Into The Fire

by blackdragonqueen

Summary

He was given one year to try again and make things right.

Notes

Disclaimer: All recognizable characters belong to J.R.R. Tolkien.

Timeline: Movie-Verse! I have never read the book so this will be mainly based off of Peter Jackson's version of events. There more than likely will be some points taken from the book but again, mainly movie base.

This will be a slow moving romance. Hopefully it will be worth the wait.

See the end of the work for more notes
Confusion and Chandeliers

Fire, death and ash.

Why was it always fire, death and ash he saw whenever he closed his eyes? He didn’t want to see any more fire, death and ash. So, he simply opened them.

There was a ceiling above him, with an elaborate metal chandelier. He stared at it, unblinking for a moment trying to puzzle out why the chandelier looked so familiar and yet not at the same time. Where was he? Was this his room?

Finally blinking his eyes, he groaned as he lifted himself up on his elbows, trying to get his thoughts into some semblance of order, struggling to remember where he was. What had happened to him? He looked about the room, trying to place it. His memory was fuzzy.

A year. Why was that the only phrase spinning about in his mind? A year. He only had one year. That was the only thought that was very clear in his mind. He just had the one. Or rather a near full year. ‘One year to do what?’

Never mind that, he couldn’t even remember what he had done yesterday. He shook his head confused. What had he done yesterday? He frowned for a moment. ‘Yesterday. Yesterday. Yesterday,’ he tried to bring up his memories as he flopped back down on his back.

Oh. That’s right. He died.

“What in the name of Mahal?” he yelped as he jerked upwards in surprise. Blankets tangled about his legs and he went rolling over the side of his small, but humble and rather lumpy bed just as a knock came at the door.

“Brother? Was that you?” The door poked open, and his younger sibling peeked in and frowned at him. “What are you doing on the floor?”

“Checking for cracks,” he muttered.

“What was that?” the voice at the door went sharp.

Thorin finally pulled himself up and sat back on the floor, looking at his sister for the first time since he left her with her sons behind him on what was thought to be such an impossible undertaking. She looked the same as he remembered her… absolutely chilling as she narrowed her eyes at him and entered his room without so much as a by your leave, shutting the door behind her.

“Is this about your meeting with the others?”

He tried to look nonchalant as he started untangling his legs from his blanket. “Hmm?”

She shifted. “I know that you are worried of what our kin think of us Thorin, but I believe in you and of this quest. I would not let my sons go with you if I did not.”

Thorin looked back down at the blanket and forced himself to fold it to keep himself from wincing as an image of them filled his vision.

Fíli and Kíli.

Falling.
He snapped the blanket shut and set it back on his bed as he finally stood up. “We will be fine sister,” he assured her, even as he tried to keep the guilt from showing. “The line of Durin will not fail.” ‘Not this time.’

She let out a snort and finally turned back towards the door. “Best have breakfast then before you go. The boys are so excited they can barely sit still.”

“Oh, hopefully they’re packed this time,” Thorin mumbled.

“What?”

“Hmm?”

She raised an eyebrow, as she looked him over from head to toe before she gave a small huff and exited. Thorin let out a sigh of relief as he went to looking for his pants. Whose idea was it to have sleeping naked before embarking on a quest a tradition? True they would be stuck in armor and traveling gear for long enough, but really, whoever it was never had a nosy sister - or female relations of any kind.

Finally finding his breeches, he quickly shoved his legs into them, his mind whirling. A year. He was back a year before the battle at the base of the Lonely Mountain.

He had a year to save them. That’s what the voice told him while he had been lost in the darkness. “You may have this year to try again. One year to change their fate and save them.”

Save them. He could save his nephews, and anyone else who may have died in that horrible bloodshed. He could change things, hopefully for the better and not for the worse. He would do what he could this time around and this time…

He sighed as he pulled on his tunic. He would do right by his company. All of them... even the smallest.

Shaking himself out of his melancholy he finished stamping his boots on and stood. He had much planning to do and little time to do it in.

But he wasn’t going to get to do anything if he didn’t get to the privy first.
Thorin was simply moving through instinct. Years of doing the same things day in and day out ingrained certain tasks into his brain that he no longer even had to think before performing them. Thank Mahal because he couldn't even begin to think straight at the moment, everything whirling in his mind like a winter storm.

He had been mortally wounded during an epic battle against orcs and wargs, surrounded by man, elves, eagles, dwarrows from the Iron Hills and one lone hobbit pulled so far away from home. Dying was strangely a simple affair. He was there and then... then he was somewhere else.

Then came the voice, a whisper really. That begged him to save them, to help them and that he only had this one year to try again. There would be no other chances. For better or worse, he had this one shot to make things right. Thorin had been so surprised at the pleading voice that he had opened his eyes to see who it was that was speaking.

The last thing he had seen before he closed his eyes was the vaulted ceiling of Erebor's great hall. Yet when he opened them to see the whisperer, it was to that ratty chandelier from his tiny room in the little house that he shared with the only close family he had. And once more, he found it was the day he was to leave for a journey he had already traveled once.

It could not be a dream. Nor could it be the afterlife for if Dís was in the afterlife waiting for him then he really fucked up somewhere along the line. Dís had been nowhere near battle, instead ensuring that the refugees of Erebor got along with their neighbors in Ered Luin. She had always been better at the political aspect of ruling than either he or their brother. Something Fíli had inherited but barely used. Thank Mahal she had accompanied him to meet with the branch families. Was going to accompany him... 'Mahal's beard, this is confusing.' Thorin resisted the urge to return to bed and pretend it was nought but a strange dream.

Dís was currently frowning at him as he shoveled his breakfast of porridge into his mouth and swallowed automatically, her sharp mind more than likely cataloguing every little twitch he made. He tried his best to ignore her and concentrate on one of the last warm meals he would have in a while. She had apparently decided to splurge for the occasion and had added honey to the pot to sweeten the bland taste. His first thought was it was a wasted expense, but then the image of the main vault of Erebor filled with gold to the rafters entered his mind.

The spoon paused halfway to his mouth as he froze, focusing on that picture and just waiting for the sudden burst of possessiveness to fill him. Of that great need to covet all that gold. It didn't come.

Frowning he shook his head as if to push away the image and went back to his breakfast of sweet porridge and bread. There was no time to ponder the strange lack of reaction to the image. He'd have time on the road to work things out. For now, there was breakfast... and his sister.

'Had she done that the first time?' Thorin frowned at another mouthful of honey exploded on his taste buds. He couldn't remember. Did it really matter? If he spent all his time dwelling on the small matters he wouldn't have time to work out his plan of action for the upcoming journey.

Certainly not with Dís staring at him so intently. 'Aw hell.' He swallowed and looked down at his bowl and away from the piercing stare. "Yes?"
He could see from under his lashes as her frown deepened. "Are you all right?" she finally asked.

Thorin actually blinked in surprise and looked back up. Was he? He had died. He was back. His nephews were alive again and... not at breakfast. He glanced around as if his two nephews would suddenly appear from thin air. "Where are the boys?"

Dís did not look pleased at the dodge, but sat back in her chair nonetheless. "They were tired of waiting for you to grace us with your jovial presence this morning," she drawled. "They're already off to meet with Dwalin and Balin."

Thorin's gaze snapped to her. "They took their packs?"

Dís snorted. "Of course they did. You practically had them all but strapped to the ponies last night."

Thorin could feel a headache coming on. They had left together the first time, but again, small details were not the main worry at the moment. Wargs, orcs, goblins, trolls, spiders, elves and men were. 'And the thrice damned dragon,' he thought with an almost hysterical laugh. 'Let's not forget the dragon.'

Dís was frowning at him again. "Thorin?"

He stood up, taking his bowl to the small barrel of cleaning water. "No... it's nothing. I just have a lot on my mind."

"I'd be worried if you didn't."

Thorin shrugged as he dropped his dishes in the barrel and moved over to where his bags sat next to the door with his weapons. It wasn't a large pack as most of his items were already in the saddlebag. A saddlebag he knew would be lost when ponies bolted frightened off by wargs.

He groaned again and rubbed his thumb and first finger against his tired eyes. Without saying a word and with Dís watching intently, he grabbed both saddlebag and pack and made his way towards the far end of the table that Fíli and Kíli claimed as their own – where he upended the entire thing. 'Less luxuries,' he thought, pulling out some of the extra tunics and such that he wore under his leathers. He could survive with two pairs, one that he would wear, and one for emergencies until they reached the elves. If anything was torn Ori, or even the Hobbit himself could always mend those on the way if it came to it.

'Worse comes to worse, I'll do without. More room for medical supplies, more weapons,' he listed to himself. 'We can get those between Bree and Rivendell for the mountains.' Hunting knives and medical supplies were moved from the saddlebag to his pack along with his few maps while things like his wooden traveling bowl and comb moved to saddlebag. Items such as his water canteen along with some flint would remain on his person at all times.

Money was also removed from the pack and he started separating some into smaller piles before storing them in various pouches. He tied one of the lighter pouches onto his belt for easier access for when they did arrive in the human towns. Nori had once told the company, after they had become more acquaintances rather than practical strangers, exactly how easy it was to snatch moneybags from oblivious dwarrows and Thorin took the warning to heart as he hid the other bags in his tunic and even one in his boot.

He wondered absently if he could hide some in the lining of his coat. It was certainly large enough. Perhaps he could add some inner pockets? 'I'll have to ask Ori about that,' he thought absently, 'or even Óin. He knows how to stitch out of necessity.'
His pipe was more of a luxury, but he'd be damned if it didn't help him think. So, his tobacco went into another small pouch and into his coat. He did pause at his oilskin for the rain, wondering if it was even worth lugging it about. Rain didn't hurt anyone, just made them cranky. "Such as Dori during the downpour that had lasted days." Thorin paused at that before he groaned. "Oh right, the week of wetness."

Bofur had called it that and it had quickly caught on. Once the rain had finally ended and everyone had regained some of their prior cheerfulness that was. Fíli had not been as amused as Kíli had by Bofur's attempt at making light of the horrible weather they had gone through. Both of Thorin's nephews had forgotten their own oilskin at home and had been forced to purchase newer, cheaper ones in Bree that had barely done anything to keep out the damp.

Fíli had been miserable with a cough that just would not go away for days. Kíli was always the more resilient of the two, yet the sniffle he had acquired had proven his own suffering during that downpour despite his cheerful outlook. "Oilskin. Definitely bringing oilskin."

He wasn't surprised to see Dís watching him intently as he emptied and re-packed his supplies when he looked up at her. She tilted her head and arched an eyebrow quizzically as he held his own oilskin up for her to study. "Fíli and Kíli's?"

Dís let out a snort as she headed off for the boys room before quickly returning, two pieces of treated fabric in her hands. "How'd you know?"

Thorin shrugged as he took the two and shoved them in the left emptied saddlebag to balance the weight. "It's been sunshine all week. Why would they remember these unless the rain is practically drenching their heads?"

Dís just clucked her tongue before returning to her seat to continue watching. There really was not much more to pack. With the extra clothes, drying cloth, candle, parchment, quills with small bottles of ink and his own personal writing journal completely removed from his pack and set aside it left more room for bandage wraps, fishing hooks, rope along with a small spool of twine, small hammer and shovel. Items that made traveling a bit easier, but would not leave him devastate if lost. While the saddlebag contained his spare tunic, leggings, his bowl and cooking pan, comb, and his oilskin along with his nephews.

Thorin gave a satisfied nod before he moved over to throw on his surcoat, weapons and cloak, leaving Dís to stare at the small pile of items Thorin was clearly planning on leaving. Glancing from the saddle bag to the shoulder pack and back again she arched her eyebrow once again. "That's an odd way to pack," she mused. "Traveling light?"

