do they exaggerate?”

Bilbo gulped, remembering Bofur's cheerily morbid description in Bag End months ago. “In truth, the tales fall utterly short.” It was true, and his heart was sinking as he stared at the dragon's golden underbelly. Like the crimson back of the beast, it was armored with huge, thick scales...save for a small patch of exposed skin near the left foreleg. A scale was missing. The point of vulnerability was small, miniscule on the great beast, but it was something. It was a target.

Smaug settled back into a crouch, his fiery gaze searching the cavern. A twitch of his tail dislodged a small avalanche of gold and jewels. One of them came to rest near the dragon's great claw, and Bilbo nearly gave away his location with a choked gasp, for it glowed.

Fíli had said it was white, but again the description fell short, for the heart of the Arkenstone held every color the Hobbit had ever seen, and some that he had never imagined. It called to him silently, even as something about it repelled him. He had no affinity for metal and jewels, not like his sense of the green growing things in the Shire, but like Mirkwood, the Stone felt sick, twisted, wrong.

This is the great treasure of the Dwarves? Concern and fear were coursing through him, giving a nauseating twist to his stomach. This is what calls Thorin so strongly? His conversation with Balin came to mind, and he remembered the worried look on the old Dwarf's face. This is what Balin
fears, he realized. *He knows that there is something wrong with the Stone, but he also knows that it is needed for Erebor to be reclaimed, and he worries for Thorin.* The dream from Laketown came back full force, bringing the memory of the overheard conversation in Rivendell. *Gandalf meant to be here. He meant to warn Thorin before we entered the Mountain, but he was delayed, and we could not wait. So now it is down to me, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, to serve both king and Wizard. I must retrieve the Arkenstone, but I cannot hand it over to Thorin...not until I understand what it is, what it will do.*

“I feel your gaze, thief in the shadows.”

The dragon's voice startled Bilbo badly, recalling him to his present predicament, and he stumbled backward, slipping on gold as he tried frantically to keep his footing. He finally managed to duck behind a green marble column and stood there for a long moment, catching his breath, before he peeked out again.

Smaug had not moved. He was staring at the Arkenstone, and the Hobbit suddenly realized how expressive the reptilian face could be, for it was suffused with greed as the dragon spoke in a sibilant murmur. *“The Stone calls to him. Almost, I am tempted to let you take it, to stay my vengeance and let you hand it to Oakenshield, just to watch it destroy him.”*

*“Your vengeance?”* the Hobbit countered, thinking quickly. *“Why do you believe that you have the right to vengeance? You took Erebor, slaying those that lived here. You stole the Arkenstone from its rightful owners. What right have you to vengeance?”*

The golden eyes narrowed with fury and the huge nostrils flared as Smaug turned toward the taunting voice. Bilbo was already moving, creeping through the shifting gold as the dragon moved his massive bulk.

“I serve the true master of the Arkenstone!” the beast bellowed, the great fire in his belly roaring to life. *“Long ago, my kind were created by our Dark Lord, and when he was cast into the Void, we submitted to his servant, who then became the master. It was our first master that found the Stone, and it was he who recognized its value and power. It was taken from his servant, hidden in the depths of the earth, until the Dwarves found it once more. And when its voice was freed, when its song called out, I was the first to answer, the first to reclaim it and hold it against the day when he might return.”*

Bilbo was finally moving toward the exit, anxious to get away from the dragon, to feel fresh air on his face and warn his friends that they were woefully out of their depth. He understood little of Smaug's raging, but he was clear on one thing. Something larger was at work here – something far beyond a simple burglar, or even an exiled king.

* X *

Trisk, Viska, and Tauriel had just finished moving the last Orc corpse to the lower level of Bard's home when a distant rumble sent fear coursing through the Dwarrowlass. She turned to stare toward the Lonely Mountain, her hand going automatically to the silver clasp in her pocket. Trisk stiffened next to her as Tauriel let out a string of unfamiliar words that were obviously curses. Sharing a nervous glance, the three unlikely allies hurried back up the stairs into the house, where they found Sigrid ordering her siblings in frantic activity. She glanced up when the Dwarves and Elf came in, her mask of confidence slipping slightly as she kept her voice low.
“It's the dragon, isn't it? He is coming for us.”

Viska hesitated, but Tauriel shook her head.

“It is the dragon, but I do not know what he will do. Perhaps he is simply stirring, rather than fully waking.”

“Best not to take a chance,” Trisk countered grimly. Viska nodded, and Tauriel did the same with a grimace.

“I have Bain and Tilda gathering food and spare clothing,” the girl murmured. “If you will make sure that they get out of Laketown, I will find Da.”

“You'll do no such thing,” Trisk snapped, seizing her arm as she started for the door. “Your father will have heard that, and will be on his way home. He would not want you roaming through town in search of him. He would want you to get your siblings ready to get to safety. Viska and I promised him that we would do whatever we could to protect all three of you, and we can only do that if you stay together.”

Sigrid hesitated, clearly torn between her duty to her siblings and her desire to have her father there to protect them. Tauriel placed a gentle hand on the girl's shoulder and gave it a reassuring squeeze.

“Load your father's boat,” she told her quietly. “Prepare your brother and sister to leave if it is needed. We will keep watch.”

* X *

A rumble from within the Mountain woke Kíli from a patchy doze and sent him lurching to his feet. His brother caught his arm and steadied him, blue gaze fixed on the secret door as the younger lad blinked and looked around.

“What was that?”

Balin shook his head, aged face creased with concern and grief.

“That, my lads, was a dragon.”

“Smaug's awake.” Fíli's voice was a growl, his fist clenching on the hilt of the long knife at his hip. Kíli felt terror leap in his heart as he turned his gaze to the door into the Mountain, half-expecting to see the great lizard on the other side.

“But...where's Bilbo?”

“Still inside,” Óin replied sadly. “The burglar hasn't returned.”

“We have to help him!”

The dark-haired prince had taken three steps toward the door before he even realized that he was moving, dragging an unresisting Fíli at his side. Then Thorin was blocking the way, glowering at them forbiddingly.

“Give him more time.”

The shadowed eyes searched his face. “You're afraid.” Balin flinched under the accusation, then straightened his back. Kíli could only gape at his uncle in disbelief, while his brother watched with narrowed eyes.

“Yes, I am. I fear for you.” Balin's reply was thrown at his king in rare open anger, startling the others. “You are losing yourself, Thorin. I do not know whether it is the Mountain, or the treasure hoard, or the Arkenstone itself, but something has changed you. You grow more like your grandfather every day.”

Fury filled Thorin's face. “I am not my grandfather.”

“Well, you are not yourself!” his old friend countered. “The Thorin I know, my cousin, my king, would never hesitate to-”

“I will not risk this quest for the life of one burglar.”

“Bilbo!” Fíli spoke up then, meeting his uncle's dark look without blinking. “His name is Bilbo, and he has saved your life – all of our lives – again and again since we descended on his home with no warning and little explanation! The least we owe him is to try and help him!”

“This is what he was hired to do. All we owe him is the payment that was promised. If he fulfills his contract.”

“Then stand aside and let others do what you will not!”

Kíli stared at his uncle and brother, toe to toe, neither willing to yield. The fire of their mother's line shone in Fíli's unwavering gaze, his set jaw, every inch the Crown Prince. Around them, the rest of the Company stood frozen, eyes locked on the royal confrontation. And into this silence lurched Bilbo himself, wheezing for air and wild-eyed.

“Smaug is alive,” he gasped out, clutching at the side of the entrance as he wavered on his feet. Thorin whirléd to face him, the dark look never leaving his face.

“Do you have the Stone?”

“Thorin!” Balin protested. “Now is not the time!”

“Now is the perfect time,” the king growled back. “He has obviously disturbed the beast. Has he brought what he was sent for, or has he squandered our one chance to reclaim what is ours?”

Bofur was at Bilbo's side, steadying the Hobbit as Óin pushed a water skin into his hand. Kíli hung back, unsure what to do. He was glad to see Bilbo alive, and upset at his uncle's preoccupation with the Arkenstone, but he did not know how to help. At a loss, he hovered on the edge of the Company, watching Fíli watch Thorin with eyes blue as a forge flame. The burglar gulped some water, then pushed the helping hands aside, shaking his head frantically.

“We can't stay here!” he insisted, shoving Bofur toward the door. “Smaug is awake, and he was expecting us! He is stirring, leaving the Mountain. We cannot stay here!”

Clearly, Fíli had heard enough. When his uncle remained unmoving, the golden-haired prince turned to the others, giving quick orders to move everything inside the door. They obeyed without hesitation, even Dwalin, and Thorin eventually joined the flurry of activity. Within a few minutes, everything was inside the dark passageway. Kíli loitered with his brother near the door, anxiety
bubbling in his stomach until he reached out to the Mountain. He relaxed incrementally as the soothing rhythm of her welcome surged through his bones and distracted himself by sorting through the information that flowed into his mind from the connection.

“The dragon is leaving!”

Dwalin's voice cut through the murmur of the Mountain, pulling the prince back to the present. He stepped away from the stone, turning to the warrior, who stood watch at the door. Thorin was lost in thought, staring down the endless halls, and seemed not to have heard. Kíli blinked, trying to clear his mind, disoriented by the fact that the Arms Master had echoed the last thing that the Mountain had told him.

“Leaving?” Fíli asked blankly. “Smaug is leaving?” Panic flared in his face and he bolted forward, brushing by the big Dwarf and out into the open air of the hidden bay. Kíli followed, sudden dread filling him. A vast winged shape was moving away from the Lonely Mountain, bellowing in anger as it flew. Fíli turned to him with stricken eyes and Kíli's heart lurched.

“Laketown. He flies for Laketown.”

* X *

They had just finished loading the boat when a hoarse, shrieking cry sounded in the distance, startling Tilda into a scream. Trisk swore creatively in Khuzdul, bundling the child onto the boat before she had a chance to resist. Sigrid turned to Viska, taking in the hunting knife that had appeared in the Dwarrowmaid's hand without conscious thought. The lass nodded grimly and jerked her head in the direction of the boat.

“Sigrid, give Trisk the arrow,” she ordered. “Tauriel, take the children and get them out of here. We will find Bard and get him to the wind lance.”

The flame-haired Elf hesitated as Bain protested indignantly. Trisk was already collecting the metal shaft, setting it aside just long enough to hand a trembling Walnut to little Tilda and wrap a blanket around them.

“I can move faster,” Tauriel argued. Viska snorted.

“Perhaps, but Bard knows us.” She offered a small smile. “Please, Tauriel. We promised to help protect them, and this is the best way. If our people woke the beast, it is our duty to try and bring it down.”

The tall Elf-maid stared at her for a long moment, a flicker of unidentifiable emotion crossing her face before she nodded once.

“Very well. May Elbereth and Aulë watch over you. Na lû e-govaned vîn.”

* X *
The world was full of fire and smoke as the two young Dwarves darted through the streets of Laketown, calling for Bard. Smaug had arrived, and the ramshackle hamlet was burning as her people fled in terror. Viska despaird of ever finding the tall Man – how could he hear them over the screams of his neighbors, the crackle of the flames?

“Triskel? Viska? Where are my children?”

They skidded to a halt as the tall bargeman appeared in front of them, his face angry and desperate.

“They are on their way across the lake,” Trisk answered quickly, holding the black arrow out to the Man. “A Captain of the Mirkwood guard is with them, she will protect them with her life.”

Disbelief filled Bard's face as he accepted the arrow. “How did you find this?”

Viska gave small laugh. “Sigrid has always known where it hung,” she replied shortly, deciding that the anxious father did not need to know about the Orcs just yet. One fear at a time. “She said the wind lance was on the top of the Master's house?”

He nodded slowly and Trisk swore again, giving the Man a shove. “Well, don't just stand there! Let's go! That tower won't stand forever with Smaug pouring fire down on the town!”

The dark eyes cleared and determination firmed Bard's jaw as he nodded to them. His gaze lingered on Viska, and his next words were directed to her.

“Go. Get to safety. I will deal with the dragon.”

“Dehersu zirin kall,” Trisk murmured. “That argument is already lost, my friend, and we do not have time. We will all deal with the dragon.”

The door of the Master's house stood open and unguarded, and there was no one in evidence as Bard and the Dwarves slipped inside. A commotion on the lower level made it clear where everyone was, and Trisk sent the Man an inquisitive glance. Bard looked disgusted.

“The treasury is down there, and the Master's private boat. He must be trying to escape with whatever he can carry while the town burns around him.” He was moving as he spoke, leading the way up the first flight of stairs. The siblings followed him, their heavy boots loud on the wooden steps. The fifth flight brought them up against a locked door and Bard backed up to charge it, only to have Trisk brush him out of the way and put all of his weight behind a blow from his foot. The lock burst, the door flying open to let the chill night air pour over their heated faces. They stumbled out onto the top floor of the tower, stepping into a nightmare scene of fire and destruction.

Laketown was burning, and Smaug the Terrible crouched nearby, his weight distributed among several buildings. The crimson and gold scales shone in the light of the deadly fires, and the dragon was purring sadistically to himself.

“Burn in fire, choke on ash. The Men of the Lake, Oakenshield and his companions – all dead, all burning. A night of death in the shadow of the Lonely Mountain.”

“NO!!”

Viska was moving before she knew it, her throat aching with the force of her scream as Trisk lunged for her. He missed, but she came up against the railing of the tower, barely aware that Bard was crouched next to the wind lance, shoving the arrow into place as the dragon turned golden.
eyes on them.

“And who is this?” His head sank between his shoulder blades, serpentine tail twitching like a massive hunting cat. “More Dwarves? And a would-be dragon-slayer, I see. You will learn, as the Lord of Dale learned, that even a black arrow is no match for my scales and hide.”

Bard stood and took his place behind the wind lance, his grim face set and proud. Smaug's eyes widened as he got his first glimpse of the arrow.

“Ah, but the tales tell that not all of Girion's arrows missed,” the bargeman countered. Viska felt a gentle hand on her shoulder and turned tear-filled eyes to her brother's face.

“You still have the Troll-blade?” His voice was a hiss as he kept his gaze on the dragon. Instead of answering, the lass slipped the knife from the sheath in her boot and tucked it into his hand. He nodded and pressed a kiss to her temple, then moved away, the hand holding the knife dangling casually at his side. The Dwarrowmaid stepped to the rail, planting her feet as her brother moved to Bard's other side. The dragon's gaze followed him and Viska growled low in her throat.

“Over here, loathsome worm!” she yelled abruptly. “I am your enemy, if you have slain those I love!”

The massive head swung toward her, and from the corner of her eye, she saw Trisk's arm move in a smooth, overhand throwing motion. A glint of metal sped through the air, striking one of the slit-pupil eyes.

Smaug went mad, fire spilling from his maw as he reared back, shaking his head furiously. The two Dwarves converged on the wind lance as Bard set his aim. The beast's recoil had exposed his chest, and the truth of Girion's claim was there for all to see – an exposed patch of hide on the dragon's breast. Chill fingers closed on hers and she took her brother's hand in a crushing grip as the weapon released, flinging the metal arrow through the air with the speed of thought.

It was almost anticlimactic. The black arrow slammed home, burying itself in the thick hide of the beast's chest, tearing through muscle to the hidden heart. Smaug lurched, his undamaged eye widening in surprise. The fire deep within him roared fierce and hot, and fear surged through Viska as the dragon's head swung down toward them, an inferno boiling behind the razor-sharp teeth. Bard was yelling a warning, and Trisk was shoving her toward the stairs as the very air began to burn around them. Then the tower was collapsing beneath them and the world was swallowed by fire and pain.

* X *

On the shore of the Long Lake, Tauriel watched the dragon fall, taking with it the tower that Sigrid had indicated as the location of the Dwarven wind lance. Fortunately, Sigrid and Bain were busy helping other refugees, the boy giving assistance to those who were struggling in from the water and the girl tending injuries. Tilda was still bundled in the blanket Trisk had wrapped around her, dozing on the ground nearby as Walnut snored in her lap. The Elf-maid shot her a glance, then turned back to the flames that were consuming the remains of the town. She had seen them before the tower fell, three distinct figures running for the stairs as Smaug unleashed his final firestorm. Tauriel watched as the massive bulk of the dragon slipped into the depths of the lake, a tear trickling down her ageless face as she offered a prayer to Elbereth, Lady of the Stars, that the brave
young Dwarves she had known so briefly had not met the same fate.

* X *

High on the side of the Lonely Mountain, the Company stared in horror as Laketown burned. After a single bellow of denial, their golden-haired prince had dropped at the edge of the hidden bay. There he remained, his dark-haired shadow crouched at his side, and no one else dared approach. Instead, they huddled in tight family groups, seeking comfort in the dark hours of the night.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
thatûr bunûhu – patterns of the stars, constellations (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Zeleg'ubrazul – The Golden Stair, a lost citadel in the Grey Mountains where Durin's folk lived for a time after the founding of Erebor. Thrór led his people back to the Lonely Mountain after his father and younger brother fell to a cold drake in the War of the Dwarves and Dragons (Khuzdul)
Na lû e-govaned vîn – Until next we meet (Sindarin)
Dehersu zirin kall - “You are striking cold iron,” a saying much like 'beating a dead horse.' (Khuzdul)
They are twin shadows of grief, silhouetted against the dim, distant glow of the inferno that has engulfed Laketown. Kneeling in the chilled grass, they are of a height – the elder curled around the aching hole in his heart and the younger curled around the elder, trying desperately to hold him back from the edge of despair. They have supported one another their entire lives, stronger together than apart, but this loss is one that the younger cannot truly share. He can mourn beloved companions, but it is not the same. He has no words that can ease the pain, no power that will change the past, and so he simply holds on. He is the only one that has dared approach, the one that will never stand aside. Love is all that he can offer, along with desperate prayers to the Valar, and so he gives both with all of his heart.

“Mahal, Creator, and Kaminzabdûna, Giver of Grains – guide us and help us to endure.

“Usahu, Lord of Waters – protect them from the firestorm.

“Kidzulzanât, Valiant Warrior, and Asranulmadtûna, Dancing Heart – let not his joy turn to ashes.

“Udmas, Lord of the Dead, and Bebanuknar, Ever-Weaving – take them not to your halls, but continue to weave them into the Great Tapestry.

“Sulladad, Father of All – bring them home, that they may play their part in Your great design.

“Manakhkhashûna, Lady of Sorrow – if they must be lost, grant us your counsel in turning sorrow to strength, grief to wisdom.”

* X *

In the dim hours before dawn, Tauriel stood guard for the dejected and weary survivors of Laketown, watching over them as they found what sleep they could before sunrise. Close by, huddled together by their father’s boat beneath the few blankets that they had kept for themselves, her three charges wandered in dreams. Even in sleep, a small frown often flickered across Sigrid’s face, while Bain moved restlessly and reached out often to reassure himself that his sisters were
close. There had been no sign of the dragon slayers after Smaug's fall, no word of the children's missing father or the Dwarf siblings. It had taken the combined efforts of Tauriel and Sigrid to convince Bain to suspend his search until morning, and there had been a fire in the young Woman's eyes that told the Elf that the boy would not be alone. Still, they had settled in next to little Tilda, whose tear-blotched face had finally relaxed into an innocent, exhausted sleep. Watching them, so very young, made Tauriel's heart ache with worry for her missing friends.

She did not know when she had started to regard the two young Dwarves as friends. She barely knew them, after all. She had been their jailer, their pursuer, and finally a comrade-in-arms, but she did not truly know them. Not as she knew Legolas, or Suilrien, both of whom had been dear companions over several centuries. She thought, perhaps, that it had something to do with what she had told the prince on the bank of the Forest River – the way their very mortality seemed to make them burn brighter even as darkness crept through the world. Rather than closing themselves away, like her own people, they had set out to push the shadows back. They had risked everything, and she very much feared that the price had been their lives.

“Who brought down the dragon?”

She did not turn at the quiet question – she had sensed the prince's arrival long before he spoke – but waited for him to move to her side before she nodded briefly to the sleeping children of Men.

“Their father, and the two young Dwarves. These children are the descendents of Girion, King of Dale, and their family had protected the last of his black arrows through the intervening years. The Dwarves asked me to get the young ones to safety while they found the Man and helped him get to the wind lance on the highest tower in Esgaroth.” She paused, her gaze now on the smoldering ruin of the town. “I saw them there, watched as they confronted and slew the beast. He took the tower in his death throes and there has been no sign of any of them since.”

She felt rather than saw the answering nod, but then the crunch of a footstep had her moving to confront whatever new threat approached. Legolas, too, turned, nocking an arrow as she drew her knives. A weary Man staggered toward them, wrapped in a blanket and cradling his left arm close to his side as he limped along the lake shore. He was damp and shivering, posing little threat to the two armed Elves, but Tauriel stepped in front of the children and challenged him in a low voice.

“Who are you? What do you seek?”

He halted, tucking the blanket into place and holding out his hands in a gesture of peace. His dark eyes were anxious as he answered quietly.

“I am Bard of Laketown, and I seek my children, Lady Elf. I was told they escaped the fires in the company of a Captain of the Mirkwood guard. Are you she?”

Before she could answer, a small, sleepy voice spoke up.

“Da?”

“Tilda!”

Tauriel sheathed her knives with a nod to her companion, stepping aside as the Man lurched forward. All of his attention was on the three youngsters stirring beneath the blankets, and he did not notice as Legolas lowered his bow and the two Eldar backed away to allow the family some privacy. Bard gathered the children into his arms, trying to hug all of them at once, as Bain pounded joyfully on his back and Tilda sobbed into her father's shoulder and Sigrid smiled through her own quiet tears. Walnut bounded at their feet, yapping excitedly, until Tauriel scooped the
furry little creature into her own arms and soothed her with quiet words and gentle scratches. After a few minutes of the muffled reunion, she glanced up at the sound of her own name.

“Da, this is Tauriel.” Sigrid stepped aside to wave the Elf forward, and Tauriel nodded graciously as she handed the little dog to Tilda. Bard surprised her by offering a low bow as his daughter continued. “She helped save us from the Orcs, then made sure that we got out of Laketown when the dragon came.”

“I owe you a great debt, Lady Tauriel.” The Man straightened abruptly as Sigrid's words sank in and he turned to stare at the girl. “Wait...Orcs?”

“Where are they?” Bain broke in before anyone could answer the clear question, the boy glancing behind his father as though expecting to find hitherto unnoticed companions. “Where are Trisk and Viska? Didn't they find you? I thought they must have brought you the black arrow.”

The Elf maid saw the flinch at the young Dwarves' names, though he tried to conceal it, and her heart sank as Bard shook his head. His arm tightened around Tilda's shoulders as she stared at him, wide-eyed, and his face was full of grief.

“They brought me the arrow, aye, and we climbed the tower to the wind lance. Viska distracted the beast, and Trisk was able to blind it in one eye and give me the shot that I needed. But the fire was everywhere, and after the tower fell...I could not find them....”

Sigrid gasped, her hands flying up to cover her mouth, and Bain's already pale face was ghostly in the dim light of the fading fires. Tauriel closed her eyes for a bare moment, allowing the sorrow to well within her before suppressing it once more. The danger had not ended with the death of the dragon, and Legolas had followed the retreating Orcs for a reason.

“This is Legolas Thranduilion,” she offered, indicating her companion. “He speaks for my king. He helped kill the Orcs that made their way into Laketown, then pursued those that escaped. He has word of their movements.”

Legolas shot her a quick glance, but did not argue, simply nodding gravely as the Man turned to him.

“I recognized their leader, a massive, pale Orc. It was Bolg, spawn of Azog the Defiler. They are from Gundabad, the great Orc fortress at the northern end of the Misty Mountains, and they fled in that direction. I fear that they may be seeking reinforcements. Azog has a great feud with the Dwarves of Durin’s line, Oakenshield chief among them.” He glanced at Tauriel, a question in his brilliant blue eyes. “I would ride north when the sun rises. We must know what passes at Gundabad.”

She hesitated a moment, but nodded, turning to gaze once more out at the surface of the lake.

“When the sun rises.”

* X *

Fíli could not speak, could not breathe. His unseeing eyes were fixed on the distant glow of the inferno that had swallowed his world. Viska's name was an endless litany of loss in his agonized mind, but his body was stone, silent and unmoving. A small part of him thought (hoped) that such
was Mahal's punishment for his failure – a return to the element from which he was crafted. If so, he welcomed it.

“Fíli...nadad, isbir-e. Fíli, innikh dê. Kasamhili, nadad, isbir-e. Fíli, kasamhili...kasamhili.... Innikh dê.”

The words came from an unfathomable distance, seeping into his conscious mind and bringing with them a painful awareness of the world. Kíli was at his side, both arms wrapped tightly around broad shoulders, face buried in golden hair as he pleaded for a reply and tears tracked down his face. As he had once before, Fíli followed the sound of his brother's voice and came back to himself slowly, gradually realizing that he was not stone. But oh, how he wished he was, for surely stone could not suffer as he did! Were he stone, he would not feel as though his heart had been wrenched from his chest. Were he stone, his very spirit would not be bleeding from the gaping wound where his soul was torn asunder. Alas, he was not stone, but flesh – warm, and alive, and in so much pain. He was on his knees, the uneven ground bruising through his trousers, hands clenched in front him so the knuckles were bloodless. His throat was on fire, and when he tried to speak, all that emerged was a hoarse whisper.

“Kf?”

The younger prince gasped with relief and his grip tightened as he continued to speak quietly.

“I'm here, Fíli. I'm here, my brother. We will go to Laketown and find her, I promise. Do not give up hope. She could have fled.”

“How could they? How much warning could they have had?”

Glóin's gruff voice was nearly unrecognizable, a deep grief threading through it rather than his habitual smug pessimism. Someone else hushed the burly merchant as Bilbo moved to Fíli's other side.

“We have to help them.” The Hobbit's face was stricken and sorrowful as he turned anxious eyes to the princes. “We brought this on them – we must help!”

“The dragon is dead. Erebor is ours. It is time to find the Arkenstone.”

Thorin's gruff voice cut through the murmurs of agreement, halting the Dwarves in their tracks. With his brother's aid, the elder prince got to his feet, turning to see that the king still stood in the threshold of the secret door, dismissing the distant fire with a contemptuous glance. Kíli stepped forward, a protest on his lips and disbelief in his dark eyes.

“The people of Laketown need our help!”

“And why should we care about a town of Men? We came to reclaim the Arkenstone, and now our path is clear to do so.”

Fíli felt his jaw clench as he narrowed his eyes at his uncle, a simmering rage beginning to build deep in his heart at the older Dwarf's disdainful attitude. Before he could speak, however, Balin was stepping forward, his expression carefully neutral.

“We came to reclaim our homeland. The Arkenstone was only ever a means to that end, a necessary tool to unite the armies of the Seven against the dragon.”

“Which is now dead, thanks to the Lakemen!”
Thorin raised a brow at Bilbo's angry interjection, a sneer twitching at the corner of his mouth.

"Perhaps, perhaps not. We do not truly know what happened to the beast. Perhaps the ancient creature's heart gave out. Perhaps he had gotten so slow and fat, sleeping long years on stolen gold – our gold – that his wings could no longer hold him aloft. All that we know is that he is dead, and Erebor is ours once more. The Arkenstone lies within, and I will see it restored to its rightful owner!"

"We promised them a new age of prosperity, not this – not fire and death while we stood by and did nothing."

Balin's voice was quiet, but he did not look away when Thorin fixed him with that dark glower.

"We did not bring this on them. Master Baggins is the one that woke the dragon, though it appears that he failed to complete the task that he was set, for he has not produced the Arkenstone. If you have a grievance regarding what has befallen Laketown, I suggest you look to our burglar for redress." Thorin paused, and Fíli was unsurprised to find that the steely gaze had fallen on him. "I would have my heirs by my side when I enter the Mountain as king."

Pain and anger flaring to life, the swordsman opened his mouth to argue, only to see Dwalin give a tiny shake of his head, dark eyes flicking over Fíli's shoulder. A moment later, Balin was muttering a warning from the corner of his mouth and urging the two princes forward gently.

"Go with him, laddie. We'll send someone to Laketown, just do not unsettle him any more than he already is."

Dís's elder son stared into his uncle's eyes, disturbed by the shadow that lurked there, and finally nodded. He stepped toward the door, gripping Kíli's arm tightly to warn his brother against arguing.

"We will be at your side, Thorin. Come, Kíli. Our place is by our king. I have already failed my One. I will not fail my people as well."

* X *

Bombur, son of Furbur, watched in silent sorrow as Fíli and Kíli approached their uncle, weighed down by the demanding darkness in Thorin's gaze. To see them so beaten, bowed by grief that they were not permitted to express, wrenched at his soul. It was more than the crumbling of the brothers' joyous spirits – it was the way that Fíli's perpetual swagger was gone, replaced by slumped shoulders and slightly dragging feet. It was the way that Kíli almost seemed to be supporting the elder prince, and the mussed golden braids hanging in the swordsman's face. The lad glanced back once, and the desolation in the blue eyes bore no resemblance to the spirit that he had shown over the past months, up to the moments before the dragon emerged from the Mountain.

It was a look that Bombur recognized. He had seen it in his mother's eyes after his father's death, in the eyes of the Lady Dís after the loss of her beloved Torvi. He had seen a hint of it in his own, once, when Eira had struggled so with the birth of their third child and he had feared that he might lose her. He had even glimpsed it in his wife's the day that he had left for the Shire, a brief flash of pain and loss that she had quickly hidden behind a supportive smile. It was a look that could not be
mistaken, not by one who had seen it before, and it only confirmed what he had suspected since the
day the Fíli had stood on the bank of the river and defended his decision to bring the lass and her
brother out of the Mirkwood dungeons against the orders of his king.

Glancing around for his brother, he found Bofur already in muttered conversation with Balin as
quick signs were exchanged with Bifur. Bombr smiled. Clearly, his brother and cousin were
already making their own plans. A moment later, as the king and princes disappeared into the
torch-lit glow of the secret passage, the miner shouldered his mattock and stepped to the large
Dwarf's side.

“We're going—”

“...To the lake.” Bombr finished the sentence for him, reaching out to grip his brother's shoulder
tightly. “Find them, nadad. Losing that lass will devastate our prince. Thorin will regret his actions,
in time – make sure that they are here when he does. I'll keep an eye on the lads, and our burglar.
And our king, for whatever good it might do.”

Bofur nodded, returning the shoulder clasp and offering him a smile of gratitude that nearly
reached his eyes. Then he turned away, heading for the secret track that would take him to the base
of the Mountain. Behind the miner's back, Bombr exchanged several quick signs with their
cousin, nodding his thanks at Bifur's response. The toymaker and the tinker were the only ones
who knew of his loss, for Bofur and his One had never even had the chance to exchange courting
beads. She had been a crafter, invested in her work, and it had taken him long months to gain her
attention, only to lose her when the Crafting Halls were buried in a landslide only days after she
first wove Mababnužanâtu Sanzadkh into her hair. Bofur had grieved quietly, only sharing his loss
with his family. It had taken nearly ten years for him to tell the lass's surviving family, only to
learn that her brother not only known, but had kept one of her beads to give him when he was ready
to acknowledge his loss. Bofur still wore it, worked into a braid that was hidden beneath his
oversized hat.

Bifur and Bombr had never even considered standing aside when Thorin asked for their support in
the quest for Erebor. They were not Exiles, but they were descended of Durin's Folk, those who
had fled Khazâd-dûm so long ago, and they were loyal to the king who had taken them in when
their own settlement was destroyed. For Bofur, however, it had been a bit more. He had the same
allegiance to Durin's line, but he also felt a strong sense of responsibility for the two princes that
should have been his nephews.

Yes, Bombr had recognized the look in Fíli's eyes as the young Dwarrow wrestled with the
possible (probable) loss of his One. After all, he had seen it in Bofur's eyes eighty-seven years past,
when his brother lost his own One – Gyda, daughter of Khervi and sister to Torvi.

* X *

He follows blindly, allowing his brother to guide him through the stone halls. His hand brushes
marble and he snatches it back, unwilling to accept the comfort of the Mountain. He does not
deserve it. He deserves to feel as he does now, full of guilt and shame. He has failed, and he has
lost his One, and he will never be the same.
Dunstan, Guard of Esgaroth, paced the shore of the lake, staring out at the remains of his home. He was one of the few who had not joined the Master in his frantic looting of the treasury, choosing instead to aid those that he could before finally toppling into a boat with the last of his strength. Fíli and Kíli might have recognized him, for he was the kind-faced young man that had led them to the house they had used during their stay. For his part, he had found the Dwarves courteous, if a bit gruff, and had watched curiously as several of them had spent their days among the people of the town. Something told him that they, too, saw the subtle undercurrents, the building unrest, the small acts of rebellion against the Master. Acts that he glimpsed from the corner of his eye and quietly ignored, hoping that they would lead to definitive action to remove the petty, grasping despot from his seat of power.

Now, that would never happen. He did not know if the Master had even escaped the destruction, for he had seen no sign of him or any of the most loyal guards from the time the dragon descended on Laketown. Dunstan had not seen the dragon fall – he had been busy helping his neighbors into boats and shoving them out into the lake. When the tower had collapsed, he had been making for the last visible boat, anxious to escape while there was still time. Steps from safety, he had tripped over two short, still forms, and his breath had caught in his chest, fearing that he had found children that would not see another dawn. Then one of the forms had moved, and he had realized that they were not children at all, but Dwarves.

Fíli and Kíli had grown up on tales of the Lonely Mountain, the great realm of Erebor where their great-grandfather Thrór had reigned as King Under the Mountain. As small Dwarflings, they had thrilled to the descriptions of the walls of green marble, carved and polished til they gleamed; the great mines and forges whence came the jewels and gold of the great treasury; the treasury itself, a vast room filled with gems, coins, and works of gold unparalleled. Only short hours ago, they had been filled with triumphant anticipation as they watched the secret door open beneath their uncle's hand.

But now that he was here, now that the Mountain was won and he stood in the Great Treasury, Fíli could not summon even the memory of that long-ago excitement. The light of the torches reflected off of thousands of surfaces – gleaming gold, shining silver, glinting gems. The vast hoard was beyond what even the expansive imagination of a Dwarfling could have conjured, but it held no draw for the heir of Durin, by rights Crown Prince and next in line for the throne of Erebor. The journey was done, the quest accomplished, dragon slain, and home reclaimed, but Fíli, son of Dís, daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór, did not care. He felt no pride, no joy, no sense of accomplishment. All he felt was empty, an unfilled mold rather than a Dwarf hewn from stone, for he had already lost a greater treasure than what lay before him, one that could never be reclaimed or replaced.

He walked beside his uncle because Thorin demanded it, but he took no pleasure in the sight of his great-grandfather's excess. He kept pace with his brother because Kíli kept a warm hand on his arm, but he was numb to the steady stream of murmurs that poured into his ear, meant to comfort and calm, pitched too low to distract their uncle's attention from the vast hoard before him. Greedy joy suffused Thorin's face so that Fíli could not meet his gaze – there was too much there of the
uncle he remembered, and yet not enough. It was like seeing a nightmarish, twisted version of the Dwarf who had helped raise and train him after his father's death.

Finally, Thorin stopped, and his nephews stopped with him, huddled together rather than flanking him as was their usual practice. He did not appear to notice. His eyes, usually the blue of a summer's evening, held a glint of darkness and ice crept into his deep voice.

“Behold the wealth of Thrór, King Under the Mountain! Look at last on the Kingdom of Erebor, your birthright and home! Is she not magnificent?”

It took a long moment of silence and a dangerous tilt to Thorin's head before the lads realized that his question had not been rhetorical.

Kíli answered for them both, his voice low and dull. “It is beautiful.”

Thorin continued to stare at them and Kíli spoke again, sounding like he was trying to muster more enthusiasm. “It is amazing, Uncle. Overwhelming, even. Right, Fí?”

With great effort, Fíli met his brother's desperate gaze and summoned a halfhearted smile to his face. “Yes, *nadadith*. Truly wondrous. And safely yours now, Uncle. Erebor is reclaimed.”

Thorin's brow darkened abruptly and Fíli wondered what he had said wrong. But his uncle turned to gaze pensively out over the glittering piles.

“Reclaimed, yes, but still I lack the Arkenstone. It must be here, somewhere. We will search until it is found, all of the Company. Only then will the throne be safely mine, and later yours, Nephew. Balin!”

“Aye, Thorin.”

The elder Dwarf had been following along behind them and now he stepped to his cousin's side, Dwalin at his shoulder. Fíli caught both of his old teachers casting worried looks his way and he made an effort to straighten his stance just a little, enough to hopefully ease their concern.

“Set everyone to searching!” the king ordered shortly, not even glancing at his lifelong friends. “We must find the Arkenstone as soon as possible.”

Dwalin frowned and Balin cleared his throat awkwardly. “Might it not be best to let everyone get a bit of sleep? It has been a long night, and a longer day before the sun set. Let them get a few hours of rest and start fresh in the morning.”

Thorin looked displeased, but finally gave a dismissive nod. “A few hours, no more. I expect everyone back in the treasury at first light, save a sentry at the front gate. The Arkenstone is the most important thing now.”