Thorin gave a small smile. "We will be facing many difficulties on the road. Best to prioritize what can be lost and what we can not be without."

Dís nodded slowly. "Sound thinking." She was still staring at him critically.

Pausing in the middle of strapping on his axe he raised his own eyebrow. "What?"

Getting up to deal with her own breakfast dishes and fetch her cloak from the peg next to the door, Dís gave him an innocent grin. "It's just surprising seeing as how you never seem to think at all."

Thorin let out a snort as he grabbed his packs again. He paused as he looked at the pile of discarded items. "Do not fret. I shall clean up after you," Dís called over her shoulder as she opened the door. "Like always." And she was gone. Presumably headed towards where Thorin had stabled the ponies.
He stared at the empty doorway for a moment before a small chuckle bubbled up from his chest and he hefted his gear. He took one last look around the tiny hut that he had lived in for nearly fifteen decades. He had no love for the place nor would he miss it. But it was strange that the second time he would leave it's walls he would feel somewhat lighter than the first.

When he had left before, his shoulders were heavy with anxiety and truthfully a bit of fear. The worry of whether or not they would even make it to the lonely mountain practically gnawing at his belly while the thought that another had defeated Smaug before their arrival and claim Erebor for their own an ache in his heart. Strange how just re-packing his gear seemed to lessen his worries.

Now he knew what lay ahead of them. What challenges they would face. What obstacles they would have to overcome. And strangely enough, Thorin was calm. For this time, he was leaving prepared.
The boys were indeed standing next to the small lean-to where the ponies were kept and, quite fittingly, horsing around. Clearly, they had gotten into another squabble over nothing and were shoving each other while Dwalin was looking over the ponies tack. Thorin was sure this was at least the fourth time this exact situation had occurred in the past hour if Balin’s expression was anything to go by. Only when Kíli pushed Fíli into Thorin’s mount as Dwalin was checking the hooves did the large dwarf finally grab them by the scruffs of their necks and give them a firm shake.

Thorin simply watched the pair for a moment, drinking in the sight of them young, enthusiastic and alive. It was all he could do not to succumb to the urge to seize them in a tight embrace and never let go. They were here and he was not dreaming. He could save them.

Kíli pouted at Balin for a bit until he saw Thorin coming down the path. Expression brightening, he immediately started jogging towards his uncle. Fíli, for his part, just looked miffed at the reprimand and went to his own pony to fiddle with the saddle. He must not have felt too angered with his brother however as Thorin saw he also looked over Kíli’s saddle.

“Uncle Thorin! Dwalin’s being mean!” Kíli instantly announced, eager for sympathy. “I didn’t push Fíli into the pony on purpose. He just fell in that direction.”

He tensed as Kíli reached him and had to remind himself that it would look odd to just drag his youngest nephew into a hug and not let go till winter set in. Instead, he made a show of dropping his shoulders and sighing loudly before jerking a thumb behind him. “If you wish to complain, there’s your mother. Speak to her.” Kíli let out a squeak as he finally noticed Dís who was already frowning at him.

Leaving Dís to it, Thorin headed towards Balin who was leaning against a water trough as he smoked his pipe.

Balin, who was always at his side, even when Thorin was on his last journey to Mahal’s great hall. Another Durin, that Balin had practically raised, dying from his own foolishness.

Thorin, Frerin and Dís had always been more like younger siblings to Balin than royal betters and distant cousins. Especially with Thorin and Frerin practically the precursor to Fíli and Kíli in mischief making in their younger days. Thorin’s death had to have hit the older dwarf hard.

He could only hope that with Fíli and Kíli to look after, Balin and Dwalin both would better endure his death better this time around. ‘And hopefully I’ll be able die with no regrets this time,’ he thought to himself.

Thorin was not so dull-witted to believe that he himself would survive the coming year. The voice told him specifically he had, but the one to live again and so Thorin would make the best of it. He would ensure that Fíli and Kíli would not fall due to his foolishness and the line of Durin would carry on as it has before. ‘Kings Fíli and Kíli,’ he thought absently, for they would be crowned together as they were wont to do all things. ‘I almost feel sorry for Balin now that I think about it.’
“Morning,” the older dwarf’s voice greeted and Thorin was surprised to find somewhere during his pondering, he had reached his destination. He was only glad he had managed to stop himself before he tripped into the trough.

“Balin,” Thorin nodded back as he tried his best to compose himself. He frowned as he realized that Balin himself had lowered his pipe as he stared up at Thorin, his mouth slightly open in surprise.

Thorin’s expression became one of puzzlement as he set his axes and pack down on the ground. “What?”

Balin shoved his pipe back in his mouth and shut it with a click of his teeth on the wood. “What are you thinking ‘bout laddie?”

“Thinking?” Thorin was puzzled as he wasn’t really thinking about anything that moment except what Balin could possibly find so interesting.

Balin looked as if he were trying to puzzle out some great riddle as he examined Thorin closely from his boots upwards. There was an eyebrow raised at the small money pouch but he didn’t comment. Instead, Balin simply continued with his inspection until he was meeting Thorin’s eyes with his own.

Thorin was firmly becoming vexed by the scrutiny. “What?”

“Feeling confident today?” Balin finally asked him.

Thrown by the strange question, Thorin waited for Balin to elaborate.

“You were anxious yesterday. Worried not only of your meeting with Dáin and the others but also of the journey itself. Concerned of what perils we’ll meet on the road.” Balin finished his pipe before dumping out the ashes and tucking it away. Today, you’re looking more… relaxed.”

Thorin merely shrugged. “Nothing I can do about anything now. I’ve prepared as much as I can for today.” Which was true. He had repacked his entire luggage.

Balin followed him as Thorin brought his saddlebag to his pony and started strapping it on before checking the girth again. One thing he had learned the last time was that the ponies loved to puff out their bellies as much as they could when being saddled only to suck it back in when the dwarrows tried to mount. Poor Ori had gone sideways more than once before he learned to balance himself properly. Nori’s doing no doubt.

“What are you doing?” Dwalin asked as he suddenly appeared next to them.

“Re-cinching this… girth,” Thorin gritted out as he tugged at the leather.

Sure enough, he was able tighten another good two inches. He glared at the gelding as it glanced back at him. “Furry menace,” he muttered, shoving the head away before he could be nipped. He really should give the animal a name this time around. It wasn’t fair that pony he rode to reclaim Erebor didn’t even have a name.

He never even noticed the look Dwalin and Balin shared behind him as he snagged the rains and tugged the pony into walking towards Dís and her mount for the trip to meet Dáin and the other
representatives of the seven kingdoms. Fíli had moved to assist Kíli in strapping down his own pack while Kíli cleaned his pony’s hoof.

All three looked up as Throin approached. Sharing a confused look with his mother, Fíli turned towards his own mare. “Are we leaving already?”

“Oh, no. Not as yet.” He looked over both his nephew’s gear. “Unless you want Kíli to lose that pack the second his mount moves?”

“Then why-?”

Kíli broke off as Thorin suddenly turned around and grabbed the cinch again. His pony hadn’t even managed to come to a complete halt, but the girth was raised another three inches. Satisfied that his gelding wasn’t holding his breath any more, Thorin finished off securing the girth, giving the saddle a small tug to check. Glóin had taught him that trick. Ponies, for all their smarts, were simple creatures.

He turned towards the others and practically backed up into his nameless pony in surprise as he found himself being stared at by all five of them. He did his best to look as if nothing was amiss as he went back to checking his saddlebag, turning away from the gaping group. “First lesson,” he directed at the boys. “Make sure your gear is secure.” He shot Kíli a look. “At all times.”

Dís let out a snort, but she did give her own pony’s girth a small tug. The look of surprise on her face when it went up a few inches Thorin wished Ori could have seen so he could draw it for Thorin later. Even Dwalin looked surprised when his own girth could be tightened.

His best friend shot him a suspicious look. “Since when are you such a equestrian?”

“Since when do you know such large words like ‘equestrian’?” Thorin shot back.

“You live with Balin and we’ll see how many big words you absorbed.”

“Children,” Dís drawled and Fíli and Kíli started snickering by their own ponies.

Thorin couldn’t help himself. He shot his sister a rather cheeky grin.

He wasn’t sure whose jaw hit the ground the fastest, but it was a close thing between Dís and Kíli. Fíli had done a double take while Dwalin was looking at him as if he had come down with some sort of pox. Balin had simply let out a small snort of amusement. Again, Thorin couldn’t stop himself as he shot Balin another grin.

“I’m surrounded by dwarflings,” Balin muttered as he headed towards his own pony.

Thorin just snickered as he double-checked his pony’s tack for the last time. ‘Ah the joys of being an old sod,’ he thought with a laugh as he watched Balin check his own girth as if it was something he did everyday. ‘Nothing fazes you.’

Fíli and Kíli were whispering frantically by their ponies while Dís was still shooting Thorin curious side-glances. 'And why shouldn’t I smile?’ he reasoned to himself. 'It's a lovely day, no one is dead and there are no elves with their blasted leaf meals called "salads" lurking behind the corners.' He paused at that. 'Must remember to pack more smoked meat.'
He was brought out of his musing by Dwalin who was staring pointedly at Thorin. “This is not a picnic,” he finally growled at Thorin’s inquisitive look.

“I know it’s not,” Thorin frowned at him. “Why would you say that?”

A myriad of expressions crossed Dwalin’s face and Thorin watched as frustration, confusion, and even annoyance flashed across his best friend’s eyes. Bewilderment finally won out. “You’re different today.”

Thorin paused in fiddling with the stirrups as he thought that statement over. “I suppose I am,” he admitted, surprised more of himself then at Dwalin's acute observation. He couldn’t’ help it however. He was different. Dying tended to change a person’s outlook on life.

Dwalin clearly was flummoxed by Thorin’s answer. “Why?” he couldn’t help asking as Balin joined them, listening for Thorin’s answer just as intently as his brother.

“Whatever happens- Dáin refusing help, orcs, wargs, the damned dragon… I know that every one of us who leaves for Erebor and the unknown will meet anything that is thrown at us head on. That is something I know I can count on without question.”

“And you are sure of that?” Balin asked curiously. “Some of those who signed the contract are… unusual, to say the least. My apprentice, I know, has no idea what he’s in for and I’m not so sure Fíli and Kíli do either.”

“Not to mention the thief,” Dwalin muttered. “He’ll head for the hills the moment our journey becomes even slightly difficult.”

“No he won’t,” Thorin countered automatically as he walked the pony back to where he left his pack and axes, the other two following close behind. “His brother’s won’t let him.” Another dubious look was shared behind him at the soft statement, but Thorin was distracted with securing his pack to the saddle and never saw it.

“You seem to have great faith in the strange band of misfits you’ve been able to collect for this quest,” Balin stated and Thorin could here the question the old dwarf had hidden in his observation.

Thorin thought about Fíli and Kíli fighting the trolls. Óin and Glóin battling wargs. Bifur, Bofur and Bombur helping others keep their feet on that tiny ledge during the thunder battle. Dori, Nori and Ori taking out goblins as they fled for their lives.

Bilbo Baggins… tackling Azog the Pale Orc just before he could bring down the killing blow on Thorin.

“I do,” he stated firmly and if Balin was surprised by his confidence, he hid it well. Dwalin just looked skeptical.

“So, are we ready to go?” Dís demanded as she appeared next to Dwalin. “Or are we going to be standing around gossiping all day?”

“The sun has been up for quite some time,” Balin agreed as the mood around them became tranquil once more. “And if I remember correctly, our illustrious leader wanted us on our way by first light. We are already behind schedule.”
Thorin let out a small laugh. “If your illustrious leader complains, just blame me like always.”