Balin nodded without comment and turned to usher the rest of the Company off to find a place to rest. Fíli and Kíli turned to join them.

“Even you, my nephews? You would sleep, rather than seek your birthright?”

Kíli's hand tightened on his arm and Fíli sighed, turning back. “By your leave, Uncle, yes. We would sleep. As Balin said, it has been a long night and day, and we have lost two dear friends in Laketown. A little sleep to clear our heads will make for a more thorough search come morning.”

“Wherever the stone is, it will still be there at dawn, unless you find it before then,” Kíli added
with a weary smile.

Fíli did not recognize the expression that flickered across Thorin's face then, but it looked very much like suspicion and distrust, and it started a low churning in his gut. He increased his pace slightly, anxious to get his brother out of the room. Something was very wrong – he could almost smell the sickness in the air, a miasma of greed that clung to his mother's brother like a noxious cloud. Any comment, especially one of Kíli's flippant remarks, might set off an avalanche of consequences that they were not prepared to face.

* X *

Her face was raw and pink with the memory of the heat of dragonfire, her eyes gritty and dry from smoke and exhaustion. Viska stood on the shore of the Long Lake in the first glimmers of dawn, gazing out over the smoldering wreckage of the town of Men, though she did not see it. Her eyes were fixed on the Lonely Mountain, a towering shape against the fading stars. Three days ago, she had watched her dearest friends depart for the Mountain, hoping to slip in and out again under the nose of a sleeping dragon. But now that dragon lay dead at the bottom of the lake, having taken Esgaroth and many of its inhabitants with him, and she did not know the fate of the Company. Thorin, Bilbo, Kíli, Fíli...the thought of any or all of them dead and lost tore at her heart and cast her into the horror only a few hours past....

* X *

The world smells of smoke, and fear, and burning leathers as the Dwarrowmaid claws her way back to consciousness. Her ears are filled with screams and the crackling roar of flames, but the closest sound is faint and chilling – a choking, hitching breath, and a soft gasp in a voice as familiar as her own. Panic surges through her as she realizes that she is trapped, pinned to the moisture-warped wood of the walkway, a heavy burden preventing her from sitting up. The weight on top of her moves, shifting slightly, and suddenly she is free, gasping and trying to fill her lungs with precious air, no matter the acrid bite in her throat. Her fingers are scrabbling against worn leather and warm metal buckles, gripping the edges of the coat that covers the still figure next to her, the fire's merciless glow painting the scene in hellish shades of red and gold. Here, then, is the burden that held her down, the shield that protected her from the dragon's final fiery exhalation, and the heat from the inferno is drying her tears even as they fall. She is keening, unable to draw breath for the cry that is building in her heart, her very soul, eyes searching the beloved face for any sign of hope. She is on her knees, trying to pull him to her, but her fingers on his back find crisped flesh, then dry muscle, and finally the smooth expanse of exposed bone, and a breathless scream slips from his lips. She snatches her hand away and reaches instead for the front of his coat, bringing her forehead against his as she smooths back the auburn hair and murmurs to him, begs, her voice hoarse and broken.

“Lu’...nê ignig! Kasamhili, Trisk, nê ignig!”

Udmas cannot have him. He cannot have her brother. He has already taken her father, the grandparents and mother that she never knew, possibly her One and the entire Company. He cannot take her brother, her strength!

There is a movement beside her and a large, strong hand clasps her shoulder as a tall Man kneels at her side. She spares him only the briefest of glances, for the look on his face is grim and she will not allow herself to accept what she can clearly see. It is the young Guardsman from their first
night in Laketown and the truth is in his kind brown eyes, and in Triskel's pain-glazed hazel, but she closes her own and shakes her head furiously, shouting at the Man in Khuzdul when he tries to pull her to her feet. Trisk's hands are on hers and he tightens his grip for a moment, fixing his eyes on her face as his lips move soundlessly. She leans in once more, but cannot keep from protesting softly when he finally manages to speak. There is no strength in his voice, only love.

“Go, namadith. Find the others, if they live. If not, carry the letter to Ered Luin. Dís waits for her sons and brother. Do not let her spend her life waiting for word from those who will not return. Be her comfort, and she will be yours.”

One hand grasps weakly at the front edge of his coat and she brushes it gently aside to reach into the inner pocket and retrieve Thorin's letter, safe in its treated waterproof pouch. She tucks it away before she takes his hand for the last time, lifting it in both of hers and pressing it to her lips. His eyes are already staring past her, to the Halls of Waiting, but he manages a slight smile and his fingers tighten on hers briefly.

“’Aimugalikh, namadith. Birashagammi.”

And then he is gone, and the Guardsman is prying her hands away and pulling her to her feet. The fire is closer now, and she can feel the heat scorching her face, her hands. She wants to stop the Man, to tell him that they must bring Trisk with them – he is a Dwarf, and should be returned to the stone, not left to burn in the pyre that once was Esgaroth – but there is no time. The flames are spreading and the damage done by Smaug's fall will soon ensure the collapse of what remains of the town. They must get to shore, find the survivors, and salvage what they can from this night of fire.

A gentle hand on her shoulder brought her back to herself, and the Dwarrowllass looked up into leaf-green eyes so like her own. There was such a depth of sympathy in them that she wondered how she could ever have thought the Elven Captain stoic and unfeeling. She managed a weak smile for Tauriel, glancing past her to where Bard was speaking with Dunstan and the other survivors about tending the wounded and gathering what they could from the remains of the town. The Elf maid's eyes flickered toward the Men, then over to the tall figure that stood apart, golden hair catching the first glow of the morning light.

“You are leaving?” It was more statement than question, and Viska could feel her heart sinking. Tauriel nodded apologetically.

“My prince has sent word to the king about the dragon, and about the Orcs, but we must ride North. The leader of the Orc pack bore the mark of Gundabad, their ancient fortress, and we must investigate.”

The Dwarf lass grimaced, the mention of the northern fortress causing a flash of ingrained racial hatred to surge through her. Shaking her head, she gave the Elf a low bow, her hand pressed to her heart in sincere appreciation for all that Tauriel had done. “Valar protect you, Tauriel of the Woodland Realm. May we meet again.”

The Elf maid glanced only briefly at the waiting prince, then met Viska's eyes seriously. “I would not leave you here alone, bereft of kith and kin,” she stated. “I can seek permission to take you to the Iron Hills, if you like.”

The Dwarf lass shook her head, her grief-darkened gaze fixed on the looming Mountain. “No, Erebor is my home, as it was my father's. We came to help reclaim and rebuild it.”
“And if your people are dead? Or Oakenshield will not let you stay?”

“Then I will find another home,” Viska replied grimly. “But I must try.”

Tauriel smiled slightly. “Dwarves are indeed stubborn as stone,” she commented. The lass shrugged.

“We are as we were created. We endure.”

“At the least, I would offer you transport to the Mountain, so you need not walk alone. There may still be Orcs in the area.”

Viska nodded. “That offer, I will accept, if your prince will permit it.”

Chapter End Notes

As always, Khuzdul is sourced from The Dwarrow Scholar (although I am aware of some errors that I am leaving alone for continuity's sake), and all butchering of grammar is mine.

Translations and Notes:
Fíli...nadad, isbir-e. Fíli, innikh dê. Kasamhili, nadad, isbir-e. Fíli, kasamhili...kasamhili...innikh dê. - Fíli...brother, answer me. Fíli, return to me. Please, brother, answer me. Fíli, please...please.... Return to me. (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
Mababnulzanâtu Sanzadkh – Maiden's Braids (Khuzdul, literally braids of the virgin)
nadamith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Lu'...nê ignig! Kasamhili, Trisk, nê ignig! - No...don't go! Please, Trisk, don't go! (Khuzdul)
nadamith – little/younger sister (Khuzdul)
'Aimugalikh, namadith. Birashagammi – Farewell, little sister. I am sorry. (Khuzdul)

Khuzdul names of the Valar invoked by Kíli (sourced from the work of the Dwarrow Scholar):
Mahal – Aulë, Lord of Crafting & Skill, creator of the Dwarves.
Kaminzabdüna (Giver of Grains) – Yavanna, protector of growing things.
Usahu (He Who Pours) – Ulmo, Lord of Waters
Kidzulzanât (He With the Golden Hair) – Tulkas, warrior & gamester, the Valiant
Asranulmadtûna (She With the Dancing Heart) – Vána, the Ever-Young
Udmas (He Who Judges) – Námo, also called Mandos, Keeper of the Houses of the Dead.
Bebanuknar (Lady of the Loom) – Vairë, Weaver of the Tapestry of Time.
Sulladad (Father of All) – Ilúvitar, also called Eru, creator of Arda.
Manakhkhashûna (She Who Continues to Show Sorrow) – Nienna, Lady of Sorrow, councilor of the Halls of Mandos.
Our Hearts Have Yearned

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

27

Our Hearts Have Yearned

The first rays of sunlight creep up the broad lawn before the Great Gate of Erebor, where a silent figure sits on a block of broken stone, restlessly sharpening an already deadly blade. The sound of the whetstone, the repetitive motions – both are soothing to a troubled soul, a mind in turmoil. That much he has learned, watching Bifur at his carving through the years.

Bifur is gone, now – he and Bofur slipped out of the Mountain a few hours ago, after a whispered consultation with Balin. No one has told him where they went, but he knows. He knows, but he does not harbor hope. Hope is a mirage, a denial of the truth. He saw Laketown burning, saw the destruction that the dragon wrought. There will be survivors – Men who fled the firestorm – but he knows his lass. Viska will have run toward the dragon, not away, and Trisk will have been at her side. The siblings showed their nature early in the quest, and every encounter has shown their hearts more clearly. Wargs, Orcs, Goblins, spiders – every enemy faced with selfless courage, and that will not have faltered in the town on the lake. Not when they know that the Company roused the beast, perhaps even believe that their companions have fallen to him already.

He has not slept. Every time he closes his eyes, he sees her – burning in dragonfire, drowning in the icy waters, crushed beneath Smaug's dead bulk, trapped in the crumbling town – and so he spent the hours staring into the deep darkness of the Mountain. At his side, Kili had dozed fitfully, only sinking into true sleep when his hand made contact with stone. For a brief moment, jealousy and anger had surged in the golden prince, bitter bile at the back of his throat. Anger was easy. Reining it in had been difficult, forcing himself to truly look at his brother harder still. The dark shadows under his eyes, the lines of grief on his face – Kili is exhausted, at the end of his strength, and he needs this time to draw on that of the Mountain.

Fili is also weary, but he cannot rest. He cannot close his eyes, cannot seek solace in the Song. He has failed, and she has suffered for it, and there can be no peace for him. Not now. Perhaps not ever. This restlessness drove him out to where he now sits. He cannot see Laketown from here, but he can see the dwindling smoke that rises from it, last wisps of the funeral pyre.

He is drowning. Grief washes over him in waves, wraps his chest in iron bands that force the very air from his lungs. Memories tumble through his mind, and there are not enough. After months of travel, he has so few moments to treasure, so few precious images of the teasing smile and laughing green eyes. Not nearly enough to soothe the long, lonely years that lie ahead. He has not yet reached his first century – in the natural order of things, he has nearly twice as many years ahead as he does behind, and it will be spent alone. He may marry – he will need heirs when he takes the throne – but it will not be for love, for Dwarves love but once.

“Fili, lad.”
The quiet voice at his elbow goes unheeded, but then a gentle hand closes on his, stilling the movement of the whetstone. He glances up, expecting to see Kíli's dark, anxious gaze, but instead finds Bombur and Glóin watching him with compassion. Of all the Company, these two are among the last he would have predicted. Kíli, Balin, Bilbo, even Dwalin, he could imagine, but the quiet tinker and the surly merchant? It is odd to see them together at all, much less at the side of their grieving prince. It takes a moment, but understanding dawns. They alone can truly comprehend the pain in his heart, for they alone have found their Ones. Glóin has his Fla, and Bombur has his Eira, and it is all too easy for them to imagine the loss that Fíli is enduring. A tiny, ungrateful thought rises in the back of his mind, reminding him that they still have their wives and children, even so far apart as they are, but he shoves it away ruthlessly and manages a small nod of acknowledgment. He is not ready to speak of his loss, but he appreciates the wordless offer. Sheathing the knife, and tucking the whetstone away in his pocket, he gets to his feet and turns his back on the smoke rising over the Long Lake.

“Thorin wants us all in the treasury,” Glóin murmurs. “Nori has first watch, but the king wants everyone else searching for the Arkenstone.”

Fíli nods, brushing tangled golden hair back from his face and settling his shoulders to conceal the pain in his heart. He strides toward the Gate, leaving them to fall in behind him. He does not know or care if they can hear him.

“I hope the Stone is worth the price we have paid.”

* X *

“You are determined to do this?”

Viska glanced up at her fire-haired companion. Tauriel was eying the Mountain dubiously as she absently stroked the nose of her mount. Their departure from the survivors' camp had been delayed by the wait for the horses to be be brought from the Woodland stables, but the speed with which the animals moved had made up for the lost time. The Elf prince had spoken no word of complaint regarding the slight detour to delivery the Dwarrowmaid to Erebor, even before she had given a quiet apology for her words in Laketown. He had simply nodded graciously and offered his regrets for her recent grief. He had also shared with her the information that he had gathered after leaving Bard's house that night, explaining that the Gundabad Orcs had been led by none other than Azog's spawn, Bolg. Now, he waited several yards away as his companions exchanged a brief farewell. The Dwarf lass offered Tauriel a sad smile and nodded her head, settling her pack securely on her shoulders.

“I must. Thorin is my king. More than that, Fíli is my One. I must know if they live. Even with Smaug dead, they are still in danger from Azog and Bolg. I must warn them, if nothing else. I will not walk away from my people.” She paused, glancing back at the lake with a grimace before she spoke again. “Bard's folk will need shelter and supplies. Winter is closing in quickly. Perhaps I can prepare the way and convince Thorin to give them temporary space in the Mountain. I must try. We owe them too much to let them freeze and starve on our very doorstep.”

The she-Elf nodded, a small frown on her face. Over the past sleepless hours, Viska had gotten to know the Mirkwood guard slightly, and she regretted that her king's antipathy toward Elves would make it difficult to pursue a friendship.
Assuming he lets me stay.

Shaking off the gloomy thought, she offered her companion a slight bow.

“Thank you, for everything. May we meet again in less...interesting...times.”

With slight smile, Tauriel nodded and vaulted onto the back of her horse, speeding off to catch up to her prince. Viska stood where she was, staring up at the Mountain. She had not let the Elves bring her too close, concerned about provoking a reaction from Thorin, so she still had half a day's walk before she reached the gates. Half a day, at least, before she would know if her friends (if her love) still lived. Taking a deep breath, she gave her pack one last unnecessary adjustment, gripped the hilt of Fíli's hunting knife where it hung at her belt, and started forward, one foot in front of the other.

She made it about four steps.

“Viska? Lass?”

The gentle, genial voice was nearly unrecognizable, choked with emotion as it was. Viska barely had time to look around for the speaker before she was nearly bowled over by a familiar hatted figure.

“Bofur? Oh, thank Mahal!” she gasped, hugging him tightly. When he finally let her go, she staggered a bit and stared around to see his cousin standing nearby, a broad smile on his face as well. “And Bifur!” She lunged over to give her silent friend a hug, and he patted her gently on the shoulder as she stared at each of them in turn. “Fíli? Kíli? Everyone is alive? Unhurt?”

“Aye, lass, when we left they were all sound in body, though rather damaged in spirit.”

“Why? What's happened?”

Bofur stared at her. “We could see Laketown burning.”

Realization broke over her, temporarily burying the deep sorrow in her heart as she understood.

“Oh! Oh, Mahal! They think I'm dead! Fíli thinks I'm dead! I have to get to the Mountain!”

She was already turning to begin the climb once more when she realized that Bifur was signing urgently and Bofur had suddenly stopped and was searching the landscape. “But where's your brother? Where is Trisk?”

The choking grief rose up once more and Viska pushed it down, watching Bofur's face cloud as he read her expression.

“He fell in Laketown.”

“Oh, lass...was it the dragon?”

She nodded, watching the dark eyes fill with tears as she fought her own. “Protecting me,” she told him quietly, unable to stifle the guilt that welled up in her heart. “In Smaug's death throes...Trisk took the fire for me.” She turned away abruptly, only to have them come up to either side, each putting an arm about her shoulders. Bofur's voice was gentle when he spoke.

“Would you have done any different for him, lass? I don't think you would. I would have done the same for Bombur, or my cousin here, or any member of the Company, had it been needful.”
Bifur nodded, pulling his arm away to sign to her, his dark eyes sympathetic.

_Accept his sacrifice with the love in which it was given, daughter of Mahal._

She managed a small smile before sudden memory surged through her.

“The Orcs! I have to warn Thorin!”

“Orcs?”

Viska nodded, already moving, forcing the two older Dwarrow to hurry to catch up. “Azog's Orcs found us in Laketown, before Smaug came. Some of them escaped, and the Elves think they are going for reinforcements. I have to warn Thorin. And I must see Fíli.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Bofur exchange a look with his cousin before he nodded.

“Aye, lass. I don't know that Thorin will listen, but we will take you to him. And I want to see Fíli's face when he sees you, safe and whole.”

For several long minutes, they walked in silence. “What happened up there?” she finally asked.

“You woke Smaug, but everyone escaped unharmed?”

“Well, technically, _Bilbo_ woke Smaug, and I'm still a little unclear as to how he escaped. I hope he'll have a chance to tell us the tale soon.”

Viska smiled. “He will be very self-effacing and modest, if I know our burglar.”

Bofur chuckled. “Aye, most like. So, he woke the beast and escaped, but it was angry, o'course, so it flew 'round the Mountain looking for us. We had gone inside when it flew out, but when we realized that it was flying off toward Laketown, we came out again. We were quite high, halfway up the side, or more.” He pointed vaguely. “We could see the fire on the lake. We saw the dragon fall.” He looked at her inquisitively.

“Bard, the Man that stood up to the Master and argued with Thorin” she answered his unspoken question. “Trisk and I were staying with his family. Apparently, he is descended from Girion, King of Dale. He had a black arrow, and there was a Dwarven wind lance on top of one of the towers. He and his children are safe,” she added, seeing the concern in Bifur's eyes for his young friends.

“Ah. Well, we saw the town burning, and the dragon fall. Fíli...oh, lass, he was a mess, our prince. It took Kíli to bring him back, calling his brother's name, begging him to respond. Bilbo wanted to go back and help the Lakefolk – several of us did. But Thorin...all he saw was the dragon dead and his path clear to the Arkenstone. He demanded the lads accompany him into the Mountain, to search for the stone. Bifur 'n I volunteered to come look for ya.”

“When did you leave them?”

“Wee hours of the mornin', and we hadn't stopped before we found you. We should reach the Mountain by dusk.”

* X *

The King Under the Mountain watched from the shadows as the others began the search for the
Arkenstone. He had not slept, spending the hours of the night in his own search, but it had not yet been found, and so he was forced to trust to their aid, despite the warning screaming in his mind.

\textit{Do not trust them! They would take it for their own! See how Balin watches you when he thinks you do not see? He would claim the jewel, and the kingship!}

They are true to their king, another part argued, smaller and quieter, buried deep within. \textit{It is the heirloom of the House of Durin, and they will see it safely to the hands of their king.}

Ah, but he who holds the Stone is the king, that sly, suspicious part of Thorin replied. \textit{Is not Balin also of the blood of Durin? Are not most of your Company of royal blood? Any one of them might claim it, not least your heirs, your sister's sons who have defied you at every turn.}

Deep sapphire eyes picked out the two youngest members of the Company, both pale and wan in the light of the torches. Deep in the Dwarf lord's soul, a third voice spoke up, distracting him.

\textit{The dragon is dead. The Mountain is reclaimed. What need is there of the Stone? The armies of the Dwarves are no longer needed – now is the time to rebuild, and Dáin will be eager to see Erebor rise once more. Send for him. Forget this futile search and send for Dáin.}

That portion of his mind was stifled even as the thought formed, however, drowned out by the nerve-scraping melody that threaded itself through every fiber. The Arkenstone was his birthright, and he would see it found.

\textbf{* X *}

Kíli was exhausted. The few hours of sleep that the Company had managed before dawn was not enough to make up for the long hours of wakefulness before the dragon's death. Nor were they enough to ease the effects of shock and grief on the young Dwarf. He could not imagine how Fíli must feel. His brother had spoken little since dawn, and the archer did not think he had actually slept at all, but he had joined the others in the treasury nonetheless. Balin had organized the most orderly search pattern that he could devise, but even the youngest prince could tell that a thorough search of the great hoard would take weeks.

Thorin, of course, had searched through the night, but the feverish glint in his eye shone just as brightly as before. He spoke no word to the others, muttering instead to himself as he dug haphazardly through piles of gems and goldwork, when he wasn't watching them silently from the heights of the stairs. In a way, it was a relief, for he had not noticed or commented on the absence of Bifur and Bofur, who had left for Laketown in the early hours. Nori had drawn first watch of the day, followed by Glóin and Kíli himself, taking turns perched just inside the Great Gate, more interested in any sign of their missing friends than whatever nebulous enemy Thorin feared. Kíli worked beside his brother, keeping a watchful eye on Fíli's listless, lost expression. It made the dark-haired prince physically ill to see his calm, confident brother looking so broken. Kíli's entire life, Fíli had been his hero, second only to Thorin, an unending source of strength. To see him so devastated, to be unable to brighten his spirits with a brotherly hug, or joke, or just by being Kíli, was a new and immensely disturbing experience.

\textit{Mahal, give him strength. If you cannot return Viska to us, give Fíli the strength to endure the loss of his One. And give me the strength to help him.}
“Kíli?”

A soft voice at his elbow startled the archer and he dropped the golden cup he had been shifting, turning to find Ori. The young scribe shrugged apologetically.

“Sorry. Glóin asked me to get you. Said it's your turn at watch. I'll stay with Fíli, if you like.”

Kíli sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. “I didn't realize it had gotten so late. Fí?” He tapped his brother on the shoulder. “I'm taking watch. Bombur should be handing dinner around soon. Ori's going to make sure you eat.” The last part was delivered with a small glare and Fíli managed a wan smile and nod.

“Fair enough. Let me know when it's my turn, little brother.”

With a final worried look, Kíli trotted out of the treasury to take Glóin's place at the gate. The burly merchant clasped his shoulder for a moment, reminding the younger Dwarf abruptly of his son, and Kíli's friend, Gimli.

“How fares your brother?”

“Quiet,” he replied frankly. “But he will run himself into the ground before he will let Thorin see him break.”

“Stubborn, and proud,” Glóin agreed with a slight smile.

“And torn apart inside.” Kíli sighed. “Mahal, I hope Bofur returns with good news. But it will be days yet before he returns at all.”

“And Thorin? Any change in him?”

“None. He remains obsessed with the Stone.”

Glóin nodded heavily and headed back toward the treasury. Kíli watched him for a moment, then sighed and clambered up to take a seat on the broken wall so he could stare down the slope in front of the gate. The seat wasn't comfortable, but it should certainly help keep him from nodding off.

He did not doze, but his mind must have gone wandering, for his awareness was jolted back by a movement outside in the landscape. Startled, he stood, peering out into the dimming evening. Gradually, the moving blur resolved into three approaching figures – one of which was undoubtedly Bofur. Excitement surged in his heart, tempered by the fact that there were only three figures. Someone was missing. Bouncing on his toes, he watched them draw closer, straining to make out more detail. Finally, he gave a strangled yelp and threw himself off of the wall, boots pounding the earth as he ran toward them.

Bofur gave a shout of greeting and waved at him as he drew closer, and the hooded figure looked up, revealing Viska's clear eyes in a face ravaged by grief. When she saw him, joy temporarily washed away the sorrow and she too began running, slamming into his embrace several steps ahead of her companions. Kíli held her tightly, feeling her shoulders shudder with conflicting emotions as she buried her face in his coat. He murmured softly in her ear, trying to calm her obviously overstrained nerves.

“Easy, namad. I am here, sister. You are safe. You are home, and he is waiting for you.”

“Fíli. I need Fíli. I must speak to Thorin, but first - “
First you need Fíli, I know.” He smiled gently, rubbing soothing circles on her back with his hand. “Wait here, dear one. Stay with Bofur a moment and I will fetch him for you.”

She nodded, still shivering, and he carefully transferred her to the miner's gentle embrace, then glanced at Bifur. Viska's condition gave him a good idea of what he would learn, but he signed briefly to the toymaker anyway.

*Her brother?*

*Dead,* came the reply. *The dragon. And there were Orcs.*

Orcs? Kíli's eyebrows shot up. That must be her news for Thorin. Well, it could wait a minute or two. Dashing back into the Mountain, he slipped silently into the great hoard, letting out a relieved breath when he saw that Thorin was on the far side, engrossed in gold.

“Ori!” he hissed. The scribe glanced up in surprise and Kíli signed at him urgently.

*Send my brother out. Quickly!*

His quiet friend blinked and nodded, then turned to lay a hand on Fíli's arm and murmur something to him. The golden head nodded shortly, then Kíli saw his brother glance up to gauge Thorin's attention before hurrying quietly from the room.

“*Nadadith?*” Fíli's expression was guarded and cautious, but Kíli felt a huge grin creeping across his own face.

“Viska's here. She's alive. Bifur and Bofur brought her home. She's waiting for you, *nadad.*”

For a moment, he was afraid that his brother was going to pass out in front of him. Fíli's face went pale, then flushed as life bled back into his wide blue eyes. Kíli caught his arm before he could run for the gate.

“One thing, brother. Triskel is dead.”

Fíli looked stricken, but he nodded shortly and Kíli let him go, following as he hurried out.

Without even seeing his brother's face, Kíli could tell the moment that he saw Viska for himself. Fíli's back straightened abruptly and he sped up, darting through the debris of the hall. For her part, Viska froze for a brief second, shining eyes locking on his face. Then she broke from Bofur's sheltering arm and ran, her hood falling back to expose her dark braids as she covered the remaining distance with quick strides. Then she was in his arms, face buried in Fíli's thick golden mane, fingers twisted in his coat as he cradled her close. Kíli felt a lump in his throat and tears filling his eyes as he blinked and glanced away. Bofur came over to join him, the miner's nose rather red and tears on his kind face. Bifur's eyes were also suspiciously damp.

“They were staying with the bargeman, Bard, the one with the three youngsters,” Bofur told him hoarsely, turning away to give the reunited couple at least an illusion of privacy. “Orcs tracked the Company through Mirkwood, then to the house. She said that the red-haired Elf lass and the princeling pursued the vile creatures to Laketown and helped protect the children. Bard slew the dragon with one of Girion's black arrows, but Trisk fell protecting her from the beast's final attack.”

Kíli nodded. “So, not only are the folk of the Lake homeless through our actions, one of theirs slew the dragon that we woke.” He sighed and ran a hand through his mussed hair. “I somehow doubt that Thorin will see it in that light.”
Concern darkened Bofur's gaze. “That bad, is he?”

“You'll see. Come on, let's leave them for a moment. Thorin needs to know about the Orcs. And...everything.”

* X *

Bofur had assured her that they were well, but even the words of a friend were not quite enough to soothe the lass who had just lost the last of her blood. True relief did not sear her heart until she looked up to see Kíli hurtling down the slope from Erebor's gate, wearing a smile that split his face, dark brown eyes alight with joy. Then he was holding her tightly, calling her sister, and another beloved voice echoed his in her mind. “You are safe. You are home.” But she wasn't home – not quite. She was close. Erebor was one step, Kíli's loving embrace another, but -

“Fíli. I need Fíli.” She was so close to sobbing, but she could not. Not yet. Bad enough that she was not strong enough to go to Thorin first – she would save her mourning until her folk were relatively safe, but she could not force herself to forgo seeking comfort in his strong embrace to fortify her heart.

“Wait here, dear one. Stay with Bofur a moment and I will fetch him for you.” Kíli was murmuring to her softly, handing her over to another's gentle arms. Then he was gone, dashing back into the Mountain.

“Come on, lass. Let's get you inside, at least,” the miner said, urging her forward. Viska nodded and let him escort her through the gate. She caught glimpses of dull green marble, long unpolished but carved and worked in wondrous designs. Then heavy, hurried footsteps were running toward her, stumbling over debris, and her vision was filled with summer eyes, blue as the heart of a forge flame, beneath a crown of golden hair. Breaking out of Bofur's arms, she ran, slamming into the broad chest, feeling the powerful arms wrap around her, holding her close. She buried her face in his hair and took a deep breath to steady herself. His rich voice was murmuring in her ear, comforting nonsense that simply meant “you are safe,” and “I love you.”

She could hear Kíli and Bofur talking off to the side, the miner passing on her news of the Orcs. The younger prince sounded grim and troubled, but resigned to bear the tidings to his uncle. For a moment, she considered letting him go alone. He and Bofur could tell Thorin of the danger – she was not needed. She could stay here, safe in the arms of her One, and let the rest of the world fade away. It was tempting, the more so because she knew that Kíli would not blame her for it, would not chastise her for shirking this one duty. But she was Kulvik's daughter, and Triskel's sister, and Fíli's beloved, and she would not avoid her responsibilities. She was the sole Dwarven witness to the Orcs, Laketown, and Smaug's fall, and she owed her king her knowledge. So she finally broke into Fíli's soft mutterings, placing a kiss on her fingertips and pressing them to his lips to silence him.

“I must speak to Thorin,” she told him quietly. “I must warn him.”

He tensed, but nodded, anxiety sliding behind his eyes. “I will go with you, amrâlimê. My uncle is...changed, even since Laketown.”
Ori had had half of his focus on the door ever since Kíli had beckoned his brother out, hoping for news of the absent Dwarves. Or perhaps it was more than half, because he certainly did not have enough attention on the rest of his surroundings to avoid being badly startled by the sudden presence of Thorin practically at his elbow. The young scribe actually yelped in surprise when he glanced up into the stormy eyes of the king.

“Where are my nephews?” Thorin demanded. Ori gulped.

“Kíli’s on watch,” he stammered. “Fíli went to speak with him for a moment. I’m sure he’ll return soon.”

Thorin growled under his breath, the sound chilling Ori’s blood. “I reclaim the Mountain for them, and still they act like Dwarflings, deserting their responsibilities!”

“There is Kíli now,” a gruff voice cut in. Dwalin had come up at Thorin’s shoulder, casting a concerned look at his old friend. “And Bofur with him. The lad might have news.”

“Unless it be of the Arkenstone, I care not,” Thorin replied dismissively. Bofur's head came up in shock and he stumbled, staring at the king in consternation. Kíli tensed, dark eyes narrowing and shoulders bracing as if for a blow.

“Not the Arkenstone, but Orcs.” The young prince looked troubled, but determined, shooting Dwalin a glance. Ori stood frozen, unsure if he should stay or go. The big warrior solved his dilemma by summoning the rest of the Company with a barked order. Behind Bofur, Bifur entered the room silently, followed by a dark-haired figure cradled against Fíli’s shoulder.

“Viska!”

Bilbo’s glad cry had all of the Dwarves staring at the approaching lass. She looked up and smiled wanly at them, her face strained and pale, but honest joy in her eyes. Bilbo was the first to reach her and she pulled away from the prince slightly to hug the excited Hobbit with a chuckle. Then the rest of the Company was crowding around her with smiles, hugs, and enthusiastic claps on the back. Fíli watched with a protective air, as though ready to whisk her away at any moment. Thorin stood back as well, watching through narrowed eyes.

It was Nori who brought everyone back from their elation.

“Where is Trisk?” the thief asked, looking concerned. The others quieted immediately, glancing around for the cheerful young silversmith. Viska straightened and stepped away, addressing herself respectfully to Thorin as she offered him a slight bow.

“My brother died in Laketown, during the slaying of the dragon, but I bring other news, Thorin Uzbad. We were set upon by Orcs, part of a pack that tracked us to Mirkwood, then followed our scent to the town.”

“Azog?” That was Dori, sounding horrified. Viska glanced at him.

“I did not see him, but I do not doubt that they were there at his command. They were led by a different pale Orc, one taller and leaner than Azog. His spawn, Bolg.”

“And you survived?”
The sneer in Thorin's voice was clear, and Ori stared at the king in shock. Viska tensed and Fíli stepped to her side protectively, glaring at his uncle. Kíli was only a heartbeat behind his brother, moving to the lass's other side and putting a hand on her shoulder. She ignored both of them for the moment, meeting Thorin's gaze.

“I did. Mostly due to unexpected aid. Tauriel, the Guard Captain of Mirkwood, and Legolas, son of the king, were tracking the Orcs. They saved our lives, and those of the bargeman’s children, for they had given us shelter when we stayed behind in Laketown.”

“Now you dare stand in Erebor and claim Elves as allies? In the very halls of my fathers?” Thorin's voice was a snarl and his hand clutched convulsively on his sword hilt. Viska's eyes flashed.

“My father dwelt in these halls as well, my king. And I do not claim them as allies, I merely state what happened. They aided us against a common enemy. I honored your wishes – I remained in Laketown until Smaug was dead. Only then did I approach Erebor to bring you warning.”

“Oh, I'm sure that your warning was the only reason you came.” Thorin barked a humorless laugh, his eyes flickering over his nephews.

Tears pricked in Ori’s eyes as he shook his head in anxious denial. Never had he seen Thorin act so cruel. He was stern, yes, and intimidating, but these vicious comments and hateful looks were beyond the young scribe's experience of Durin's heir. He thought they might be beyond anyone's experience as well, for Thorin's own nephews were staring at him in hurt bewilderment, edging toward anger. Balin had his hand bowed in grief, shaking it slowly, not daring to look at his old friend. Dwalin stood, as ever, at Thorin's elbow, but his brow was lowered and anger was etched into his face. Bilbo was glaring quite openly, as was Nori. Bofur still looked hurt and confused, while Bifur looked impassive, but had to keep restraining himself from reaching out to Viska. Dori stood at Ori's own elbow, grumbling under his breath. Bombur was absentely patting his elder brother's shoulder gently, gaze fixed on the floor. Glóin stood in thoughtful silence, and Óin was pushing his way to Viska's side, apothecary bag in hand, affecting to ignore everyone else.

“No doubt you've injuries that need tending,” the irascible old healer muttered, brushing Kíli out of the way and taking the lass's arm. “Younglings – never a thought to having your hurts tended, too busy trying to impress your elders. Come along, lass. Don't crowd her, lad, I've tended lasses before!” This last was aimed at Fíli, who seemed reluctant to release his grip on her arm. With a quick glance at her face, he relinquished his guardianship and allowed the healer to lead her off to the next room. Thorin had turned and stalked away as Óin broke the tension that had gathered. Balin followed him, speaking quietly, likely about the threat of the Orcs. Glóin and Dwalin were deep in conversation as well. Bombur sent his brother and cousin off to get some sleep, then handed out the evening's rations to the remaining members of the group. Ori took a seat near Fíli and Kíli (deliberately avoiding Dori for the moment) and sat with them in companionable silence. Fíli ate absently, his gaze locked on the door where Óin and Viska had disappeared. Kíli, meanwhile, was watching his brother with a small smile on his face. Realizing that Ori was looking at him, the dark-haired prince dropped a cheerful wink, then crammed the last of his meal in his mouth and got to his feet.

“I'm going back on watch. I should not have left, but Thorin had to hear Viska's news. We'll need to think about fortifying the gate soon.”

“Already on it, lad.” Dwalin rumbled. He glanced at Balin and received a nod, then turned to the rest of the Company. “You heard the lass! Orcs are still on the hunt, and they know we've reached the Mountain. Time to seal up that gate!”
Translations and Notes:
namad – sister (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
uzbad – king (Khuzdul)
Óin set his kit aside and turned to study the lass carefully. Most of her physical hurts had already been tended, neat bandages tied with Elven knots, and she did not hold herself like one trying to conceal further damage. No, the pain he saw – in her protective posture, in her shuttered face, in her shadowed eyes – was emotional, the soul-deep ache of her brother's loss, intermixed with the echoes of fading terror. In ideal circumstances, her healing could be left to time, and the support of her dearest friends. He sighed. Current circumstances were decidedly less than ideal, yet he knew of no other remedy, no potion he might prescribe. She had faced a dragon, something only one other of their Company could claim, but unlike their burglar, she had not emerged from the encounter unscathed. The dragon was dead, but a new tyrant was rising behind the king's eyes, and the healer did not like the tension that he felt building in the Mountain. It made him fear for the future in a way that he had not experienced since the days before Azanulbizar. Even the portents had become difficult to read, and that was deeply troubling in such times of confusion and danger.

“Óin?”

Startled from his own thoughts, he glanced down to meet the Dwarrowmaid's gaze, noting the small smile that quirked her lips, the hint of humor in her sunken eyes.

“I am well, I promise. Tauriel is not quite a healer, but she does have some experience with tending battle injuries.”

He sighed and nodded, resting one hand on her shoulder. “Aye, lass, I can see that much. It was more to get you out of Thorin's sight than aught else. He...well, you saw how he was. I fear that we are losing him, as we lost....” He trailed off, unwilling to complete the thought. Never had he imagined that Thorin might fall to the same fate as Thrór, consumed with thoughts of treasure that overrode his sense and honor.

Viska sank down to sit on a piece of broken wall, her face troubled. “The Men of Laketown have little left, and they will be coming up to Dale to seek shelter from the winter. I had hoped to persuade Thorin to help them, to give them space in the Mountain so that they would not be defenseless when the Orcs arrive, but with his current mood....”

Óin was already shaking his head when she glanced up at him anxiously, his heart heavy with
grief.

“He’d not spare them a moth-eaten blanket, lass. Balin and Bilbo have been trying to ease his temper since Smaug fell, but it is unpredictable and he is more likely to lash out than to listen. He is no longer the Dwarf we followed.”

She nodded, then took a deep breath and visibly summoned her strength, getting to her feet once more. “Then we need to help him find himself.” Her statement was simple and confident, her gaze direct. “And hope that Gandalf arrives soon. Perhaps the Wizard will know how to bring him back.”

“Perhaps, if he ever arrives.” Óin shrugged helplessly. “And if Thorin listens to him.”

This time, it was her hand on his shoulder, a gentle smile on her face. “We will do what we must.” She glanced toward the door as Dwalin bellowed outside, summoning the Company to gate to begin repairs. “And right now, we must fortify the Mountain against the arrival of the Orcs.”

* X *

“Fí.”

Fíli turned at his brother's soft comment, just in time to see Viska emerge from the side chamber ahead of Óin. The old healer gave her a fatherly pat on the arm before joining the rest of the Dwarves at their work. A quick glance at Dwalin revealed the Arms Master watching him with a small smirk.

“Go on then.” A chuckle rumbled in the barrel chest as Dwalin jerked his head toward the approaching Dwarrowlass. “Take a few minutes with your lassie. Better than having you distracted while we haul and stack masonry.”

Fíli grinned and hurried toward her, taking in the details that he had missed when she first arrived. He had been so relieved to see her alive and whole that he had not really registered the assorted bruises and cuts, or the braids that now hung to either side of her face. Joyful disbelief bubbled up in his heart as he studied the intricate design, slightly worse for wear after all that happened in Laketown, but still recognizable. He reached up to touch the silver beads, his hand trembling.

“This is your father's sigil.” He met her eyes quizzically. “You carried them all the way from Lanzhindîn?”

She gave him a sad smile. “Trisk did. They were my mother's.”

“Well, it is good to finally see you looking like a proper Dwarrowlass.” He smiled as his teasing words brought a slight curve to her lips. Pulling her close, he pressed his forehead down to hers and closed his eyes, holding her tightly as he spoke, finally giving voice to the emotions that he had kept buried during those long hours. “Viska...gabshele...I thought you were dead. I watched Laketown burn, and my heart burned with it.”

“I thought the same of you.” Her reply was soft and slightly choked and he tightened his arms around her in an effort to protect her from the pain. “Smaug implied that he had already killed all of you – he even knew Thorin's name.”
He pulled back, eyes wide. “Smaug spoke to you?”
She shook her head, her face twisting with the memory of what had followed. “He taunted us. Trisk and I were trying to keep his attention off of Bard, so I challenged him and Trisk managed to blind him in one eye with that little knife I took from the Troll hoard. Then Bard fired the black arrow.”
She gazed up at him, her eyes pleading. “Fíli, we have to help them. The people of Laketown have nothing left. Somehow, we must convince Thorin to help them. When the Orcs come, they will not stand a chance.”

He nodded wearily and pulled her tight against his chest once more, the smoky smell of her hail tickling his nose. “I know, amrâlimê. I do not know how, but we must do something.”

* X *

Bilbo had yet to get used to the stubborn, unyielding endurance of the Dwarven race. He knew most of the Company was still tired, the shocks and labors of the past few days piling up, but they set to work on the gate fortification with a will. Of course, the knowledge that the pale Orc was still hunting them probably lent some energy to their limbs, the Hobbit reflected. Still, there was no doubt that they could work quickly and well when the occasion called for it. Even Viska joined in once Óin had tended her limited hurts, working side by side with Fíli and Kíli. Fíli, for his part, kept checking to make sure she was still there, while Kíli watched his brother watch the lass, a sparkle in his dark eyes. Bilbo smiled to see the young princes in better spirits – Fíli’s deep melancholy had alarmed him. Even now, there was a shadow over the small group, a constant reminder of their missing fourth, like the lines of sorrow on Viska’s face. But there were signs of joy there, too, and determination, and Kíli had stopped to assure the concerned Hobbit that she would allow herself to properly grieve once the current crisis was over.

“When we can, Fíli and I will take her aside – possibly some of the others as well. We will be her family and sit with her while she lets him go. It is hard that his body burned with Laketown – Dwarves should go back to the earth.”

Bilbo helped with the construction as best he could, no more eager to have Azog’s Orcs in the Mountain than any of the others, but he also watched Thorin and wondered. Had the king ordered the building of the wall against the Orcs? Or against the refugees from Laketown who were even now working their way up toward the ruins of Dale? He had established a pattern – watching the progress on the wall for a time before returning to his search for the Arkenstone in the depths of the treasury. The second time that it happened, late in the early winter night, Balin watched him go, then turned away, shaking his head, and Bilbo was stunned to see tears in the old Dwarf’s eyes.

“It’s the gold sickness,” Balin explained quietly. “It drove his grandfather mad, but I’d thought – I’d hoped Thorin would be able to withstand it, hold it at bay. I’d never have followed him here if....”

Bilbo offered him a weary smile. “Yes, you would have. And so would I, and all of the others. That is the type of leader that Thorin was.” The Hobbit frowned, thinking back to the conversation that he had overheard in Rivendell. “In fact, I recall Lord Elrond and Gandalf speaking of the possibility the night we left,” he mused. Then the exact words that the Elf lord had used swam into his memory and he turned to the old councilor, his eyes wide. “Lord Elrond was not worried about the gold, but the Arkenstone itself! Gandalf assured him that it would not have any power over Thorin because he had never touched it. He seemed so certain.”

Balin blanched, realization spreading across his face. “Ah, Tharkûn, why did you not confide in
me?” he murmured, closing his pale blue eyes. When he opened them again, they were full of painful knowledge. “That is what I have been missing. I knew Thorin's behavior in Laketown reminded me of something.”

Bilbo stared at his friend in confusion as Balin lowered his head and stood a long moment in deep thought. Finally, the white-haired Dwarf met his gaze.

“Thank you for telling me about Lord Elrond's concerns regarding the Stone.” His voice was low as he reached out to clasp the Hobbit's shoulder tightly. “I must think on this, and decide what is to be done. You and I will speak with the others when we can, Bilbo. For now, why don't you get some sleep? You look worn out. The lads will have this wall done before dawn, and you can take your turn at watch, if you like.”

“Yes, sleep sounds lovely.” With a quiet word to the members of the Company, Bilbo headed for the small room he had claimed for his sleeping area. Once settled on his bedroll, he lay awake for a long time, staring up at the ceiling. Finally, he turned over on his side, back to the door, and pulled the cloth-wrapped bundle from his trouser pocket. Holding his breath, he unwrapped it carefully, revealing a large gem that shone with an inner light like the white hot heart of a forge, or the crystal glow of a distant star.

The Arkenstone.

A dark figure stands in the bay outside of the hidden door, speaking softly to the feathered burden perched on its arm. The raven quorks softly and ducks its head, accepting a tidbit of food from the tall Dwarf, then the figure's arm swings upward to give the bird a boost into the air. Black wings carry it into the darkness, but the figure that it leaves behind stays still for long moments, staring out over the landscape.

The Arkenstone is here. It must be! Its song is so loud, so clear, so close! It rings through the halls, resonating through Erebor so thoroughly that he cannot pinpoint its source. It is a direct counterpoint to the Song of the Mountain, the two clashing in his mind when he touches flesh to stone. To prevent the discordance, he has stopped touching the Mountain. She will not help him find that which he seeks, and so he has no use for her. His hands are gloved to prevent accidental contact, and his kin notice this with bewilderment. They do not understand. To them, the Mountain was the goal, home. But he is the King. The Arkenstone sings to him, calls for him to take it and claim his birthright. They cannot understand. They are not rulers. Even Fíli... Kíli. ..even his nephews, his heirs, do not understand. They are drawn to the Mountain, not the Stone; to security, not greatness. They lack the vision for loftier goals.

With the dragon dead, it should have been so easy, but new threats rise to replace the old – Orcs, and Men. He is not so foolish as to believe that the survivors of Laketown seek only shelter from the coming winter. They want his treasure – gold, gems, the Arkenstone. But they will not have it!

Summons sent, he turns and reenters the Mountain, turning his steps toward the great armory.
Viska's first glimpse of the treasure of Erebor had been physically staggering. Never had she imagined so much gold. She had known that Thrór had been wealthy, but had only had a dim image in her mind of a large room stacked with chests of currency. The reality was a vast hall filled with hills and drifts of gold, jewels, and precious metals. Coins stamped with the unmistakable Durin profile formed the bulk of it, a lake of gold pieces with some silver mixed in. There were household objects made of valuable materials, golden platters, silver cups, alongside jewelry of the same, with glimmers of mithril. And the gems! Ruby, emerald, sapphire, diamond. Every torch's light reflected off of a thousand shining surfaces. In full sunlight, it would have been blinding. Even by the light of the torches, it was hard on the eyes.

And ears. With fourteen Dwarves searching through the accumulated wealth, the treasure was constantly shifting, a never-ending jingle of metal and stone sliding over one another. They moved carefully, trying to keep too much from moving too quickly, but the sheer amount made it a difficult and dangerous task. They almost lost Bofur when he accidentally removed a silver goblet that turned out to be bracing the larger portion of a massive pile and the golden avalanche trapped him before he could move. It had taken half an hour of frantic digging to pull him free, the miner looking bruised and slightly panicked when he was finally out.

“Like a cave-in, that was,” he muttered, eyes wide as he tried to knock his hat back into shape. He spent the rest of his shift in the treasury on the outer edges, reluctant to test his luck near the larger piles.

“You know this task is impossible, right?” Viska whispered to her companions as night closed in, the second since her arrival at the Lonely Mountain. “We'll only find the stone by the sheerest luck! There's just too much to sort through.”

Fíli nodded heavily, stretching to relieve his cramped muscles. His hair hung in his face, the braids coming loose, and deep shadows pooled under his eyes. Kíli looked much the same, and their hands were covered in small scrapes and cuts from sharp metal edges, the skin dry and sore. The younger prince groaned, stretching his back out with a grimace.

“I'm exhausted, and hungry, and tired of looking at gold – and I never thought that I would say that!”

“Well, our shift is over, nađadith.” Fíli stopped to offer Viska a hand down from the pile where she stood. “Let's get our cram from Bombur and get some sleep. That will help with two of the three, and you'll be able to face the gold again in the morning.”

“Tired of cram.” Kíli was clearly worn out, as he was getting petulant and almost whining. “I want to go hunting, but it wouldn't even do any good. Nothing lives close enough, thanks to the dragon.”

“The land will heal in time,” Viska murmured, following the lads back toward the sleeping area. “There is much to do to restore Erebor, but the land will restore itself, now that the dragon is gone.” She sighed, scrubbing at her face with one hand. “I want a bath. I can eat cram for another week, if I must, but I wish I could be clean!”

They were entering the room they had set aside for sleeping, and Balin looked up with interest as he heard her last comment. He, too, was beginning to show the strain of dealing with Thorin's temper and the exhausting schedule, but he managed a small smile.

“That can be remedied, lass. We can heat water from the river. All of us could use a wash.”
A couple of hours and a dozen or so cauldrons of hot water later, the Company was as clean as they could manage with their limited resources. Viska chuckled as she peeked cautiously out of the side room where she had done her own bathing and avoided the general nakedness of her unashamed male companions. Bilbo looked positively blissful as he wandered off to his bedroll. Most of the others had cleared out of the room, either taking their turn in the treasury or going to take their own rest. Fíli caught her eye and waved, in the middle of combing out his long golden mane.

“It's safe,” he told her with a smile. “They're all dressed and off to sleep or search. Care to help me with my braids?”

She froze, staring at him, her cheeks flaming. A small stone suddenly clipped his ear and the prince yelped, clapping a hand over it and turning to stare at his brother. Kíli swatted him for good measure as soon as he was within reach.

“That was completely inappropriate, brother!” he scolded fiercely, yanking the comb out of Fíli’s hand (along with several strands of hair, by the elder's wince). “You're not even courting! Besides, she doesn't know the braids.” That last was added with a wink as he turned to speak to the flustered lass. “The double braids for his status as heir are a bit of a pain. Took me ages to learn, and he can't do them himself. He ties his hair in knots. Here.” He offered her the comb and motioned for her to take a seat on a block of stone, then shoved Fíli down to sit in front of her. “You can comb it out, and I'll teach you the braid, if you want.”

Viska hesitated, feeling overwhelmed with emotions – fear, excitement, embarrassment, and a deep thrill that she was trying not to examine too closely. Kíli suddenly stopped to study her face, concern in his dark eyes.

“You don't have to, Viska. Not if it makes you uncomfortable, namad.”

Fíli turned, looking stricken. “No! You don't have to do anything! I just – I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to upset you. Mahal, I'm an idiot!”

She smiled, suddenly realizing that her eyes were full of tears. No wonder the princes had panicked.

“I'm not upset, kurdê. Just surprised, overwhelmed. I'm exhausted, and it was a bit sudden, but I would love to learn how to do your braids.”

The blue eyes sparkled at the endearment, but he held her gaze for another moment, searching for something, then he relaxed and a delighted smile spread across his face, revealing his deep dimples. Kíli chortled and sat down next to her as his brother turned around again and she began working the comb through the thick golden waves.

Viska could barely see straight when she finally collapsed in her bedroll. The braids weren't complex, but they were precise, and it had been intriguing to watch Kíli's nimble fingers weaving them almost effortlessly. She closed her eyes, remembering the silken weight of the golden mane slipping through her fingers, and fell asleep with a tiny smile on her face.

* X *

Raised voices and urgent movement in the great hallway woke Viska early the next morning, her second full day in Erebor. Blinking sleepily, she scrambled out of her bedroll and went to the door,
just as Fíli and Kíli were approaching.

“What is happening?” she asked, falling in between them as they hurried toward the gate. The brothers looked strained and anxious, as did all of the Company, and a sick feeling was growing in the pit of the Dwarrowmaid’s stomach. “Are the Orcs here already?”

Fíli shook his head, taking her hand and squeezing it gently as he glanced over at his brother. “Ori had the watch. He says an army of Woodland Elves has set up camp outside of Dale. A rider approaches.”

“The Elves?” She frowned in puzzlement as they joined the others at the base of the barricade that they had built. Thorin stood atop it alone, watching the rider coming up the road. “Why would the Elves be here? The survivors of Laketown, I understand, but the Elves have no claim on Erebor.”

“Precisely,” Kíli muttered, dark eyes equal parts angry and worried. Fíli’s arm went around the lass, warm and reassuring, and she leaned into his side. The younger prince hovered anxiously next to them, hands clenching and relaxing unconsciously. The other Dwarves looked similarly ill at ease, watching their king warily from the floor of the hall as he gazed out over the road. He had armed and armored himself sometime in the hours since they had seen him, and he was an imposing figure atop the battlement. The hoof beats outside came to a halt and Viska let out a breath that she hadn't realized she was holding when a familiar voice called out greetings.

“Greetings Thorin, son of Thráin, King Under the Mountain! I am pleased to see you well. We feared for your Company’s safety.”

Fíli’s eyebrows shot up and he glanced at Viska. The lass smiled, mouthing Bard's name in confirmation, and he nodded. “Better him than the Master,” he murmured quietly. Above them, Thorin did not seem to share the sentiment. They could hear the sneer in his voice as he replied.

“Feared for our safety? You'll forgive me if I find that hard to believe. Nor do I think that you are pleased to find us well.”

“The people of Laketown wished you no ill, my lord. Did we not aid you in your quest, giving you supplies for the last part of your journey?” Bard sounded confused and troubled. Thorin barked a laugh.

“Oh, but of course! Men are always eager to help when they believe there is gold to be had,” the Dwarf king retorted. “Do you deny that the Master of Laketown hoped that we would perish facing the dragon, leaving our gold unclaimed so that he might fill his pockets?”

The older prince sighed and Viska reached up to the hand that rested on her shoulder, twining her fingers with his. Blue eyes flickered to her face and he smiled slightly, then pressed a gentle kiss to her temple. Outside, Bard was countering the king’s cold response.

“I cannot answer for the Master, and he has not been seen since the dragon descended, so he is not here to answer for himself.” The bargeman's reply was calm and measured, leaving unspoken the fact that the dragon had attacked Laketown as a result of the Dwarves' actions. “I speak only for the survivors of Laketown. We seek what assistance you might be able to provide, for we have lost our homes on the edge of winter and the ruins of Dale offer little in the way of shelter. On behalf of the people of Laketown, I ask that you honor your pledge. A share of the treasure so that they may rebuild their lives.”

A low growl built in Thorin's chest. “I will not treat with any Man while an armed host lies before my door. Send the Elves away and then we may talk. Thranduil of the Woodland Realm has no claim on the treasure of Erebor.”
Bard sighed. “King Thranduil brought aid to my people – I cannot turn him away. He says that an heirloom of his house lies within, and that his armed host will attack the Mountain if we do not come to terms.”

Thorin turned to glance down at his followers and Viska caught sight of a disturbing half-smile flickering across his face as he shook his head. “Your threats do not sway me.”

“And what of your conscience?” the Man replied. “Does it not tell you our cause is just? My people offered you help, and in return you brought upon them only ruin and death!”

“We will pay the folk of Laketown for their assistance – in our own time – and not under threat of force. This audience is over.”

* X *

The great armory of Erebor lay virtually untouched, being of little interest to Smaug and located down a series of corridors too narrow to have accommodated the beast. At Thorin's order, the Company lost no time in seeking out new weapons to replace the oversized and awkwardly-balanced items they had been given in Laketown. Kíli found a sturdy Dwarven bow that only wanted a bowstring, of which he still had several spares stowed about his person. There were plenty of arrows, so he filled a couple of quivers and set them aside before selecting a sword. His clever combination scabbard and quiver was long gone, but he managed to cobble together a workable alternative.

Fíli's twin falchions were a bit harder to replace, but Dwalin finally unearthed a set of matched blades that were close to the correct weight. The prince tested their balance before nodding in satisfaction, then started rebuilding his collection of knives from the vast array available. Meanwhile, Viska was trying various long-swords, finally settling on a simple blade with an unadorned hilt. Belting the scabbard in place, she glanced over at Ori, who seemed a bit bewildered by the sheer variety of weapons.

“I doubt you'll find a slingshot in here,” she teased gently. The scribe grinned and ducked his head, blushing slightly.

“I actually do have some training with a sword,” he admitted. “I'm just not sure how to pick one out.”

Nori joined them at that moment, a smile on his narrow face as he held up a short blade. “Here you are, Ori. I think this will work for you, nadadith.” His smile slipped and he gave an annoyed little grimace. “I should have fought Dori harder about getting you trained up, but at least you've got the basics. C'mon, let's spar a bit and see how much you remember. Care to join us, Fíli? Viska?”

She shook her head. “Perhaps later, but I don't want to upset Dori.”

Ori turned to her in surprise. “Oh, he isn't mad any more, Viska! He was devastated when we thought you'd died! Said he wished he'd spoke to you before we left and cleared the air.”

Viska smiled, her heart lifting a little. She had hated being at odds with members of the Company, though she had been the one in the wrong.

“Glóin, too,” Nori added with a grin. “They both welcomed you when you came back, though I
think you were a bit unfocused at the time, so you might not have noticed.”

“I didn't,” she admitted, “but it is good to hear. I will probably join you later, then.”

The thief nodded and led his brother off to where the others were already working. Viska watched them go, then turned to find Fíli watching her with a small smile. She arched a brow at him.

“Can I help you, my prince?”

He laughed and took her hand, tugging her toward the area that held the armor.

“Most of the others have already found some gear, and you'll be needing something more than a tunic and coat. Come on.”

Kíli was already there, sorting through shirts of chain mesh and pieces of plate. He glanced up as they came in and nodded to a pile he had set aside.

“Try those, brother.”

The elder prince nodded and picked out a chain mail shirt. He looked it over critically before handing it to Viska, waiting for her to try it on. She settled it on her shoulders and drew her new sword, taking a few experimental swings. Finally, she nodded and sheathed her blade.

“Not too heavy, and I can still move.” Fíli smiled approvingly, then began rummaging for one for himself as Kíli picked out bracers and shin guards.

The three young Dwarves were soon outfitted in sturdy, well-made armor that still left them able to use their agility and speed. Viska's smile had faded by the time they left the armory, though, as she looked beyond the preparations themselves to the reasons.

War was coming. She no longer had any doubt of that. The only thing that remained to be seen was who they would fight. She did not want to believe that Thorin would insist they take the field against the Elves and Men – it would be insanity to start his rule in Erebor by making enemies of both neighboring realms. If only he could be convinced that they needed to unite the armies, including Dáin's, to face the Orcs she knew were coming. Azog was out there, and she had a feeling that the coming conflict would prove to be even bigger than the pale Orc. Gandalf's continued absence worried her. The Wizard had seemed very troubled just before he had left the Company at Mirkwood, and he had been adamant that he would rejoin them before they had to enter the Mountain. Whatever had kept him from doing so must be grave indeed.

So, Men and Elves waited outside, intent on claiming gold and jewels they felt (correctly or incorrectly) they were owed. Beyond, Dáin and an army of Iron Hills Dwarves marched to lend aid to the Dwarves of Erebor. And somewhere, Azog and Bolg led unknown numbers as they sought to end the Line of Durin, possibly assisted by something even more terrible. All of this lay outside of the Lonely Mountain, danger and uncertainty enough for anyone to face.

While inside of the Mountain, a potentially great king spiraled deeper into madness, his mind shadowed by the dragon sickness so that he no longer knew friend from foe. She wasn't even sure how often Thorin left the great hoard, pausing in his obsessive search for the Arkenstone.

“Bilbo!”

Kíli's greeting to the little Hobbit jolted Viska from her dark thoughts and she glanced up to see their friend giving them a wan smile. He looked pale and weary, fidgeting with a sparkling shirt of mesh draped over one arm. Fíli's eyes widened at the sight of it.
“Is that mithril?” he asked, lifting a corner to study it appreciatively. “Where did you find it?”

“Uh...Thorin gave it to me, actually. I feel ridiculous wearing it, but he said it was partial payment, so...” he trailed off, shrugging uncomfortably.

“It is the least you deserve, and a princely gift at that,” the elder prince replied with a smile, clapping the Hobbit on the shoulder. “True mithril is only found in Khazâd-dûm, and it was lost long ago. Wear it proudly, my friend, though I hope you won't need it.”

Viska studied the Halfling's face as he nodded, noting the nervous tic and the shadow in his eyes.

“What has happened, Bilbo? Did Thorin say something else to you?”

He sighed and shook his head. “The Arkenstone. Always the Arkenstone. Now he begins to believe that there is a traitor in the Mountain, someone working against him from within.”

The princes exchanged a startled, concerned look and Viska felt ice creep down her spine.

“That's insane,” Kíli argued. “He knows the Company is loyal. None of us would betray him! It makes no sense!”

“I'm not sure that Thorin is thinking clearly enough to realize that.” Fíli's face was thoughtful and troubled. “Would the uncle we knew in Ered Luin be preparing to go to war with Men and Elves over a share of gold? Would he be working us night and day to find the Arkenstone? Something is wrong, Kí, and it has been since we set foot on the Mountain, if not before.”

The dark prince nodded reluctantly after a long moment, his knuckles white where he gripped his bow. “What can we do?” he asked finally, his voice low and miserable. Fíli sighed and shrugged.

“I don't know, nadadith. For now, we'll go back to searching for the Stone. Perhaps Gandalf will return soon and knock some sense into everyone. Go on ahead. I'll catch up.”

The younger prince hesitated a moment, then glanced at Viska and smiled before hurrying back toward the treasury. Bilbo followed without a word. The Dwarf lass watched them go, then turned a questioning look on Fíli. He grinned back mischievously and glanced around before darting through an open door into a small side room, dragging her with him. When he turned to face her, the wicked smirk had softened into something else – a tender expression that she had never before seen. His blue eyes were dark and serious, but joyous as he let go of her hand and reached up to run a gentle, calloused hand over her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into his touch, a tiny smile on her lips as she swallowed against the nervous lump in her throat.

“I'm not sure if this is the right time to say this,” he admitted, his voice low and slightly rough as she opened her eyes. “But I know that it needs to be said, and I won't risk running out of time. It has gone unspoken for long enough and some things need to be acknowledged, lest they be lost. I love you, Viska, daughter of Kulvik and Laika. You are my One, the other half of my heart, and I want to spend the rest of my life with you at my side, no matter what comes.”

She stared at him, lost for a moment in the forge fire of his eyes, blinking when her own filled with tears that made her vision swim.

“I love you, too.”

It was the only answer that she could muster, her voice barely a whisper, but it was the only answer that truly mattered. His smile broadened, lighting up his handsome face as he pulled something out of his pocket. Before he could speak, however, she put a shushing finger to his lips. His eyes
flicked to meet hers, startled.

“Erebor holds to the tradition of Bujbû Yasath?” she asked with a small smile. He nodded, eyes sparkling.

“In courting and betrothal, my lady.”

Her hands trembling, she carefully removed the bead from her right braid. Taking a deep breath, she spoke the traditional words.

“Fili, son of Torvi, will you consent to wear my courting braid for all of the world to see?”

“Viska, daughter of Kulvik, nothing would make me happier,” he replied, then smiled and pressed a kiss to her forehead before turning so she could work the braid into the golden hair behind his ear. When she was done, he returned the favor, combing out her right Maiden's Braid with his fingers before replacing it with the Courting Braid and slipping his bead into place. She stared at it for a long moment and he looked at her with concern.

“Viska? Are you well?”

She nodded, not trusting herself to speak, her hands moving in halting signs.

*Happy. Amazed. Sad. Miss my brother, my father.*

“I know, love.”

He folded her into an embrace and she sank into the comforting warmth, listening to his heart beat steadily in his chest.

“You are my One, and I love you. I cannot replace what you have lost, but you will have a home in my heart forever. I even have a pesky little brother to share with you,” he finished with a smile. She laughed and pulled away slowly, reluctantly.

“We should join the others in the treasury before Thorin comes looking for us.” His eyes clouded, but he nodded and turned to start out of the room. With a sudden surge of mischief, she reached out and caught his sleeve.

“Fili?”

“Hmm?” He glanced back curiously and she found herself staring, as she had in Beorn's orchard so long ago, at the fascinating frame of his mustache braids.

“We're courting now.”

“Yes, we are.”

“Does that mean that I'm entitled to a kiss? One that doesn't end with you falling out of a tree? Or me falling off of a bench?”

He laughed, a rich sound that filled the room and warmed the aching places of her heart. Stepping into his arms, she reached up to pull his face near, then let her eyes drift shut and closed the distance.

Like the kiss in the orchard, it was soft, sweet, and hesitant...at first. Then it deepened and his hands slid up to tangle themselves in her hair, and her fingers were teasing his beard along his jaw. He growled, a low rumble deep in his chest, and she pulled back, trying to catch her breath. His
eyes remained closed and he pulled her against him, smoothing her hair and humming softly to himself. “Why do you do that?” she asked curiously, twisting the edge of his coat in her fingers. His hands on her hair froze and the humming stopped as he opened his eyes and looked at her sheepishly.

“Do what?”

“The humming. I've heard you do it before, while we were traveling. You only do it when you look deep in thought.”

A faint flush crept up his face and he coughed, releasing her and stepping away slightly.

“I don't realize that I'm doing it.” He seemed unable to meet her eyes, focused on straightening his coat self-consciously. “Kíli had to point it out to me. I actually only do it when I'm thinking about you.”

She stared at him. “But you have been doing it for ages! Since the Misty Mountains!”

“Really? Then it took Kíli a while to say anything.”

She narrowed her eyes and studied his open, honest face. He looked genuinely embarrassed and she had to admit that it was nice to think that he had been thinking about her for so long. She gave him a small shy smile and shook her head, then turned for the door.

“You are impossible, but you are also endlessly charming, so I cannot even scold you. Now come on, before Thorin really does come looking and skin us both.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Lanzhindîn – Hills of Evendim (Khuzdul)
gabshelê – my greatest treasure (literally 'treasure of all treasures,' Khuzdul)
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
Tharkûn – The Dwarves' name for Gandalf
nadadith – little/young brother (Khuzdul)
cram – a dry and tasteless travel ration made by Men and Dwarves
namad – sister (Khuzdul)
kurdê – my heart (Khuzdul)
Bujbû Yasath – Maiden's Choice (literally 'choice of the bride,' Khuzdul)
Kíli was hopping impatiently from foot to foot when his brother and the lass rejoined the Company in the treasury, a hopeful grin already on his face. The glow in Fíli's eyes and the embarrassed blush on Viska's cheeks answered his question before he even had to ask and the young archer lunged forward with a whoop to pound the golden-haired prince joyfully on the back. Fíli endured it for a few moments before shoving him away with a laugh and Kíli turned to offer Viska a gallant bow before pulling her into a warm hug that had his brother growling at him playfully. The Dwarrowmaid rolled her eyes at their antics, but gave the younger Dwarf a smile and returned his hug, but their moment of quiet celebration was cut short as Balin approached, his eyes reluctant. Kíli felt a chill go down his spine at the look on the elder Dwarf's face.

“My apologies, lass, but I need to borrow the princes.” He clasped her shoulder gently and Kíli watched her meet his gaze, her green eyes full of troubled knowledge. She nodded quickly and he turned to the brothers. “Your uncle has summoned you. He is in the throne room, waiting for us.”

Kíli glanced over, dark eyes meeting light for a long moment before Fíli nodded slowly. The swordsman pressed a kiss to Viska's brow before they turned to leave, the younger prince following reluctantly. Balin led the way, lost in his own thoughts. Kíli, too, walked in silence for a bit, his gut roiling with apprehension, both at the summons and at the fact that he actually feared facing his uncle. When he finally spoke, his voice was low and hesitant.

“What does he want?”

Balin sighed and shook his head. “He did not say, but there is only one thing in his thoughts of late.”

At the young prince's side, his brother nodded, eyes shadowed.

“The Arkenstone.”

Thorin was a grim, glowering presence on the great throne of Erebor. He still wore the armor he had donned to speak to Bard that morning, and a rich, heavy cloak hung from his shoulders. The massive crown on his head was a marvel of Dwarven craftsmanship, several precious metals intertwined and worked with intricate designs.
“Is that-?”

Fíli nodded, answering his brother’s unfinished question. He had never seen it before, but he had heard enough tales to recognize the Raven Crown that Thrór had worn when he ruled under the Mountain. According to Amad’s tales, it had been left behind, dropped in the struggle when Thráin dragged the protesting king from the halls of Erebor. It had undoubtedly found its way into the great hoard, and Thorin had found it. None among the Company would argue against his right to wear his grandfather’s crown, or to sit on his grandfather’s throne, least of all his nephew and heir. Still, a sense of unease slithered in Fíli’s gut as he took in the scene before him. There was a darkness behind the sapphire eyes, a shadow over the grim lines of his face. Thorin had always been stern, each smile a rare gem to be treasured by his family, but there was little of the uncle that the prince remembered in the Dwarf lord before him.

He glanced around the room as they waited for Thorin to speak. Bilbo hovered at the edge of the gathering, one hand toying restlessly with some hidden trinket in his pocket. Dwalin was a soldier at ease, his dark gaze never still. Beside him, Balin looked older than ever, his eyes fixed on the king. Kíli was an anxious presence at Fíli’s shoulder, just beginning to fidget as the quiet dragged on.

“It is here in these halls. I know it.”

Thorin's voice was a low rumble that carried through the hall, startling the golden-haired prince after so long a silence. Bilbo flinched and shook his head, staring at the green marble beneath his feet. Balin sighed and Kíli huffed with annoyance.

“We have been searching for days.” The archer had either missed or ignored Dwalin's look of warning, his voice indignant. “We have dug through treasure nearly every waking moment since the dragon fell!”

“Yet it is still not found!” the king snapped, slamming a gloved fist down on the arm of the throne. Kíli tensed and opened his mouth to reply, but Fíli caught his arm, giving a tiny shake of his head to discourage his brother. Instead, Balin stepped forward, his hands held out in entreaty, his voice soft and soothing.

“The dragon is dead, Thorin. Smaug is dead. Erebor is won. The armies are not needed. The Arkenstone is not needed.”

Thorin's eyes fixed on his old friend, a sneer creeping across his face as he rose to his feet. “That Stone is my birthright!” He did not move from in front of the throne, but the princes flinched back from the anger and distrust that thickened the atmosphere in the room, exchanging worried glances. “It is the emblem of the leadership of the Seven Families.”

“Only because your grandfather made it so.” Dwalin's counter was a growl as he took one daring step forward. “None would deny your right to the throne, cousin. You are the heir of Durin, last descendant in the direct line of the eldest of the Seven Fathers. You have won back your kingdom – what is a stone compared to that?”

Fíli shivered as his uncle turned that bruised glare on the Arms Master, the king tilting his head curiously to the side in a gesture that reminded the prince of a big predator studying its prey. When Thorin spoke, his voice was a deceptive purr over iron.

“Why do you seek to dissuade me from the Arkenstone?” he asked, that disturbing gaze flicking over each of them in turn. “Why do you try to placate me with less than my due? I will have what is mine!”
Bilbo cleared his throat, shooting a distressed look at Balin. This was what the burglar had been trying to tell them, Fíli realized. Alone of the Company, the Hobbit had realized how far Thorin's folly had progressed. “Do you truly doubt the loyalty of anyone here?” the little fellow asked, his voice barely more than a whisper. “They are your companions, Thorin, your *kin*! They have stood at your side through every obstacle, every danger.”

“True, Master Burglar,” Thorin replied darkly, deep suspicion in every line of his face. “My kin. My blood. And every one convinced that he would make a better king than I.”

“No!”

Fíli's protest slipped out even as he stepped forward without thinking, his fists clenched at his sides. Dwalin's roar of denial drowned out Balin's quiet gasp of shock, but it was Kíli's incredulous yelp that rang through the hall.

“Are you MAD?”

Bilbo gulped and closed his eyes, shaking his head desperately, and the golden-haired prince's heart stuttered in his chest as his uncle's feral gaze fell on him and his brother.

*Oh Kí, he thought sorrowfully, finally seeing the damage that had been done – the crazed greed, the suspicion. Don't you see? That's exactly what he is.*

“I AM YOUR KING!!” Thorin bellowed, striding toward the younger Dwarves so that Fíli shoved his brother behind him and Dwalin moved to put himself in his old friend's path. Thorin halted a few steps away, his hand on the hilt of his sword and his voice icy with promise. “The Arkenstone is the King's Jewel, and I am the king. I will have the Stone, no matter the cost in time or blood. And if any should find it and withhold it from me – be he companion, kin, or heir – *I will be avenged.*”

He stalked from the room without another glance at any of them, leaving Fíli with heart pounding and Kíli's despairing whispers in his ears. The elder prince turned toward Balin pleadingly, only to see the faded blue eyes full of grief. It was Bilbo that finally broke the silence, his voice low and hesitant.

“Balin...if we found the Arkenstone...would it help Thorin, do you think? Put his mind at ease so he might think clearly again?”

The councilor took a deep breath and let out a long sigh, then shook his head. “I doubt it, lad. I think it might just make it worse. My father once said that Thrór's madness increased tenfold once that Stone was discovered. I'd not risk it. I can only hope that it is never found.” He glanced at Dwalin, who nodded shortly, before turning to Fíli. The prince felt his chest tighten at the look on his old teacher's face. “We must speak later, you and I. Before it is too late.”

* X *

Viska sat alone on the ramparts above the Great Gate of Erebor, watching the campfires burning among the ruins of Dale. The refugees of Laketown huddled there with what little they had salvaged from their destroyed home, while the Elves of Mirkwood camped nearby. She had drawn first watch of the night and had relieved Bifur, who had given her a warm hug before leaving. The long hours of solitude had given her too much time to dwell in the depths of her own memory, and
her thoughts of the Lake folk gathered below had only served to remind her that her brother's body still lay in the burned remains of the town, if it had not sunk into darkness of the Long Lake with the fallen dragon.

“It's not right. He should be returned to the Mountain!”

“That he should, lass.” A gentle voice interrupted her sorrowful musings and a kind hand landed on her shoulder. “I've told Thorin the same, and I hope to convince him sooner rather than later, for your sake.”

She turned and offered Balin a sad smile as the elder Dwarf joined her on the battlement, looking weary beyond his years. Viska knew that he had been constantly at Thorin's side since her arrival, and probably before, sleeping only rarely and trying to soothe the king's temper and spare the rest of the Company. She wondered how long he would be able to keep it up.