“I’ll be sure to do that,” Dwalin snickered.

Thorin and Dís said goodbye to the others, as they would not be accompanying them to the meeting. Instead, Dwalin and the others were going to visit with each of the dwarrows who signed contracts to inform them of date they were to set off and give them a copy of the map to the Shire and one Bilbo Baggins that Gandalf had given Balin. Thorin was given his own map as he was arriving from a different direction where he and Dís were to meet with Dáin and the others.

Finally giving into temptation, Thorin pulled Fíli into a quick hug. “Watch your brother,” he instructed firmly.

Fíli smirked back at him. “So, carry on as usual, huh?”

“Hey!” Kíli was pouting again and Thorin pulled him into the small hug.

“Safe journey,” Dwalin thumped Thorin on the shoulder when he released the boys as Balin gave Dís a quick hug.

“To you as well. Though, try not to frighten the Wizard's friend too much,” Thorin smiled as he mounted. The saddle, he was pleased to note, stayed where it was suppose to and he turned back to Dwalin. Even without his knowledge of the coming events, Dwalin always went into a new situation first to ensure there were no traps or other dangers.

"Think he's of a delicate constitution do you? I heard those halflings were easily startled."

"That might be true, but I would hate to see what Gadalf would do to you in retaliation for scaring the hobbit out of his wits."

Dwalin just let out a laugh even as Balin gave Thorin another curious look. 'I'd like to see the wizard try something!' he declared.

Farewells were said all around and the two groups turned towards different roads leading away from the mountains.

A thought occurred suddenly to Thorin and he turned back towards Kíli who was turning his pony to follow Dwalin’s. “Kíli!” he barked to catch the boy’s attention.

The young dwarf instantly halted his pony even as Fíli gave him a small sympathetic smile as he passed. “Yes uncle?”

“What do we do before we enter someone else’s home?”

Kíli looked blank for a moment before he shot a helpless look towards Fíli who had turned around on his pony to watch curiously. “Um… check for threats?”

A good answer, but not the one he was looking for. “And when we enter as a guest?” Thorin prompted.

“Er…” Fíli looked just as confused when Kíli glanced at him again for help.
“We wipe our feet!” Thorin declared as he steered his pony towards the opposite road, both his nephews now looking utterly flummoxed. He twisted in the saddle to add “and not on the furniture!” just to be clear.

Fíli and Kíli looked even more confused as Dwalin spun around in his own saddle to stare at Thorin disbelievingly. Thorin just shrugged at his friend before he waved goodbye at all of them.

Dís was looking at him critically again when he turned forward again. He frowned at her, confused as to why she was looking at him like that. “What? You’re the one who’s always saying the boys need more lessons in manners.”

“And you’re going to teach them?” she asked skeptically. He nodded, still slightly puzzled. “You?”

Oh now he was just insulted. “Why not me?”

She stared at him for another moment before she turned forward herself. “Well, why not you? After all, you did such a fine job teaching them how to fish.”

Thorin let out a groan as he dropped his head against his pony’s neck. “I leave fish carcasses on the table one time…”

“They were fish carcasses! Heads, tails, guts! All over my nice, clean table dining table! They were staring at me Thorin! Staring!”

This was going to be a long trip…

Chapter End Notes

Why yes, I did have a stubborn pony when I was younger. Darn thing would always puff out like a blow fish whenever we tried to saddle her. I'd slid sideways off of her more times than I could count. I figured poor Ori would have the same issue as he's more a reader than a rider.

Thank you for reading!
Dís was very difficult to ignore when she was in a temper… extremely difficult to ignore. Thorin, however, had had decades of practice and so turned his thoughts inward and on the upcoming journey; more specifically the dangers that they would be facing on the trip.

‘Trolls, wargs, stone giants, goblins, Azog, spiders, elves, men, dragon and the battle,’ he listed silently. Groaning, he looked up at the sky. ‘Where do I even start?’

Best to start at the beginning he decided and that meant the trolls.

The troll cave is where he got Orcrist, which came in handy when captured by the goblins. But as he was desperately hoping not to be captured by goblins this time around, did he need to find the troll cave? He scowled at that thought. Elven blade or not, Orcrist was his damn it. It had served him well during the skirmishes they fought on the way to Erebor and in the final battle. Though he had eventually died, it was not due to fault of the blade.

‘Fíli would wield it well if he inherits it. So, to the troll cave we go,’ he decided. ‘So… how do I go about “discovering” the trolls and their horde?’

There were many different things he could do with this situation. He knew where the troll cave was, so he could lead the others while the trolls were asleep and trap them in the cave. However, trolls and dwarrows battling in tight quarters such as the cave would be difficult. ‘Perhaps burn or smoke them out into the light?’ he mulled over. ‘Then we have enraged trolls and no guarantee the sun will hit them considering their cave was deep in the thick woods.’ He winced as he pictured the trolls just squashing them in fury rather than attempting to cook them.

‘Okay, new plan,’ he continued. ‘We find them at their camp… how do I explain just suddenly finding a troll camp? Send out scouts? Balin would be suspicious, not to mention the wizard who warned us to get the hell out of there in the first place due to the ruined farm… If I send out scouts to look for the cause of the burned farm the trolls will be in their cave…’

Thorin sighed as he realized he was left with one choice. ‘I'm going to have to let Fíli and Kíli lose the ponies. Mahal help me.’ He looked back up at the sky again. ‘New question: do I let the go after the ponies.’

Letting the boys go after the ponies was the height of irresponsibility. Glancing at Dís’ back, he shuddered. She would more than likely hunt him down in the afterlife if he knowingly put her sons in danger but what else could he do? ‘Perhaps have someone else watch the ponies?’

He was immediately shaking his head, dismissing that idea as anyone else guarding the ponies would more than likely challenge the troll the moment they see it rather than alert the camp. ‘And more likely be eaten before anyone notices they're missing,’ he thought. ‘Or alert not only our camp, but the other trolls as well.’ Another image of squished dwarrows while others were being
hauled off for cooking appeared in Thorin's mind and he groaned again. He really was being left with no choice.

The boys, at least, were more frightened of Thorin's anger at the lost ponies than battling a troll for bragging rights. Perhaps if he sent someone to check on the boys while they were watching the ponies… 'Tell them I am simply worried for my young charges rather than ensuring they're doing their duty,' he mused. 'The warg howls are reason enough to be worried for the younger dwarflings. In that case, Nori would be the best bet,' he decided. 'He himself knows what it's like to worry for a younger relative and he's the best to check on the boys unnoticed. He would be the one most likely to return to camp first rather than chase off after the trolls as well.'

'With more of a warning, we can devise a better strategy for fighting the trolls this time and won't have to rely on Gandalf and dawn to save us. And no sacks. I do not fancy being stuck in that blasted sack for a second time.' He shuddered at the memory.

Of course, this was only a tentative plan. There was no guarantee that anything Thorin planned would work when actually put into action. But it was still better to have at least an idea of what to do rather than go in blind.

Next on the list of things that went wrong was the warg run.

They had only been caught by the wargs because they had dallied at the cave. Though half of that wasn't their fault as the other wizard had appeared, seeking Gandalf with urgent wizard business and they had all used it as an excuse to linger. 'If he was looking for Gandalf specifically, that means he'll catch up with us if we're already moving away from the forest. I'm sure whatever they spoke of could be discussed as we travel.'

Of course, if the wargs were searching for them as well, that meant that the wargs would catch up with them also. 'Make a run for it or rely on the rabbit sled as a distraction again?'

Thorin looked down at the pony he was riding. If they kept the ponies, they would be more in the open and unable to duck and dodge the wargs as they had on foot. Plus, if they were riding the ponies, there was no guarantee that anyone would keep their seats if the animals spooked and attempted to throw their riders. 'Not to mention the ponies themselves would better escape the wargs on their own.'

And they would be unable to take the ponies over the Misty Mountains anyway so the animals would be left behind either way. 'Best to let them fend for themselves,' he concluded. 'If anything, I can ask the elves to keep an eye out for them.'

Which brought up the elves of Rivendell.

There would be no avoiding Rivendell. Between the wargs and a very, very adamant wizard, it seemed inevitable that they would end up there. No matter how much Thorin disliked them, they would be stopping with our without his blessing. Gandalf alone was insistent that only the elves could read what Thorin knew now to be moon runes and would pressure Thorin to go if not trick him into going as he did the first time.

"I still don't believe he can not read that blasted map," he growl slightly to himself. Dís didn't seem to hear him, but the pony flicked an ear towards him before trying to snag a branch full of leaves to munch on as they passed.

That map with the location of the hidden door was the whole purpose of seeking out a wizard to begin with. If Thorin suddenly, miraculously knew what the runes said, not only would Balin and
Gandalf be suspicious, Glóin and Óin would wonder why he had never mentioned the door as an incentive when he was trying to convince them to finance the trip as he had already stated he would be acquiring the expertise of a wizard to deal with the particulars entering the mountain under the dragon’s snout, so to speak.

'Plus we can not only raid their pantries for anything that's actually edible, but their medicine stores as well.' Thorin smirked. If Lord Elrond truly was the most gifted healer on Middle Earth as the gossip said, then he should have an infinite supply of medical equipment to spare. 'Best if Óin has all the medical gear he can find for the battle at Erebor.'

Though getting Óin to accept elven medicine would be a battle in itself. Óin was as stubborn as they come and very set in his ways. 'Almost as much as I was,' Thorin sighed. 'Perhaps I can get the boys to turn those big begging eyes on him. They'll do it if I ask…'

He frowned as he thought it over. Usually when Fíli and Kíli used the pleading eyes it just exasperate people, as they tended to use the eyes at the drop of a hat. He mulled over the problem. 'Perhaps I can have them teach it to Ori and sick Ori on Óin.'

That might work. Nearly everyone went out of their way to please Ori, as he was not only the youngest, but also such a polite young dwarf. No one ever wanted to disappoint him.

Everyone believed Nori was the shrewd one of the brothers 'Ri. Thorin now had to question if that was only because Ori was too polite to correct everyone’s assumptions. He wondered briefly if Dori knew.

Chuckling to himself, Thorin turned now to the problem of the Thunder Battle.

Best course of action. Avoid it at all cost. If he had waited for Gandalf as originally planed instead of thinking he knew best and forging ahead, then they would have gone into the mountains a day latter and missed the battle completely. However, that could mean that the small ledge they had traveled could be irrevocably damaged. So, does he press them to forge ahead and pray for the best or did he drag his heels and hope the small mountain trail survived the stone giant’s little tiff?

'Perhaps if we make good time to Rivendell, we'll be ahead of schedule?' he pondered before sighing in resignation.

There really was no way to plan for the thunder battle. Whether they were a day early or a day late, there could always be another battle going on and perhaps that battle would be even more ferocious than the one they had endured the first time. There was nothing he or anyone could do against stone giants and Thorin had no idea if even Gandalf would be able to do anything if they were to wait for the wizard this time around.

He was at a stand still. They had to go over the mountains, there was no other rout they could take and that meant more likely than not, encountering the giants. 'I'll have to just wait until we reach the mountains to try and plan for that particular problem,' Thorin realized.

Next was the goblin cave.

'Avoid. At all costs!' Thorin was resolute on that point. Avoid the cave - avoid the goblins. Simple. If they could miss the Thunder Battle and the rain, he could hopefully keep the others from entering the cave.

But again, he wouldn't know until they actually arrived at the mountains. However, avoiding the goblins brought about avoiding another problem.
Azog.

The only reason Azog had been there when they escaped the goblin cave was because the goblin king had sent for him. If he avoided the goblins, chances were that Azog wouldn't be as close as he had been. Without the Eagles of Manwë it would be another day or two to the skin-changer's place, but it would be worth it if they could just keep ahead of Azog. 'Another avoid at all costs.'