“How is Thorin? Is he getting worse?” she asked bluntly. Balin gave her a surprised look and she wanted to bite her tongue. Who was she to speak so to a descendant of Durin about another? About the king, no less? But Balin did not look angry. Rather, he smiled a little as his gaze flitted to where the Courting Braid held Fíli's bead. He nodded in approval, though of the courtship or her question, she did not know.

“Aye lass,” he responded, just as bluntly. “He paces, and snarls, and all but accuses us of deliberately withholding the Stone.”

“Bilbo mentioned that. He cannot honestly believe that one of the Company would betray him!”

Balin sighed and shook his head. “I do not know what he might believe any more. He is not himself. He hasn't been since we set foot on this Mountain. He does not listen to the Mountain – he is too obsessed with the Arkenstone. I had hoped that without the ring....” He trailed off, looking alarmed as the scuff of a boot on stone heralded the arrival of another member of the Company. Viska thought fear flashed in his eyes as he turned, and it tore at her heart to think that Thorin could now inspire such in one of his oldest friends. It was not Thorin on the stair, however, but a solemn-faced Fíli, followed by a tired Kíli, and Balin relaxed with an audible sigh.

“What ring, Balin?” Fíli asked quietly, moving to sit next to the Dwarrowlass. His brother sank down in a deceptively lazy posture nearby, where he could keep an eye on the stairs and the hall below. Balin shook his head and shrugged helplessly as Viska leaned into Fíli's side and his arm settled around her shoulders.

“I don't know why Thorin never told you of it. How well do you remember the history of the Second Age? The Rings of Power, in particular?” Fíli's eyes narrowed in thought. “They were tainted by the Enemy's influence,” he replied carefully. “Except those of the Elves – not that they would ever admit otherwise. Some were given to each of the races, save Hobbits, who always seem to be left out of everything. The Dwarves had seven – one for each of the clans – so I guess that our ancestor had one. Why?”

“Aye, our family had one. As recently as your grandfather, lad, though it was rumored that Durin's ring was also untouched by the Enemy. Legend says it was given directly to Durin III by the Elf that crafted it, Celebrimbor.”

“The one that worked with Narvi?”

“The very one.” Balin nodded at the archer's quiet question. “Thrór wore Durin's ring when Erebor fell, but he gave it to Thráin before the Battle of Azanulbizar. Thorin said that Gandalf asked him about it when they met in Bree, when this quest was decided upon. The ring vanished with Thráin, of course – the last of the Dwarf rings, since four where consumed in dragon fire and the remaining...
two were lost to the Enemy before the Last Alliance. Thorin speaking of it reminded me of what happened to the Men who were gifted rings, and I wondered – hoped – that perhaps the ring was why Thrór fell to the Dragon-sickness.” The elder Dwarf broke off and sighed heavily, shaking his head. “But Thorin never wore it, and -”

“-and he has fallen anyway,” Fíli completed grimly.

“Aye. But I have been speaking to Master Baggins, and he had an interesting tale to tell.”

The prince raised one eyebrow and met Balin's gaze.

“It seems that our burglar overheard a conversation between Gandalf and Lord Elrond, the night before we left Rivendell. Our host was concerned about Thorin being influenced by the Arkenstone. Gandalf never intended for Thorin to touch the Stone – Bilbo was to hold it until the dragon was dead.”

Viska's mind was whirling, and she could see a thousand thoughts tumbling behind Fíli's eyes and furrowed brow. Kíli moved restlessly, his eyes flickering to his brother's face as as both lads seemed to arrive at a conclusion simultaneously.

“The Arkenstone is the danger then. But why did Gandalf never warn us?”

“He probably intended to do so,” the lass interjected quietly. “I don't believe that he ever meant to be away from the Company for so long. Doubtless, he thought he would have plenty of time to explain to Thorin.” She glanced at the councilor. “You said Lord Elrond was worried about the Arkenstone's influence. What of Gandalf? Beyond his intention not to let Thorin touch it, could Bilbo tell if he had the same concern?”

“He did not.” Balin nodded at her shortly, then met Fíli's gaze. “But I fear that is because he was not aware of Thorin's history with the Stone.”

“What do you mean?” Fíli leaned forward, frowning slightly, and Viska took his free hand in both of hers, gripping gently. Balin sighed once more.

“I had forgotten, until Thorin's behavior in Laketown, and I did not make the connection until Bilbo told me of what he had heard. The headaches, the phantom music – Thráin had similar complaints in the months before Erebor fell, the months after the Arkenstone was found. I remember my uncle and my father speaking in hushed whispers about it. The problems faded a few weeks into the Exile, but they began after he touched the Arkenstone.

“Gandalf thought Thorin would never have touched the Stone, since he was so young when the dragon came. He thought he would have been safe. But Thorin did touch the Stone. Only once, and only briefly, but he did touch it. It was a foolish dare that only learned about later. My fool of a brother dared him to creep into the throne room and touch the Stone above the great seat. Gandalf never asked, and I never thought to tell him.”

Fíli sighed gustily, pulling his hand from Viska's grasp to scrub at his face. “What if we found the Stone?”

The councilor shook his head. “I still believe what I told Bilbo. The Arkenstone would make it worse, as it did for Thrór when it was originally found. If we find it, we will lose him.”

“And if we do not, my uncle will lead this Company to ruin, unless the arrival of the Orcs changes something. You said that he is not listening to the Mountain?”

“No. He will not touch her stone, lest it distract him.”
Viska looked from one to the other in confusion. “What do you mean?”

Balin sighed and took a seat on a broken block of stone, but there was a small smile on his face as he glanced around at his audience.

“The lads learned a bit of this the night we opened the secret door, but I will tell you the tale as it was told to me. As it should, perhaps, have been told to you long since.

“When Durin's Bane woke and walked in Khazâd-dûm, we lost two kings of Durin's Folk in the space of a single year. Durin VI was slain by the beast, and his son Náin, and finally the ancient city fell and their people were sundered. Many fled west, finding homes in the Blue Mountains among those Firebeards and Broadbeams that had remained, or that had returned to their ancestral homes during Khazâd-dûm's long isolation. Others went north, moving through the Misty Mountains in what may have been an attempt to retake Gundabad from the Orcs. If so, it failed. The new king, however, led those with him east, toward the ancient Longbeard mining colony of the Iron Hills. Their route took them past the Lonely Mountain. Some of his kin, proud and reluctant to arrive as beggars and refugees, suggested that the Mountain be surveyed, to see if it might serve as a location for a new home. Thráin I agreed and sent trusted Dwarrow to do just that. And they, of course, found more than they could have imagined, for the Mountain had a heart of green marble and several promising veins of precious metal. When the first high quality gems were found, the king announced to his people that the kingdom of Durin's Folk would be rebuilt beneath Erebor, and he would be King Under the Mountain.

“It was shortly after this decision was made, when his people still dwelt in shelters at the Mountain's base as the first hallways were carved, that Thráin realized that whenever he laid a hand on the stone of the Mountain, he could feel a low hum, like a rhythmic, wordless song that emanated from the depths of the world. Being a rather young king, barely into his majority, he was reluctant to mention it to his advisers, so it was not until his older cousin came to him in confusion that he discovered that others could hear it as well. After close questioning of those closest to him, it was established that only those descended from the Line of Durin could discern what they came to call the Song of the Mountain, and that they could do so from a very young age. It tied them to the Mountain, in a way. When word came, after Thráin's death, of the growing community of Durin's Folk in the Grey Mountains, Thorin I wrote of his reluctance to leave the Mountain, even to join their kin in the north. The few writings that were preserved from the time spent in Zeleg'ubrazul mention that those of Durin's Line that remembered Erebor often complained of the “silence” in their new home, the loss of the ancient Song. When Thorr led them back to the Mountain, after the war with the dragons that cost him his father and younger brother, the Song welcomed them home when the Great Gate was opened once more.”

“As it did when Thorin opened the hidden door.”

Viska blinked, staring at the older Dwarf as she tried to sort her jumbled thoughts into some sort of order.

“Erebor...sings?”

Behind her, Kíli gave a small bark of laughter, and she could feel Fíli trying not to chuckle at the disbelief in her voice, but Balin merely gave her a broad smile.

“In a way, lass, though Gandalf tells me that it is more of a natural vibration that our minds interpret as a song. Erebor woke when Durin's Folk first came, and she is tied to Durin's Line.” His smile faded slightly as his brow furrowed. “Though, I must say that she seems...stronger than I remember. Perhaps it is the long years blurring my memory, but I don't recall her communicating so clearly before Smaug's arrival.”
Viska barely heard his last comments, for her attention was on Fíli and the realization that had lit her mind.

“Is that the song that you always hum?”

This time, Kíli did not bother trying to conceal his quiet laughter, and she watched a deep flush creep up her One's face as he studiously avoided her gaze. Balin chuckled.

“Ah, the romanticism of Durin's Sons. Aye, lass. He'll have heard it from Dís for much of his life. The vibration becomes such a part of us that our kin have always used it to tie those we love closer to us, in a way. My father hummed it to my mother, and to Dwain and I when we were wee things, as I'm sure Glóin did the same for Fla and young Gimli.” He stopped suddenly, fixing a sharp eye on the golden prince. “That's what Kíli used to bring you back in Mirkwood, isn't it, lad?”

Fíli nodded, his blush fading somewhat as his eyes went distant and thoughtful.

“When I was lost in the dream, the Elven enchantment was a song, a melody that twisted my thoughts away from what I knew to be true. When Kíli sang the Song of the Mountain, it drowned out that magic and helped me come back to myself. Then Thorin's voice joined Kíli's and I was able to make my way back completely.” He sighed and shook his head. “Amad told us some of this when we were very young, but Kíli and I always thought it was just a story.”

“Until you felt it for yourselves. And who can blame you?” The elder Dwarrow shrugged, then pressed his hands to his knees and slowly pushed himself to his feet. “And now, I believe that I will retire, and I suggest that you lads do the same. We all get little enough sleep as it is.”

“We will, I'm just waiting—” Fíli broke off with a smile as Kíli jumped to his feet to welcome a sleepy-looking Bombur as the tinker joined them on the rampart.

“Welcome, sleepy head! Come to take the watch?”

Fíli stood, helping Viska to her feet as Bofur's quiet brother gave them all a tired smile, then covered a massive yawn.

“My turn, it seems. Bifur was restless and took it upon himself to wake me. Apologies if I'm late.”

Fíli shook his head, clapping their friend on one broad shoulder. “None needed. We are all exhausted, and I'll not begrudge you a few extra minutes.”

“Especially when it is not actually his watch that you are relieving,” Viska put in with a wry smile. “Peaceful watch, my friend.”

Viska stopped to give the tinker a hug as Balin started down the stairs, Kíli on his heels. Fíli loitered at the top, waiting patiently as Bombur caught her arm and spoke to her quietly.

“Try to make sure that they actually get some rest, lass. Balin and Fíli especially. They need to calm those busy minds of theirs and get some sleep. I fear that we will need all of the level heads that we can muster over the next few days.” She nodded and he paused, studying her face for a long moment before pulling her in for another quick hug. “I am truly sorry about your brother, Viska, but I am glad to see you safe. We feared for Fíli, if you were lost.”

Tears burned in her eyes as she glanced over at the golden-haired prince, but she shook her head firmly. “He would have been survived. He still had Kíli. They are strong when they stand together.”

Bombur shook his head, his eyes grave and sad. “They are, and you are right, he would have
survived. But he would never have been the same. The others, save Glóin and my brother, do not understand the bond as we do. They do not truly understand what it would have meant for him to have lost his One. His mother would, were she here, but for all of the loss in his life, Thorin never lost one to whom his heart was bound. Fíli would have survived, but he would have been forever changed."

Viska frowned, her attention caught by his mention of Bofur. “Wait, do you mean Bofur....” She trailed off as he shook his head sharply.

“It is not my tale to share, but I think, perhaps, that he will do so soon. Sleep well, lass.”

* X *

Bilbo watched from a dark alcove as Balin, Kíli, Fíli, and Viska made their way down from the battlements. A small smile crept across his face at the clear affection between the young Dwarrow couple. He, too, had noted the new braid that each wore, and a discreet question to Bofur had confirmed his guess that they were finally courting. Another reason to hope that his plan worked and conflict could be avoided. The burglar remembered the devastation in the elder prince's eyes when Laketown was burning and Viska feared lost, and he never wanted to see it again.

Bombur was on watch when the Hobbit slipped quietly up the stone staircase, a glum expression on the tinker's face as he stared out into the night. He glanced around in surprise at Bilbo's approach.

“Bilbo? Is something wrong?”

“No,” Bilbo assured him with a smile. “I couldn't sleep, so I came up to see if you wanted me to take your watch. No need in two of us sitting wakeful when only one is needed.”

Bombur's eyes brightened. “Are you certain? I could sleep, but-”

“Very certain. I cannot make myself even doze off, so I might as well be useful. Get some more sleep, Bombur. I do not doubt you'll need it, whatever tomorrow brings.”

The gentle Dwarf got ponderously to his feet and started for the stairs, clapping the burglar on the shoulder with one large hand. “Many thanks, Master Baggins. Peaceful watch.”

“Sleep well.”

Bilbo waited for Bombur to get all of the way down the stairs, the Hobbit fidgeting nervously with the gold ring in his pocket the whole while. Another, larger burden weighed down his trouser pocket, but that was one that he was trying not to think on overmuch. Finally, when Bombur was out of sight, Bilbo stood for a long moment, staring into the depths of Erebor. The Mountain itself intimidated the Hobbit – he was made for the open air and green fields of the Shire, not the deep stillness of the Dwarves' home. But the Company had become his family over the past months, from gruff Glóin, always talking of his family back in the Blue Mountains, to quiet Ori, with his journal and sketches. How could it have come to this, where the only way to save was to betray? For Thorin would see it so, he had no doubt of that. Most of the others, as well. But the Orcs were coming, and they could not afford to waste time and allies.

Taking a deep breath, Bilbo let it out slowly, then turned to the battlement, where a rope was still tied for the younger, nimble Dwarves to climb out to check the wall. Scooping the coil of the rope
from the stone, he dropped it over and watched it unwind down to the ground. A moment later, he was over the side, climbing carefully down the rope until he could drop safely to the grass. Again, he paused for a long moment, staring up at the barricade that they had constructed from rubble and debris. A wall against the world. Then he turned and hurried off into the night, heading for the camp of the Elves, the Arkenstone in his pocket.

* X *

Bard of Laketown was beyond weary, so he was not best pleased when an Elf appeared at his tent to tell him that his presence was required by King Thranduil. Sighing heavily, he nodded and sat to pull his boots back on. He cursed silently when his movement disturbed Sigrid, who was curled up on a pallet with her siblings.

“Da?” she asked quietly, blinking sleep-clouded eyes. “What's wrong?”

“Nothing, sweetheart. Go back to sleep. I'll be back soon.”

“You need to get more rest, Da,” she scolded gently, still half-asleep herself, and he chuckled softly at how much she sounded like her mother.

“I know, love. I'll sleep when I get back, I promise. Now, hush.”

With a last check on Tilda and Bain (and the little dog cuddled between them), he slipped silently from the tent and followed the Elf through the encampment. So far as he could tell, the Elves did not sleep, and their king looked the same by lantern light as he had during the day – alert and immaculate. He sat in his carved chair in the largest tent, eerie blue eyes fixed on a small, barefooted figure that Bard recognized as the quiet little fellow who had traveled with the Dwarves. The tall, gray-clad Wizard that had arrived that afternoon was also there, a small smile on his weathered face as he smoked his pipe.

“Bard of Laketown,” the escorting Elf stated, ushering the bargeman in before he bowed and left. Thranduil nodded dismissively, then glanced at the Man with a strangely amused look on his face.

“It appears that we have a visitor, Master Bard. A member of Oakenshield's Company, come to treat with us.”

“This is Bilbo Baggins, a Hobbit of the Shire,” Gandalf put in quietly, aiming a quelling look at the Elf king. “He is indeed a member of Thorin's Company, and he comes seeking to prevent needless conflict.”

“It will not come to that,” the Lakeman protested. “We will not attack them. Surely the Dwarves will see reason soon.”

The Hobbit gave a sad laugh. “Begging your pardon, Master Bard, but you do not know Thorin Oakenshield as I do. He will fight before he sees one piece of gold leave that Mountain. And the others will follow him, even if they do not agree. His mood is fell and dangerous, but he is their king.”

“And how do you think to stop it?”

“By bringing you the only thing he treasures above gold – the only thing you might use to bargain
He pulled a small bundle from his pocket and set it on the table, unwrapping the cloth to reveal a white gem that shone with a brilliant inner light. Bard stared as Thranduil started to his feet in surprise.


The Hobbit nodded sadly. “And the heart of Thorin Oakenshield. The King's Jewel.”

“Worth a king's ransom, or more,” Bard noted. He stared at the little man. “How is this yours to give?”

Bilbo fidgeted uncomfortably. “I was promised a fifteenth share of the treasure, with no stipulations, so I claimed this. I believe that Thorin will trade a share of the gold for this Stone. We cannot afford to fight amongst ourselves. The Orcs are out there, somewhere.”

The Elf king had regained most of his poise and a contemptuous look crossed his face at this statement. “So the Wizard says, but I have seen no evidence of such.” Bilbo looked around at him in disbelief.

“But, they attacked Bard's home in Laketown, Viska told us.”

“Aye,” the Lakeman put in, staring at the Elf. “She and her brother protected my children, with the help of two Elves. Have your people not told you of this?”

The king shrugged, looking unconcerned. “Legolas and Tauriel sent me word that they were scouting North after an Orc attack, but an attack by a small band does not mean that a larger army is on its way. Mithrandir claims these Orcs sought to prevent the Mountain being retaken. They have failed.”

The Wizard shook his head. “Did you miss the part about Azog paying homage to Dol Guldur? To the Necromancer? To Sauron? Do not be a fool, Thranduil!”

The Elf's eyes were chips of ice as he addressed his comments to the incredulous Man. “I imagine that you have had little experience with Wizards, Bard of Laketown, but you will come to learn that they are fond of delivering dire warnings and gloomy prophecy.”

Gandalf's eyes sparked. “You will also learn, Master Bard, that certain Elves are pompous, arrogant, and pigheaded to the point of folly!”

Unwilling to get further caught up in the quarrel between the two powerful beings, Bard turned to the Hobbit, studying him curiously.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked, seeing the conflict in the small man's face. “You owe us no loyalty.”

Baggins sighed and shook his head. “I'm not doing it for you, I am doing it for them. Dwarves are stubborn, and obstinate, and secretive, but they are also brave, kind, and loyal to a fault. They are merchants, husbands, fathers, sons...a prince and his beloved. They have become my friends – even Thorin, and I will not let him lead them to a bad end if I can help avert it. They do not deserve it.”

Bard nodded, aware that the Elf king and the Wizard had fallen quiet listening to the short speech. For all of his bloodline, descended from the Lord of Dale, Bard considered himself a simple Man, and the disputes of the great were far outside his ken. He was only a bargeman, after all, a father...
seeking to protect his children. This, though, he could understand.

“And that, my dear Bilbo, is why I chose you for this journey.” Gandalf spoke quietly, a fond look on his aged face. He glanced at the others. “Can we at least agree to accept the offer that Master Baggins has set before us? Will we try to bargain with Thorin?”

After a long moment, Thranduil nodded curtly. Bard followed suit, watching as their guest relaxed slightly.

“Very well. Now that's settled, I need to return to the Mountain before I'm missed.”

“You can't go back!” Bard protested, relieved when the Wizard echoed him.

“It is too dangerous, Bilbo. When he sees that we hold the Arkenstone, I do not know what he will do. Especially if he realizes that you handed it over to us and not him.”

“I don't fear Thorin,” the Hobbit told him firmly.

“You should.”

“No, Gandalf – I said that they are my friends, and I meant it. I will not hide out here. I did not make this decision lightly, and I will take the consequences, whatever they may be.”

* X *

A small figure crept up the rope at the Great Gate, keeping to the shadows as he scrambled over the battlement and pulled the rope up after him. Turning to look out over the slope that led down to the ruins of Dale, Bilbo Baggins sighed heavily. Hopefully, his actions would avert a war between the Dwarves, Elves, and Men...but how much longer before the Orcs arrived? He did not doubt Viska's word, or Gandalf's warning. He just hoped that they would have time to prepare.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
Zeleg'ubrazul – Golden Stair, a Longbeard citadel in the Grey Mountains
COME UNTO HIS HALLS

Bilbo’s aren’t the only eyes that watch the small group descend from the battlements. There is a thrill of joy in the deepest recesses of his mind, where Thorin still retains some shred of himself. The greater part of him, however, is given over to the Arkenstone’s influence, and is lost in suspicion and anger, finding only a threat.

Does she think that he does not see? That he does not notice the warm looks, the sweet smiles, the lilting laughter? Day by day, she worms her way deeper into the affections of all the Company. Day by day, she draws his heirs further from the one that deserves their loyalty, corrupting their hearts.

With a low snarl, he turns from the scene in the entry hall and returns to where he feels most secure – the treasury. There, he basks in the glow of the fire-lit gold, filling his senses with the power of possessing. It is all his – gold, jewels, kingdom – and once he has the Arkenstone in hand, none will stand against him. Not his kin. Not his heirs. Not the arrogant Elf king, or some sanctimonious wandering Wizard. And certainly not a presumptuous jewelry-maker without a drop of Durin’s blood. No, once he holds the Arkenstone, all will be set right and devotion will be given where it is due.

It may be hours or moments before he falls into a dream of power and riches, subject to the weakness of his physical body, but it is well past midnight when he shifts in his sleep, uneasy movements displacing stamped golden coins. He does not wake, his exhaustion too deep to release him quite yet, but his dreams are altered, responding to a change in the song of the Arkenstone.

* X *

Kíli had the dawn watch, and he was waiting impatiently for his replacement when he spotted the approaching riders. He might not have Elven sight, but the young archer was keen of eye for a Dwarf, and it was not difficult to pick out Bard's familiar form. He had not seen the Elf before, but the figure poised and arrogant astride a massive forest elk could only be the king. He did not study the party further, turning instead to Bofur as the miner reached the battlements, his face sober and his gut churning at the thought of how his uncle might greet this new embassy.

“We have visitors.”

Bofur grimaced, his gaze going beyond the prince’s face long enough to mark the arrivals before he gave an oddly formal nod and turned back toward the stairs.
“I’ll take word to the king.”

“Wait.” Bofur paused and glanced back as Kíli sighed. “If you wouldn't mind, Bofur, fetch my brother and my kin, as well. The more cool tempers we have for these negotiations, the better.”

The miner gave him a speculative look, sorrow and understanding in the dark eyes as he gave a small smile and a tiny bow.

“Aye, your highness. I’ll wake Prince Fíli and the Lords of Durin on my way.”

The young prince gave a brief nod of acknowledgment, trying to mask his shock at hearing the titles from his old friend. Even with the Mountain reclaimed, he had not really thought far enough ahead to consider what changes might occur as the kingdom was restored. Still, there was no time to dwell on thoughts of the ephemeral future. As Bofur hurried down to the floor of the entry hall, the youngest Heir of Durin turned to stare back out at the new arrivals. There were actually three riders, and something teased at his mind, a familiarity tied to the stooped figure cloaked in gray that rode next to the king and the bargeman. It was there, and then gone, slipping from his mind as the sound of a heavy tread on stone alerted him to his uncle's arrival, Fíli and Balin on Thorin's heels. The rest of the Company followed, with Dwalin, Óin, and Glóin in the lead and a gray-faced Bilbo trailing behind. With barely a glance for his nephew, Thorin strode to the center of the battlement and fixed his imperious glare on the visitors below. Kíli groaned quietly and fell back to his brother's side, trying to muster a reassuring smile for Viska as the lass stepped to Fíli’s other side, her face pale and eyes dark with concern. Fíli's gaze followed the king.

“Why come you to the Gates of Erebor?” Thorin's voice was an angry bellow, his face shadowed and lined with strain. “Did I not warn you that we would have nothing to discuss until Thranduil and his army returned to the Woodland Realm?”

Kíli could see the wary look on Bard's face, the way the Man's eyes flicked over the Dwarves gathered to either side of their irascible monarch, and he felt a dull ache of guilt, even as he knew that he had no other choice. Thorin was the eldest of Durin's Line, rightful king and his uncle – to defy him was to betray every bond of his family and his people.

“We come to treat with the King Under the Mountain.”

Thorin's hand flexed on the hilt of his sword.

“There will be no negotiation so long as the Elves stand ready to besiege this Mountain!”

Thranduil's face was icy and remote as he drew himself up, seeming to stare down his nose at them even now.

“We need no negotiation. We thought only to offer the King Under the Mountain an opportunity to redeem the payment that was already offered and accepted.”

Kíli felt his brother tense at his side, saw Thorin go absolutely still for a moment, heard the whispers of confusion among the Company. Then the king drew himself up regally and smirked down at the Elf.

“You have nothing that I want.” The smirk spread into a cruel, chillingly dismissive smile. “I have the Mountain, and the treasure within. All the treasure. What could you possibly have to offer?”

“This.”

The third rider produced a small chest from the depths of his pockets and opened it, holding it out for all to see. And time stopped.
It was as though he had captured one of the distant stars, for the light that shone from within the chest was of all colors and none, a mesmerizing glow that called to the very soul. Kíli only became aware that he had stopped breathing when his lungs began to ache for air, and he gasped noisily, echoed by those around him. Time began to move once more, whispered exclamations and anxious conversation breaking out among the Company.

“It can't be!”

“How?”

“Mi targê!”

“Mahal, no....”

“It's a lie!” Glóin's angry outburst broke through as the merchant stepped to Thorin's side. “A trick!”

“Aye, a fake!” Óin agreed. The archer could not read their expressions, could not tell if they truly believed what they were saying, or if they were trying desperately to forestall the king's fury. In the end, it did not matter. Thorin ignored them, his attention locked upon the shining stone, recognition in his eyes. When he spoke, his voice was a low, deadly rumble that stilled all others.

“No. It is real. I can feel it.”

* X *

The air atop the battlements seemed to thicken with suspicion as Thorin glared at the Man and Elf, a chilling thread of hostility in his voice that sent ice creeping along Fíli's bones.

“How came you by the Arkenstone? Which of my kin betrayed me?”

The king turned his bruised glower on those nearest and Fíli actually fell back under the sheer rage in the sapphire eyes. Viska's hand had crept into his, and Kíli was pressed against his shoulder as Thorin stared at them. For the first time in his life, he faced his uncle with true fear in his heart.

No...this is not Thorin. This is not my uncle, not my king...not anymore. This is the Arkenstone's creature. Even as the realization broke on Fíli's mind, he reacted instinctively, dropping Viska's hand as he stepped in front of her. When Kíli started to move up beside him, the crown prince shoved the younger Dwarf back as well, his muscles thrumming with tension.

But the thing that wore Thorin's face was still speaking, voice dropping to a low, deceptive purr of malice as he advanced.

“Which of you has done this? Which of you has betrayed your king, your blood, your very race? Was it you, Fíli? Are you so impatient for the throne, so eager to cast aside all loyalty and honor? Or perhaps Kíli? Did you decide to betray me, to betray your brother, by usurping his birthright and taking what was never yours? But no.” He stopped, his gaze shifting, and the golden prince heard the Dwarrowlass behind him protest quietly even as her hand found his arm. “No, I think I know -”

“It was me! I did it!”
There was a stir in the tight huddle of the Company and Bilbo lurched forward, eyes wide. Fíli turned to the Hobbit in shock, gripping tightly to Viska's hand as it crept down to his. Bilbo was pale but determined, facing Thorin with a grim look on his usually gentle face.

“I gave it to them, Thorin. Not Fíli, or Kíli, or any of the others. I gave them the Arkenstone.”

A dull roar filled Fíli's ears as he stared at the burglar. The other Dwarrow were frozen in place, their expressions ranging from anger (Dwalin, Glóin, Nori), to disbelief (Ori, Bofur, Óin), to a deep sorrow (Balin, Bombur, Dori). Bifur's expression was inscrutable – the elder prince could not even be certain that the toymaker knew what was happening. Kíli had his eyes closed, face ashen, and was shaking his head in denial. Viska's eyes glistened with tears and her lips moved soundlessly, her hand locked in a painful grip on his own. Fury raged in Thorin's eyes such as Fíli had never seen and the king lunged for the Hobbit, grabbing him by the coat and hoisting him up before any of them realized his intention.

“You? You have betrayed me thus? You have handed over the most treasured possession of my kingdom to my enemies? This is how you repay my trust, my friendship? I will cast you from the battlements, thief!”

Fíli was already moving forward, a protest on his lips, but Viska got there first, slipping by him even as Balin gave a horrified protest.

“Thorin, no!”

The Dwarrowmaid moved carefully, both hands open and beseeching as she approached.

“My king, please – Bilbo has ever been a true and loyal companion! Has he not saved your life, the lives of the entire Company, repeatedly? At least hear his reasons before you condemn him!”

Fiery eyes turned on the lass, the familiar handsome features contorted with rage as Fíli's heart froze to see his beloved trying to come between the furious king and the object of his anger.

“Tread lightly, daughter of Kulvik, lest I conclude that you had a part in this treason.”

Bilbo spluttered and choked, frantically repeating a denial, but Viska simply shook her head and dropped to one knee, her head bowed in deference. Her voice was almost calm, only the barest tremor of fear threaded through it.

“I knew nothing of the Halfling’s plan, my king. I did not even know that he had found the gem. Have I not been searching for it this whole time, side by side with the rest of the Company?”

“Side by side with my heirs, you mean.”

Thorin's grip on Bilbo's coat had slackened, and a sick fear in the pit of his stomach prompted Fíli to begin inching forward. He was reluctant to be out of reach of his One as she faced his raging uncle, but neither did he want to provoke the king to action. Words, Viska could handle, as she demonstrated when Thorin continued to speak in that low, threatening tone.

“Do you think I have not seen how you cling to their sides, closer than a shadow? How you have wormed your way into their affections, twisting their minds and subverting their loyalty? After all, why settle for a sixteenth share when you can ensnare an Heir of Durin?”

“Fí!”

Kíli's urgent whisper and hand on his shoulder brought the prince back to himself, suddenly aware
that he was growling deep in his chest, every muscle tense as his instincts screamed. His own
willpower restrained him, more than his brother's grasp. Willpower, and the desperate hope that
physical intervention would not be necessary. Viska, meanwhile, kept her attention on the king as
she rose to her feet, eyes and posture conveying both respect and determination.

“I had no such plan, my king, and the only lie of which I am guilty is in seeking to pass as a lad so I
might help win back the Mountain where my ancestors dwelt.”

Thorin had released the Hobbit, and Bilbo was staggering back to catch his balance, horrified gaze
locked on the confrontation between king and Dwarrowmaid. He was muttering sadly, almost to
himself, as Bifur and his cousins moved up to surround the Hobbit protectively.

“I only wanted to prevent a battle. I thought if I claimed the Stone as my share, Bard could
exchange it for enough to help the Lakemen. I only wanted to save lives – Men, Elves, and
Dwarves should not be fighting, not when there are so many other enemies. Not when the pale Orc
is out there.”

“Regarding which we have only this liar's word.”

“What reason would she have to lie?”

The incredulous outburst came from Kíli, the younger prince taking an impulsive step forward.
“The people of Laketown have nothing, Thorin! Whatever else they did, they slew the dragon after
we woke it!”

The king's gaze never left Viska.

“You seek to turn even my kin against me, while the Halfling hands over the greatest treasure of
my house to my enemies.”

Viska's temper slipped.

“It is a gem, Thorin! A rock! Nothing more!”

His hand cracked across her face before anyone could move, sending her sprawling on the stone
floor. Fíli suddenly found himself restrained by Dwalin, who was staring at the king in horror.
Nearby, Glóin was holding Kíli, while refusing to look at Thorin. Balin looked stricken, and Ori's
face had crumpled, his eyes filled with tears. Thorin ignored them all.

“It is the King's Jewel, the Heart of the Mountain, and the most valuable thing in my kingdom!”

Her cheek already swelling, blood trickling from where his ring had split the skin, Viska met
Thorin's gaze with sorrow-filled eyes.

“And you have lost yourself, Thorin Oakenshield, for once you would have named your people
thus. Once, you would have called your heirs the greatest treasures of your house. Now, you are
sunk in the gold sickness and cannot see the worth of those around you.”

Thorin's face darkened and he stepped forward as the lass stared at him. Before he could speak,
however, something seemed to catch his gaze.

“What is that?”

The deep blue eyes narrowed, then widened in incandescent fury as he drew a knife and lunged
forward...for Viska's courting braid. The Dwarrowmaid scrambled backward and Fíli shrugged free
of Dwalin's grip. In a heartbeat, he stood between his uncle and the lass, blade bared as he snarled at Thorin. Behind him, Ólí had his own sword in hand even as he pulled Viska to her feet, and the elder prince realized that Dwalin and Glóin had moved to flank the king, the Arms Master disarming him carefully as the fire-haired merchant glowered with disapproval. When Viska stepped to Fíli's side, he pulled her to his shoulder, his free hand going protectively to her braid as he shook his own golden mane back to show the one that he wore. Thorin opened his mouth, but Glóin cut in before he could speak, his voice low and urgent with reminders of ancient law as Balin offered quiet interjections. Finally, the cousins fell silent and Thorin once more turned his gaze on his nephews and the lass they sheltered. He stared at them for a long moment, then fixed on Viska.

"Get out."

"Uncle?" Ólí sounded bewildered and horrified, but the king's eyes never left the lass.

"Unhand my heir and get out of my Mountain, ushanxh binarzâm. Take the deceitful akdâmuthrab with you, or I will execute you both. Go to your allies. Go to the Men, and the Elves. They will have their gold for the Arkenstone, one sixteenth to be counted your share, and good luck to you in seeing any of it. Now, get out of my sight."

Bilbo was already moving, Bofur hustling him toward the edge of the battlement. The rope they had used during the construction of the blockade still hung there, and the miner wasted no time in assisting the Hobbit up. Fíli caught at Viska's arm before she could start away. She managed a small smile, pressing a quick kiss to her fingertips and then to his lips.

"Nê ikhshim, kurdê. All will be well. I love you."

She bowed to Thorin, then turned to follow the Hobbit. A torrent of emotion churned through the prince, finally coalescing into an icy certainty. He met Ólí's eyes and his brother froze.

"I'm sorry, nadadith."

Ólí shook his head, the corner of his mouth quirking up as his hands moved in swift signs.

I understand.

You must stay here, as long as you can. You and Balin must be Thorin's reason. Be safe.

With a last sad smile for his brother, Fíli turned on his heel and hurried after Viska, wrapping an arm about her shoulder. Startled green eyes flitted to meet his gaze.

"Fíli, you can't-"

"What I cannot do is watch you walk away. Not again."

"FÍLI!"

Thorin's bellow stopped them both mid-stride and Bilbo halted in the act of starting down the rope. Bofur waved him on urgently and the Hobbit gave them a sympathetic grimace before disappearing from sight. Fíli's arm tightened as the young couple turned to face his uncle. Nausea twisted his gut and pain tore at his heart as he confronted the Dwarf he had once admired above all others.

"Get back here. You are my heir, Crown Prince of Erebor!"

"I am Fíli, son of Torvi and Dís, not your possession. I lost my One once, and she came back to me beyond all hope. I will not lose her again, not for all the gold in Erebor. Not even for you, my uncle..."
and my king. Since she is banished, I go with her.”

“If you leave this Mountain, you are no longer my kin.” The rich voice was icy with promise and the golden prince simply nodded.

“So be it. Kíli will make a fine heir.”

Leading Viska quickly over to the rope, he watched her clamber over the parapet and start down. A clap on his shoulder brought his gaze up to meet Bofur's, sorrowful and sincere as he whispered a farewell.

“I wish you all the luck in the world, lad.”

Fíli nodded a thanks to the miner, then climbed over the wall, taking one last look at his companions before he began his descent. Thorin had turned his back and was yelling down at the leaders that had come to parley. Balin was at his side, looking resigned and hopeless. Dwalin hovered by his brother, looking unsure for the first time that the fair-haired prince could remember. Dori had an arm around his youngest brother as Ori wept silently, and Nori toyed idly with a small dagger, a troubled look on his face. Glóin was studying the floor, while Óin stared at the king sorrowfully. Bombur was downcast, standing close to his cousin as Bifur signed a quick Be well. And Kíli...dear Kíli, the other half of his soul, the other side of his coin...Kíli stood tall and proud, messy hair swept out of his face, dark eyes fierce and alight with purpose. With a final nod to his brother, Fíli began the journey to the ground, leaving behind his king, his people, and his birthright to follow his heart and his conscience.

* X *

Balin stood with his eyes closed, blocking out the sight of the mad rage that twisted the face of his cousin, his king, his friend, as Thorin bellowed at the riders at the gate. Despair and grief chilled the old Dwarf's heart.