That was the plan. Keep ahead of Azog and avoid at all costs. It wasn't so bad a plan if he did say so himself.

Continuing on, that brought him to Mirkwood and the spiders.

Perhaps if he pressed the urgency of going through Mirkwood as quickly as possible they could avoid the spiders and elves alike. If everyone was alert, they could probably keep Bombur out of the river and they would be more aware of their surroundings. Nothing instilled vigilance quite like fear. And Thorin being leery and cautious of Mirkwood rather than dogged and defiant at traveling through elven territory might just be the thing to kick the others in the arse to run through the woods as fast a possible.

He also had to ensure that they were laden down with food and ration it out from the moment they first entered the woods rather then when they were half way through and down to one sack for everyone to share out of. If they could avoid the spiders, it was more likely they would not be caught unaware by the elves. If they were not captured, that meant they wouldn't be shoved in barrels. Like the troll sacks, Thorin was not a fan of being shoved in barrels either.

Another thing Thorin would prefer to avoid was actually Lake Town and the humans.

Knowing they wouldn't assist in fighting Smaug until the dragon was already in the middle of burning down another of their towns, he wondered if it was worth stopping. While it would be prudent to stop for supplies, the sudden appearance of a whole group of dwarrows would clearly alert the masters that something was afoot. But then there was the whole situation with Bard. How it was that the human was the one to fell the dragon was beyond Thorin but he wasn't so sure that Kili could make the shot that the human had. Then there was the fact that the humans had claimed dwarven gold.

Groaning, Thorin dropped his head against his pony's mane. It was his failure that he had been weak and had succumbed to the dragon's sickness that the humans had threatened war. Now removed from the situation and clear headed, Thorin could see that it was more than likely there was human gold in Erebor.

But how much would be the issue rather than whether or not the humans had any right to it. Any human records more than likely had been destroyed with Smaug's arrival and who knew if any of Erebor's records had survived. But being in the mountain, it was more than likely that there were some documents about. Thrór had been so unreasonable towards the end he had had everyone account for even the smallest of golden nuggets.

'Perhaps rather than guards and their spears, Dáin could send accountants and their abacuses.' He snorted at that thought. 'Ridiculous.'

But he could not discount that it was due to the elves and men marching on Erebor for their so-called right to the treasure was the only reason they were able to come out of the battle against the orcs as well as they did. He could more than likely gain the human's alliance if he agreed to assist with the rebuilding of Dale along with ensuring that they would have their gold back once the bean counters were able to tally everything. But would dwarves and humans be enough to push back the
Did the elves make that much of a difference? He couldn't remember. As much as Thorin did not wish to be prisoner to the elven king, avoiding them meant they would have no knowledge that the dwarrows were trying to reclaim Erebor. Why would they be at Erebor if he didn't strike at Thranduil's pride by mysteriously disappearing from his inescapable dungeon?

That brought him back to Mirkwood and the spiders...

… He was getting a headache. And Dís was looking at him again.

Coming back to himself, he found that it was well past midday and the noon meal. "Er…" he looked back towards his sister. "Sorry. Got lost in thought."

"I figured as much." She smirked and nodded down towards his mount. "Though it looks as if your pony has taken it upon himself to find his meal."

Thorin groaned as he realized his gelding had managed to pull a whole branch loose and was almost dragging the thing along. "Sorry," he apologized ruefully. "You must be hungry."

Dís just laughed as she made her way towards a clearing off to the side of the trail and Thorin allowed his pony to follow. "Me? I can practically hear your stomach from here! I thought it time to bring your attention to it."

Thorin's spine straightened. "I am perfectly all right. I can go all day without eating."

Even the pony's ears twitched at the sound of Thorin's stomach growling at the end of his announcement. He dismounted with a blush while Dís let out a boisterous laugh. "If you say so."

Supper was full of discussion on how they were going to present their case to Dáin and the representatives of any of the kingdoms that decided to attend. As Thorin already knew how the meeting would go, he allowed Dís free reign of the conversation and let her say her piece. Fíli and Kíli's role in the quest was debated as was how this would change them.

Thorin could attest that they would come out of this journey as adults rather than the young adolescence they start out as. They would be blooded warriors and Thorin could only hope that the battle and his own death would shake them out of their stubborn cling to childhood and become the responsible kings he knew they could be.

Food consumed, they tugged their ponies away from the now very shortened patch of grass they had found and continued on. They could travel a few more hours before they would have to bed down for the night. He and Dís continued their small talk before they fell into silence once more and Thorin found his mind wandering towards the one subject he had avoided all day.

The Hobbit, Bilbo Baggins of the Shire.

Thorin had originally thought that it was a given that Bilbo would be traveling with them when he had first awoken but… was it fair to Bilbo? More often than not it was the hobbit that pulled them out of trouble. First, with the trolls, then Mirkwood, then trying to barter their safety with both humans and elves. Though he could have found another item to trade, Thorin had to admit that Bilbo did what he thought was best as a hobbit saw it.

If there was anything he learned about hobbits during the journey it was that they saw the world so much differently than dwarrows. In Bilbo's mind, the Arkenstone for their lives was the simplest solution. It was an easy choice for him and it was clear Bilbo could not understand why it was it
had infuriated Thorin as much as it had. After all, it was just a stone. A glowing one for sure, but a rock nonetheless. It wasn't worth sacrificing their lives for.

Thorin never regretted how he treated Bilbo as much as he did dangling the hobbit off that parapet. In fact, he regretted much of his attitude towards the hobbit. After all that Bilbo Baggins had done for them on the journey, after being dragged from his comfortable home and all he had ever know and tugged nearly kicking and screaming across the world, Thorin had done nothing but disregarded him, belittled him and in the end banished him and denied him what he had been entitled to as the stated by the contract to begin with.

Bilbo Baggins deserved better than that and Thorin felt shamed at how he had acted. His actions had been as far from a king's bearing as he could get. Especially for one under his care as the contract had made the hobbit. Bilbo had been one of the company, for all he was an outsider, and Thorin had treated him shabbily indeed.

Thorin now knew what they would be facing; there was no need anymore for Bilbo to go, superstition or no that only having thirteen in their company would be their undoing. Óin could squawk in Thorin's ear all day if he wanted, but Thorin would listen to the hobbit this time and if Bilbo said he would not go, Thorin would not pressure him. Nor would he allow the wizard to pressure him. Surely, with his knowledge of what was to come, they would not need Bilbo to travel with them.

While Bilbo joining them meant that Thorin would have the opportunity to make up for the way he had treated the halfling the first time around, whether Bilbo remembered his slights or not, Thorin's conscious would not allow him to knowingly put the hobbit in harms way. The hobbit had had a miserable time basically the entire trip. Though again, that was mainly due to Thorin's attitude towards him.

The only time Bilbo had even seemed pleased to have been pulled away from his comfortable hole was when they had been with the elves in Rivendell, much to Thorin's annoyance. The rest of the time he had been the very portrait of misery. From the ponies, to the mountains to the elven dungeon to facing the dragon, to the catastrophe with the Arkenstone he had put on a brave face, but looking back, Thorin realized that the hobbit had been terrified out of his wits.

Thorin would have to think of how to deal with the dragon without the hobbit's assistance. He would not force the hobbit into going with them to Erebor. He would not fail Bilbo Baggins again.

Fire, death and ash.

The village was burning. Grass and trees were glowing with the intense heat of the flames. People were running for their lives while wargs and orcs chased them down, striking them as they passed.

Thorin stared in shock at the chaos that surrounded him. He recognized those round doors. 'Impossible…'

The burning shire disappeared and instead was replaced with another burning town. A human city this time. Orcs by the thousands battling human riders. Oliphaunts lumbering over the battlefield, swatting at anything in their paths.

Now he was staring at a city in a mountain. Another human city, not a dwarven one. More orcs were swarming walls as the gates were crashed through. Humans and elven archers desperately trying to slow the hoard.
'I thought the human/elf alliance was no more...' Thorin thought. 'What is this? Where is this?'

He looked about the fighters on the wall and his breath caught in his throat as he small a small pocket of fighters. A human, an elf and a dwarf! All three, knocking down orcs like they were mere flies.

Thorin knew that dwarf. He was sure he had met him but he couldn't place him. Who was it? Where had he seen him before?

The scene changed before he could pinpoint when he had met the dwarf battling alongside both elf and man and now he found himself staring down at a tower surrounded by orcs forging weapons.

Thorin felt his blood run cold. They were preparing for war. Not just battling to take cities and kill anyone in their path, but with the sole focus of annihilation. Around the tower, stumps showed where a great forest once stood.

Thorin turned back towards the tower, trying to determine where he was before it changed again. Then the surrounding area shifted but strangely enough, the tower remained.

Then the tower changed. It became darker, sharper in design...

And above it all, one giant eye...

On fire!

Thorin jolted awake in the small camp he and Dís had set up only hours before in alarm and no small amount of fear.

"What in the name of Durin's beard was that?"
There was a flurry of whispers going on behind him, occasionally punctuated with a rather outrageous cry or a disbelieving snort. Normally he would ignore such hissed gossip being flittered about, considering it as nothing more than annoying insect buzz. However, as the furious whispering behind him had been going on since the wee early hours of the morning…

"Don't you old maids have anything else to be yapping about?" he finally burst out, frowning at the figures behind him.

Two sets of wide, surprised eyes stared back at him before looking towards his brother for assistance.

Fíli just sighed and leaned over in order to whack his younger brother upside his head.

"What?" Kíli asked huffily. "They've been nattering at each other all day!"

"It's only been an hour whelp," Dwalin said pointedly.

"Well, it feels like it's been all day…" Kíli muttered.

"Aww, do you feel left out?" Fíli snickered. Kíli sent him a small frown to show just how much he wasn't pleased with his brother teasing him.

"But what was with uncle Thorin though?" Fíli asked as he brought his pony to a halt to wait for the older two dwarrows to catch up. "He didn't seem worried at all. He was almost… relaxed."

Kíli let out a huff. "Of course he's relaxed. We're going to trounce that dragon and show him that it was the biggest mistake of his life to mess with the dwarrows of Erebor! What's there to be worried about?"

Fíli looked like he very much wanted to whap Kíli again, but was now too far back to reach. Dwalin looked to be calculating his own arm's length verses the young prince's distance.

"Thorin did seem different this morning," Dwalin said instead, as he decided it wasn't worth the strain.

Balin let out a small chuckle at that and Dwalin looked over at his brother in askance. "Thorin from the past few decades? Yes. But not so different than Thorin had once been before."

"Exactly, before," Dwalin quickly exclaimed thoroughly vexed, startling Fíli beside him. "As in before. Before the dragon. Before the mass exodus to the west. Before Kazah-dûm and the pale orc and… I don't understand it. Yesterday he was so stretched tight he was nearly as taunt as Kíli's bow."

"And did you see that grin today?" Fíli added keenly around Dwalin. "He looked just like Kíli!"

The second young dwarf turned at the sound of his name being repeated, but seeing as none of the others were even looking at him he rolled his eyes and pulled on the reins to allow his brother to catch up. "What about me?"
"Uncle Thorin! He looked just like you when you're about to do something you're not suppose to!"

"Indeed, he did," Balin confirmed. "He always looked like that in his younger days. Just before he, Dwalin and your uncle Frerin usually did something that would ensure I would have a pounding headache - for days."

Balin's statement perked the two younger dwarflings up. They were always interested to learn more of the uncle they never knew. All they ever heard was how much they were just like Thorin and Frerin had been at their age. Thick as thieves, mischievous and prone to trouble. And just like Fíli and Kíli, Thorin and his brother had only been five years apart in age.

It was one of the main reasons why the two never brought up their other uncle within Thorin's hearing range. The thought of losing Kíli horrified Fíli enough, but he never wished to be the reason for that look of sadness and loss that always stole over Thorin's face when his brother was mentioned. Kíli was of the same mind on the issue so the only time they ever heard of Frerin was when one of the older dwarrows brought him up.

Dwalin let out a snort. "You mean when Frerin was up to something that would get him into trouble. Usually Thorin and I had to go after him to pull him out of it before their father learned of it."

"And more often then not ending up tangled into the mess right along with him," Balin chuckled.

"Oy! That fiasco with the goats and the silk dye was all Frerin!" Dwalin protested.

"Sure it was…" Balin sounded as if he was of a different opinion altogether on the subject and Dwalin grumbled a bit while the boys dissolved into snickers. Luckily, they knew better than to press for details - for the moment at least.

"However, in regards to this morning," Balin shifted the conversation back to the main issue. "I believe that Thorin is just rather impatient to get back to Erebor and deal with the fire-wyrm."

"You would think that would make him more grumpy than he usually is, not happier," Fíli mused. Dwalin just inclined his head towards the fair-haired dwarf and nodded in agreement.

"I did not say that he was not worried," Balin assured them, thinking back to the distracted Thorin who had nearly gone head first into the trough. "Just…"

A distracted Thorin was one thing… but that smile! Not the cheeky grin that he had given his sister and her sons, but a smile of pure delight to see him. Him! Balin.

Thorin looked so pleased, and Balin could almost swear relieved, to see him that Balin had nearly inhaled his tobacco ash along with the smoke. He had not seen Thorin wear a look like that since before Smaug and the bitterness had settled around the young dwarf like a cloak. 'Or a shield,' he amended to himself. 'More tightly fastened than any other made of steal… or oak for that matter.'

"Confident?" Dwalin supplied as Balin trailed off into his own thoughts. "He seemed almost… excited to be leaving. Eager. Not troubled and anxious as he had been."

"But what is the reason, that's what we're trying to figure out!" Kíli pressed. "It's like he went to bed one dwarf and woke up another!"

"Kíli," Fíli groaned exasperated.

"What? It could happen!"
"This is not a nighttime story Kíli!"

"Perhaps it is the fact that he has a purpose once again," Dwalin suggested quietly as the boys dissolved into a small squabble over whether or not Thorin was being possessed by a rather odd, albeit cheerful ghost. "I hate to admit it, but toiling away as he has been since the loss of Erebor, ensuring we all had roofs over our heads and food in our bellies, has been putting a strain on his shoulders that even I could barely recognize him there for a while."

"It could be," Balin granted. "He's been given a single focal point with the desire to reclaim our home and Thorin always did work best with a single-minded purpose."

"One reason I did not argue when Thorin first proposed returning to Erebor," Dwalin stated pointedly.

Balin stiffened in his saddle. "My fears are well founded. You were on the other side of the city with the garrison when the dragon first arrived."

"But you must admit that Thorin's fears of others looking towards the mountain and calculating Erebor's coffers are credible," Dwalin insisted. "Besides," he continued on in what was his optimistic voice, "the beast may very well be dead."

"We could only be so lucky," Balin mumbled. "As we are, our forces are no match for a dragon if we are not able to maintain the element of surprise. Including whatever forces Dáin may or may not grant us, we would still need more dwarrows than we will have to face the dragon head on."

"We're not bad fighters as we are," Dwalin disputed.

"No, but many of us are… unseasoned." Both of them glanced at the backs of the two younger dwarrows. "And have never seen battle. What we need are strong veterans who have been to war. Those who would not balk in the midst of the fighting."

"And unfortunately, brother, many of those died at the battle of Azanulbizar following King Thráin."

"Yes, yes. I'm well aware," Balin acknowledged, remembering their own father briefly before shaking himself back into the present. "I know very well that there is no one else… doesn't mean I have to like it though." He sighed. "Trying to reclaim Moria was a haste decision on Thrór's part. I only hope the attempt to reclaim Erebor does not follow suit."

Dwalin hummed in thought, but said nothing as he pointed towards the small dwelling ahead of them. "We seemed to have arrived."

"First stop of many," Balin agreed as he eyed the moderate hut that Glóin had attained.

The door opened at the sound of the approaching ponies and the elder son of Gróin poked his head out. He nodded at the sighted of them and said something over his shoulder, most likely to his younger brother, before coming out of the building proper. "Morning!"

The mounted dwarrows all called out a greeting as the door opened once more and a younger dwarf made his way next to Óin. "Ho there travelers!" he greeted exuberantly.

"Gimli," Óin prodded the young dwarf on the shoulder. "Go back inside."

"What? I am saying hello to our guests," Gimli responded hotly in the direction of Óin's ear trumpet. Balin had to wonder if Óin's lack of hearing was the sole reason why that particular half
of the family was all so … boisterous. He almost felt bad for his cousin's neighbors who had their own doors and windows firmly shut despite the beautiful day.

"Gimli, if you insist on remaining outside, why don't you offer to take the ponies?" Glóin prodded as he appeared at the small gate. Fíli and Kíli started snickering again and Gimli shot them a rather annoyed look.

"Oh no, we do not mean to stay long," Balin insisted even as he dismounted. "We just stopped by to ensure you have everything you need."

"Everything you need you mean," Glóin declared in exasperation. "Don't worry. I have the coin all set up for you."

Balin nodded in thanks as Glóin snagged Gimli's collar and hauled the boy back inside. Gimli didn't look too pleased to be dragged away and Óin snickered. "He's very put out he will not be accompanying us," the other dwarf explained. "Thinks he's a grown dwarf he does."

"He's not the only one," Fíli chuckled. Kíli shoved him nearly off his pony, which prompted Fíli to retaliate, and soon Dwalin was doing his best to keep them from having a brawl right there in the road.

"I also came to give you this." Balin pulled out a stack of parchment from his pouch and handed one over to Óin even as he pitched his voice so the trumpet could pick it up. "Directions towards the Shire and our supposed fourteenth member the wizard found for us."

"A halfling," Óin let out a loud laugh. "I've seen them you know. Down by the human towns. Seemed a rather soft lot to me."

"I'm sure the wizard knows what he's doing," Glóin stated as he reappeared with a multitude of little pouches and his beloved abacus. Gimli was right on his heels with a few more bags, totaling nine in all. "This should be enough for eight ponies plus some to spare as I'm not sure about the wizard's horse and whether or not he will be providing his own or..." The dwarf went to work with the counting beads.

"I'm sure the wizard will provide for the wizard," Balin assured him as he took the purses. He nodded to the tiny grazing pasture where two ponies were whickering at their own mounts. "I see you have already acquired your own ponies."

"Fine mountain stock!" Glóin announced proudly. "Sure footed and able to travel even the furthest of distances."

"Very nice," Balin complimented automatically. Óin was already rolling his eyes while Gimli was relating how his father had haggled the human trader down the price of the ponies to near nothingness eagerly and vociferously to Dwalin and the boys. "The map shows you where the Hobbit lives, but Gandalf ensured us that the door will be marked as well incase the map is lost or someone gets turned around."

"My sense of direction is impeccable," Glóin bellowed indignantly. "How dare the wizard insult us like that!"

"We'll meet next Mersday and leave early on Highday," Balin continued to Óin as if Glóin hadn't spoken.

"We'll be there, no worries," Óin assured him.
"We will see you then in that case," Balin nodded again as he re-mounted.

They said their goodbyes, Glóin once more holding onto Gimli's collar so the young dwarf didn't follow them and soon they were on to their next destination. Needless to say, the group was rather... quiet for nearly an hour after they had departed.

"Well," Fíli began. "they were rather..."

"Loud," Kíli finished flatly.

"Kíli!"

"They were! My ears are still ringing!"

"And here you were worried we would encounter difficulties on the road brother," Dwalin chuckled. "I'm sure Glóin could scare away any trouble we may find ourselves in with his thunderous personalities."

Balin couldn't help himself, he burst out laughing. "And it seems young Gimli has developed the family habit. Remind me to make sure I have ear cotton packed."

It was very late in the morning when they reached their next destination.

The home of the once miners, now toy makers, was smaller and definitely more humble than the one Glóin had acquired. It was practically leaning against the mountain in order to stay upright, but the smells drifting from the window had the boys already shifting in the saddles, eager to pay a visit to the inhabiting dwarrows; or more specifically, their table.

One of the three who lived there was seated on a bench outside, whittling away at a small piece of wood in the warm sun. "Morning," the dwarf nodded at the group as they approached, placing his work down to the side so as to greet them. "Come with news then you have?"

"Good morning master Bifur," Balin replied while the other three looked rather puzzled at one another. Balin made a mental note to himself to have his charges, and brother apparently, brush up on their ancient Khuzdul. As far as Balin could tell, aside from Bifur's own cousins, only he could understand the dwarf completely.

He did have to wonder though, as to why Bifur had learned the old archaic version in the first place. The other dwarf had to have studied it at one point in order for the orc axe embedded in his forehead to cause him to speak nothing but. Normally only those who worked in the library would even have cause to learn it in the first place and that was to read the old scrolls. Very few could actually speak the language and certainly not as fluently as Bifur could.

Ori could understand him to a point, but he was still learning the antiquated version of their mother tongue and it was quite difficult sometimes to understand Bifur's accent. Even Balin could not get the inflection on some of the phrases that Bifur could achieve.

Ori was at least better than the completely lost look Fíli and Kíli were currently sharing. Bifur looked annoyed briefly before he repeated his greeting, this time accompanied with signing in Iglishmêk. The boys looked abashed as they quickly repeated the greeting while Dwalin just gave the dwarf a nod. Balin also made a note to remind everyone that they would have to speak in Westron once they met up with the wizard and his hobbit. It wouldn't do for everyone to be speaking in Khuzdul all the time. Especially when they stopped in the human towns.

The door opened and another figure appeared in the yard. "Oh! Visitors! Going to stay for lunch
are you?"

"Good morning mister Bofur. Thank you for the offer, but unfortunately we do not have the time," Balin explained swiftly. Everyone couldn't help but grin at the exaggerated groans from the two young dwarrows. "I'm sure Bombur will be disappointed."

"News they came with," Bifur announced, this time with the signing so everyone could follow, before sitting back down with his work.

"Not news so much as just information," Balin returned as he dug out the stack of parchment again. Map and money purses were handed to Bofur along with giving him the days they were to meet at the hobbit's home.

"Mark on the door?" Bofur asked disbelievingly. "Does he think we will get lost in that little town?"

"You've been there?" Balin was surprised. Not many dwarrows had purpose that far from the mountain range.

Bifur let out a snort even as Bofur shrugged. "Well, no. Not the hobbit towns themselves, but I've passed them on the way to sell our wares at Bree. Seem rather small to me. And straight forward. Just follow the road, don't ye?"

"They're hills. If you get lost, just climb one," Dwalin drawled.

Bofur smiled in agreement. "Not like scaling down the wall of the inner mines. We'll find our way after we buy some ponies for ourselves."

"Apparently the human merchant can be easily intimidated into lowering his prices if Gimli's story is anything to go by," Fíli told him.

Bofur laughed even as Bifur grinned rather maniacally. "Are you sure you can't stay for lunch?" Bofur tried one last time. "Bombur never minds adding more to the pot." He let out a bark of laughter. "It's all we can do to keep him from dumping everything in the pot."

Feeling the pair of pleading eyes staring into his back and smelling the heavenly scent wafting from the still open door, Balin regretfully shook his head. "We have a ways to go before meeting with the last of our group and then Dwalin is going to acquire a pack pony for us along with one for the hobbit."