“I am betrayed by within, and left with no alternative but to bargain for what is rightfully mine.” Every word was a hurled insult in the Dwarf king's rumbling voice, an avalanche of contempt and hatred. “I will give a sixteenth part of the treasure, that which was promised to the thief, since this is what he has chosen for his share. The rat himself, I send out for you to do as you see fit.”

“And these others? I see two Dwarves descending the rope as well.”

There was a hesitation and Balin ventured to open his eyes, hoping against hope that his king might be struggling with his decision. But Thorin's jaw was set and a flicker of contempt passed over that regal profile as he answered curtly.

“Traitors, exiled in disgrace.” Ignoring Kíli's indignant protest and Dori's dismayed gasp, he continued. “They are of Durin's Folk, and thus are mine to judge and sentence. They have forfeited all claim to the treasure and lands of Erebor through their actions. Welcome them or banish them, I care not.”

The old councilor groaned and shook his head as a ripple of distress ran through the Company. Turning his head slightly, he met his brother's gaze and found determination and anguish in the dark eyes as Dwalin nodded. Before he could seek the same agreement from Glóin and Óin, the third rider threw back his hood. The vague air of familiarity that had concealed him dissipated as
Gandalf's voice rang through the still morning air.

“You are making a poor figure of a king, Thorin Oakenshield. Is it wise to begin your rule by making enemies of your closest neighbors?”

Thorin sneered. “Ask rather if it is wise for my nearest neighbors to court the anger of the King Under the Mountain, Wizard. I should have known that you would arrive well after the dragon was dealt with, siding with Elves in their greedy machinations! I should have cast the burglar down to you, rather than allowing him to scurry out on his own feet! Never again will I have dealings with Wizards or Shire-rats! You will have your gold and silver at midday tomorrow.”

Bard nodded shortly, reaching out to close the lid of the wooden chest that Gandalf carried.

“Very well. The Arkenstone will be returned to you then.”

* X *

Viska found Bilbo waiting when she reached the ground, his kind eyes looking pained as he took in the swelling lump on her face.

“I am so sorry.” The Hobbit sounded miserable, one hand fidgeting with something in his vest pocket as he shifted his feet and shook his head. “I never meant for you to get caught up in that, Viska. It was all me, I didn't think Thorin would-”

“Peace, my friend.” She held up a hand to halt his apology, managing a painful smile as she tried to ignore Thorin's shouted conversation with Bard and the others. “It is hardly your fault. Thorin has not trusted me since Mirkwood, I think, and the Arkenstone has a strong hold on his mind. He is not himself. Had I kept silent, things might have been different.”

“Perhaps.” Fíli dropped to the ground next to them with a grunt, pain flitting across his face as the rope was withdrawn. Setting his shoulders, he turned his back on the battlement and focused on his companions. “For now. But once Bilbo was gone, perhaps he would have found other crimes to lay at your feet. His accusations of trying to manipulate me and Kíli sounded like something that had been festering for a while. No, Master Burglar, you and Viska are well out of his reach, and I think it is for the best. If I could, I would get all of the Company away from him until we could get him free of the Arkenstone's influence.”

“Fíli, I....” Viska trailed off, staring at him in silence for she did not know what to say. He had walked away from everything to stand at her side – rank, kin, and family. Banished by Erebor, cast out by Durin's Line, they would find no welcome among any of the other Seven Families. Any who offered them shelter or succor would invite Thorin's wrath, a risk none would be willing to accept.

The golden prince seemed to read her tumbling thoughts in her face, for he smiled softly at her and his eyes lit as he reached out to stroke her cheek, smoothing the thin braid that hung in front of her ear. In spite of her grief and fear, she felt a small thrill as she leaned into his touch. Callused fingers cupped her face and love swelled in her heart.

“Nê ikhshim, amrâlimê. All will be well. Kíli and Balin will try to reach him, reach the real Thorin. Come, I want to speak to Bard and Gandalf.”
She nodded and let him draw her to his side as they followed Bilbo toward the little group at the
gate. Viska leaned into Fíli's warmth, drawing comfort from his presence as she met Gandalf's kind
eyes, Bard's compassionate dark gaze, and the unnerving, unearthly blue orbs of the Elf King of
Mirkwood. The Elf lifted one elegant brow.

"Master Halfling, who are your companions? I assume that this is the she-Dwarf and one of the
members of Oakenshield's Company that you helped escape from my dungeons?"

Viska nodded tightly, but did not move from Fíli's side. "Viska, daughter of Kulvik and last of his
line."

She saw a shadow of sorrow flit across the Wizard's face, but Bard was elaborating on her
introduction with a small smile.

"Viska, friend to Laketown, who defended my children from Orcs and helped get them out when
Smaug descended. And Fíli, nephew and heir to Thorin Oakenshield, if I am not mistaken. Another
Dwarf to whom my family owes thanks, for his rescue of my youngest daughter from the waters of
the Long Lake."

Fíli stepped forward and offered a small bow.

"Fíli, son of Torvi and of Dís, daughter of Thráin, though now disinherited and disowned."

His tone was light, but she could see the pain in the lines of his face, the tension of his shoulders,
and she moved to his side once more. Gandalf looked troubled as Bard's eyebrows rose. Thranduil's
eyes might have widened slightly, but his face was cool and impassive.

"Disinherited? For what crime? It was Master Baggins that brought us the Arkenstone."

"I think we had best discuss this back at the camp." Gandalf shot the Dwarves a glance, a glint of
humor in his eyes. "I would offer our friends rides, but I doubt that either of the Dwarves would
care to ride with the king."

Thranduil stiffened slightly, then nodded. "Very well. I will carry our esteemed Hobbit, if he has
no objections."

Bilbo looked slightly flustered, but did not protest, so he was lifted up behind the Elf King on the
great elk. Gandalf took Viska up behind him, and Fíli rode with Bard. The Wizard gave the former
prince a disturbed look as they headed toward the encampment.

"It troubles my heart to see you without your brother," he confessed quietly. "Kíli would not
come?"

"He would have, yes, but I asked him to stay." Fíli's posture was tense, as though he was barely
keeping himself from turning to watch the figures atop Erebor's battlements as they receded with
the distance. "Perhaps he and Balin can guide my uncle back to himself. He will remain in Erebor
for as long as he can, but I know Kíli. He will join us if he feels he is no longer of use there."

"Then we must hope that he does not leave it too late."

Gandalf refused to elaborate further on his comment and they finished the ride in silence,
dismounting in front of a large tent with simple, elegant lines. The Wizard helped Viska down
carefully, then turned to stop a passing Elf and send him on an errand before turning back to the
Dwarrowmaid.
“Bard made mention of your brother's sacrifice, my dear lady. You have my deepest sympathy for
your loss.”

Resolutely stifling the fresh surge of grief, she nodded her thanks, then joined Fíli as he followed
the tall folk into the tent. Low stools were quickly set in place for their comfort and she sank down
gratefully, leaning just slightly into Fíli's shoulder. Catching sight of a tiny smile on Gandalf's face,
she felt a blush warm her cheeks as he chuckled. At her side, Fíli darted a startled glance at the
Wizard and the old wanderer answered his unspoken question.

“I worried for Viska, once I realized the truth – I hoped she would be safe on the expedition, but I
certainly did not expect for her to find her One. Though I must say, I find you well-matched, Fíli. I
offer you my sincere congratulations.”

Fíli smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners and dimples deepening as he gazed at her. When Bard
offered his blessings with a fond smile, the lass snickered as the prince eyed the bargeman with a
hint of jealousy. Bard saw it, too, and shook his head gently.

“She and her brother saved my children from Orcs, and saw them safely out of the path of the
dragon, Prince Fíli. With the Elf Captain that helped them, your lady will always be counted a
friend to Dale and Esgaroth, and I rejoice to see her so happy after her recent sorrow.”

Fíli's face cleared and his bowed his head slightly, one arm creeping around Viska's waist. “Your
pardon, Master Bard. Dwarves are protective of their treasure, whether it be gold or love. I also
understand from my lady that we have you to thank for the dragon's demise. Though I am no
longer my uncle's heir, I offer you thanks on behalf of the Dwarves of Erebor, as well as my
deepest apologies. We had no intention of setting him on your folk.”

Thranduil chose that moment to cut into the conversation, his tone cool.

“And why, exactly, have you been disinherited?”

Bilbo shifted on his seat.

“I'm afraid that's my fault.”

“No!” Viska cut him off a little more sharply than she intended and offered the Hobbit an
apologetic smile before she explained to the others. “Thorin lost his temper when Bilbo confessed
to giving you the Stone. I was the first to intervene, and he could only see the lass that had lied to
him from the Shire to Mirkwood. He lashed out.”

“Literally,” Fíli rumbled. A silent Elf had provided him with a bowl of clean water and a cloth that
he now touched gently to her face.

“He banished me from Erebor.” She choked slightly at this admission but drew strength from the
gentle smile on Fíli’s face as he dabbed away the blood and set the cloth aside. “When Fíli
determined to go with me, Thorin disowned him.”

Fíli's brow furrowed and a darkness stole through his eyes, leaving him looking slightly lost as he
turned to the Wizard.

“He is deep in the sickness that took Thrór. I can only hope that Kíli and the others can help him
find himself again.”

Gandalf shook his head, confusion writ large on his face.
“I did not anticipate this. I knew that the draw of the Arkenstone was a strong one, but Bilbo never handed it over to Thorin. It should not have been able to seize him like this – not if he never touched it!”

“But he has.”

Gandalf froze, staring at Fíli in consternation. “What?”

The fair-haired swordsman sighed and shook his head. “Balin told us last night. When Thorin was little more than a Dwarfling, before the dragon came, one of his cousins dared him to sneak into the Throne Room and touch the Arkenstone.”

The Wizard sighed, pain in his aged voice. “I never knew. Thráin said that he had warned his children away from the Stone.”

“He did. I remember that from Amad's tales. But Thorin was young, and stubborn, and a dare from one of his cousins would have been difficult to ignore.” Fíli sighed and settled his shoulders, turning his brilliant blue gaze on the Wizard. “Mistake were made on all sides. But they are in the past, and they cannot be changed. All that we can do is make the best choices moving forward.”

Bard cleared his throat, reminding them of his presence. “I feel I have missed some deep meaning to these events, but I will stick to what I know. Thorin has agreed to ransom the Arkenstone. Once, I would have trusted his word, but now I must ask – will he truly follow through with his promise?”

Viska and Fíli shared a glance and she shook her head reluctantly.

“He set it for tomorrow to buy himself some time.”

“Dáin is on his way from the Iron Hills,” Fíli continued grimly. “Thorin sent for him when the dragon fell, claiming the Arkenstone was found and the throne was his. He will have sent ravens to hurry him along since the Elves arrived, though I do not know the latest word. If he set the meeting for midday, he expects them to arrive before then.”

“That's good, though, isn't it?” Bilbo glanced around the room, a surprised look on his expressive face. “I mean, a Dwarf army to help fight against the Orcs?”

Fíli shrugged. “Perhaps. If we can convince them to fight with us, and not against us. And we've no idea when the Orcs will arrive.”

“Tomorrow, before the sun reaches midday.”

Viska startled at the new voice and turned with a soft cry of relief to see two familiar figures stepping into the tent.

“Tauriel! It is good to see you safe, my friend!”

The fire-haired Elf spared the Dwarrowmaid a quick smile, then bowed to her king and took up a deceptively relaxed military stance. Her companion, the golden-haired Elf prince, nodded respectfully to the assembled leaders and met his father's surprised gaze. His words were blunt, his face grim and jaw set.

“Gundabad is empty. Bolg, spawn of Azog the Defiler, leads the legions toward Mirkwood and the Lonely Mountain. They will arrive before noon tomorrow.”
Thranduil's face had gone still, but his eyes searched the younger Elf's face for a long moment before he nodded. “Very well. Warn the Captains.”

“There is more, my king,” Tauriel spoke up. “I sent scouts along the border of the wood...another army marches from the direction of Dol Guldur, led by the white Orc himself. There are murmurs that the dark fortress has been overthrown, but they march nonetheless and their ranks are swollen by Goblins from the Misty Mountains. They may arrive before those from Gundabad, but it will not be by much.”

The Elf King closed his eyes for a bare moment, then turned to the Wizard, a wry, self-deprecating twist to his lips.

“I find myself in the rather uncomfortable position of hoping that a Dwarven army arrives sooner rather than later. Prince Fíli, will Lord Dáin listen to you? Will he fight alongside us?”

The young prince considered for a long moment before meeting the Elf's gaze with a smirk reminiscent of his absent brother. “I do not know if he will listen, but I do know that he hates Orcs as much as any Elf. One way or another, he will fight. I just hope that he gets here early enough for us to actually make a plan for the battle.”

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Mi targê! - By my beard! (Khuzdul)
ushnakh binarzâm – faithless traitor (Khuzdul)
akdâmuthrab – burglar (Khuzdul)
Nê ikhshim, kurdê. - Do not worry, my heart. (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/young brother (Khuzdul)
Nê ikhshim, amrâlimê. - Do not worry, my love. (Khuzdul)
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

31

A SONG FOR HEART AND SOUL

“Then we're all agreed?”

Balin's query was mostly rhetorical, but Dwalin found himself glaring around the small room regardless, ready to quell any debate. The five Dwarrow gathered before him, however, nodded quickly, and the Arms Master relaxed as he took in the determined looks on their faces. They were only seven, for Bofur had the watch on the battlements, while Bombur and Bifur had excused themselves from the discussion on the grounds that it was the business of Durin's Line. Kíli had been left out at Balin's insistence – Mahal only knew where the lad had wandered off to, anyway. He had disappeared soon after the ugly scene at the Gate, and no one had the heart to track him down. Especially not for business such as this.

It felt wrong. The big warrior had accepted his brother's reasoning in his mind, but his heart was torn and his gut roiled with unease. He wondered abruptly if this was how Bilbo had felt when he was making the decision to take the Arkenstone from the Mountain and hand it to those who threatened to lay siege. It was wrong, but it was also the best thing that they could do. They were running out of time, that much he knew in his bones. Balin had spent several days trying to guide Thorin back to reason, and had only succeeded in driving himself to the point of exhaustion and despair. The Dwarf that wore the Raven Crown was no longer recognizable as their cousin. His behavior toward the Men outside had been bad enough – Thorin's promises of payment to the Lakemen had been made reluctantly, true, but never had he hinted that he did not intend to honor them. Dwalin himself was more than a little annoyed that Thranduil had seen fit to lead an army to their gates, but he could not begrudge Bard's willingness to accept the Elves' aid for those who had fallen into his charge. Thráin would have done the same, had the Elf King seen fit to offer it, but it was not the fault of the Men that they received the assistance that had been denied to the Dwarves. No, Thorin's anger with the Elves and Men was frustrating in light of the approaching Orc army, but it was not what had shaken the faith of even his staunchest supporters.

He had turned on Bilbo, despite the fact that the Hobbit had proven his friendship several times over the past few months. Even in his own anger about the loss of the Arkenstone, the Arms Master had recognized the desperation on their burglar's face as he tried to explain his reasoning. Remembering his own brother's cautions that recovery of the treasure would likely do more ill than good had helped temper his reaction as well. Still, to an outsider, one who had not traveled with the Company, the king's rage would appear justified and eminently forgivable. Other actions, however, would not.

Dwalin sighed, vowing silently to himself that if Mahal saw fit to bring him through the coming days intact, he would make it a point to seek out the Hobbit and apologize for not supporting him at the Gate. Then he would need to do the same for Viska and the lads. He frowned, wondering idly if it might not be easier to to simply sacrifice himself in a blaze of glory.
“Tonight?”

Dori’s question was soft, the leather-worker looking worn and pale, although he had committed to their little plot with only a moment’s consideration. Balin nodded.

“Earlier, if we can manage it. We can wait no longer. Dáin draws closer with every hour, and there is no knowing when Azog’s army will arrive.”

“Fíli will probably buy us a little time.” There was a small smirk on Nori’s narrow face as the thief slipped a newly-sharpened blade up his sleeve. “If I know the lad, he’ll back Dáin down long enough to explain something of has happened.”

“Aye, he’s grown, that one. Be a fine King Under the Mountain one day!” A proud smile split Glóin’s thick red beard as he nodded his agreement. “Nearly swallowed my teeth when he stood up to Thorin outside the hidden door about going in after Bilbo. And defending his lass atop the Gate! A perfect blend of his parents, he is – Torvi’s even temper and Dís’s fire when it’s needed.”

Ori managed a small smile, the younger Dwarf’s eyes haunted with guilt. He had been the most reluctant to join them, his gentle heart ill at ease with the kind of betrayal that they planned. Dwalin was fairly certain that only Thorin’s actions in banishing Fíli and Viska – and his attempt to cut the braid from her hair – had allowed them to sway the scholar.

“What about Kíli? Won’t there be better chance of success if he’s involved?”

Balin frowned and nodded, then gave a small shrug. “Possibly, but I worry about the influence of his anger at Thorin after the events of this morning. Perhaps once it is begun.” He glanced at their healer. Óin was already digging through his apothecary bag for the herbs he would need, but he nodded shortly at the councilor’s questioning look.

“After dinner. It’ll take me a bit to get the dram mixed, but it should be ready by then.” He paused, gazing around at his kin, and shook his head. “Mahal forgive us.”

* X *

The Mountain is a tomb.

He had known that it would be – in his mind, he had understood that those who had not escaped had perished in the depths of Erebor. Some had been consumed by the dragon, others still mouldered in whatever hidden alcoves they had found before the end. His own mother, Princess Ara, rests somewhere in these vast halls.

He had known, but it had never been real to him. Even now, it is a remote realization. The power of the Arkenstone wraps him in a cocoon of isolation, putting all emotions (save rage) at a distance. It is only recently, with the distance granted by the Hobbit’s treasonous removal of the Stone from the Mountain, that some hint of the pain and loss has crept into his heart. He remembers Balin’s words beneath Ravenhill – ten thousand Dwarves in Erebor, and fewer than three thousand had escaped the dragon’s wrath. The entire Mountain is a sepulcher, and in his brightest moments, he can almost hear the whispers of the lost.

In a way, they are comforting. Not to the part of him that is deep in the Arkenstone’s control, however. No, it is the deepest core of his mind, that part which is essentially Thorin – son, brother,
uncle, friend – that finds peace in the ancient echoes of the dead. He knew many of them, once, though names and faces are long forgotten, and he will rejoin them in the Halls of Waiting when his time in Middle Earth is done. For now, they are companions in the darkness, balm to a tortured soul.

A conflict looms outside the walls, but inside his mind, battle has already been joined...and he is losing. The flame within is guttering under the constant onslaught of the Arkenstone's power. He wishes he could reach out to the Mountain, feel her cool marble beneath his hand, truly commune with the past, but the Stone will not let him. After so long imprisoned in the depths of the living rock, the Arkenstone hates and fears the Lonely Mountain (and perhaps the effect that such contact will have on him), and so he is cut off from his greatest source of strength.

At his core, he is still Thorin, the true Thorin, the Dwarf that hates himself for his body's actions at the Gate, that bleeds inside for the pain in the eyes of his nephews, his friends. The greater part, however, is still under the control of the Stone, surrounding him with fear, anger, and seething jealousy. And it is this part that surges to the fore when he hears footsteps in the hall outside of the Throne Room, senses his remaining nephew (Mahal, he banished Fíli!) hesitating at the threshold. Thorin screams inside the prison of his mind, begging Kíli to go, to recall his brother and rally the Company before it is too late, but his body is no longer his to control. Instead, he can only watch, a captive behind his own eyes.

* X *

“Gandalf?”

The Wizard glanced at her, seemingly unsurprised by her presence as Viska fell into step at his side. He slowed slightly, matching his strides to her shorter ones, and graced her with one of his compassionate smiles.

“Ah, Lady Viska. You appear to have misplaced your champion.”

She smiled slightly, her face warming at the twinkle in his kind eyes.

“Ah, Lady Viska. You appear to have misplaced your champion.”

She smiled slightly, her face warming at the twinkle in his kind eyes.

“Fíli is with Bard, trying to find places in the ruins of Dale where the noncombatants can be hidden. He thinks that enough of the city was built on Erebor stone that he can find old cellars that might still be intact.” She shrugged, still confused by the idea that the royal family could actually communicate with the Mountain, imprecise though it might be. “And please, Gandalf, it is only Viska.”

Her companion shook his head as he came to a halt, his face grave. “With that braid in your hair, my dear, you are the Lady Viska, soon to be betrothed to the Crown Prince of Erebor – until and unless Thorin draws up documents to the contrary. And I rather imagine that he has other concerns at the moment.”

The Dwarrowlass felt her face fall, one hand going to the braid that bore Fíli’s bead.

“He tried to cut the braid from my hair, you know. Just before we left. Fíli drew his sword on his uncle – threatened his king with live steel.” She closed her eyes, shuddering at the memory. “It felt...wrong, as though the world had tilted.”

Glancing around, Gandalf found a sturdy crate and took a seat, putting his head closer to her level
as he studied her intently. “I realize that it may bring no comfort, but Thorin is truly not in control of his own actions. The Arkenstone is a powerful artifact, from an ancient time, and nothing he does under its control is indicative of how he would behave of his own free will. I think, however, that you had another topic in mind when you sought me out. What did you wish to discuss?”

She sighed and focused her thoughts, meeting his patient gaze as she chose her words carefully. “I have heard troubling things over the past months, and I am beginning to piece them together. I do not believe that you have been entirely open with us, dear Wizard, and I would ask that you help me complete the picture. With as few of your vague hints and riddles as possible, but I will not deny you all of your fun.”

Gandalf chuckled. “The world was poorer for your silence, my dear. I will answer what I can, though you may find yourself with more questions by the end.”

Viska nodded, then looked him in the eye, her own not quite challenging.

“Something is rising, isn't it? Some darkness, some evil. You have been distracted and troubled throughout our journey, and I know you intended to be with Thorin when he entered the Mountain. Bilbo overheard your conversation with Lord Elrond about the dangers of the Arkenstone. Why were you so anxious for Smaug to be driven out? Why was Beorn so troubled when we left him? And why are there whispers that the evil fortress of Dol Guldur is no longer empty?”

Gandalf was silent for a long moment, his gaze flickering away – not in evasion, but in thought – before returning to her as he sighed deeply. “I did not know, not when we set out. I only knew that something was screaming at me that Erebor must not be left in the control of so dark a creature. I can tell you, however, that Dol Guldur is now empty. Azog leads its armies, but his dark master is driven out. The White Council, the eldest and wisest of Middle Earth, broke the Enemy's power there and sent him scurrying back to the depths of Mordor. His strength is reduced, but he is not vanquished, even though his ring of power is long lost and beyond recovery. He will rebuild, and I believe that he will seek to reestablish the ancient evil land of Angmar, west of the Misty Mountains. This cannot be allowed to happen.”

She stared at him, everything she knew about the War of the Last Alliance running through her mind, and the last fragments slid into place.

“You want Erebor to strengthen the defense of the North, to ensure that Angmar does not rise again, to stand with the Elves of Mirkwood against the Enemy, should he truly rise.”

He nodded. “I do. But it may never be needed, or it may be far in the future.” He studied her closely, searching her face. “You are angry?”

The Dwarrowmaid shook her head, her gaze moving beyond him to the looming shadow of the Mountain. “No. You are Tharkûn, but you are also Gandalf, and Mithrandir. You must see to the protection of all of Middle Earth.” She turned back to him, green eyes clear and jaw set. “And the Dwarves of Erebor are a part of it. We will fight.”

“I know.”

She sighed, a familiar figure catching her eye as he moved through the camp, looking rather lost. “I did not know what Bilbo was doing, but if I had, I believe that I would have agreed with him, even helped him. He was right. I just wish that his ploy had worked as he intended it to. We need Thorin. Azog is still out there, I know it. He will come.”

“He will. He was in league with Dol Guldur, with the Enemy that now licks his wounds in
Mordor.”

“It is more than Azog.” She stared at the Wizard, a chill running through her. “The Enemy wants the Line of Durin extinguished. Why?”

“They are the eldest of the Dwarf lines, and they had the strongest affinity with Erebor.”

“The Mountain? It really is conscious? Fíli and Balin tried to explain, but I was not really sure what to believe. It's true, then? The Line of Durin is tied to the Mountain?”

Gandalf nodded heavily, his gaze finding the Great Gate.

“It is not conscious, not truly, but yes, there is a tie there. They need the Mountain, and she needs them, to thrive, to reach their full potential and strength. And that is the best defense if Mordor should rise again.”

Viska stared at him blankly, her mind in turmoil. “Mahal, what kind of family will I be joining?”

The Wizard smiled and stood, reaching out to rest a comforting hand on her shoulder. “One that will stand to defend the Free Races of Middle Earth. And one that loves you.”

* X *

Kíli stood at the door to the Throne Room, gathering his courage and steeling his nerves. He had spent the past few hours in the little bay outside of the hidden door, staring blindly out across the expanse of northern Mirkwood. He had promised his brother that he would try to reason with Thorin, but he did not even know where to start. All he could think of was that last glimpse of Fíli's face as he disappeared over the battlements, tense and determined. It felt wrong – watching him go, not following. He had followed his brother for his entire life, into and out of mischief and danger. They did not spend every waking moment in one another's company, of course, but they were close, even for brothers, and it had made him nauseous to stand by and watch the elder prince leave the Mountain. In the hours outside, he had come to a single conclusion: it could not stand. He could not leave Fíli outside Erebor, while he remained safe behind stone walls. It was not in his nature. He and his brother had always been stronger together than apart, and that strength was vital now. Fíli had Viska, and Kíli would not jeopardize their future by failing to be at his brother's side when the danger was greatest. He would make one last attempt to speak to their uncle. Then he would go where he belonged.

Taking a deep breath, he strode into the chamber, his focus locking on the brooding figure on the throne. Thorin looked ill. His skin was pale and clammy, shadows beneath his eyes like bruises. And those eyes! They glinted with feverish fire as the king muttered to himself, just quietly enough that the archer could not pick out the words as he halted several steps before the great seat. After waiting, unacknowledged, for several minutes, he cleared his throat. Thorin's gaze snapped up and Kíli barely kept himself from stepping back in shock at the fury in their depths. Instead, he took a deep breath and offered a small bow, his right fist pressed to his heart.

“I come to ask what my king commands, should the Orcs attack as we have been warned.”

He kept his voice low and respectful through great effort, his pulse pounding with repressed emotion. Braced as he was, he still flinched when Thorin's response was a vicious laugh, a feral grin overtaking his face.
“If we should be so lucky, we will do nothing! Let Thranduil, the mighty Elf King, deal with Azog and his ilk. The Mountain will be safe enough.”

“And Dáin's men? If they are caught outside of Erebor?”

The king shrugged. “They will do their duty and serve their liege. To the death, if necessary.”

Kíli stared at him in disbelief.

“We will do nothing? You would leave them to die out there? The Men of Laketown, who lost everything because we woke the dragon? The Dwarves of the Iron Hills, marching to serve their king, led by your cousin? Gandalf, Bilbo, Viska, Fíli?”

Thorin sneered and Kíli realized that he had never seen such an ugly expression on his elder's face. Frowns he had seen aplenty, but this...this was an expression that belonged on an Orc or Goblin. Not on a king, never on his uncle.

“Do not speak to me of traitors!” Thorin was practically growling as he got to his feet. “The Wizard was the one that selected that thieving Shire-rat – the Orcs are welcome to both of them.”

“And Fíli? Your heir? My brother? What of him? Bad enough that you are ignoring the many times Gandalf and Bilbo saved our sorry hides on this expedition, what of your kin?”

“He is no kin of mine.”

Kíli blinked, feeling as though he had been struck between the eyes. He shook his head, unable to accept that he had actually heard Thorin utter those words. “You do not mean that. You cannot. You would never turn your back on us!”

The king advanced on him, hand darting to his sword hilt, rage scrawled across his face. “He turned his back on me! He drew steel on his king! The moment he chose his whore over Erebor, he was no longer a Son of Durin!”

Kíli had never been known for his restraint, and it took every ounce he possessed to keep his sword sheathed. There was not enough left over to keep his hands from curling into fists, or to keep one of them from swinging for his uncle’s jaw. Thorin's head snapped back as it connected, staggering him enough that he fell back onto the stairs before the throne. The archer stood frozen, fists clenched at his sides, breath heaving in his chest as something flared in the sapphire eyes. He must have been hallucinating, because it looked almost like pride, and hope. Then it was gone, the now-familiar contempt and rage staring back at him, mixed with shock. Thorin was still not moving, though, and the young prince seized the moment to speak before he could be silenced, hissing through clenched teeth.

“She. Is. His. One! I have watched them since Rivendell, protecting one another, supporting one another. She has been at Fíli's back as much as I have these past weeks, and you banished them from the kingdom that she helped you reclaim! You threatened to cut his braid from her hair, a violation of our oldest laws! Of course he followed her! How could he do otherwise?” All of the fight drained out of him abruptly and the lad slumped, dropping his gaze to the floor. When he spoke again, it was a low murmur, directed mostly at himself. “And how could I stay behind and let him go?” Taking a deep breath, he straightened his back and lifted weary eyes to meet the icy blue of the King Under the Mountain. “You want to stay here and protect your gold, Thorin? Fine. But I am going out there. I will fight at Fíli's side, and die there, if Mahal has decreed it is our time.”
With the smallest nod of respect for the Dwarf Thorin had once been, he turned on his heel and marched away, glancing back only once, when he heard Thorin call after him.

“Kili! Don't be a fool! You belong here!”

“I belong with my brother.”

* X *

The Elves saw the approaching army first, but Fíli already knew that they had stepped onto Erebor stone. The foundation of the Mountain stretched for miles in every direction, running beneath the soil. South, it reached the far edge of Dale, though not the Long Lake. West, it passed just under the eaves of the Mirkwood. He was not certain how far North it went, but he had been in contact with the stone for much of the late afternoon and nothing moved in that direction save wild animals. Now, however, Erebor sang a song of welcome as more of Durin's Folk came within her ken. Dáin's army approached from the East as the sun began to sink behind the Misty Mountains, and the golden-haired former prince knew that the time had come. He nodded silently as Thranduil’s messenger relayed word that the Dwarves of the Iron Hills had been spotted, mentally rehearsing once more the words he hoped would sway their lord from his original goal. A hand rested on his shoulder and he glanced up into Gandalf’s face, the Wizard's kind eyes glinting with approval. Viska was staying behind (he still wasn't quite certain how he had managed that), but Gandalf and Bard would ride with him.

“Ready?”

Fíli nodded once more, squeezing Viska's hand gently before he turned to accept Bard's hand up onto the tall horse that the bargeman rode. Settling in place, the young Dwarf glanced down at the lass that wore his bead. She smiled up at him, her face confident, and he found himself wishing he had as much faith as she did in his ability to win Dáin over.

“You are a Son of Durin,” she reminded him, a fierce glow in her green eyes. “Be sure of yourself, and he will listen.”

“As you say, amrâlimê,” he agreed with a smile. “Mahal willing, we will have a battle plan before dawn, and we can send Azog and his filth into oblivion together.”

The ride was not a long one, but they approached the Dwarven army slowly, giving Dáin plenty of time to see them as Bard held up a banner of peace to avoid provoking a hasty reaction. The Dwarf lord brought his troops to a halt, the foot soldiers stopping neatly in ranks as several squads of ram-riders spread out to either side. After a short consultation, Dáin himself approached, fierce and proud atop his great boar, accompanied by several of his commanders. Pulling up within easy hearing distance, they sized up the two riders before them. Gandalf spoke first, nodding respectfully to the Lord of the Iron Hills.

“We are well met, Lord Dáin.”

“Gandalf the Gray.” Dáin sounded wary, but not angry, his sharp eyes darting to where the Man sat his horse easily, both hands visible. “I had not thought to find you here, aligned with those who threaten my kin, Wizard. You were friend to Durin's Line once. What changed?”
“Nothing,” Gandalf answered quickly. “My companion is Bard of Laketown, he who slew the
dragon Smaug. We ask only a moment of your time, to explain the situation more fully than Thorin
will have in his messages by raven.”

“How do you know of the ravens?” The burly Dwarf's eyes narrowed, sudden suspicion flooding
his face. “My cousin tells me that the Arkenstone is stolen, held against a demand of gold and
silver. He tells me that an army of Men and Elves waits at his Gate, and that much I can see for
myself!”

It had gone far enough. It had always been long odds that Gandalf would be able to convince Dáin
of anything, but time was too short for this verbal sparring match. Taking a deep breath, Fíli slid
from his place behind Bard, his boots thumping to the ground as the Dwarven commanders startled
and reached for weapons. The young Dwarrow offered a polite bow, not too deep, fixing his gaze
on Dáin's face.

“My lord, if you will not listen to Tharkûn, will you at least spare me a moment of your time?”

He could see the thoughts whirling behind the hazel eyes as his cousin stared at him, taking in the
braids and beads that he wore. Waving the commanders to stillness, Dáincocked his head in a way
that was not quite disrespectful.

“And who might you be, laddie?”

“Fíli, son of Dís, daughter of Thráin.”

Murmurs broke out among the commanders and Dáin's eyes narrowed. Dismounting, he
approached, studying Fíli's face closely. The lad waited without speaking.

“Thorin's nephew? His heir?”

Fíli nodded.

“And what are you doing outside the Mountain, lad? Why are you out here with the Men and
Elves?”

The last word was a sneer and Fíli barely restrained a sigh as he answered quietly.

“Please, my lord, might we speak with privacy? Bring one of your men with you, but I ask that you
chose your most discrete.”

The Lord of the Iron Hills stared at him for a long moment before offering a jerky nod and waving
to one of his commanders.

“Halvr, with me. The rest of you, wait here.”

With Fíli and the summoned commander following, he strode off to find a spot equally distant
from his army and the golden-haired prince's companions. When Dáin stopped, he turned to face
the young Dwarf, his arms crossed across his burly chest and a shrewd look on his face (what was
visible of it beneath his thick red beard).

“Explain. Why are you in the camp of our enemies, son of Dís?”

“Because they are not our enemies,” Fíli said, taking his cue from Dáin's blunt question. “They
would stand as our allies against the true threat – the Orcs that march from Gundabad behind Bolg,
and from Dol Guldur behind his sire, Azog the Defiler.”
The fierce warrior was silent, but Halvr spoke up in his stead, his tone saved from condescension by the earnest kindness.

“Impossible, lad. The Defiler is dead.”

The golden-haired prince shook his head, keeping his gaze on Dáin. “No. He is not. Twice he has attacked us on this quest, and a third time he sent scouts into Laketown seeking us, nearly resulting in the deaths of two of our Company. The Defiler lives – I have seen him with my own eyes, and had confirmation of his identity from Thorin himself.”

Dáin nodded, his eyes flicking to the looming Mountain.

“Why is Thorin not out here then?” There was a strange reluctance in his voice, as though he did not truly want the question answered. Fíli hesitated.

“The king fortifies the Mountain. He...does not believe Gandalf's warning, or the word of the Elven scouts who have seen the enemy.”

The red-bearded warrior closed his eyes, a flicker of pain crossing his craggy face as he shook his head. “The sickness has seized him. That is why you wanted to speak in private.”

In spite of all that had happened, the young swordsman felt himself bristling and hurrying to defend his uncle. “Thorin is noble and honorable-!”

“Peace, lad!” Dáin reached out to clasp his shoulder firmly, meeting his gaze with a direct and honest one of his own. “I cast no blame. I saw Thrór.” He exchanged a glance with Halvr, the latter looking troubled. “Has the Arkenstone actually been found?”

“Yes. In that you were told true. It was found, but it is no longer within the Mountain. According to Gandalf, it is likely the architect of some of our current trouble. It is a long story, but suffice to say that Thorin was not pleased with its removal. Words were said, blows were struck...in the end, I was banished and disinherited.” He met the flinty gaze, his jaw set. “But that changes nothing.”

“You are certain of the Orc threat?”

“I am.”

Those sharp eyes studied him a moment more, then the Lord of the Iron Hills nodded decisively. “Very well, then. I will follow your lead, as Thorin's heir. The Dwarves of the Iron Hills stand ready.”

A measure of the terrible tension eased from Fíli's muscles and he barely kept himself from sighing with relief. Instead, he offered another small bow.

“Thank you, Lord Dáin.”

Never one to delay what must be done, the burly warrior started back toward the waiting army at a brisk pace, Halvr at his heels. The prince kept up easily, already planning how best to introduce the irascible Dwarf to his new allies. After a moment, the gruff voice broke into his thoughts.

“Where's your brother, lad? Back at the camp? I cannot imagine he would allow himself to be left behind in the Blue Mountains, not if he has the Durin temper.”

Fíli shook his head with a tiny smile, his eyes going instinctively to the Mountain, his heart aching with Kíli's absence. “Still inside Erebor, trying to help Thorin see reason.”
“Mahal guide him, then. Thorin always was stubborn enough for two, but he is also strong of mind. Keep hope, lad. He will come to his senses. He is not Thrór, or even Thráin. He is Thorin, the Oakenshield.”