"We're going to have every pony west of the Lune River, aren't we?" Bofur chortled.

"We just might," Balin admitted.

"Hang on a tick," Bofur bid them and disappeared into the house. Bifur ignored the four on ponyback and Balin could tell the boys were getting slightly antsy on their mounts as they waited. However, the awkwardness faded into elation as Bofur reappeared with a few loafs of bread.

"Oy," Bifur frowned.

"Bomber said he'll make more," Bofur replied as he handed a loaf to Dwalin and one to Fíli who eagerly broke it in half and passed a piece over to Kíli.

Thanking Bofur for the fresh bread and ensuring the thanks would be passed on to Bombur, the group took their leave once again and was soon on their way towards their next destination. The
boys were slightly calmer with warm food in their bellies once again and Balin saw no better time to start quizzing them on their knowledge of ancient Khuzdul and how it differed from the current version.

The younger pair rather suddenly spotted a small rabbit and soon the two were chasing it down to add to their supplies. Dwalin looked as if he would have given anything to go with them as Balin did not stop his questions with the boy's departure and was looking at his younger brother quite expectantly for the answers. Balin always did have the reputation of being quite the stern taskmaster.

Chapter End Notes

1) In looking up information for this story I was surprised to see Frerin was only five years younger than Thorin just like Fíli and Kíli! Thus I believe that they would have been quite close if not as close as Fíli and Kíli are.

2) Everyone knows it's Balin & Dwalin, sons of Fundin and Óin & Glóin, son of Grón. What I find interesting is no one ever bothered to mention that Fundin and Grón were brothers themselves, making Balin & Dwalin and Óin & Glóin first cousins!

3) Again, I have only seen the movie and not read the book. Thus I am trying to get my information from practically everywhere else. I've purchased "The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey – A Visual Companion" by Jude Fisher (I am too poor for the chronicles. :( ) and in the book, it states that Bifur spoke ancient Khuzdul not just Khuzdul itself. It also stated that no one could understand him at all but I thought that as the librarians, wouldn't Balin and by default, Ori have to know it in order to read the old scripts? Kind of like Evelyn in Stephen Sommers The Mummy.
Three rabbits lashed to the saddles, Kíli was practically preening about his finer archery skills even an hour later. Fíli was rolling his eyes at his younger brother's blustering, but wore a small, proud smile nonetheless as Kíli went into a third telling of how quickly he was able to shoot the rabbits. Noticing his brother's expression, Kíli was swift to compliment his brother at routing the rabbits from their hiding spots as they approached their next destination for the day.

The last, small dwelling they came to was not as pristine as Glóin's, but neither was it as in such a rundown state as the toy makers had been. A modest building as far as the hastily erected homes that had been scattered along the Blue Mountains were concerned, with a small shop in the front. There were a few dwarrows here and about, but it seemed as if the shop was near empty.

Well, almost empty as the door was flung open with such exuberance it bounced back off the wall. Balin couldn't help but smile as his apprentice waved at them excitedly as they approached.

"Master Balin! Good afternoon!"

"Hey ya there Ori!" Kíli grinned as he hopped down off his pony.

"How's the ink running Ori?" Fíli asked as he too jumped down and threw an arm around the other dwarfling.

Ori's excitement fled him and he fidgeted slightly, ducking his head at the sudden attention he was receiving even as he greeted the two dwarrows politely. It was almost easy to forget that Ori was a few years older than the two princes as his quiet nature tended to make him seem younger than he was.

"Leave my apprentice be, you brats!" Balin chastised good-naturedly and he received two identical grins in return.

"Boys, why don't you go take care of those rabbits?" Dwalin urged as he dismounted, accepting the reins of their mounts.

Excited about their catch, the two quickly asked Ori where they could deal with the animals and the other young dwarf pointed them towards a small out table under the shade of a tree.

"You truly have to learn to stand up to them," Balin told his student as the two went off and Dwalin left to tether the ponies. "You will be in charge of their scriptorium and library in due time. You will have to learn how to handle them and better yet, how to tell them to back off."

"I know," Ori replied despondently. "It's just so… hard."

Balin patted the young dwarf on the shoulder. "You'll learn in due time," he assured him. "This trip will be the perfect start for your training."

"Start of my training?" Ori asked bemused.

"On royalty herding," Balin winked. "First off, never let them dictate what it is you write down for kingdom's records. Unless of course they're dictating a letter, then it will be your job to translate it from kingly arrogance to courtly courtesy before sending it off."
Ori looked as if he didn't know whether to laugh at Balin's joke or be completely horrified at the idea.

"Here, what's all this then?" a new voice asked and Balin sighed at the sight of his student's older brother coming down the front steps.

"Good afternoon master Dori."

"Lord Balin." Dori gave a small bow as befitting Balin's station.

Not many still adhered the proprieties with the loss of Erebor, but Balin had quickly learned early on in Ori's apprenticeship that Dori clung to them with a fierce aspiration. Balin presumed that it was due to the fact that Ori once told him that they could trace their line back to Thráin the first. Thought granted it wasn't his wife who they descended from, but rather a young kitchen maid.

Balin had looked through the royal family lineage scrolls upon learning *that* little tidbit, but it soon became apparent that the first Thráin never claimed the child, as he should have. Even out of wedlock, each child was precious and a blessing of Mahal. If he had, the mother's family would have been granted a higher place in society, especially as the child was still a royal no matter his mother's lineage.

He guessed that Dori and Ori's family was perhaps still bitter at the snub even after all these centuries and did everything they could to finally reach the position they were once denied. Hence the family's fierce commitment of the proper etiquette. Ori claimed that their mother was quite the aspiring socialite in her younger days and Dori was clearly raised to follow in her kid slipper footsteps.

Strangely enough, it was his apprenticeship to Balin that elevated Ori's own status. As a scrivener, a scribe of the court, he was closer to the nobility than his brother who was still a simple tea maker. Odd for the dwarf to be a tea maker when so few dwarrows even drank it, even amongst the nobility, preferring spirits or ale. However, Balin had never gotten the story out of Ori as to his brother's love of the drink.

"We've brought you a map to our meeting place," Balin stated their business clearly. He paused a moment before adding "along with funds for mounts and supplies."

"Of course you did," Dori muttered tetchily.

"Dori," Ori hissed under his breath, a flush already creeping down his neck.

"I still do not see why we need to go on this abysmal vocation at all," Dori hissed back.

"I am to document the journey," the younger insisted as Balin pretended to be engrossed in watching the boys skin the rabbits rather than eavesdropping as he was. "It's my first real assignment as a scrivener."

"There will surely be other, safer expeditions to record."

"You don't have to come you know," Ori returned petulantly. "No one asked you to."

"You are only just into your majority," Dori returned hotly. "You need the proper chaperone."

Ori threw up his arms in frustration. "The princes are younger then me and they don't have a chaperone."
Balin cleared his throat, not wanting to interject himself in the conversation, but knowing he had to say something. "Begging your pardon, but in truth their uncle would be considered their chaperone." He gave Ori a sympathetic smile even as the boy's face fell and Dori looked rather vindicated. "So in truth, the proprieties are being seen too. Not that he really needs to as they're all but married to each other save for the appropriate documentation."

Dori raised an eyebrow in question and Balin nodded the affirmative, causing both Dori's eyebrows to shoot up in surprise. Balin couldn't blame him. It was rather startling when you first realized that the closeness the princes shared wasn't just from a strong brotherly bond.

It was rare for dwarrows to find their other half at such a young age, let alone in their own family, but not unheard of. The moment five-year-old Fíli had first seen Kíli in his tiny bassinet, he had declared firmly and loudly just whom Kíli belonged to with a very vocal "mine!" to the rest of his family. Fíli and Kíli had been One ever since.

Dís and Thorin were both adamant that they wait a few years before having their bond officiated and recognized throughout the realm. However, the boys were hoping that with fighting the dragon and reclaiming their homeland, they could prove they were full-grown adults and capable warriors and receive their king's blessing to marry sooner. Even Thorin could not deny that they would be established adults and strong fighters after facing a dragon.

Dwalin returned, looking between the three dwarrows confused at their silence. "Is there a problem?" he demanded to know. Balin had explained to his brother of Dori's disapproval of Ori joining the quest and it was clear Dwalin thought there was another disagreement being held over the matter.

"No, no issue's at all," Balin reassured him.

"Humph," Dori huffed and Ori groaned, dropping his head in his hands as Dwalin glowered at the tea maker. Balin had to hand it to him. Not many dwarves could withstand his younger brother's scowl let alone be able, and willing, to glare back.

Fíli and Kíli were now looking at Dori in awe while Ori looked to wish he were anywhere but where he was.

"What do you think you're doing?" A livid voice suddenly rose from the small crowd of dwarrows traveling down the lane. More voices rose in protest and annoyance as a figure pushed through them and stomped towards where the four were standing in front of the small home and tea shop.

Balin raised his own eyebrow in surprise, as he finally was able to place the voice as belonging to the thief that Dwalin was always complaining about. Hair pinned in an elaborate three peaks and beard braided to reflect the hairstyle, the dwarf was rather quite distinctive as he stomped towards them.

And quite furious if the scowl on his face was anything to go by. Fíli and Kíli had both risen from the table, Fíli's hand on his sword hilt and Kíli going for his bow. Balin shook his head at them. The thief hadn't done anything yet.

"Nori!" Ori cried out with happy surprise even as the thief pushed himself between Dwalin and Dori, whirling about to glare up at the guardsman unflinchingly.

Wait a minute… Balin recognized that glare! He had just seen it! On -

"What do you think you're doing, intimidating my brothers?" the thief, Nori, who was apparently
brother to both Dori and Ori, exclaimed furiously.

Balin could only stare in surprise as a small voice in his head wondered bemusedly how it was that Thorin had been able to see the relation between the thief and Balin's apprentice after only one meeting when apparently no one else had.

"You have no right to bother my family," Nori was continuing loudly, "they have nothing to do with my way of life! This is harassment! They know nothing about anything I do! They're law abiding citizens!"

Dori was groaning in the background. "Mahal's hammer, Nori. What have you done now?"

"Nothing!" Nori shot back resentfully. His gaze moved from Dwalin to Balin and his spine straightened defiantly. "If this is about honoring that contract, I signed didn't I? I'm a dwarf of my word." He turned to glare up at Dwalin. "Even if I was coerced into it!"

Dwalin didn't even react at the accusation, still staring down at the thief in complete shock as he had since the other dwarf first appeared from the crowd. "Brothers? You have brothers? They're your brothers?"

"Well of course I have brothers!" Nori shot back. "I have family same as anybody else!"

"Wait a moment! You signed a contract? The king's contract?" Ori exclaimed excitedly.

"Say it isn't so," Dori moaned dramatically.

Dwalin looked from thief to tea maker and back again before a small smirk appeared on his face. "It was either that or be locked up for instigating that bar brawl," he offered helpfully and the thief glared at him so hard Balin was surprised Dwalin didn't burst into flames. Balin still didn't know why Dwalin had suggested Thorin present that choice to the thief when he had been caught yet again or why the thief had even accepted the offer, as it seemed he was of the opinion the whole quest a fool's errand.

"Nori!" Dori gasped appalled.

"What? I didn't start the brawl!"

"No, that would be the two whom you pickpocket, blaming each other for their missing coins," Dwalin supplied rather cheerfully.

"Nori!" Dori shouted again infuriated.

"They got their money back, didn't they?" Nori huffed before he turned back to Balin. "You didn't have to have this lout hunt me down to ensure I'll show up for the damn trip, you know. I would have shown up at the meeting place."

"You don't even know when and where we're gathering!" Dwalin disputed.

"Mersday, isn't it? At that hobbit's hill down in the valley." Nori drawled and left Dwalin sputtering.

"We didn't come here for you actually," Balin picked up the conversation when it was clear his brother was unable to.

Nori now looked at Balin confused. "Then… why are you here?"
"The contract!" Ori proclaimed happily, grabbing Nori's sleeve and tugging at it in excitement. "And you signed it?" he asked eagerly. "You're going then? On the quest?"

Nori turned towards his brothers bewildered. "What do you know about it?"

Ori had on the largest smile Balin had ever seen on the boy. "Because we signed it too! We're all going together! Isn't that wonderful?"

Dori looked as if he was being asked to eat Thorin's infamous fish carcasses, scales, guts and all, instead of reveling at the prospect of a long journey with his own brother.

Nori was now staring at his younger brother in mounting, abject horror. "You signed it?"

Ori nodded so fast his few small braid beads were clicking together. "Yes!"

Nori stared for a few seconds longer before he whirled to look at Dori. "He signed it? How could you let him sign it?"

"What do you mean 'let him'?” Dori shouted back. "I didn't let him do anything!"

"You could have forbidden it! You're the eldest!” Nori reminded him.

"What? Now wait a minute! I’m an adult now!” Ori was protesting crossly.

"There was no letting him do anything! He had already signed it by the time I even learned about it!"

"There's no letting me do anything at all!” Ori bellowed. The deafening pitch Ori had achieved for his declaration surprised even Dwalin. Who knew Ori could give even Glóin a run for his gold in sheer thundering volume? "I can decide for myself what I'm to do!"

Clearly, Dori and Nori were used to tuning out their younger brother as both continued on as if he hadn't said anything at all as Nori focused on the eldest. "I left for five years, at your insistence mind you, and look what happened anyway! He's going to get himself killed!"

"Who could have predicted this situation would even ever come up?"

"That's why you haven't been to visit? Dori! How could you do that?"

"Couldn't you get him out of it? What about stating preceding obligations of the family?” Nori was demanding.

"This is my obligation!" Ori protested. "I have to go with them! I'm the chronicler!"

Nori looked to Dori for confirmation who just waved a hand in Balin's general direction. "It's part of his apprenticeship apparently."

Nori turned his gaze towards Balin in surprise. "Wait, you're Ori's teacher?"

"I am," Balin hesitantly admitted and braced himself.

"How could you be bringing him with us on this madness?"

"Here now! It's not madness!" Dwalin objected. "It's a legitimate endeavor. Something I'm sure you know nothing about."
Nori just glared at him. "If he's here for my brother, then why are you here, guardsman?" he asked instead.

Dwalin let out a snort as he jerked a thumb in Balin's direction. "That's my brother."

"Your brother?" Nori yelped aghast. "You have an elder brother?"

"Of course I have a brother," Dwalin bit back. "I have family same as anybody else, don't I?"

Nori flushed red in anger as his own words were shot back at him. His eyes darted to Balin before shooting back to Dwalin. "Your older brother is my younger brothers master?" he asked incredulously.

"Small world, ain't it?"

Nori whirled back to Balin. "He's not going!"

"Hey!" Ori shouted.

Balin simply looked at the other dwarf. "They signed the contract, same as you. Or are they not dwarrows of their word… unlike you?"

"He doesn't know what he's getting himself into. Ori doesn't know what's out there! He's never been outside Ered Luin! He-" Nori's voice choked off as his eyes widened. "What do you mean 'they'?"

"Dori signed the contract too!" Ori informed him rather gleefully and Balin winced at the tattling tone.

"You signed it?" Nori whirled on his elder brother.

"Of course I did!" Dori told him point-blank.

"What were you thinking?" Nori shouted. "You don't know what's out there! You'll be taken out by a sheep let alone an actual wild animal!"

"Well, I couldn't very well let Ori go off by himself, now could I?"

"I'm not going by myself! Master Balin is going as well! Along with mister Dwalin and a whole group of others! You didn't need to come!"

"Yes I did! Going off without the proper accompaniment!"

"Oh here we go again!" Ori threw up his hands in annoyance. "What about Nori! He was going without a minder!"

"He is practically a lost cause as it is," Dori decreed. "You are not." Bizarrely enough, Nori was nodding in agreement, until Dori turned towards him. "Though I do not appreciate having my work doubled if not tripled! Ori at least is biddable! You, on the other hand, are a complete menace! You will behave on this journey and refrain from embarrassing our family or so help me Mahal I will turn you over my knee!"

"What?" Nori nearly shrieked in horror.

"Hah!" Ori laughed.
"Ori! Do not think you are getting out of this either!"

"What did I do?" Ori wanted to know. "I haven't done anything! That's the whole point! I've never done anything with my life!"

"And we're not saying what you can or can not do with your life, you just can't go on this trip!" Nori proclaimed.

"You're both obstinate idiots!" Ori declared. "I do not need to be coddle!"

"Clearly you do if you're going about signing contracts for ridiculous quests!" Nori shouted.

"You signed it too!"

"And I'm going to be eaten! We're all going to be eaten! I thought you were smarter than that!"

"Um…" All five turned to stare at the slightly nervous Fíli, Kíli cowering behind him. "We're attracting a crowd."

And so they were. Dwarrows were staring at them from the surrounding homes, shops or just standing in the lane gaping. Balin groaned.

Ori just sniffed and before anyone could even twitch, his hands shot out and he snagged an ear each of his brothers. Ignoring their squalling he turned towards Balin. "Master Balin, we will see you on Mersday! All three of us!" and he proceeded to drag his older brothers towards the shop. A rather loud "we're closed!" had what few tea patrons there were scrambled for the door and it was slammed behind them so hard the frame shook.

"That was moderately horrifying," Fíli stated wide-eyed as the crowd began to disperse.

"Who knew Ori's family was so…" Kíli struggled for the right word, "eccentric?"

Balin just groaned again while Dwalin went to retrieve the ponies in a daze. He could only hope that Thorin was having a better time of it than he was.

Chapter End Notes

1) Again, according to the Visual companion to the movie, Dori claimed relation to Thorin, though admittedly from the 'wrong side of the blanket'. Creative license was taken in when exactly that took place by me.

2) Scrivener as defined on Wikipedia: 

   "[Scrivener (or scribe) was a Middle English term for a person who could read and write. This usually indicated secretarial and administrative duties such as dictation and keeping business, judicial, and history records for kings, nobles, temples, and cities.] I thought it was interesting enough word to be used by the people of Middle Earth more than a mere scribe. Thus, Ori is a scrivener in this fic. Found this out while trying to look up where scribes were placed in relationship to nobility. (Though, most of them were the monks or priests)"

3) Ori's age is never mentioned by Tolkin, so I'm taking some liberties and making him just a few years older than Fili and Kili. He's just so cute in the movie! x3
4) In Nori’s bio in the little booklet that accompanied the blu-ray/dvd, it states that he joined Thorin’s quest to “get out of a spot of bother”. In my mind, this came to mean that Dori and Ori also signing up for the quest was purely coincidental! Nori deciding that the quest would be a good opportunity to reacquaint himself with his kin I believe came later after they were already on their way.

**This was suppose to be part of chapter Five... as you can see, the brothers ’Ri demanded they have their own chapter and really, who am I to deny Ori anything? Next time, we're back to Thorin, I promise!
Bad honey.

That was Thorin's first conclusion as to what had caused his strange dream that first night; or rather his strange nightmare. He had spent most of the next morning trying to remember if he had his breakfast with the honey the first time around and if it really was food poising before even remotely considering that there might be another reason for seeing such a thing in his sleep.

But he did not have the luxury of blaming bad food when the same dream occurred on the second night.

He could not understand what it was that Mahal was trying to show him. Why he was having such a dream at all was another answer that eluded him.

The images of the battles being fought against wargs and orcs… Was it a warning? If so, then a warning of what? What, in the name of all that was gold and gems, was the point of showing Thorin these images if he had absolutely no idea as to what they had to do with the quest to reclaimed Erebor. Thorin had never been in any sort of massive battle like the one shown to him save for Kazah-dûm when he was still a dwarfling.

Well, that one and the one at the base of the lonely mountain that he would have to fight yet again come the end of the year.

'Is that it?' he suddenly wondered. 'Did fighting alongside elves and men that day make that much of a difference?'

The small moment in time during the one dream battle where it was dwarf, man and elf taking down orc after orc came back into the forefront of Thorin's mind. 'Is that… is it that what this is? Are these dreams of things that have yet to pass?'

Thorin frowned trying to puzzle it out. No Erebor dwarf would fight alongside an elf. At least, none would now. But after Erebor… The image of the orcs forging weapons beside the first black tower. If he was right and these were dreams of things that were to come…

A cold chill ran through him colder than the bitter winter that swept the land a few decades before. A war was coming. Erebor was just the beginning. A small taste of what would sweep across the land bringing death and darkness.

Had it been such a turning point? Was fighting alongside the men and elves at the gates of Erebor the start of an alliance that could push back the orcs? Was that one battle such a defining moment in the long scheme of things?

Would forging an alliance with the men and elves sooner help all that may come to pass afterward?

Thorin groaned. He was not looking forward to the barrels again, not one bit. But if that was what he would have to do, he would do it. To ensure his nephew's survival he would allow himself to be shoved in a barrel in order to tempt the woodland king into chasing after him to the lonely mountain. If there truly was such a war looming on the horizon as the one he saw in his dream, his nephews would need all the help they could get. Even if it was from elves.

Thorin began re-plotting the trip through Mirkwood, finally believing he had determined the
purpose of his dreams.

Then the third night, the dream changed.

Thorin was standing down at the bottom of the steps that led up to the burglar's small home. The green door flung wide with a warm light beckoning into the darkness and the sound of laughter ringing from inside. He almost started going up the stairs before he remembered his promise and stopped. How could he drag such a softhearted, benevolent creature out on such an unpleasant, wearisome journey?

That's when the light changes from a warm glow to a brighter flicker. It almost took him a moment to realize the laughter had abruptly ended and all he could here now was a small, crackling sound coming out from the open doorway before it suddenly shifted into a dull roar. Thorin bolted up the stairs.

Nothing but fire greeted him at the door. The heat practically pressing him backwards as the smoke chocked his throat. He couldn't see anyone in the hobbit hole. He couldn't see anything in the hobbit hole. There was simply nothing left in there to see.

Jerking upright from his bedroll once more, Thorin bit back a cry of pain. He could hear the ponies shuffling their feet, startled by Thorin's sudden movement. Dís' side of the camp was eerily silent and he knew his sister was not only awake, but also listening to him very intently. He couldn't say anything to her however. Not right now.

Flopping back down onto his hard patch of dirt he had claimed for his bed, he ran his hand over his face as he tried to understand the rather blatant answer he had been given.

This dream had been short and to the point and Thorin believed he had finally, finally figured out what it was that the dreams were trying to tell him. What decision he had made that caused one of the Valar to send him such horrific dreams in a desperate bid to have Thorin change his mind back.

He groaned as he dropped his head into his hands. "Are you truly that cruel to force him on a path he does not even wish to tread?" he muttered under his breath.

The battle alone would not forge the ties between the three races strong enough to ensure a strong alliance for the coming war.

It needed the hobbit. They needed the hobbit. Thorin needed the hobbit.

It was Bilbo Baggins that shook Thorin, that shook Thranduil and Bard, out of their hatred for each other long enough to see that they were not each other's enemies. It took Bilbo trying desperately to keep the men and elves from attempting to annihilate Thorin and his kin by bartering the one thing he knew the dwarrows searched for in order to bring hopefully a peaceful end to the arguing. Had Bilbo not tried, who knew what shape any of the three armies would have been in when the orcs crested the hills and attacked.