* X *

Balin watched his king anxiously, alert for the first signs that Óin's mixture was doing its work. They had managed to add it to his water skin as he raged after Kíli, the young archer refusing to acknowledge his uncle as he gathered his gear and allowed Dwalin and Glóin to escort him to the battlements. The old advisor did not know what had been said between the two in the Throne Room, but it was impossible to miss the swelling along Thorin's jaw, or the broken look in the lad's dark eyes. He could only hope that whatever wounds had been inflicted could be healed. If their plan worked.

Thorin yawned, stumbling slightly, and Balin's gaze darted to Óin. His cousin gave an almost imperceptible nod and the white-haired Dwarf's hands moved in subtle signs. Those of Durin's blood began moving toward them, leaving Bofur and his brother chatting casually and sharpening weapons while Bifur stood watch atop the Gate. Thorin growled under his breath and turned toward the Throne Room. The Company held back as he disappeared into the dark hall, Nori the one who slipped after him on quiet feet. When he returned minutes later, his hands were moving quickly.

He's asleep, on the throne. Now or never.

Balin led the way, his brother close behind, and within a short time, they were gathered around the throne. Balin took up a place to the right of the great seat, Óin at his side. Then came Dori, Ori, Nori, Glóin, and finally Dwalin, mirroring Balin's stance on the far side. Moving slowly, carefully, the Arms Master cut off the glove that Thorin wore on his left hand. Balin did the same on the right as the others reached out to place their hands on the marble of the throne and dais. Pressing the king's hands flush on the arms of the throne, the brothers stared at one another for a long moment. Then Dwalin nodded and each of them reached out to the stone of the Mountain. Closing his eyes, Balin began to hum. One by one, his kin added their voices, the Song of the Mountain reverberating in the massive chamber.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
amrâlimê - my love (Khuzdul)
Bilbo stepped carefully off of the last stone stair, the weight of his burden causing him to stagger slightly as he entered the dimly-lit room. Carefully setting the overflowing basket on the floor against the wall, next to a precarious pile of similar supplies, he stretched his back with a grimace, feeling every mile of the journey from the Shire in his sore shoulders. There was a thud as his companion dropped a heavy load of provisions and he chuckled as the Dwarrowlass flopped down on the crate, groaning dramatically.

“Remind me never to let you volunteer my assistance again.”

Ignoring the teasing glare she sent him, the Hobbit merely smiled and turned to take in his surroundings. Feeling rather at loose ends, he had offered to help the folk of Laketown move what little they had to safety before the looming battle, and he had recruited Viska with the observation that it would keep both of them occupied as they awaited Fíli’s return and news of Dáin. There was little enough safety to be had, but the Dwarf prince's long afternoon consulting with both Bard and the Mountain had yielded an unexpected bounty. Most of the surface buildings of the city of Men were in a dangerous state of disrepair, damaged by the violence of Smaug's arrival and left to crumble where they stood for over a century. The builders of Dale, however, had not constructed their city in the shadow of the greatest remaining Dwarf kingdom without taking advantage of the expertise of their neighbors. Beneath the city itself, sunk deep in Erebor stone, were a large number of storage chambers, their construction still as solid as the day they were built (most likely with the help of Dwarf masons). With the assistance of the Elves, the chambers had been cleaned out, their doors reinforced and camouflaged to safeguard the location of those who would be taking shelter. The wounded and the little ones had already been moved, then the provisions had been divided under the guidance of the young Lakeman Dunstan and Guard Captain Suilrien of Mirkwood. The burglar and the jeweler had helped move the last of the meager supplies, and this was the first opportunity that he had had to actually look at the subterranean chambers. He suppressed a shudder, but turned to find green eyes watching him with a knowing gleam.

“Not really Hobbit-friendly, is it?”

Glancing around at the windowless stone walls, Man-height ceiling, and tight quarters, Bilbo chuckled and shook his head.

“Not the most comfortable, no. Still, 'picking and choosing is for when the wolves aren't howling at the door,' as my mother used to say. Safety over comfort. I just hope....”

He trailed off, not wanting to put words to the sickening feeling in the pit of his stomach, the inner warning that this would not end well for any of them. He could read the knowledge in the lass's face, but she wanted to voice it no more than he did. Instead, she reached for a new topic of
“Are there many in the Shire? Wolves, I mean?”

“No, not as a general rule. In fact, they are quite scarce, unless the Brandywine River freezes. They came across in droves during the Fell Winter thirty years ago. My-”

“Viska!”

A child's squeal of joy, accompanied by the eager yapping of an excited pup, interrupted him, and he was caught off guard by the slight figure that hurtled past to throw itself on the bemused Dwarrowmaid. Viska laughed and hugged the child gently as Bilbo fended off the squashed-face little dog that seemed intent on climbing his legs, curled tail wagging frantically. A smiling young Woman hurried over, shaking her head in fond exasperation as she scooped the snorting monster off the floor.

“My apologies, Master Dwarf,” she murmured, soothing the little creature with well-placed scratches. “Walnut is a bit unsettled by all of the activity and excitement. She won't hurt you – she just wants attention.”

He nodded slightly, reaching out to scrub the dog under the chin and watching her eyes half close with delight. “Aren't we all. Unsettled, I mean. And I'm not a Dwarf, actually. I'm a Hobbit. From the Shire, west of the Misty Mountains. Bilbo Baggins, at your service.” He finished with a slight bow, realizing as he straightened that his friends' mannerisms had certainly begun to rub off on him. The girl set Walnut on the floor and bobbed a shallow curtsy, her gray eyes wide with curiosity.

“Sigrid of Laketown.”

“And this is her little sister, Tilda.” Viska nodded a greeting to the taller girl, having disentangled herself from her small assailant. “Daughters of Bard, the dragonslayer.”

“With your help, but – Viska, what happened to your face?”

Bilbo watched the reunion with a fond smile, wondering at the difference that a few months had made in his perspective. In the Shire, most respectable Hobbits would immediately dismiss the Dwarf lass as the worst sort of troublemaker. A spectacular bruise had blossomed from the gash on her cheek, nearly blacking her right eye and spreading over the vivid scar she had borne from the beginning of the quest. A gift of the Goblin blades during the raid on her home, it ran from the center of her forehead to her right cheek, narrowly missing the eye, and combined with her bead-weighted braids to give her an exotic, dangerous air that would have put off all but the most adventurous of the Took and Brandybuck clans. Yet here she stood, playing affectionate big sister to two daughters of Men, girls who had seen their home invaded by Orcs, then destroyed by a dragon, only to take shelter in a crumbling city that was itself in imminent danger from two massive Orc armies.

Not for the first time, Belladonna Took's son wondered what had possessed him that April morning, sending him out of his door and into a tale too large for a simple Hobbit. He had traveled with Dwarves, dined with Elves, befriended a skin-changer, and worked alongside Men. He had dodged Trolls, riddled with the twisted creature beneath the Misty Mountain, stood up to the massive pale Orc, tricked giant spiders, and spoken to a dragon. He carried a glowing Elvish sword, a shirt of shimmering mail (that Fíli had assured him was worth a rather large fortune), and a golden ring that let him walk unseen. But more than all of this, he had made friends such as he had never imagined, friends for whom he had risked his life without hesitation. After so much, how
could he ever return to the Shire? Surely it would seem too small now, too stuffy and confining, with its uneventful turn of the seasons and peaceful traditions.

But no. The answer came even as he considered it. The Shire was quiet, but it was home. It was not so elegant as Rivendell, or so awe-inspiring as Erebor, but there was beauty in the simplicity of life there. Hobbits as a whole might be a bit standoffish, or overly-concerned with respectability, but there were bright, adventurous spirits, too, and who better to nurture such daring hearts than one who had his own tale to tell?

* X *

Balin was the first to disengage from the stone, weary to his very soul. Sipping from his water skin, he studied his king. Thorin dreamed, that much was clear, but of what? There was no denying that he was in communion with the Mountain – Balin had felt the brush of his cousin's mind, though only briefly, within the greater presence of the Lonely Mountain herself. Something was happening, he just did not know exactly what the results would be.

* X *

*His earliest memories are like fragments of a half-forgotten dream – a collection of sensory impressions, fleeting glimpses without a narrative...*

*...his mother's golden braids are redolent with the scent of lavender, catching the candlelight as she pulls a blanket up to his chin and presses a kiss to his forehead, her eyes like sapphires in shadow...*

*...his father's coat is rough beneath his hand, the intricately-embroidered wool a deep blue that swallows the light, ingrained with the rich aroma of tobacco smoke no matter how many times it is laundered...*

*...his grandmother's hugs are warm and comforting, and she always smells just slightly of rose petals as she tells the gentle tales of their ancestors, where adventures always end in joyful discovery and lessons are learned by all...*

* ... his grandfather's voice is deep and resonate, his blue eyes fierce as he leads the songs during the Feast of Remembrance, honoring the battle-fallen through the Ages, Mahal's children given to stone after sacrificing everything for their kin ...*
...his sister's laugh is the sound of bells, his brother's smile a mischievous smirk that fills him with both foreboding and anticipation, for they always plan the best pranks, and he has never been able to deny their headlong enthusiasm...

...and through it all, the Song of the Mountain reverberates within his deepest soul. It vibrates beneath his hand when he touches a wall or balustrade, singing to him of home, and family, and belonging....

* X *

The sky was dark and starlit when Viska emerged from the ruins of Dale. At her urging, Bilbo had remained behind, safely adopted by Bard's daughters. The last she had seen of him, he had been surrounded by the youngest of the refugees, distracting the children with funny stories from the Shire as their exhausted guardians put the finishing touches on the deeproom's defenses. Dunstan had offered to escort her through the city, pointing out the subtle barricades that the Elves had created to steer any stray Orcs away from the hidden rooms.

“And you've seen the weapons stores.” He paused, a worried frown on his young face. The Dwarrowmaid was not sure of his exact age, but he looked barely into adulthood, only a few years older than Bain. He was not the only survivor of Esgaroth's guards, but he was the one that Bard seemed to trust the most, and he had quickly found himself regarded by many as the right hand deputy of their leader, a fact that seemed to bemuse the young man. “For what good the weapons will do. If the enemy makes it that far...we can only hope that the children can make it to the concealed exits.”

She nodded silently. Neither of them needed a reminder of the obvious – even with the adults willing to give their lives to delay the Orcs, there was little chance that the children would make it through the city, much less to the meeting points outside where any surviving fighters would gather to try and get them to safety. The guard was young, but he was no fool. He knew the stakes. They all did. Their unlikely alliance would stand or fall together. If it stood, the children would be safe. If it fell...well, they would have to ensure that it did not fall.

“Lady Viska?”

She turned to find an unfamiliar Elf maid studying her curiously. Dismissing Dunstan with a nod of reassurance, she lifted her chin and met the taller female's gaze steadily.

“I am Viska.”

The Elf gave her a slight bow, giving no hint of anything other than a distant respect.

“Nenith of the Woodland Realm. My king bid me ask you to come to the command tent. Mithrandir has returned, with Prince Fíli, Lord Bard, and Lord Dáin. Your company is requested.”

Tension that she had not even realized that she carried eased from the Dwarrowlass's shoulders and she felt a smile spread across her face.

“Thank you, Nenith, for your news. I am in your debt, but I fear that I must ask you another favor. Would you be so kind as to show me the way to the command tent? I fear I have gotten a bit turned
around, and things look much different beneath the starlight.”

“Of course. If you would follow me?”

Once it was in sight, King Thranduil's command tent was difficult to miss, but she realized as she approached that her ears could have led her there nearly as well. From the sound of it, Lord Dáin and the Elf King were in disagreement, with Bard occasionally throwing in quiet suggestions. The absence of Fíli's distinctive baritone worried her, until a moving shadow slipped from the tent's entrance and resolved into the fair-haired prince. Mindful of their audience, the lass greeted him with a smile and nodded toward the raised voices with a raised brow.

“Dáin and Thranduil getting along well, then?”

A small smile flitted across Fíli's face, dimples flashing as he shook his head in fond exasperation.

“I'll leave them to it. They have thousands of years of combat experience between them, and Gandalf to advise, if they stop shouting long enough to listen to him. I've just gotten word that a Dwarf has approached one of the sentries, from the direction of the Mountain. I'm going to see who it is. Will you accompany me?”

Viska nodded and he turned to offer a small bow to the Elf maid.

“Thank you for bringing my lady to my side, Nenith of the Wood. Your king knows of our errand, so yours is complete. Go in peace.”

Nenith hesitated, the evening breeze teasing wisps of her long russet hair, before she smiled brightly, the expression bringing a startling youth to her ageless face. She offered a low bow in return.

“I thank you for your courtesy, Prince Fíli. If I may say so, you are not what I expected in a Dwarf.”

“And you are refreshingly open for an Elf,” he responded, taking Viska's hand in his own with a gentle possessiveness and starting toward the far edge of the Elven encampment. “I wish you well tomorrow.”

“Valar protect us all,” came the quiet response.

“Mukhuh mabaddakhi y bunmû Mahal.” Viska's voice was low and fervent, and she heard Fíli hum in agreement as they hurried along. She kept pace with him easily, but realization began to dawn as his speed increased. “You think it’s Kíli?”

He nodded, his face slightly grim. “They said it was only a single Dwarf, and I don't think any of the others would have come alone. I hope he brings news that they will be joining us soon, but I am selfishly glad that he will be with us, at least. It has felt...wrong...not to have him at my side.”

She did not reply, but her hand tightened on his, grief welling in the aching hole that was Triskel's place in her own life. She could well understand his eagerness to have his brother with him. She would have given nearly anything to have her own back. Ahead of them, a quiet scuffle disturbed
the quiet of the night.

“Fí? Is that you?”

“Master Dwarf, please-!”

“Let him pass, Master Elf.” The golden prince spoke up quickly, dropping Viska's hand as he broke into a jog and a familiar raven-haired figure dodged around the tall sentry. Kíli slammed into his brother at a dead run, knocking the shorter Dwarf back several steps as Fíli struggled to maintain his balance. Watching them with concern, Viska waved the Elf away when he would have interceded.

“It is his brother, Prince Kíli. Please, return to your post. We will take him into camp. Thank you for the summons.”

The sentry nodded and hurried away, a flicker of relief in his eyes, and the Dwarrowmaid stepped to Fíli's side. When Kíli finally stepped back, she reached out to clasp his arm reassuringly, studying him. His face was wan and pale, dark eyes wide with shock beneath the messy fringe of hair on his forehead, and he was shivering with nervous energy. When he spoke, his voice was hollow and disbelieving.

“I hit him, Fí. I hit Thorin! I tried to talk to him, like I promised. I swear I tried. But he was so cold, so...dismissive – of Dáin and his men, Bilbo, Viska, you! I have never seen him like that. They were the words of a coward, a fool – not a king, not a Dwarf of Durin's Line.” His eyes bored into the elder prince's face, begging for understanding, for reassurance. “The Dwarf that sits that throne is not Thorin – it cannot be our uncle, our king.”

“It is not him, Kí. Not really.” The Crown Prince kept his voice a low rumble, blue eyes shadowed. “It is the Arkenstone, as Balin feared. I have been speaking with Gandalf – it is controlling him, twisting his mind.”

Kíli stared at him, anger growing beneath the devastation in his expression. “Then why did Gandalf bring us here? If he knew-!”

“He didn't know, nadadith. He never suspected.” Viska spoke up gently, drawing the archer's gaze. “He thought Thorin would be safe. He made a mistake, Kíli. The Arkenstone can only control those who have touched it. Gandalf thought that, since Thorin was so young when Smaug came, he would not have done so, that it would not have gotten a grip on his mind.”

The younger prince's shoulders sagged, the fight and fury draining out of him as exhaustion began to set in. “And Dáin?” He met his brother's eyes questioningly and Fíli managed a small smile.

“Trying to shout down the Elf King's strategies when we left the command tend,” he said with a hint of humor. “He knows a little of what has happened inside Erebor, but only he and one of his men have any idea that anything is amiss. He believes that Thorin can come back to us.”

Kíli nodded, dashing his sleeve quickly across his face to wipe away the tears that the others pretended not to see. “I think Balin has an idea,” he told them, a hint of his usual nature sparking in the dark eyes. “The whole lot of them were acting shifty when I left, and Bofur said they were going about the business of Durin's Line, whatever that might mean.”

Viska saw a sudden glimmer in Fíli's eyes, and there was hope in his face as the golden prince glanced toward the Mountain.

“Balin, you brilliant, devious soul. Mahal's blessing on you all.”
The memory of the day the dragon came is a haze of fear and smoke. The tales of the Men of Dale state that the first warning they had was a hot wind from the north, but the son of Thráin was on the far side of the Mountain, finishing a training exercise with his companions, and his first warning was the Mountain screaming in his mind.

(Thorin does not remember the day he was 'introduced' to Erebor – he was only five days old at the time – and so he does not recall a time before the Mountain was a distant presence in the back of his mind. Like his father and grandfather, and all of the Line of Durin, he is tied to the Mountain. Durin's heirs woke Erebor, and Durin's heirs are her link to the Dwarves she shelters. To Thorin, Frerin, and Dís, this means little beyond a sense of warmth and welcome when they touch the stone of the Mountain. Until the day the dragon descends.)

He is out in the foothills with Dwalin, Kulvik, and others, when his hand lands on an outcropping of stone and he stiffens as a wordless scream of warning crashes into his mind. The young Dwarf cries out in surprise and shock, falling to his knees. His companions are at his side instantly, taking no notice of the hot, dry wind whipping around the Mountain, their attention on the king's grandson.

“Thorin?” Dwalin is the first to speak, exchanging a nervous look with the others. Sapphire eyes open and lock gaze with him, then his cousin seizes his hand and pulls it to the stone, uttering a single word.

“Dragon!”

As one, the lads turn for the Mountain, filled with fear for their families, but as they come in sight of the Great Gate, they discover that the attack is already begun. Dale is burning, and the great green sward between the two cities is aflame, and a massive serpentine shape is at the Gate of Erebor. Thorin lunges forward, screaming for his father, mother, sister, brother, but Dwalin holds him back, tears flowing for his own kin inside. They retreat reluctantly to the foot of Ravenhill, watching as the Gate falls, as survivors begin streaming out through the few other exits, straggling along with the wounded and grieving. The young prince is the first to see the Mirkwood Elves arrive, led by their king on his great elk, and the first to realize that the Elves are not going to help. He roars in anger and disbelief as Thranduil stares at the wreckage and refugees before turning away, and once again Dwalin is restraining his cousin. Then a cry of joyful relief breaks through to them and they turn to find that some of those feared lost have escaped. Balin is there, with his father Fundin, and Óin with Gróin. Ladies Tíla and Srôfa are close behind, with little Glóin, and beyond hope, a copper-haired lad arrives with a black-haired lass and Thorin is holding his siblings tightly. As the sun sets, the last survivors trickle out of the Mountain, including a weary Thráin and a resisting Thrór, who has been forced to leave his treasure, including the Arkenstone, to the dragon. The Line of Durin is intact, down to the youngest lass, but so many have been lost. Dís babbles of the walls telling her to run before even the alarm was sounded, while Frerin shrugs and shakes his head.

“The Mountain was screaming. No words, just warning. Then Dís came running, crying, and we just ran. I could not find Amad.” He weeps at his failure, but Thorin holds his little sister close and praises his brother for getting her to safety. Thráin, too, rejoices that his children live, though he will mourn his wife for the rest of his days, and it is he who realizes that all of those with Durin’s blood have escaped – even Nif and her two little ones, descended from the black sheep
younger sister of Náin II. This the day that Thorin realizes that the tales are true – Erebor sings to the Line of Durin, and she has saved their lives even as they failed to defend her.

By nightfall, the Dwarven refugees have taken shelter under the eaves of the Mirkwood, and they gradually drift off to sleep. In the morning, they will begin their long trek, the Exile, that will take them across Middle Earth to the Blue Mountains – but first, they will be turned away from the halls of the Woodland Realm, and Thorin's anger will solidify to hatred of the Elves. For now, though, he is simply a young, grieving Dwarf prince who sits on the farthest edge of Erebor's stone with his father. Leadership has fallen to them, for Thrór rages after his lost treasure, and they have this one night to mourn their loss before they must devote themselves to protecting those that survive. Frerin and Dís are already asleep, curled together like pups in a pile, faces tear-streaked and dirty. Thorin will join them soon, taking comfort in their presence, in the fact that they still live when so many do not. Thráin smiles gently at the exhausted youth and pulls him close to touch foreheads.

“Izlif, dashatê,” he rumbles quietly, a rarely-heard gruff affection in his voice. “Tomorrow, we will lead our people to safety, and then we will figure out a way to return, to drive the beast from our home and retake Erebor.”

Thorin nods and curls up with his siblings, unaware that once they enter the forest, he will not see the Mountain again for more than a hundred and fifty years, by which time only he and Dís will remain of the royal family that fled the dragon.

* X *

Fíli sat under the stars, Viska a warm presence against his chest as he leaned back against a boulder. Kíli was safely asleep the tent that had been given to the Dwarves and Bilbo, the archer exhausted by the day's events. The elder prince and the Dwarrowlass had found a quiet place to rest, away from the main area of the camp but close enough that no Orc would catch them unaware. He thought she was dozing, so he was a little surprised when she gave a low chuckle and twisted one of his braids in playful fingers.

"Care to share the joke?"

"I was just thinking."

He waited a moment, but she offered no further information, and he finally sighed in defeat.

"A copper for your thoughts?"

She sat up slightly and turned to him, eyes dancing with mischief as a teasing smile tugged at her lips.

"Only a copper? It is good to know that my thoughts are valued so highly, my prince.”

Fíli gave a bark of startled laughter, then spread his hands to indicate his meager possessions.

"It's all I have, my lady, and I may have to borrow it from my brother. Your prince is currently a pauper."

She cocked an eyebrow. “Then perhaps my prince should count himself lucky that I would love
him still if the only gold he ever had was his hair. Still, you have something of value.”

He smirked slightly. “Pray enlighten me.”

“A kiss.”

“Very well, then. A kiss for your thoughts. Shall I pay in advance?”

“Of course.”

He pressed his lips to hers, realizing it was more promise than kiss, a reassurance that she desperately needed, though she would not ask. When she pulled away, he reached up to run callused fingers over her courting braid.

“Now, your thoughts?”

She smiled, though a dark shadow still lingered behind her eyes, then shrugged. Settling back, she tucked herself into his shoulder and rested her head on his chest.

“Nothing of importance. I was merely thinking of the night we met.” She peeked up at him through dark lashes. “Shall I return your payment?”

“No need, amràlimê. They are all rightfully yours, anyway. For the rest of our lives.” He chuckled, hugging her tightly, then glanced down in confusion. “What about the night we met?”

“You called me an Elf.”

He sighed. “I said you ate like an Elf. And I apologized, rather profusely, as I recall.”

Viska nodded. “True. You did. In spite of the fact that Trisk had to stop me from responding very rudely. In fact, I was rather rude several times that night.”

He arched a brow at her. “Really? I don't recall.”

A faint blush crept across the lass's cheeks and she became very interested in the trim on his coat. “I laughed at your greeting when we arrived. And I was not subtle about it.”

Fíli laughed and shook his head. “I remember, but that I can forgive. We have done it most of our lives, but I can imagine it looking odd to someone who didn't know us.”

“And at dinner, when I told you Kìli had gotten all the charm.”

“Ah, but that was part of general conversation and banter. All you did was defend my brother when he was not close enough to defend himself.”

“So you were in the wrong?”

The golden prince groaned melodramatically and hung his head in mock shame. “Not my finest moment, I admit. No wonder Balin turned against me. It's a wonder you ever spoke to me.”

She gave him that sweet, bone-melting smile and snuggled into his side, her eyelids drooping with exhaustion. “You had better moments. Much better moments.”

“Such as?”

“When you pulled me from the river,” she sighed, her voice soft and slightly slurred. “When you
goaded me to wakefulness in the Goblin tunnels. When you stood up to your uncle on the battlements.”

He smiled, watching her slide toward sleep. “Rest well, tablûna,” he murmured, his arm tightening around her. He could feel Urakh drawing him ever closer, and he was glad that he had let Gandalf know where they would be. The Wizard had agreed that they both needed time away from the bustle of camp, and they would need whatever rest they could manage before the dawn arrived. They were safe enough, well within the line of Elven sentries, and so he gave himself over to the Lord of Dreams with a sigh of relief.

* X *

Thorin woke from the vivid dream of the past, tears of remembered grief drying on his face. His father's voice still echoed in his ears, and he could feel the soft texture of Frerin's copper braids under his hand as he soothed his little brother to sleep. It had been so long since he had seen his brother's face – so long since he had recalled Frer as he had been in Erebor, rather than how he had looked at the end, at Azanulbizar. And Dîs...his sister had been so young when Smaug had descended on them in a storm of smoke and flame, but already so strong of spirit. She had stood by him through all that followed, even to sending her own sons with him on the quest to reclaim their homeland.

Her sons. Fíli, the gentle soul, with Durin iron buried beneath his father's golden coloring. Kíli, the joyful heart, with his father's bottomless dark gaze and the Durin glower. His sister-sons, who had journeyed, fought, and bled beside him on this quest. His heirs, who he had cast out of the Mountain over a mind-poisoning stone and an earnest lass who had sought only to remind him of the true wealth of Durin's Folk. How poorly he had repaid them, all of them.

Thorin, son of Thráin, pressed his hand to the arm of the throne, reaching deliberately for the consciousness of Erebor for the first time since he had opened the secret door. And the Mountain answered, joy, relief, anger, and warning surging through him in a dizzying flood. Joy that the Heirs of Durin had returned, relief that the Arkenstone was at least temporarily beyond his grasp, anger at the banishment of Fíli, and warning of the great host of Orcs that even now crossed on to Erebor stone. Toward Dáin and the army of the Iron Hills. Toward Thranduil and his Elven host. Toward Bard and the Men of the Lake. Toward Bilbo and Gandalf. Toward Fíli, Kíli, and Viska.

The image that filled his mind then was from his own fearful imagination, not from the Mountain, and all the more chilling for that fact. He knew war – he knew the smells, the sounds, the sights, and it was all too easy to see them still and cold, their lifeblood mingling with the black ichor of Orcs on the frozen ground, staining a blanket of snow....
Ice filled Thorin's veins and his heart pounded painfully in his chest as a roar of protest from the Mountain echoed through his skull. In the moment before he broke contact, he felt Erebor's anger in his very soul and his eyes blazed with blue fire.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Mukhuh mabaddakhi y bunmû Mahal – May we meet again with the grace of Mahal (Khuzdul)
nadadith – little/younger brother (Khuzdul)
Amad – Mother (Khuzdul)
Izlif, dashatê – Sleep, my son (Khuzdul)
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
tablûna – apple lady (Khuzdul)
U’rakh – Dwarven name for Irmo, the Vala of Dreams and Visions
Thorin lurched to his feet, reaching for the sword he had gotten from the armory. Footsteps on stone announced the arrival of more than a single Dwarf, and he turned to the door as Balin entered, a look of concern on the councilor's face. Dwalin was right behind his brother, but anger rode his brow, though both sons of Fundin stopped in their tracks when they met Thorin's gaze, a tentative hope flickering in their eyes. The king shrugged out of the heavy royal robe, fighting to remove the plate mail he had donned at the arrival of the Elven army.

"Has it begun?"

Thorin gave Dwalin a tiny nod of thanks as the big warrior stepped forward to aid him with the straps and buckles, but his attention remained on Balin. The councilor ran a weary hand over his face and shook his head.

"It is early yet. The Orcs approach, but battle is not yet met."

"Has there been any sight or news of my nephews? The lass? The burglar?"

"None."

"They'll be in the thick of it." Dwalin's face was grim, his voice confident with knowledge of the young Dwarves. "Save perhaps the Hobbit."

Burying the pang of fear that his friend's words inspired, Thorin nodded, settling his sword-belt into place. "Dwalin, rally the Company. Balin, do you still remember how to mix a firepot?"

A smile spread across the aged face. "You insult me, cousin. I've already prepped the Alchemy Hall. I thought to make some up, just in case."

"Do so. Take Ori and Nori with you. Our sneaky friend might have some other recipes to suggest, and his brother is quick and clever. Mix as many as you can, anything you think might be of use." He met each of their gazes in turn, his own steady and sure. "We will not hide behind stone while others fight our battles. We will not leave our kin to fight alone."

Balin nodded, tears in his faded blue eyes, but lingered just a moment, staring at him, clearly unwilling to ask what had brought about the change. Shame filled Thorin's heart and he reached out to clasp both brothers by the arm.

"I cannot undo what has been done, but know that I regret the events of the past few days, and I am
humbled by your loyalty. I know what you did to bring me back to myself, and I thank you. With your help, Erebor has reminded me of what is important. Away from that accursed Stone, and surrounded by my kin, I can hear the voice of the Mountain again, and she sings to Durin's heir.”

“She always has, laddie,” Dwalin murmured. “You just weren't listening.”

* X *

Fíli eased toward wakefulness, dimly aware that the sun was on the rise. His sleep had been thin and troubled, despite the comforting presence of his One, haunted by images of loss and devastation, so returning to the world was something of a relief. He knew of the danger that waited, but for the moment, there was peace. Tucking the nightmares into the darkest corner of his memory, he focused instead on the soothing sensation of gentle fingers carding through his thick hair. He did not move, not wanting the moment of quiet intimacy to end. He felt a smile spread across his face as Viska deftly wove the intricate braids – the short Durin braid in front of his ear, then the longer heir's braid, close to his scalp and tucked behind. Finally, carefully, the courting braid. When it was done, she paused, then he felt her warm breath on his ear.

“One of us has to move, if you want the other side done.” There was a smile in her voice, a fondness that warmed his heart. “You can stop faking. You're no better at it than your brother.”

He chuckled and opened his eyes a slit, just enough to see a glimpse of her face in the dawn's light. “Not faking, just enjoying the moment.” He left the rest unsaid, the dark thoughts swirling in the back of his mind – that this might be the last time he woke with her in his arms, the last time she touched his face so tenderly....

“Don't.” Her voice was firm, a tone of command that he rarely heard from her. “Come back to me, Fíli. Come back to now. I'll not lose you before I lose you.”

At that, his eyes opened completely and he stared at her in consternation. She shook her head. “It is written all over your face, kurdê. In your eyes. In this.” She held up the finger that she had traced across his cheek and he realized that it was wet. He had not even realized that he wept. “We are safe. Kíli is safe. Even Thorin, and the Company, are safe – for now. We will do what we must to keep it that way, to hold the Mountain for our people, to protect the innocents of Laketown. If we fall, it will not be without a fight.” Her eyes softened and she smiled at him, a little of her usual humor returning as she gestured to the rather bedraggled braids on the other side of his head. “Now, shall I finish?”

Chastened and humbled by her courage, her sheer determination, he merely pressed a kiss to her fingertips and nodded. With her help, he sat up and shifted around so she could reach the other side of his head, then reached out to place his hand on the boulder where he had slept. Humming softly, he sank into the dreamy state that allowed him to communicate with the Mountain – an exercise that became easier each time he tried. As her fingers worked through his golden locks, he lost himself in the endless Song, letting his mind wander within Erebor's vast, though simple, consciousness. Immediately, there was something new, something almost familiar, but a greater disturbance drew his attention and the first curiosity slipped away and was gone. When he came back to himself, Viska was working quietly on the back of his head, gathering the thick mane.

“What word from the Mountain?” she asked, digging through her pocket for something. He took a
moment to reply, blue eyes fixed on nothing as he gathered his thoughts. When he finally spoke, his voice was solemn, but not grim.

“They come. North and south, they come, at great speed. They mean to catch us unaware, like animals in a trap.”

“Just as well we are not unaware and do not intend to accommodate them, then, is it not?” She held out a silver clasp, the one that bore the sigil of Durin – the one that he had given her on the dock in Laketown. A promise writ in silver. “Hold this a moment, please?”

He took it, running his fingers idly over the familiar design, but did not hand it back when she reached for it.

“Fíli?”

“The leather thong is good enough for me.” He closed his hand over the clasp, setting his jaw. “I would have you wear this. It was a gift.”

“It was a token, an oath that we would meet again,” she responded gently, plucking it out of his grip. “It is the emblem of Durin’s Line, of your blood. It is not mine to wear. Not yet.” She clipped it into place and went to work on the final braid, weaving it swiftly as he struggled to articulate what was in his heart.

“It could be.”

She sighed and tugged at the braid slightly as she slid the last bead into place. He turned to face her, meeting her serious gaze. After a long moment, she shook her head.

“No.”

His heart froze, but she reached out to press a hand to his jaw, green eyes loving.

“Not yet. Not like this, uhlatlu kurdê. We will follow the traditions of our people. When this is over – when Azog and Bolg are defeated, when Erebor is made safe. Then we will speak the words, before our kin, as is proper. You are Crown Prince of Durin’s Folk, Fíli, no matter Thorin’s words at the Gate. There can be no shadow of doubt over our future. It is enough, for now, that I wear your bead.”

Catching her hand, he pressed a kiss to her the palm and offered her a small smile.

“Now you worry about traditions.” His voice was teasing, but he understood something of her thoughts. She grinned slightly, then tugged her hand free and got to her feet. He followed suit.

“That, and I am not brave enough to deny your mother the chance to see her son married. You forget, I have met the Lady Dís.”

He stumbled, choking on a laugh that never quite emerged. He could well imagine his mother’s expression if she arrived at Erebor to find her eldest already married, with no word or warning, and it was enough to make him flinch. Not even Kíli would be foolish enough to tempt fate in such a way. He wasn’t sure Thorin would face Dís in that sort of mood. Viska’s bright laughter, however, tweaked his pride and he raised a playful eyebrow at her, deliberately burying all of his anxiety about the immediate future.

“Laugh while you can, tablñana. My mother would want to be at my wedding whether it was held in the Blue Mountains or the wilds of Dunland, but we have reclaimed Erebor. Do you really think that Balin will let us have a small, private wedding?”
The lass froze, her face pale for a moment as she stared at him. Just as he was beginning to worry that he had actually frightened her out of marriage completely, she ducked her head as color rushed back into her cheeks, reaching out to shove a cloth bundle into his hands.

“'It's a blanket. It was draped over us when I woke.” She waved one arm toward the encampment when he glanced at her in confusion. “You should probably go make sure Kíli is awake, so I thought you could take it back with you.”

“Where are you going?”

She touched a sheet of rolled paper at her belt and smiled at him, a hint of fear still behind her eyes. “I have an errand to run, but I will meet you at the tent in a bit.”

With that, she was gone. Fíli watched her hurry away, trying to resolve the whirling storm of emotions in his gut. War was coming. Not a battle like those they had faced during the quest, but a war – a massive army of Orcs against the might of the Woodland Realm, five hundred warriors of the Iron Hills, and the survivors of Laketown. A war that might end in disaster for Dwarves, Elves, and Men. And his One, his beloved, would fight in it at his side. He could not decide if he was more proud or terrified. After a moment's consideration, he decided that it was probably an equal split.

But Viska would not be the only one he loved who was in danger, he remembered, glancing down at the blanket he held. He did not know that Kíli had brought it to them – the young archer had been sound asleep when they left him in the tent – but it would not surprise him. His brother often woke in the night, a restless sleeper and accustomed to the watch shifts of the journey. It would be like him to bring it out to keep them warm, then return to his own bed. Tucking his fears firmly in the back of his mind, the Crown Prince of Erebor headed into camp.

* X *

Thorin stood in the bay before the hidden door, looking much the same as he had on the day it had been opened. Gone were the royal robes, the heavy crown, the shining armor – he wore only the light gear in which he had traveled so far, through so many dangers. The other Dwarf lords had considered it a fool's quest, certain death for any who followed him. Yet here he stood, quest accomplished, Mountain reclaimed, dragon dead...and very little of it through his doing. He had led them, yes. His had been the hand that opened the door by the last light of Durin's Day. But it was Bilbo Baggins of the Shire who had entered the Mountain, going alone to the very heart of the dragon's lair. It was Bard of Laketown, with Triskel and Viska of Evendim, who had slain Smaug. His kingdom was his, but through few actions of his own, and at what terrible cost?

A flurry of wings caught his attention and he turned to watch a large raven settle on the rock, just at head-height. The beady eyes studied him intently before it offered a quick dip of its sleek head. Ravens were proud birds, and the ravens of Erebor were prouder than most, but they had long served as friends to Durin's Folk, and this one had proved no different. Thorin nodded respectfully to the bird – it was the same that had greeted him when he first slipped out of the Mountain, seeking a way to send word to Dáin of what had happened. Roäc was the leader of the returning ravens, son of the great bird Carc that Thorin and Balin had known as Dwarflings.

“I thank you for coming, Friend Roäc.” The bird quorked, a hint of annoyance in his voice when he replied.
“The King Under the Mountain calls, and the ravens of Erebor answer. The Ironfoot is come, but you may not like what has happened, Thorin, son of Thráin. He does not march on the Elves.”

Thorin grimaced. “Good,” he replied shortly, a tiny smirk stealing across his face when the raven blinked. “Over the past days, you have offered me much council, Roäc, and I wish to thank you for it. And to apologize for not heeding it. The only explanation I can offer is that I was not myself. I spurned your cautions and ignored your warnings, and for that I am deeply sorry.” He offered a bow, not too low, but lower than the King of Erebor would normally make to any but another ruler. Roäc was still for a long moment, then the bird's head dipped once more.

“It is good to see you thus. You know of the armies that march on the Mountain?”

“I do. Orcs, from Dol Guldur in the south, and Gundabad in the north. They think to crush us between them. I would prevent that.”

“Gundabad answers the pale Orc's call, but those that come from Dol Guldur march in equal parts rage and fear. The old fortress has fallen, so say the birds of the Wood. Elves and Wizards confronted the evil that dwelt there several days past, and it fled into the east, leaving the Orcs to answer only to their own foul kind.”

Thorin nodded, absorbing this new knowledge without comment. He did not doubt Gandalf was involved, given what he had heard of the information that had been brought by the bedraggled Radagast all those months ago. Word of a victory was heartening, but the idea that whatever had been defeated had fled rather than being destroyed worried him.

“And outside the Mountain?”

“The Ironfoot had made alliance with the Elf king and the Men of the Lake. My son's son followed the Wizard when he rode to meet the Dwarf army, and he saw a golden-haired Dwarf speak to the Lord of the Iron Hills, offering fair words and news of events in the Mountain. Dáin offered him loyalty, until the Orcs be defeated.”

Thorin felt a smile bloom across his face – the first true smile in what seemed an Age – as pride rushed through him. “Fíli. I thought it would have been his doing. He will be a fine king.”

Roäc bobbed his head, his voice low and gravelly, as though he spoke only to himself. “The Sun King, to bring light and life to the lands of Erebor and a new dawn for Durin's Folk.” Catching Thorin’s eye, the old bird made a chortling noise and cocked his head. “The blood of Durin does not have the only tie to the Mountain, son of Thráin. But I bring news, since you are of a mood to hear it. There is word from my sons and daughters, where they fly far and wide to scout the lands, oh king. The Great Eagles have left their eyrie in the Misty Mountains, and the Great Bear rides with them. They follow the Brown, and they are on their way to Erebor.”

Thorin stared at him, the words taking a moment to process. “The Eagles are coming? And Beorn? Radagast has called them to the aid of Erebor?”

It felt as though a great weight had lifted from his shoulders and heart. Alone, the Company would have stood no chance against Azog's host. Even the three armies currently outside of the Mountain were not enough to guarantee victory. But the Eagles, the shape-shifter, and a Wizard? Two Wizards, for surely Gandalf remained in the camp at the Mountain's feet.

“You ease my heart, Roäc, as well as the burden I have come to place on you. I had thought to send you for aid, but it already comes unlooked-for. This leaves only a single boon I that I would ask of you.”
The beady eye regarded him steadily and Roäc nodded. “You know that it will be done.”

“Nonetheless, I would ask it, in all humility and acknowledgment of what has happened these past days. Send the strongest of your flock to watch and protect them, to the best of the ravens' abilities. Your folk cannot fight, but they can warn, they can distract, and they can summon help. Safeguard them.”

“Your heirs.” There was a challenge in the raven's eye, and the Dwarf king wondered exactly how extensive the bond was between Mountain and birds, how much Roäc knew of events beneath the stone.

“All of them. Bilbo, if you can find him – if he is not hidden away as a last defender for Laketown's noncombatants. The others, I know will be on the field. Fili will be king, but he will need them at his side. His brother, his One – together, they will restore our people and champion the Mountain. They will rule far better than I ever could.”

“You brought them back to Erebor.” Roäc's voice was almost gentle. “You achieved the impossible, Thorin, son of Thráin. Do not so easily discard what you have done.”

“I do not. I have led my people for so long – at my father's side during the Exile, then with my sister after his disappearance. I was what they needed then. I am, perhaps, what is needed now – but not in the days to come. I will stand by Fili's side for as long as I am able, but this will be his kingdom. In many ways, it is already.” He trailed off, staring out over the landscape below, feeling the chill breeze on his face. “They are the future of Erebor, but more, they are the children of my heart, and I would see them safe. I have failed them too many times as it is.”

Roäc bowed once more and spread his wings. “It will be done, Thorin Uzbad. The flock will guard Erebor's king.”

The raven took to the sky, but Thorin stood for several long minutes, staring out at a view that he did not actually see. Far below, he knew, three armies made ready to face the approaching enemy, and he had preparations of his own to make – the Orcs would arrive all too soon, and his Company chafed to join the defense of their home. They only awaited his word.

* X *

Bilbo had spent a largely sleepless night in the deeproom beneath Dale. The Lakemen had been kind enough, welcoming him into their refuge and giving him smiles of gratitude as he kept the little ones entertained, but they were mostly strangers. Tilda hovered at his side, and Sigrid was a frequent presence, but his heart was torn with worry for the Company and he could not relax in the relative safety of the stone room. The morning found him restless and struggling with the implied promise that he had given Viska. He had never actually said that he would stay here throughout the battle, had he? No, he had merely agreed to stay the night, helping with the children. The Dwarrowluss had strongly hinted that he should stay until all danger was past, but no promise had been given.

Thus, none would be broken. He had only to make it to the stairs without catching her attention. The chestnut-haired lass had arrived a few minutes ago, heading straight for Bard's family and speaking to them in a quiet voice. Glancing around to make sure that no one was watching, the Hobbit slipped the golden ring onto his finger and edged his way across the stone floor, hoping to
escape without bumping into anyone in the crowded quarters. Viska was pressing a rolled page into little Tilda's hand as the girl stared at her with wide eyes.

"Thank you for saving it from the fires, but I would ask that you keep it for me a bit longer. I will return for it when the Orcs are gone."

Sigrid put a hand on her sister's shoulder, her face grave as Tilda spoke in a tiny voice.

"But what if you don't come back? Da said people will die, Viska. What if you die?"

The young Dwarf smiled and gave the girl a quick hug. "Then Sigrid will help you make sure it gets to Fili, or Kili – you met them the day you fell in the lake. If they -" Viska's voice caught and Bilbo felt his stomach twist as she stopped to take a deep breath before she could continue. "If the worst happens, take it to your da." She glanced up at Sigrid, her eyes fierce. "No matter what happens, the Dwarves will be returning to the Mountain. Get it to Balin, or any of the Company, and they will see it is given to Lady Dís. I no longer have any family, but she is Fili's mother, and if we fail...if we fall...if we fall, she deserves to have this, to know that her son was happy."

That answered the curious twitch in Bilbo's mind – clearly, she spoke of the picture that Ori had drawn, of the prince and the lass in Beorn's orchard. He had no doubt that there were portraits aplenty in the scribe's notebook, sketches that would tell the full tale of the Company's journey, but it brought tears to his eyes to hear the earnest determination in Viska's voice. That, as much as any of the thoughts that had plagued him through the night (Walnut snoring in his ear like a Dwarf herself), made up his mind. He was only one small Hobbit, but he could not stand by while his friends fought, and bled, and died. Taking a deep breath, he waited for a clear path to the stairs, then darted for the exit. A few hurried steps, and he was out in the fresh, chill air. Safety, such as it was, behind him, he made for the Elven camp, where he could lose himself in the bustling activity.

* X *

Beneath the feet of the armies, the vast, rudimentary consciousness of the Lonely Mountain stirs in disquiet. Though insulated from the Arkenstone, there is another presence, like and yet unlike, that disrupts the ancient melody of the bedrock. It is fire where the Arkenstone was ice, but its power is not directed at the Mountain. It is simply there, an irritating discordance that is gradually subsumed into the cacophony of war.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
kûrdê – my heart (Khuzdul)
uhlathu kûrdê – hero of my heart (Khuzdul)
tablûna – apple lady (Khuzdul)
uzbâd – king (Khuzdul)
Thorin stood in the entry hall and gazed around at his depleted Company, subdued and gratified by their fierce dedication. The past few days were a haze in his mind, but he remembered enough to know that he did not deserve their loyalty, or the compassion that shone from their faces. The grief in his heart was his own doing, and four of his companions were in danger because of his actions. Bilbo, who had been so unexpectedly fierce an ally. Viska, who had helped slay the dragon, only to lose the last of her kin. And his sister-sons, his heirs. Dís would kill him if they died this day, and by Mahal, he would let her.

The sound of boots on stone drew his attention and he glanced around as Balin, Dwalin, Ori, and Nori emerged from one of the many hallways, all but the white-haired advisor lugging a heavy crate filled with sand and, he hoped, a deadly surprise for the approaching Orcs. The wicked smile on Nori's face was expected – the matching one on Ori's was a bit of a surprise and it startled Thorin into an answering smirk. Balin cocked an eyebrow at him and nodded in confirmation. The king felt his smirk widening into a feral grin as he returned the gesture, then he took a deep breath and turned to address the Company, Dwarves he would forever trust at his back.

“I have no right to ask this of you,” he admitted quietly, studying each face in turn. “My actions since we reached the Mountain have been...less than honorable. And yet you have all stood by me, save those I drove reluctantly from my side with cruel words and crueler blows.” He paused, reading the determination in each pair of eyes, from quiet Bombur to protective Dori, and felt his heart swell. Never had any king been so blessed in his allies. “No matter your blood, you are all my brothers. Erebor is ours once more, beyond all hope and in spite of all conventional wisdom. But with Smaug defeated, a new threat rises and reaches for our home, threatening our allies and kin. Azog leads a great army from the south, from the Enemy's ancient fortress. His spawn Bolg leads another from the north, from Gundabad that they stole from us so long ago.” He sighed, a thousand questions and half-formed scenarios running through his mind. “I am certain that Gandalf knows what ultimate prize they seek, and he would perhaps have told me, if recent events had gone differently. For now, however, the little that I do know is enough. Orcs are the enemy of all the Free Peoples, and Azog particularly is the enemy of me and mine. Erebor has not been won only to fall to such ilk, and Durin's Folk will not stand by as blood is shed to defend our Mountain. I do not deserve it, but I will ask nonetheless. Will you follow me, one last time?”

He started when a cheer broke from his companions, fierce joy lighting their faces as weapons were hefted. Dwalin took a step forward, offering a proud nod as he swept his arm back to indicate the entirety of the Company.

“We are with you, Thorin. We are few, but fierce, and we will fight to the last Dwarf.”

That brought a flash of pain to his heart, an echo of memory, similar words spoken a lifetime ago
by a bright-eyed Fíli, but Thorin seized the ache and used it to stoke his determination.

“We are few indeed, my friend, and I fear that a dozen Dwarves more on the battlefield will make little difference—before the proper moment. Better to put each of you where you will do the most good.” He glanced at Balin, who stood by the sand-filled crates looking rather smug. “How many, cousin?”

“Twenty-five to a crate. Firepots, mostly, but with a little extra, courtesy of young Ori. Five of each, though, are the most delicate pots we could find, filled with a rather nasty mixture of Nori’s. Where would you have them, my king?”

Thorin studied his companions for a long moment. “On the ledge outside the hidden door. Bolg’s army will pass within good range. Nori, Ori, Dori, Bifur—do as much damage as you can. When you run out, or if they find you, come back in and seal the door behind you, then return to the Gate.” Those he had named hastened to obey, the young scribe grabbing a torch to light their way as the others each hoisted a heavy crate and started for the first flight of stairs. The king turned to those who remained. “Bombur, get to the Horn of Thráin,” he ordered, referring to the massive stone instrument carved into the side of Erebor by the first King Under the Mountain. “Wait for my signal to sound the charge and follow with your cousin when he returns. Bofur!” He turned to the miner as the rotund tinker hurried off, smiling slightly as Bofur offered him a cheeky salute and shouldered his mattock. “The base of the barricade. You know where. You’ll bring it down on my order. Óin, Glóin—the catapult station to the right of the Gate is still intact. The weapon itself is probably useless, but see if you can do any damage with the ammunition that might be left. Perhaps one of the big crossbows is still functional.” As the Company scattered, he turned to Balin and Dwalin, his oldest friends and most loyal allies. “With me, above the Gate. Dwalin, you will be my eyes, Balin my voice with the ravens. We will help send these scum to the Void that consumed their master.”

*K X *

Kíli was armed and armored when Fíli slipped through the tent flap, dark eyes lighting at the elder prince’s arrival. He caught the blanket that was tossed his way and set it aside, a teasing smirk on his face.

“Sleep well, nadad?”

Fíli shook his head with a wry grin. Kíli’s impudence was heartening, in a way. It was a reminder that his brother stood by him, as ever, hope and optimism personified.

“Well enough,” he agreed, pulling his brother in for a gentle headbutt. “Thank you for the blanket. Are you feeling better?”

A hint of shadow darted through the archer’s eyes, but he nodded firmly. “I am sorry about last night. I was—”

“You were exhausted and heartsick, and no one thinks the worse of you for it.” Fíli cut him off, clasping his shoulders firmly. “Mahal, Kí, I understand. It nearly killed me to leave Erebor, no matter Thorin’s behavior toward me, toward Viska. And to leave you behind? My soul was torn, kandith. It is still damaged, but it begins to heal. We are stronger now, the both of us.”

“Stronger together than apart.” Kíli pulled away as he murmured the mantra that their mother had
always drilled into them. A ghost of a smile flickered across his face as he tilted his head toward one of the cots. “I almost forgot – that fire-haired Elf lass brought a bundle by a little while ago. I think you'll be pleased.”

Pleased he was, for the bundle contained the weapons that had been taken from them in Mirkwood. He unwrapped it quickly, breaking into a broad smile when he found his own unique scabbard, both falchions firmly in place. Most of his knives were there as well, though there was nothing for Viska. Kíli shrugged when he commented on it.

“She lost her sword during the fight, remember? Bilbo told us that he had seen it, but he was too busy following the spiders to retrieve it. My bow is gone too, but I brought out the one I found in the armory, along with two quivers of arrows.”

Fíli nodded, setting the scabbard aside and discarding his coat so he could pull his chain mail over his head. “She still has the blade from Erebor, at least. Perhaps Tauriel will have a chance to search for hers when this is all done. They seem to have found a sort of friendship.” The chain in place, he put his coat back on and began stowing his blades carefully, Kíli handing them to him each in turn. The double scabbard came last, and he sighed with relief as it settled into place, an old friend returned. Kíli chuckled, then glanced around the tent curiously.

“Where is Viska?”

“Staying in Dale, I would hope.”

Both young Dwarrows spun at the new voice, though only Kíli reached for his blade, as Fíli had recognized it immediately. Dáin stood in the entrance, beard bristling, great red war hammer strapped to his back. Kíli stared for a moment before glancing at his brother in confusion, but the Lord of the Iron Hills simply strode forward and pulled the archer into a fierce hug.

“Kíli, son of Dís! It is good to meet you, lad. Your brother worried for you. How fares your uncle?”

The younger prince's face cleared, but he did not smile, for he had no good news regarding Thorin. “When I left, he was lost in his own dark thoughts. But I believe that Balin and the others had a plan. Perhaps they will rouse him where I could not.”

Dáin nodded thoughtfully. “Perhaps. There are few I would set against Fundin's son in a battle of words or wit. If anyone can think of a way to break the Stone's sway, it will be him.” He regarded Kíli seriously for a long moment. “I'll tell you what I told your brother. Thorin is strong – of will, of heart, and of mind. If any Son of Durin can be brought back from this darkness, it'll be your uncle.”

Kíli nodded silently, and Dáin turned to Fíli. “Now, this lass of yours – she'll be staying somewhere safe, I hope? The deeprooms in Dale that Gandalf mentioned?”

Fíli sighed and shook his head. “She will be here soon.”

“You'll not send her to safety?” Dáin stared at him incredulously and Fíli felt his temper flare as he met his cousin's eyes.

“You think I don't want to? I am terrified for her, even after everything we have already faced. She is alone, Dáin. Her brother was her last living kin, and he died saving her from Smaug, leaving her alone in ruined town of Men before she could rejoin us in the Mountain. I will not order her to leave my side. Not now. Not when....” He trailed off, unwilling to complete the thought and give voice to his deepest fears.
“But...surely she'd understand that you only want to keep her safe-” Kíli started to interject, only to wilt under his brother's incredulous gaze. “No, you're right. She will stay, no matter the danger,” he admitted, turning to Dáin. “She disguised herself as a lad to join the Company, after her father died. She is a fighter and a survivor. She will stand by him to the end.”

Dáin stared at both of them for a long moment before he nodded, a hint of admiration in his eyes. “Then keep her there and keep her safe, lad.”

“And she will do the same for him.”

Fíli smiled as Viska stepped into the tent, head up and eyes flashing as Dáin turned to her. Moving to her side, he introduced them smoothly. “My lady Viska, may I present Dáin, Lord of Zirinhanâd, my cousin. My lord Dáin, this is Viska, daughter of Kulvik of Lanzhindîn. My lady.”

The fierce warrior offered a formal bow, his sharp eyes going immediately to the cut on her face and the bruise that surrounded it. Raising an eyebrow at Fíli, he murmured half under his breath. “Blows were struck?” he quoted the Crown Prince's explanation of the evening before. “Thorin did that? He struck your One and the worst you did was walk away? You have a will of iron, lad.”

“Or merely an understanding heart, my lord.” Viska's face was full of sorrow and Dáin nodded heavily. “True enough. I remember Thrór's madness, and if Thorin suffers the same....” He trailed off, his thoughts clearly dark, and was silent for a moment before his eyes returned to meet her gaze. “Kulvik's daughter, then? I knew him slightly. He was an honorable Dwarf, and a good friend to Thorin. Stood with Fundin and young Frerin at Azanulbizar, if I remember correctly. Ah, that was a dark day. Never thought to see the like again.”

“That is why we need to finish this, today,” Fíli said, turning aside to help Viska shrug into her mail coat. “We will make sure that Azog is dead, and his foul spawn Bolg. Whatever alliance they have with the dark power in Dol Guldur, it ends today. We have an army of Men, Dwarves, and Elves, and we have the Mountain to aid us.”

“Not to mention a Wizard!” There was a wild recklessness in Kíli's face that didn't quite cover the deep fear in his eyes, and the sound of an Elven horn cutting through the chill morning air brought his head up like a deer scenting a predator. Just as Fíli was about to reach out a steadying hand, his brother's jaw took on a determined set and he reached for his bow. At his side, Viska had paused in the act of slipping one last knife into a hidden sheath, but she recovered just as quickly, securing the ties on her coat. Dáin surveyed the trio and beamed approvingly, placing one hand on Fíli's shoulder.

“You'll be on Ravenhill?” Fíli nodded, handing the sheathed sword to Viska and watching her strap it into place on her back.

“Where I can see the field and hear the Mountain, if needed.”

“And where you can be seen, with that golden hair of yours,” the Lord of the Iron Hills retorted gruffly. “I'll send a couple of my best to stand with you, buntelith.”

He was gone a moment later, leaving the three young Dwarrow alone. Fíli reached out blindly, pulling his brother and his One into a tight embrace, pressing their foreheads together as he spoke to them without words, willing them to be safe in the coming hours. He could feel Kíli's grip on his
collar, Viska's fingers wound into the hair at the back of his neck as they held tightly to one another for a timeless eternity that was all too short. They broke apart at the next call of the horn, eyes bright, and then they were out of the tent, the thin winter sunlight warm on their heads as they hurried through the encampment toward the door at the base of Ravenhill.

* X *

Someone had once told Nori that the quietest folk were the ones to watch the closest, a warning he had shrugged off with a grin and a chuckle. Now, he was wondering if he should have given it more credence, for he was seeing a side of his scholarly younger brother that he had never imagined. Ori was downright frightening.

It had started when Balin had summoned them to accompany him to the Alchemy Hall, wanting their assistance in mixing as many firepots as possible before the arrival of the enemy armies. Ori had joined in enthusiastically, eager to learn and help, which was typical Ori. Once the mixture was complete, however, and they were ready to fill the thin ceramic pots, the quiet artist had frowned, the thin line between his brows a familiar sign that he was deep in thought.

"Wouldn't they do more damage if we added broken glass? Or even stone shards? Then, when the pots explode-"

"-they'll tear through flesh and muscle!" Balin's eyes had lit up, a fierce smile on his face. "Brilliant, Ori! Quick, gather up whatever you can find while we mix up this paste of Nori's."

The thief's own contribution to their weaponry had been a thinned out version of an acidic paste that he had used on occasion to gain access to areas that were secured against more conventional means of egress. At full strength, it could eat through most stone, though it took a while. Even the watered-down version, however, would corrode flesh. He had never used it in such a way before, and he hoped that he never would again. Only the knowledge of what they faced had persuaded him to produce the sealed vials of the main ingredients from their hiding places (Ori had blinked in surprise, prompting a shrug from the elder brother and a muttered "who searched through a Dwarf's hair?" as he slipped them from concealment beneath two of his three elaborate crests). By the time he and Balin had mixed and diluted the paste and filled fifteen of the thinnest of the pots, Ori had returned with a collection of broken glass, ceramic, and stone. Working quickly, the three Dwarves had packed the sharp debris in with the normal mixture of the firepots, adding a short fuse to each before packing them in sand-filled trays and stacking the trays in the crates. Dwalin had joined them as they finished the last tray, bringing word that Thorin had returned and was waiting in the entry hall, before the Great Gate.

Now, as he stood once more on the grassy ledge outside of the hidden door, Nori watched his brother and wondered when quiet little Ori had become so fierce. It was a small comfort that Dori also watched the other askance as the scholar piled several of the firepots within easy reach, one already in hand as they watched the first ranks of Orcs begin to pour around the side of the Mountain. The first to fly came from his hand, and many of those that followed found significant targets due to his keen eyesight and precise aim. Nori flicked a glance at Bifur, who met his eyes steadily before shrugging.

"Damum Durinul," the enigmatic warrior commented quietly, flashing a quick grin before he flung the thin pot he held.
Damum Durinul. Blood of Durin. And so they were, though of a distant line, somewhat disgraced in long years past. The Mountain had welcomed them, and the fire of Durin's Heirs sang in their blood. Nori realized that he wore a wicked smirk, and that it was mirrored on the faces of both his brothers. Side by side, all differences forgotten, the sons of Tomri hurled death down on the Orcs of Gundabad. After the first few, Bifur left them to it, making it his part instead to watch the enemy below. He was the one who saw when the Orcs realized where they were, and he was the one to tap Dori's arm, bringing the mithril-haired leather-worker out of his concentration to point out the approaching danger. Ori flung the last of the firepots as the others hurried into the small tunnel, then followed them as Dori began to swing the heavy stone into place. By the time the Orcs found their way up to the ledge, there was nothing to be seen but a scattering of sand, three empty crates, and a featureless wall, for doors of Dwarven craft are made to be invisible when closed.

* X *

The firepots had done their work, and done it well. Thorin, deep in communion with the Mountain, saw the damage wrought by the deadly missiles – flesh torn, bones shattered, blood spreading across the cold ground beneath the dead and maimed. Nori had focused on the Trolls that marched with the army, sending them mad with pain as the acidic paste ate through their thick hides. They had slain nearly as many of their own as the firepots, trampling their companions in vain attempts to escape the agony. The army from Gundabad was weakened, but still dangerous, and the pale Orc at its head was furious and frantic. As Bolg rallied his troops and led them at a rush around the final arm of the Mountain, the king's attention was caught by something in the stone itself. She whispered to him of a weakness there, where a century of ice and water had caused cracks to form and spread. A fierce grin spread across his face and he pulled back, turning to hurry down the stairs, his cousins at his heels.

“Dwalin, call the Company. Balin, tell Bofur to drop the right side of the barricade on my signal.

“What signal?”

Thorin laughed.

“I promise, it will be impossible to miss.”

* X *

The Princes of Erebor stood halfway up Ravenhill, on a deep ledge accessed via the stairwells that led from the storage cellars of the tower to the heights of the guard post. Fíli stood in the middle, one falchion in hand, while Kíli flanked him on the left and Viska on the right. Kíli already had an arrow nocked, though he had not yet drawn his bow, and the Dwarrowlass had her sword drawn. Half a dozen of Dáin's soldiers had joined them, hardened infantry with a grizzled officer who bowed respectfully to the three young fighters before taking up a protective stance around them. Catching the officer's eye, Kíli shifted his grip on his weapon long enough to make a few quick, subtle signs. The scarred veteran's eyes widened slightly before a nearly imperceptible nod conveyed his agreement and the young archer felt a small measure of tension leave his shoulders. Like him, the soldiers would focus their attention on protecting Fíli and Viska. It was underhanded,
perhaps, and would no doubt anger his brother if Fíli should ever find out, but Kíli was set in his course of action. He did not want to die. He had made a promise to his mother, who had already lost so much, and he fully intended to keep it. But he had also decided long ago that he would give his life to keep his brother safe, and that had never changed. It had simply evolved to encompass Viska and the future that she represented.

“My blood spilled before theirs, my life laid down for theirs, to protect my brother and his One to my last breath and beyond.”

The first explosion caught them by surprise, Kíli whipping around to face north, drawing back the string on his bow as he moved. The second confused him, for there was nothing to see, and he turned to his brother. Fíli already had his hand on the stone of the Mountain, eyes closed as he reached through Erebor’s sluggish consciousness. When his eyes opened again, they flared with a dangerous light and he spoke loudly, offering the welcome news to any of their allies within earshot.

“Dori and his brothers are outside of the hidden door! They are hurling firepots down on the northern army.”

Kíli stared at him, then whooped in delight, a broad grin spreading across his face as Viska chuckled. Fíli grinned back at him, lowering his voice to a quiet murmur as he continued.

“Thorin is himself. I can feel his presence in the Mountain. He speaks with her. The Company prepares to join the battle.”

His eyes found Viska's and Kíli felt his heart clench at the love that shone from both of their faces. He turned away, unwilling to intrude, but he could not close his ears.

“Do not take this wrong, but...I wish that you were not here, amràlimê.”

“I know, but I could not be anywhere else, kurdê.”

And then the battle was upon them.

* X *

Across the battlefield, Azog hears the explosions, the rumble of the rock slide as part of the Mountain gives way and buries a swathe of the army from Gundabad. His grimace is pure fury, for soldiers lost mean fewer numbers in their battle. He cares little for Bolg, beyond determination that his offspring will not shame him, for Orcs do not share this weakness, this...sentimentality...for others of the same blood. But long years have taught them how to exploit it, oh yes. He does not need to seek Oakenshield – he needs only to find those that the Dwarf lord values.

And there they are, halfway up Ravenhill, fighting with a small detachment of soldiers from the Iron Hills (and that was a nasty surprise). The Dwarves who came to Oakenshield's defense on the cliffs of the Misty Mountains, the ones he protected outside of the home of the Great Bear. Sun-gold and raven-dark, they fight side by side as swords flash and they scream defiance at their enemies. Another fights with them, unfamiliar and yet not as the weak winter sun glints off of silver beads in an intricate braid, and the pale Orc abruptly recognizes another irritant of the past several months. Here is one of the young ones that has stood by the heirs since that first encounter, and it is clear from the way the three of them interact that this one is also close and dear. So then, it will
be three...three pieces of bait...three morsels of tender flesh to tear and mangle. He will reach them, or Bolg will, and they will not need to search out Oakenshield. Once they are in hand, Oakenshield will come to him.

* X *

High above Ravenhill, unnoticed in the growing confusion below, Erebor's fiercest, strongest ravens drifted on steady wings, beady eyes watching for any threat to the three young Dwarves that were their charges.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:

nadad – brother (Khuzdul)
kandith – little/young wolf (Khuzdul)
Zirinhanâd – The Iron Hills (Khuzdul)
Lanzhindîn – The Hills of Evendim (Khuzdul)
buntelith – little/young lion (Khuzdul, literally "young cat of all cats")
Damum Durinul – Blood of Durin (Khuzdul)
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
kurdê – my heart (Khuzdul)
We'll Fight As Long As We Live

Chapter Notes

A/N: Okay, here we go - last chapter of what was previously posted!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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WE'LL FIGHT AS LONG AS WE LIVE

History will know it as The Battle of the Five Armies, a naming both perfectly apt and woefully inadequate to convey a true sense of its magnitude and consequence. As the years pass, tales will be told and songs will be sung – and some will even contain more than a grain of truth.

The Elves are icy precision, grace in every movement. Their skills have been honed over centuries, no movement wasted. Every step flows seamlessly into the next, a deadly dance with blade or bow. Thranduil is a storm of death atop his great elk, the sneering courtier replaced by the warrior king that took up his fallen father’s banner in the Battle of Dagorlad. He is relentless and awe-inspiring, and where he leads, his folk follow and Orcs die by the dozens. But so do Elves, pierced and hewn by cruel blades, and his crystalline eyes dim a little more with every lost immortal life.

The Men are grim anxiety, fighting a foe they never thought to face. They are not warriors, these Men of the Lake, but fishermen, craftsmen, and merchants. Those that wield actual weapons from Dale's ancient stores do so awkwardly. They reek of desperation, but they stand, and they fight, for of all the combatants, they have the most to lose. Their families are nearby and vulnerable, and they will fight to the last breath to protect their own. Bard is their reluctant leader, discomfited by the fact that they look to him and see only the Dragonslayer, descendent of Girion. He is both of these things, but above all, he is a father, and it is in this that he finds his strength. He will lead them for little Tilda, with her sweet smile and love of that silly pup. For Sigrid, with her mother's strength, who slew an Orc to safeguard her siblings. For Bain, all coltish limbs and bravado, who even now waits with weapon in hand in case the deeproom is breached. For them, he will lead the Lakemen against a cruel and terrible foe, and thereby cement their loyalty and love without even realizing how it happened.

The Dwarves are tireless determination, their smaller size more than balanced by the ferocity with which they fight. With this battle, they have been given the chance to right two wrongs done their race. They will defend Erebor, last of the great Dwarf kingdoms, as they could not against the dragon. And in doing so, they will finally be avenged on Azog the Defiler for the slaughter at Azanulbizar. Dáin's mighty war hammer is in constant motion as he plows through Orc ranks on his great boar. He has his own score to settle with the Azog, the sight of his father's sightless eyes burned into his mind. For Náin, for Thrór, for Thráin, for Frerin...for Thorin, his cousin and king, whom he has failed once already by not supporting this quest to retake the Mountain.

Within the Mountain itself, the Company of Thorin Oakenshield prepares to take the field. They are
only eleven, but they have proved their loyalty over a thousand miles of obstacles and trials. They will fight for king and kingdom, for the past that was lost, and the future yet to come. And Thorin will lead them, his sword fueled not by rage or vengeance, but by sorrow and a fierce determination to ensure the future of those he has hurt so deeply. No matter the cost in his own blood, Bilbo will return to the Shire and his beloved home, with whatever rewards the Hobbit will accept from the grateful kingdom for his friendship and steadfast honor. Fíli will sit the throne, with Viska at his side and Kíli at his shoulder. Mahal willing, Thorin will be there to guide his heir, for the restoration of Erebor will be a long and grueling task. In the end, though, his heart is set on a single goal – their survival. He owes it to them, to his people, and to his sister, waiting in Khagal'abbad.

The battle will end, and fade into history. Time will pass, as She is wont to do, and those who survive will look back and remember the confrontation before the Gate of Erebor, when Elves, Men, and Dwarves (and one lone Hobbit), fought to stem the rising tide of darkness. But this is here, and real, and NOW, and the ending of the tale is yet to be written...who will live, and who will die, not yet decided.

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Bilbo Baggins stared in horror at the sight before him. After the perils of the quest, he had thought himself prepared for what he would find on the battlefield. After all, he had faced Trolls, Goblins, and Orcs before – the battle before Erebor would simply be the confrontation near Beorn's writ large. And with allies. The Lord of the Iron Hills led five hundred soldiers, while the Lakemen had perhaps two hundred untrained fighters. He had not counted the Elves, but their force had looked larger than that of the Dwarves even before their king had sent for additional troops. Together, they might not have rivaled the legendary Last Alliance of the Second Age, but he had thought them magnificent, unbreakable. Surely Azog's rabble would turn tail and run when confronted with such a foe!

Never in his life had he been more wrong. He stood near Gandalf – the Wizard had not been best pleased to find the burglar at his heels, but it had been too late to send him elsewhere, and so a long-suffering sigh had been his only comment – and watched the enemy approach, his heart somewhere in the vicinity of his toes. The enemy army was like a nightmare. Rank upon rank of massive Orcs, crudely armed and armored, faces suffused with hate and bloodlust. There were Warg-riders, their beasts snarling and slavering with anticipation, and Trolls of a different breed than those in the West, which did not turn to stone beneath the weak winter sun. Goblins, too, ran shrieking alongside the massive army. It was terrifying.

And then the forces met, with a crash that shook the very ground beneath his feet, and Sting was in his hand before he even knew he was reaching for the blade. The enemy was still far from his position, but he shifted his grip slightly, as Kíli had taught him so long ago, and gave mental thanks to his young friends for insisting that he accept basic training with the Elven blade. He was no warrior, but months of association with a Company of headstrong Dwarves had infected him with some of their stubborn determination.

The faint sound of distant explosions had him staring at Gandalf in confusion as a smile crept across the weathered face.

“That will be our friends in the Mountain, doing what they can to slow the army from Gundabad.” The Wizard closed his eyes, heaving a great sigh of relief as Bilbo realized what he meant.
“Thorin?”

“Is himself once more.” The silvery blue eyes opened and Gandalf pointed toward the Gate of Erebor. “Do you see? Beside the Gate?”

Turning, the Hobbit strained to see what he indicated, squinting fiercely. Finally, he was able to make out two small figures in an alcove next to the hastily-constructed barrier. He frowned, unable to see exactly what they were doing. A moment later, a shadow flew from the alcove. Bilbo's eyes followed it reflexively, only to see several Orcs stagger, pinned together by something unseen as they fell. He glanced up to see a fierce smile on Gandalf's face.

“It appears that one of the big crossbows is still in working order. Not black arrows, perhaps, but dangerous enough, I would say”

Bilbo glanced up at the figures once more, his brow furrowed.

“Is that...Óin and Glóin?”

Two more missiles flew before the Dwarves disappeared back inside, each massive arrow taking out several Orcs or Goblins. Bare moments after his two friends were out of sight, the sound of a massive rockfall cut through the confusion of the battle. A murmur of confusion went through the group of Elven archers nearby, but then another rumble from the front of the Gate seized their attention and held it as a section of the barricade crumbled. At the same time, the cry of a great battle horn rang out, echoing within the stone spurs of the Mountain. A small contingent of Dáin's army, cut off from their allies by a fierce group of Orcs, suddenly found themselves reinforced by a band of fresh, furious fighters. The Orcs slain, the Iron Hills Dwarves rejoined their fellows and a cry went up in Khuzdul and Westron.

“The king! The king is come! Rally to the king! Erebor stands!”

“Thorin! Gandalf, it's Thorin!”

“The king rides forth,” the Wizard muttered, half to himself. “Dáin and his warriors rally to the king.”

Bilbo's laugh was bordering on hysteria, but it cut off abruptly as he caught sight of a large pale figure climbing the slopes of Ravenhill. He stared, unsure what he was seeing.

“Is that Azog? Why would he be climbing up there?” His thoughts were sluggish and confused. Thorin had just revealed himself at the Gate – why would the pale Orc be moving in the other direction? Gandalf glanced over quickly, his eyes narrowing before they widened with realization.

“Not Azog.” His tone was grim and Bilbo saw his hand tighten on the gnarled staff. “Bolg, his spawn. It seems he survived the attacks on the northern army.”

“But where is he going?” Even as he asked, the burglar caught sight of a familiar golden head halfway up the hill. His heart lurched. “Fíli. Kíli.”

“Thorin's heirs,” the Wizard agreed heavily. “Sons of Durin.”

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It would, perhaps, have been wiser to creep quietly from the Mountain, joining their kin without alerting the enemy to their arrival. But that was not the Dwarven way, not when the king strode forth to lead his people against their hated enemy. The twin rumbles of rockfall and barricade had disoriented the Orcs and their allies, and the Horn of Thráin had announced his coming to friend and foe alike. No, the element of surprise was long since lost, and so Thorin chose to lead his Company out of the Mountain at a charge, reinforcing a group of Iron Hills warriors that had gotten cut off from the rest of Dáin's forces. No words were needed – the grizzled veteran leading the group simply offered a nod of thanks before turning to his soldiers and leading the cry as they moved back toward the main army.

“The king! The king is come! Rally to the king! Erebor stands!”

Thorin followed them, flanked by Dwalin and Balin. The others were close behind, roaring with rage, whooping with excitement, or simply moving with silent deadly intent, each according to his temperament. It seemed only moments before a familiar red-bearded Dwarf came into view, his war hammer covered in black Orc blood. The great boar was gone, the Lord of the Iron Hills standing side by side with his infantry.

“Good to see you, cousin!” Dáin bellowed his greeting, dispatching an overly-ambitious Goblin with a vicious swipe. “Glad you could join us!” There was no rancor in his voice, but the uncrowned king felt his conscience twinge with guilt. Apologies, however, could wait. Instead, he clapped his cousin on the shoulder and offered him a tight smile.

“Couldn't let you have all the fun, cousin.” He sobered as the warriors moved around them, isolating the two leaders for a few brief moments of peace. “Dáin, my sister-sons....” He trailed off, unsure how to finish, wondering how much the other Dwarf knew of what had happened within the Mountain. The affable expression hardened slightly, and a glint to the hazel eyes told him that the answer was “enough.” A reply came quickly, though, and the tone of the voice was almost gentle.

“Aye, I saw them. Brave lads, and dangerous.” He snorted. “Talked me into fighting with that arrogant leafy bastard Thranduil, as you can see, which testifies to young Fíli's golden tongue.” The big bearded warrior pointed across the battlefield, toward the old watch tower. “They're on Ravenhill, the ledge halfway up. Both lads, and the lass your eldest is courting. Refused to be parted from him, she did, though she's faced her share of trials already, by the sound of it.”

There it was – a thread of anger through his cousin's voice, and one that was not half what he deserved. Thorin sighed and nodded, meeting Dáin's gaze steadily. “They are more than I deserve, all three,” he acknowledged with rare humility. “And I owe them all a great debt.” With that he straightened and turned his attention back to the battle raging beyond the wall of Dwarven warriors as his rage at the Orcs began to rise up once more. “And I intend to begin paying it here and now. Shall we find Azog, cousin?”

Dáin's reply was a roar that parted the soldiers before them like a blade through flesh, and he hefted his war hammer as they charged together back into the confusion of the battle.

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Nothing had prepared Kíli for this. Not Balin's tales, or Bofur's songs, or even the small conflicts of the journey had given him an adequate frame of reference for the sheer madness of the battle for Erebor. The confusion, the noise, the Mahal-forsaken smell...all plucked at his tightly-wound nerves until they sang with tension. Only Fíli's solid presence at his side kept him grounded until
his body could take over, long years of training ensuring that he moved almost without thought, responding to the threats as they approached, taking absent note of those that did not. Arrows spent and sword in hand, his world narrowed to the small patch of ground that he held with his brother and soon-to-be-sister. Dáin's half-dozen warriors were nearby, but he had little attention to spare for them. As a Dwarf, and as a Son of Durin, he was aware of their presence, their every move, at a deeply unconscious level. As a brother, and as a part of the fighting unit of Fíli-and-Kíli, he was most closely attuned to the golden swordsman to his right, and the chestnut-haired lass just beyond. Their cohesion was nearly flawless, months of practice allowing Viska to fit herself neatly into the rhythm that the brothers had developed.

His archer's eyes saw the Orc first, a large pale shape moving up the slope of Ravenhill. He blinked in confusion, unsure what he was seeing. Where Azog was massively muscled, built almost like an oversized Dwarf, the approaching figure was leaner and taller, more like a Man, or even an Elf. Rather than true armor, the Orc wore only spiked spaulders and boots, as well as a heavy belt with a leather loincloth. Sharp pieces of metal appeared to have been embedded directly into his flesh along his ribs, and one milky blind eye stared from between bands of iron similarly attached to his skull. Cracked teeth were visible behind torn lips as the beast caught his eye and offered what might have been a smile. Kíli shuddered and tore his eyes away, just in time to cut the legs out from under an Orc that was lunging for his brother. As Fíli finished the creature off with one falchion, Kíli hissed his name and nodded toward the new threat. The older prince's reply was grim.

“I see him. Azog's spawn, Bolg, from Gundabad.”

“Du bekar!”

Kíli turned in surprise to find that their honor guard of Iron Hills warriors had moved to close ranks in front of the princes. The scarred leader cast them a stern look over his shoulder as he growled at them.

“Lord Dáin sent us to stand with you, and stand we shall!”

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Bilbo was alone on the battlefield, the golden ring hiding him from the combatants as he crept toward the door at the base of Ravenhill. Gandalf had forbidden him from going, pointing out that Bolg would likely reach the young Dwarves long before he could. He had also dwelt heavily on the fact that a single Hobbit didn't stand a chance against the host of Orcs, Goblins, Wargs, and Trolls between him and his goal. The burglar had simply smiled at his old friend and shaken his head.

“I wasn't asking, Gandalf. They might not even be up there if not for me. I must help them, if I can. Be safe.”

The Wizard might have said more, but an Orc had lunged through the gathered Elven warriors and he had turned to face it, sword in hand. As soon as his back was turned, Bilbo had settled the ring on his finger and slipped away.

He was starting to regret it. The ring's magic kept him from the eyes of the enemy, but it did nothing to protect him from being stepped on, knocked aside, and accidentally stabbed, so he kept...
his head low and moved as quickly and quietly as he could (which was, as Gandalf had told the Dwarves long ago in Bag End, almost a kind of magic itself). He did his best not to look at the bodies that he passed, praying absently to any Valar that might be listening that none of them belonged to anyone that he knew. He caught a distant war cry that sounded like Dwalin, and the Elven king’s elk thundere by at one point, making him dodge quickly out of the way to avoid being trampled, but once he reached the foot of Ravenhill, all of his attention was focused on the distinctive golden hair halfway up the side. Fíli was back to back with his brother and Viska, the three moving as a single unit as they covered one another. Bolg had not yet reached them, held back by two fierce, unfamiliar Dwarven warriors. Even as the Hobbit watched, one of them fell, joining several other unmoving figures on the ground near the Orc's feet. The last soldier gave a cry of fury and renewed his attack, and Bilbo was moving again, darting up the interior stairs on silent feet.

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“We have to get to Fíli and Kíli!” Thorin's order brooked no argument, and he could tell that Dwalin would not have offered one. The big warrior simply glanced at his brother and nodded, then, turned to his king.

“Are they still on Ravenhill? I cannot see from here.”

Dwalin stooped to clean his axes on a fallen Orc's tattered clothing and Thorin reached out until his hand met stone. For a bare moment, a blinding second, he was seeing with other eyes, hearing with other ears – the connection forged through the Mountain on a bolt of desperate fear.

...he is on one knee, hand braced on stone as he struggles to rise. He would already be dead, felled by a blow from the pale Orc's sword, but for the intervention of his brother. Kíli lives, but he cannot see him, for his eyes are fixed on the sight before him.

Viska struggles in Bolg's grip, held tightly by the throat as she tries to reach one of her hidden knives. The Orc's eyes meet his and he realizes that the bastard knows. He knows what she is to the prince, and he is enjoying himself, restraining her effortlessly with one powerful hand. A roar of defiance breaks from Fíli's chest and he surges to his feet, losing contact with the skin of the Mountain...

Thorin gasped as the connection was severed, the scene burned into his mind's eye. Then he was moving, barely hearing Dwalin's shout of surprise behind him.

“Ravenhill! Bolg!”

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It only took a moment. A second's distraction – a Goblin dropping from a ledge above – and
everything changed. The Goblin was dead in the space of a heartbeat, Fíli running him through with a falchion. The prince's blood thundered in his ears as he turned back. He had taken his eyes off of Bolg for that one breath, and the big Gundabad Orc seized his chance. Taller than a Man, the beast had a long reach, and he was on Fíli before the Dwarf could move.

Or he would have been, had Kíli not charged in with a yell, sword flashing in the gloomy winter sunlight. Bolg snarled and spun on the dark-haired archer, his hand clenching into a powerful fist the size of Kíli's head. It met the young Dwarf's face and the golden-haired swordsman heard his brother's nose break. Kíli dropped, sword falling from nerveless fingers, dark eyes wide and stunned. Fíli's heart froze as the Orc raised his jagged scimitar, a sneer on the disfigured face.

“No!”

Fíli was moving, but Viska was faster. She was just suddenly there, standing in front of his defenseless brother as Kíli scrambled for his weapon. Her eyes sparked with fury and she hacked at Bolg's sword arm, slicing deep into the flesh and drawing black blood. The Orc howled and yanked his arm away, sending both swords flying as he lashed out with his other hand and caught her by the neck. When he straightened to his full height, she hung suspended, boots kicking furiously as her fingers scrabbled at his hand, trying to pry herself loose.

A red haze washed across the elder prince's vision and he attacked heedlessly, his mind empty save for the knowledge that his One, his beloved, was dying in front of him, and he must not allow it to happen. A careless swipe of Bolg's bloodied arm sent him staggering backward, balance lost as he fell heavily to one knee, vaguely aware that his head was ringing and he had dropped one of his swords. He shook his head, trying to clear his blurry vision, and braced himself with one hand on a stone outcropping, all of his attention locked on the scene before him.

Bolg ignored him at first, staring at his captive for a long moment. Then, clawed fingers tightened and trickles of red began to soak her collar. Fíli knew he was bellowing, could feel it shredding his throat, but the world seemed to have gone quiet. Bolg turned to grin at him, the expression blood-curdling on the Orc's twisted features, and the muscles in the thick forearm rippled as he began to bear down. Fíli lunged to his feet and the air around them erupted in furious screeching as a flock of ravens descended, beaks and claws ripping at the pale Orc's eyes and face. The birds were enraged, a thick black cloud around his enemy's head, and then they were gone. Fíli blinked as an expression of almost comical surprise crossed the beast's horrific visage, now torn and bloodied. Bolg stared down at himself, drawing the prince's attention to a deep gash that had suddenly appeared in the Orc's side, far too large to have been the work of a raven. They both gaped, not even noticing when Viska abandoned her grip on Bolg's wrist to contort herself enough to pull a knife from her boot. The awkward movement finally caught the young Dwarf’s eye and he glanced up just as she buried it to the hilt as close to the elbow as she could reach. She used both hands to twist it cruelly, severing muscles and sinew until his grip loosened and she tumbled to the stone. Bolg roared with rage and lunged forward, one heavy, booted foot coming down on the Dwarrowmaid's leg as she struggled to move out of the way. She screamed and Fíli sprang forward, his brother at his side. As Bolg stepped toward Fíli, Kíli's longsword cut deep into the back of his thigh. The Orc dropped abruptly to one knee as his hamstring was severed, a flicker of pain finally showing on the scarred face. A moment later, Fíli's falchion sliced cleanly across the pale throat, nearly cleaving through the spinal column. Black blood poured forth as Bolg reached up to staunch his wound, and the fell light was fading from his eyes even as he toppled to the stone.

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Icy terror stole through Dwalin's gut as he bent low over the neck of the battle ram, urging the beast to greater speed. He was an adequate rider at best, preferring ponies to rams and his own feet to ponies, but time was too short to argue when Dáin commandeered the animals from his troops. Instead, the Arms Master had simply nodded his thanks and mounted only a moment behind Thorin. The uncrowned king led, followed closely by Dwalin and Dáin as Balin and Bifur helped some of the Iron Hills soldiers to clear a path out of the thick mass of combatants. Once free of the immediate press of bodies, they were able to make good use of their mounts' climbing ability as they moved up to race along the steep side of the Mountain spur. They rode silently, with single-minded purpose, dispatching the occasional foolhardy Goblin with fierce efficiency.

Thorin's gaze was locked on their goal, the deep cliff that banded Ravenhill roughly halfway up (much like the Eyrie of the Eagles, though not so high or quite so deep). Dwalin, however, kept his eyes moving, watching for any threat approaching from the battle below as Dáin did the same on the other side. It was a battle reflex, but it was also self-preservation of a different sort. He did not want to see their destination as they drew nearer, for deep in his heart, he feared what he would see. Rams or no, they had taken too long. A deep foreboding had seized the big warrior, and he knew with a terrible certainty that tragedy lay ahead for the Line of Durin.

And so, he did not look – he would not accept the death of any of his kin until he must. Instead, he scanned the lower slope of Ravenhill, and thus was the first to see the new threat moving up from the battlefield.

Azog.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
Battle of Dagorlad – Battle fought between the Army of the Last Alliance and Sauron's forces just outside of Mordor. Oropher was one of the commanders in the battle, leading his Silvan Elves in alliance with the Noldor Elves of the West, but refusing to place themselves under the command of Gil-Galad and Elrond. Thranduil's father died in the first attack.
Khagal'abbad – The Blue Mountains (Khuzdul)
Du bekar! - To arms!
Viska lay in stunned silence, her gaze fixed on the spreading pool of black blood beneath the corpse of the Orc that had come so close to killing her. She made no effort to move, her breath harsh in her throat, the icy stone of the Mountain stealing the heat from her body. Her neck stung where Bolg's claws had drawn blood, and the various small injuries she had sustained were beginning to make themselves known, no longer muted by the warmth of battle fury. The dull throb in her knee worried her the most, however, for a loss of mobility was no small danger on such a battlefield.

“Viska?”

Fíli's voice, warm with concern, broke into her dazed thoughts as he knelt at her side. Beyond him, Kíli stood over Bolg, staring down at the disfigured Orc, face pale and eyes shadowed.

“He's dead. Praise Mahal and all the Valar, the bastard is finally dead!” the young archer murmured, slumping slightly in relief.

“Viska!”

Fíli's voice had taken on an edge of fear and the Dwarrowlass realized that she had not yet answered him. Catching his hand, she gave it a comforting squeeze, drawing his gaze to her face.

“I'm alright, Fíli.” She met his eyes and offered him a small smile. His answering one was rather weak, the charming dimples barely a flash behind his mustache, but some of the tension drained from his shoulders and he shifted to help her sit up. Kíli was finally moving, retrieving his brother's dropped falchion as he joined them. A moment later, the sound of light steps on stone had him dropping to a crouch and spinning to face the new threat, a snarl building in his throat. Viska, catching a glimpse of fire-red hair and green woods garb, called out to the prince quickly.

“Friend, Kíli! It is Tauriel, the Elf that helped us in Laketown!”

“Peace, brother. She is an ally,” Fíli added, nodding to the she-Elf, who had frozen in place at the first sign of hostility. As Kíli relaxed, she approached and dropped to one knee, her eyes wide with dismay.

“Viska, mellon-nin, you are hurt.” Gentle hands flitting over the Dwarrowlass's throat as Tauriel examined her injuries.

“She faced down Bolg to save my brother.” Pride and frustration warred in Fíli's voice and exhaustion washed over his face for a brief moment. “Come, love, can you stand? This peace will not last.”
Leaning heavily on the golden-haired swordsman, and with Tauriel assisting on the other side as Kíli stood guard, Viska managed to rise carefully. As soon as she tried to put weight on the damaged limb, however, a bolt of agony shot through the joint and she crumpled, biting back a shriek. Swearing softly in Khuzdul, Fíli ran careful hands over the rapidly-swelling leg, his face darkening.

“This is not just a dislocation,” he muttered, worry in his eyes. “You cannot walk, and it cannot be treated out here.”

“Thorin! Fíli, it's Thorin!”

Kíli’s abrupt exclamation drew their attention, and Viska turned to follow the archer's gaze out across the battlefield. Below them, riding hell-for-leather down the spur of the Mountain, three rugged battle rams pounded toward them. The Dwarrowmaid felt her heart leap in her chest. It had been one thing to hear Fíli's news, gleaned from the vast, vague consciousness of the Mountain. It was something else, something more, to have it confirmed by the evidence of her own eyes. There was no doubting it, however, for there, carving through ranks of Orcs and Goblins, was the uncrowned king of Erebor, flanked by the burly form of the Arms Master and the wildly bearded Lord of the Iron Hills. She glanced at Fíli as his hand found hers and tightened, a fierce joy lighting his face. He pulled her to him, burying his face in her hood and holding her tightly for a long moment, until Kíli's whoops of delight turned to a cry of dismay and they flinched back, turning to seek the king.

Azog had come. He and his great white Warg had charged in among the three warriors, separating them so that Dwalin and Dáin faced the four-legged beast and Thorin stood alone before the pale Orc. Sword in hand, spattered with blood both red and black, the king charged into battle against his foe, the massive Orc chieftain nearly twice his size and armed with sword and mace.

“THORIN!”

Kíli had already taken a step forward, hand tightening on his sword hilt, when anxious dark eyes turned to his brother. Fíli lunged to his feet, conflict clear on his face. He glanced at Viska, then at Tauriel, and Viska knew his thoughts even before he spoke.

“Fíli, no! Please-”

He ignored her, beyond a small squeeze of her hand, focusing on the Elf.

“Lady Tauriel, I would ask a boon of you, on your friendship with Viska.”

The Elf Captain fixed that cool gaze on him, her face carefully expressionless, though the Dwarrowllass saw a glint of understanding in the green eyes. Struggling to rise, Viska tried again.

“Fíli, you swore!”

“Take her to safety, if there is any to be found,” he continued, holding Tauriel's eyes. “My duty now must be to my king, but she is my life. Do this, and you shall have the eternal gratitude of the future king of Erebor.”

Tauriel stood motionless for a moment longer, then nodded respectfully, one hand clasping Viska's shoulder gently.

“I do it for Viska, my lord prince. For her stout heart, and true courage. And in memory of her brother, who I could not save.”
Fíli nodded tightly, then knelt and took Viska's face in his hands, pressing his forehead to hers. She leaned in to his touch, letting her eyes close for a second as she opened her other senses to everything that was Fíli.

“Amrâlimê, I know I swore, but you must understand,” he murmured, his voice rough and almost pleading. “Please. Thorin needs me, but I cannot-”

“You cannot go into battle with Azog without knowing I am safe,” she finished for him. “I know. I am sorry. I will go, beloved.” She took a deep, shuddering breath and kissed him softly, opening her eyes to find his boring into her. “Stay safe, kurdê. And you, my brother,” she added as Kíli dropped a kiss on the top of her head. “Protect one another.”

“Hikhthuzul, namadith,” he replied. “Stronger together than apart.”

She nodded and closed her eyes once more as Fíli pressed a hunting knife into her hand and pulled away. She shivered with the loss of his warmth and felt the she-Elf's slim arm around her waist.

“Come, mellon-nin,” Tauriel murmured, lifting her effortlessly to her feet. “There are passages carved into this hill, a series of stairs and halls to provide access to the guard post at the summit and the rooms at the base. Much of it is in poor repair, but the part I came through was sound enough. I will bear your weight.”

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Bilbo Baggins had learned one significant disadvantage to being invisible – being hidden from one's enemies also mean being hidden from one's friends and potential allies. The wound he had delivered with Sting had been just enough distraction to give Viska a moment to act and free herself, but the Hobbit had paid the price when the Dwarf brothers lunged in for the kill and he lurched awkwardly out of the way. He had tripped over the body of an unfamiliar Dwarf, one of those that had stood between Bolg and his friends earlier, and now lay sprawled on his back. He lay there for a long moment, trying to catch his breath before he attempted to rise. He rolled clear of the fallen as the red-haired Elf emerged from the same stairwell that he had used, and was scrambling to his feet as Kíli cheered for Thorin's arrival. He had just reclaimed Sting, the Elven blade black with Bolg's blood, when he heard the young archer's jubilation turn to angry dread, and he turned to see the uncrowned king facing off against Azog.

It took the Hobbit a moment to realize that the princes intend to charge to their uncle's side, though he should have known immediately. One had been disinherited, the other had left in support of his brother, but even exile could not alter the bone-deep loyalty of the Sons of Durin. Gandalf's explanation of the corruption carried by the Arkenstone had only confirmed their suspicion that their uncle was not in control of his own actions, and they would have stood with him against any adversary that took the field. That it was the pale Orc, sworn enemy of their bloodline, only made it an easier decision.

He did not hear the hurried conversation with the Elf, but he saw the look on Viska's face when Fíli turned away. He saw the look that the brothers exchanged – the regret that etched itself across Fíli's face, and the way Kíli's grip on his sword tightened with fear and determination. Then he watched in horrified fascination as the two young Dwarrow hurled themselves into the battle. It was only as the Elf and the Dwarf lass approached that he was able to tear his eyes from the terrible battle below and recover his wits, fumbling to yank the golden ring from his finger before he could be
left behind.

* X *

Only the sight of Thorin locked in single combat with Azog could have pulled Fíli from Viska's side, and even then he felt as though he was ripping his heart from his chest to leave her. But she understood. He owed this much to his king and kin. He could not rest while Azog lived.

Moving in sync, fury speeding their steps, the sons of Dís charged for the edge of the outcropping and launched themselves forward, full-throated battle cries splitting the air as they fell. They landed simultaneously, turning their momentum into somersaults that brought them within striking distance of Azog. The calm, analytical part of Fíli's mind noted that the wickedly curved blade, made of a metal that looked oily and unwholesome, was actually embedded in what remained of the Orc's left arm, replacing the hooked claw that had been there during their earlier encounters. The other part of him, the part that ran on instinct and training, was already moving, flanking Azog on the right as Kíli mirrored him on the left. When he realized that they were there, Azog roared in fury, and three Sons of Durin roared back with a single voice. The king charged, and the brothers scattered, moving automatically into the pattern of old drills now done in deadly earnest, surrounding the Orc and harassing him ruthlessly as battle was joined.

It was no happenstance that Azog was the war chief of Gundabad, no accident that he had led the slaughter at Khazâd-dûm. His intelligence made him dangerous, but his sheer size made him deadly. He was bigger, heavier, stronger than a normal Orc, much less a Dwarf. His hide was thick and tough even without the metal armor, and his reach kept them on the defensive as the three kinsmen wove a circle around him, testing and striking wherever possible. Their agility was their saving grace – that and the innate knowledge of each ally's location and movement, stemming from both that distinctly Dwarven trait, and from the fact that they had trained together for years, fought side by side for months as they traveled across Middle Earth.

In the end, it came down to mortality. The First Fathers of the Dwarves had been hewn of stone, crafted by Mahal, but they had been given true life by Sulladad, the Creator of All, and He had made them flesh, and mortal. Orcs, twisted and warped by Melkor in his quest to create servants of his own, had their origins in the Firstborn, and they enjoyed many of the advantages that the Elves had over the other races. Thorin, Fíli, and Kíli had fought their way to that moment, all three already weary and wounded, while Azog was rested and relentless. In his exhaustion, Kíli misjudged the massive Orc's reach and failed to fully dodge the next swing of the heavy mace. He was lucky enough to catch the handle, rather than the spiked head, but it cracked across the top of his skull with enough force to stun the archer and send him stumbling. Fíli sprang to his brother's defense, but was thrown back by the bladed stump, leaving Thorin standing alone. A smirk twisted Azog's face as the Orc chieftain pressed his advantage, advancing in a flurry of blows that the king narrowly managed to dodge. The golden prince scrambled desperately to his feet, terror freezing his heart as his uncle fell back, barely keeping his footing and struggling to keep his hold on his sword. Acting on pure instinct, Fíli threw himself forward to catch Azog's blade with his crossed falchions, knowing it would not be enough, that he had left himself open to a strike from the massive mace. But when the attack came, another sword was there to deflect it. He knew without looking that it was Kíli, steady as the stone, and together they held the Orc at bay as Thorin regained his balance. He advanced again, and the united princes threw the beast back as their king raced forward, blade high. Azog dodged narrowly, the Dwarf moving past him so the three kinsmen had their foe bracketed once more.
“Tauriel, stop a moment.”

The Elven Captain paused, glancing down at her companion as she allowed the Dwarf lass to lean against the side of the hill. Viska's breath was hissing between her teeth, her face pale with strain and making the wounds on her neck stand out in sharp contrast.

“We are almost to the tunnels,” Tauriel assured her. She reached out to help the injured fighter to her feet once more, but Viska waved her off.

“This will not work.” The dark-haired maid's voice was insistent, her gaze skimming their surroundings. “If the Orcs have found the stairs, you will need to be able to fight. You cannot do that when you are practically carrying me.”

The Elf frowned. The same thought had occurred to her, but she had dismissed it, knowing there was no other option. Viska's leg would not support her without assistance, and all that they could do was hope that the tunnels within Ravenhill remained clear of their foes.

“I promised—”

“I know.” The jeweler cut her off with a grimace of pain as she shifted her weight. “I'm not asking you to leave me behind, but looking for a way to make it easier. There.” She pointed toward a cluster of fallen Dwarves, all wearing the sigil of the Iron Hills. “They were our honor guard, sent by Lord Dáin.” Viska sighed, grief clear in her voice. “They died trying to keep Bolg from reaching us.”

“I don't—”

“They may be able to help still,” the young Dwarrowlass explained. “The one closest to the edge has a walking ax. If you can get it for me, I can use it to walk so you can keep your hands free.”

Tauriel darted nimbly over and retrieved the weapon, returning to her companion quickly. Tucking the blade that she carried into her belt, Viska wrapped both hands around the haft of the ax and hauled herself upright, mindful of her damaged knee. The she-Elf watched her closely, troubled by the risk.

“You may do further damage.” She gave the warning quietly, meeting her young friend's gaze. Viska winced and nodded, hobbled a few steps away from the support of the mountain.

“I may,” she admitted frankly. “But it's worth the risk. We won't stand a chance if we encounter Orcs and you are too encumbered to fight. A damaged leg may heal, in time. Death does not.”

Tauriel nodded and drew her long hunting knives as she watched the Dwarf take another careful step. “If you are certain.”

A small, choked laugh escaped Viska's lips as she continued to make her painstaking way toward the door to the inner staircase. “I am certain that it is our best chance, not that it will ensure our survival.” She held back a moment, allowing the Elf Captain to go ahead of her, and started when a familiar voice called her name. Turning carefully, she stared in surprise at the Hobbit.
“Bilbo? What are you doing here?”

“Ah, trying to leave, actually.” He ducked his head, looking slightly shamefaced. “I think I'm a bit out of my depth here. I came up to help, and I did, a little, against Bolg, but -”

“Master Hobbit, we must go. I do not know how long the stairs may remain safe.”

Viska glanced at Tauriel, seeing the concern on the ageless face, and nodded quickly. “Come, Bilbo. There'll be time for explanations later. Follow Tauriel. I'll bring up the rear.”

“No.” There was a determined look on the Halfling's face, one that she recognized from the confrontation with Thorin on the battlements. He was terrified, but set in his course as he hefted his small sword. “I'll take rearguard.”

Viska did not even hesitate before accepting his offer and turning to the Elf maid.

“Lead on, my friend.”

A moment later, the three had vanished from the ledge of Ravenhill, disappearing into the darkness of the Dwarven tunnels.

* X *

Fíli did not even see what happened to turn the tide. Thorin had just managed to partially disarm the Orc, the heavy mace skittering across the Mountain spur to disappear into the mass of movement below. He saw Kíli freeze, dark eyes wide with shock as he fell to one knee. He let his attention flicker to his brother for a bare moment, a breath of time, and it was all of the opening that Azog needed. The bladed stump flashed out, knocking his swords from his grip, and a clawed hand was suddenly digging into the back of his head, tangled in his thick hair and the collar of his mail shirt, yanking him around to face his uncle as the tip of the beast's sword came to rest on his back. Thorin froze, lowering his weapon as the Orc snarled and dug the blade just deep enough to draw a hiss of pain from his prisoner. Behind the king, Dáin and Dwalin stepped past the newly-fallen corpse of the white Warg, their faces tight with anger when they saw what was happening, their eyes blazing with helpless rage.

The terror in Fíli's heart gave way in that moment to icy determination. Azog needed to die. For the dead, for the dying, and especially for the living, the pale Orc must die. Here and now. But their hands were tied. Thorin, Kíli, Dwalin – none would act while his life was held hostage. And that could not stand. Fíli was not a pawn, not a shackle, not a shield to hold his kin at bay. He was the Crown Prince of Erebor, a Son of Durin, and he would not be used.

He would sooner die.

The golden prince closed his eyes, his decision made, taking a deep breath as he silently mourned what would not be and wished that he could apologize to her for what he did. When he opened them once more, he could see the knowledge in those shadowed blue eyes, in the way the king's hands flexed on his sword's hilt. Thorin made no protest, though it was clear that only an iron will made it possible, and when Fíli silently begged him to look away, he shook his head almost imperceptibly. Dáin's head was down, his eyes closed, while Dwalin's gaze was fixed somewhere beyond the Crown Prince, something unrecognizable in his face.
A imugalikh, amrâlimê. Birashagammi.

The apology was spoken in the silence of his own mind and he knew that she did not hear. But it seemed almost as though someone did, for in the instant before he moved, his brother answered, voice rough and agonized.

“Baishfit!”

With no time to consider, Fíli moved.

And his world exploded in pain.

* X *

The arrow had slammed into Kíli's thigh with the force of a hammer blow and he had dropped to one knee before he even registered the pain. Dimly, he heard the snarls from the battle with the Warg cut off with a single yelp, but the war cries he expected when Dáin and Dwalin joined them against Azog never came. Instead, he looked up into horror.

The pale Orc had his brother. Azog's back was mostly to the younger prince, but he could see the massive hand that held fast to Fíli's hair and armor, the dismay on Dáin's face and the disbelief on Dwalin's. And Thorin – Thorin had gone pale and still, sword lax in his hand. His eyes saw only his heir, and Kíli saw his brother's decision in his uncle's face. A howl of denial building in his throat, the archer lurch to his feet, discarding his sword in favor of the long blade tucked into his boot. He aimed for the arm holding his brother, rather than the blade, offering a silent prayer to Mahal that it was the right choice. Taking a deep breath and shunting the pain aside as best he could, he charged forward, screaming for Fíli to move. His left hand caught the back of Azog's armor and he used it for leverage as he swung the other around to bury the hunting knife in the vulnerable area beneath the Orc's right arm. The shock of the impact ran up his arm, but he maintained his grip, digging and twisting through muscle and sinew. It would not be a mortal strike – the beast's rib cage would see to that – but with luck, it would be enough.

The Orc roared in fury, and Fíli was moving, twisting to the side, leaving a handful of golden hair in the creature's loosened grasp. But the blade was moving, too, and the archer saw blue eyes widen as it struck, saw Fíli's face go pale as it came back covered in red. Then he was falling, there was blood on the stone, and Thorin, Dáin, and Dwalin were plunging forward, roaring with rage as Azog turned, his sword seeking Kíli's throat.

Only the ravens saved him. Even as he fell back, losing the battle with the pain in his leg, a smaller flock of corvids descended to tear at the Orc's face with claws and beaks, screaming in rage. The feathered bodies blocked any view of the young archer, giving him a moment's respite, finally withdrawing when Thorin landed the first blow and turned the pale Orc's attention back to the three furious elder Dwarrow as they attacked.

But Kíli's eyes were only for the figure laying face down in the dusting of snow. Pulling himself awkwardly across the stony ground, he ripped a section from his own tattered tunic and pressed it to his brother's side, unsure of where exactly the injury was, knowing only that he had to stop the bleeding. When his fingers found the source of the sticky warmth, he pressed the cloth into place, bunching part of Fíli's tunic around it as well. Torn, he stared down at the elder prince for a long moment before starting to struggle to his feet to join the fight with Azog. He could hear the blades
singing, the crack of the hammer on stone, but he could not see them. He felt the impact of the second arrow when it hit, the radius of pain from where it stood high in his shoulder, but he could not see through the tears in his eyes as he sank down beside his brother once more.

“I think I'll just lie down here with you, dadadê,” he murmured, his voice breaking as he curled in on himself, taking one of Fíli's hands in his own. He thought, perhaps, his brother's fingers twitched, but he could not be sure. “I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I swore it would be my life before yours. I'm sorry I failed you.” There was no reply from the golden prince, and Kíli sighed. Tucking his brother's hand against his heart, he leaned his forehead against Fíli's temple and let the world fade away.

* X *

Thorin's heart spasmed with grief as he tore his gaze from the crumpled, bloody forms of his sistersons. Without a word spoken, Dwalin had taken an immovable stance over the two princes, roaring his rage as he protected the youngest Heirs of Durin. They were not even certain if the lads still breathed, and there was no time to check. They would be defended regardless. There was no sign, either, of Viska – she had vanished sometime after Azog's attack, and he could only hope that she was well. He could not spare more than a moment to think of any of the young Dwarrow that he had wronged so grievously, for the battle was not yet over, and it was beyond time for the war chief of Gundabad to be stripped of life. When Azog turned from the fallen, Thorin was there to meet him, feet planted, rage boiling in his gut even as he forced himself to an almost eerie calm. The last time he had faced the pale Orc, beneath the trees in the Misty Mountains, he had allowed his anger and his desire for vengeance to rule his head. And he had failed, fallen, nearly died. He would not allow that to happen again. Not now, when there was so much to lose, if not lost already. Azog deserved death, for Thrór, for Thráin, for Frerin, Fundin, Náin, a thousand others that had fallen at Khazâd-dûm, for the scores now falling before Erebor. But it was not for any of the dead that Thorin fought. They were gone, safely in the Halls of Waiting. Fíli, Kíli, Viska – they might yet live, and he would not fail them again. And so he met Azog's blade with his own, smiling grimly into the sneering face of the massive Orc, and turned it aside even as Dáin's great hammer slammed into the beast's side and sent him staggering. With a last glance down at his nephews, Thorin moved to follow, driving the Orc further away from the vulnerable princes.

Thus they danced, as the battle raged below them, two Dwarf lords against the pale Orc, Dwarven blade and hammer against Orc-forged iron. Blade and hammer, Azog dodged or met each strike despite his wound, pale blue eyes glowing in the scarred face. The sound of the combat on the plain was a distant thing, a dull roar almost muffled by the deadly silence on the spur of the Mountain. Blade clashed on blade, the thudding impacts on flesh, grunts of pain, and harsh breaths taken in the icy air, but no words were spoken. The time for threats and promises had passed – it was time now for deeds, and a final reckoning.

When finally the quiet was broken, it was not by the Dwarves, nor the Orc. Rather, it was the piercing cry of a great bird of prey, and the raging roar of the great bear. Azog actually flinched, and Thor thought he saw angry incredulity in the pale eyes as the Orc's gaze turned for the briefest moment to the sky. The Eagles had come, and Beorn with them, and they tore into the Orc army with a raging vengeance. It was only a second, but Azog was distracted for that one brief, precious heartbeat of time, and Thorin acted.

He drove forward with blade held high, the battle cry of Durin on his lips, his cousin at this back,
and he did not stop, even when the Orc turned to meet him. The jagged blade of Azog's arm drove into the king’s chest, tearing muscle and breaking bone as he allowed his momentum to keep carrying him onward. The tip of the Dwarven blade pierced the base of the beast's throat and he pressed on, ignoring the fiery agony that burned along every nerve. Azog's eyes widened and he staggered, crumpling backward as the eldest of Durin's line bore him to the ground. They were locked together by the two blades, the Orc's arm wrenched by the placement, and Thorin sat astride his great enemy, twisting the sword as it passed ever further through the thick throat. And then it was through, and there was only stone beneath his weapon, stained with a black flood that poured forth. Only then did the uncrowned king of Erebor stop, Dáin's hand on his shoulder.

“He is dead, Thorin,” the red-bearded lord murmured, kneeling at his side. “He is dead, and the Eagles are turning the tide below us. See?”

Thorin did not see – he had eyes only for the dead Orc beneath him – but he could hear. Cheers were rising from the battlefield below, the voices of Dwarf, Man, and Elf. The great bear roared, and Goblins shrieked in terror. It sounded as though Beorn was moving toward the ledge, but the king was too weary to look. Closing his eyes, he felt the strength go out of his shoulders even as his cousin lunged to support him.

“None of that now, cousin. I can't get you free of that great blade, but I'd rather you not impale yourself more thoroughly than you already are 'afore I can get help.”

Thorin did not answer, but he knew in his heart that help would not matter. He would fall, last male of the direct Line of Durin, but at least he had finished the long battle. Erebor was reclaimed, Smaug dead, Azog and Bolg as well. It would be enough, and not just because it had to be. His people could come home, and he would stand before his ancestors and his maker in the Halls of Waiting and submit to their judgment. He did not believe that his successes outweighed his failures – not with his sister-sons fallen at his side, and his sister bereft of parents, brothers, husband, and sons. But his great task was done.

* X *

Beorn found them there, beneath the ledge of Ravenhill. Dáin still knelt by his cousin, staunching the bloody wound the best he could as Thorin's breaths grew labored and his face gray. Dwalin stood over the silent princes, his face streaked with tears and blood, axes grasped in hands that shook with exhaustion. Arriving on the skinchanger's heels, Balin stepped to his brother's side, his quiet voice finally penetrating the warrior's weary mind and convincing him to allow the anxious healers access. Assisted by Beorn, the Wizards, and the Elven prince, they were able to gather the wounded and hurry back toward the hastily-assembled healing tents in front of the Gates. Behind them, Ravenhill stood silent and the first flush of sunset filled the western sky.

And so the Line of Durin was carried from the field, and none knew if any of them would live to see the dawn.

Chapter End Notes

Translations and Notes:
mellon-nin – my friend (Sindarin)
amrâlimê – my love (Khuzdul)
kurdê – my heart (Khuzdul)
hikhthuzul, namadith – always, little sister (Khuzdul)
Sulladad – Khuzdul name for Ilúvitar, Creator of All
Melkor – The fallen Vala, later called Morgoth; Sauron’s master
'Aimugalikh, amrâlimê. Birashagammi. - Farewell, my love. I am sorry. (Khuzdul)
Baishfit! - Move away! (Khuzdul)
nadalê – my brother (Khuzdul)

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