He had no choice. Bilbo Baggins would be going with Thorin on the quest for Erebor.

Just as Thorin determined it would be cruelest of cruelty to force Bilbo to go when it was clear that he did not wish to, he was shown that without the small hobbit, the outcome of the quest for Erebor would be changed indeed. Without the hobbit, in truth the whole fate of Middle Earth might be changed. Leave Bilbo behind, and things would possibly be even worse than how Thorin had left it the first time.

Fate seemed to love its irony. As, apparently, did Irmo.
With the latest dream, Thorin was starting to doubt it was the dwarrow's great creator Mahal who was sending him them at all, or if it was another of the Valar who was showing these things to him. Mahal, after all, had nothing to do with dreaming. That, according to legend, was another Valar Lord's domain.

Irmo, called Lórien by the elves, was the bringer of visions and dreams to both men and elves, but never before had Thorin ever heard of a dwarf receiving a vision from the spirit master. Then again, Thorin had never heard of anyone, dwarf, elf, human, wizard or hobbit that woke up a year prior to their own deaths either.

It would also explain why his small decision to leave the hobbit behind had provoked such a desperate reaction from the Valar as to show him things he should not know of after his death. If the hobbit was such a significant factor in the coming war that would encompass all of Middle Earth, it would make sense for other Valar to be involved.

As astonishing as it all was to believe, everything seemed to hinge on the hobbit. So, why was it Thorin had been sent back to live the year again? What was it that he was supposed to do to change everything? At first he had not questioned awaking not only alive, but a full year in the past, simply grateful to be able to save his nephews from his own foolishness.

But was that the only reason. If they were not the "them" that Mahal, if it even was Mahal whom he heard, had begged him to save… who was? What in the name of all the Valar had happened after he died?

He was still pondering things as he saddled his pony, Gyth he had finally named him, the next morning. He could feel his sister's gaze practically boring into his back, but he couldn't say anything to her.

Dís was starting to become worried about him and what was worse, motherly over him, but Thorin could not honestly explain what exactly he was dreaming about and his sister had come to her own conclusions. No mention of Dáin or the dragon had been brought up for the past two days, but as the weight had not left Thorin's shoulders, she was starting to argue the idea of turning around and calling off the whole business.

Thorin just pressed on saying nothing. The silence began to weigh heavy on Dís and finally she could not hold back any longer.

"Thorin, if the prospect of Dáin turning us down is upsetting you this much…"

"It's nothing," Thorin muttered around another yawn. "I'm fine."

Dark circles under his eyes and listing in his saddle, Dís was inclined not to believe him. "Then what? The journey to Erebor? Thorin, it doesn't make sense. You've wanted to reclaim our homeland for years. If you're now having second thoughts…"

"No, that's not it- trust me."

"It's not Dáin, it's not the dragon… what is it?"

Thorin hesitated, shifting in his saddle before frowning and leaning to the left in order to center the saddle again.

Dís was not amused at his avoidance. "What is it?" she finally burst out. "The dwarrows you hired? The supplies? The route you planned? The wizard? What?"
Thorin frowned. "None of that."

"Then what? Mahal take it Thorin, if you're behaving like this now we might as well turn around this moment and cancel the whole thing!"

Thorin saw hoards of orcs and wargs overwhelming anything they came across, humans, elves, dwarrows, - *hobbits.* "The burglar," he blurted before groaning quietly to himself as Dís gained a look of puzzlement.

"Burglar? The… that thief Dwalin had you compel into joining your group?"

Thorin winced. "No, not Nori."

Dís quirked an eyebrow at how quickly Thorin was able to pull up a name he had only heard once. Even Dwalin only referred to him as "that brazen thief" during his tirades of the thief's most recent antics. She tried to remember all the contracts that Balin had been sorting the week before. "Who then? That's the only thief I thought you hired."

There was another pause before Thorin answered her. "The hobbit."

"The wizards companion?" Dís' jaw dropped in surprise. "He's a thief too?"

"Burglar," Thorin corrected.

"I thought he was a hobbit."

"He's a hobbit burglar."

Dís frowned. "I thought those hobbits were rather passive creatures."

"Passive he is *not,*" Thorin chuckled absently; missing Dís' sharp look as he remembered the quarrelling and mulish glares Bilbo use to throw at him whenever they disagreed. "Passive aggressive maybe, but he is, at heart, a gentle sort." His expression became resolved once again. "Which is why I do not think he should be going with us to Erebor."

His sister mulled over that for a moment. "But you only have thirteen in your party. Not counting any soldiers Dáin may send, your personal company would be ill-fated."

"That's not the issue," he frowned at her. "Superstition is only as strong as the strongest believer. If we do not believe we are cursed, we will not be." Even as he said it, the whole quest flashed before his eyes. *'We had our fourteenth member, and we still had so much bad luck.'*

Or was that the problem? Thorin never truly considered Bilbo to be a full member of the company. He was not a dwarf, after all. What did he know of strife? Could it be *that* which would make all the difference? Thorin simply accepting Bilbo's aid during the journey rather than resenting it after it was done? The trolls, the elves, the spiders, Azog and the dragon…

Dís suddenly leaned over and pressed her wrist against Thorin's forehead. "Are you feeling okay? Any pain in your gut?"

"What? No. I'm fine…"

Sitting back in her saddle, she looked at him critically. "So, what is it about the hobbit has your beard tied up in knots?"

Thorin hesitated before releasing his breath in one long whoosh. "I do not think it wise to have him
travel with us. The road is dangerous as it is-

"So leave him behind," Dís said dismissively.

"However Gandalf chose the hobbit for a reason and while I believe I understand the wizard's intention, I do not feel it is honorable to pressure the hobbit into going as Gandalf is most likely will do-"

"So, don't let him."

"But I think the hobbit needs to go with us," Thorin finally finished. "I do not think we would be able to endure anything we may come across as well as we can without the hobbit's assistance."

She looked at him questioningly. "How so?"

Thorin gave a small sigh. "Hobbits… how do I put this?" he struggled to figure out how to word his thoughts into something his sister could understand without outright telling her of all the hobbit would eventually do for Thorin and his company. "Hobbits do not look at the world the same as we do. Perhaps it is because they are not Mahal's children that means they can look at a problem and not see a chance to strike at stone, but rather coax it out of the wall that holds it."

She was staring at him. "What? Thorin, what in Durin's name are you babbling about?"

Thorin looked heavenward before finally explaining. "I do not think we should bring the hobbit along. It's not fair to him, as he does not have anything to do with the dragon or our undertaking to reclaim our home. Yet at the same time, I fear what would happen if we don't have him travel with us."

Dís continued staring at him for a long time. "It is not like you to be so indecisive."

He shrugged. "The issue with the hobbit is… complicated. He is the wizard's friend, but at the same time… I do not feel right putting him in possible harms way."

"To go, not to go… is that not the hobbit's choice?"

Thorin startled at that. "What do you mean?"

"You seem to be looking at this as either Gandalf having the hobbit joining or you leaving the hobbit behind. Isn't that the hobbit's choice on whether or not he will go?"

Thorin could feel his jaw drop and Dís let out a small chuckle. "You still tend to complicate the simplest of things. The hobbit will go with you or he won't. That is not anything you or the wizard can choose for him."

"But Gadalf."

"What about him? This is your quest, is it not? Simply tell the hobbit all the facts and let him decide for himself. He isn't a child Thorin. I'm sure he can judge the situation on his own and come to his own conclusion."

Thorin remembered the desperate call to wait as Bilbo came running up the small incline to where they were leaving, waving the contract like a flag. True he had left the signed contract out in the open at the wizard's direction, a small way to nudge the hobbit into going along, but he had honestly never believed Bilbo would sign it that day.
It would be Bilbo's choice, but Thorin now knew due to the dreams that Bilbo had to go with them on this quest. He winced. Dís was right, damn it all.

He could not let Gandalf pressure the hobbit into going. The wizard tended to not so subtly shove people into doing what he thought was best and that most likely was why Bilbo refused going to begin with. This time Thorin would do something he would have never considered doing before he had returned to the start of the year. He would simply be honest with Bilbo Baggins, fully and completely. And pray that the hobbit would be more willing to accompany them this time.

Dís smiled as Thorin seemed to sit up straighter in his saddle. It seems as if that was what had been bothering her brother these past few days. Strange that such a thing would weigh so heavily on her brother, but she knew absolutely nothing about hobbits where, oddly enough, it seemed as if her brother did. Just when exactly had Thorin met a hobbit?

It would be something to ponder over at a later time as they rounded a corner and came upon the small pathway that would lead them to the ruins of Belegost and any representatives of the other seven kingdoms that decided to attend the meeting and hear their plea.

'Mahal, please let them help,' she sent a small prayer to the skies above. Though it seemed as if Thorin was more worried about whether or not he would receive aid from a small hobbit he had never met before than finally swallowing his pride in order to ask for help from his very own kin. She wondered vaguely what it was that Thorin knew that she didn't.

Then they saw the ponies ahead of them and the dwarrows guarding and she could not take the time to wonder anymore.
The ruins of Belegost was massive.

Large columns leaned precariously against one another while massive stone staircases began to chip and crumble in spots as they eroded away. One of the gigantic doors to the main hall had fallen forward at some point, coming off the hinges and shattered upon impact on the floor. As a result, the dwarrows had to go around or climb foot thick stones in order to make their way into the hall as the other door apparently was wedged in place.

It was still very clear that a great city had stood there once upon a time. Nothing at all like the ruins of Nogrod where practically nothing remained.

It was nearly impossible to even go into the mountain where Nogrod once existed as colossal cave-ins buried the once great caverns. Even the very walls were continually crumbling, threatening to collapse on any unsuspecting dwarf who ventured into the depths of the cave and tunnels within. Flooding and landslides were also a hazard as warm springs and blazing summers melted the northern mountain snows not to mention the very air itself seemed to be foul with the curse of death.

Some of the old miners had always refused to go into tightly enclosed tunnels without small birds or mice with them, claming that if the animals died suddenly they knew the tunnels would lead only to their own deaths and would go no further. Those who did never returned and no one would dare go for the bodies.

Thorin had always thought it an old, unfounded superstition when in Erebor. At Norgod, dwarrows died simply by traversing down the wrong corridor. For those who did brave the twisted caverns, they found only the smallest shaped stones indicating that a great city once stood in the center of the mountain centuries ago. Even the most of the elaborate carvings in the wall had washed away with time.

The whole mountainside was practically unlivable.

What was most infuriating to Thorin was that western dwarf lords knew it was in that condition that when they sent him and his kin there.

When the suggestion of Nogrod came up during that dark day weeks after the failed attempted to reclaim Moria, Thorin had actually felt so relieved that his people would not remain homeless and wander the whole of Middle Earth for the rest of their existence he was exceeding grateful to the other lords. However, upon arriving at Nogrod and seeing the conditions the old ruins were in, that relief and gratitude withered into a hard, bitter stone of anger in the pit of his stomach. It was that bitterness he had held onto tightly when he asked for those who would help him reclaim Erebor and seek vengeance on the dragon that would attack a dwarf city the last time he stood in this very
same crumbling hall.

And was denied aid by ever single one of them.

Now however, after everything that had already happened, was going to happen in the past/next year, petty feuds and held grudges were the last thing on Thorin's mind as the guards escorted himself and Dís to the main hall.

In the center of the old room, a long great table had been set up with chairs surrounding the one side facing the door. Six thrones were for the great Fathers of the dwarrows tribes, now occupied by their decedents, while the other six were in honor of their One who awoke with them, now seating the current spouse or heir. Totaling twelve chairs in all.

Twelve.

There should have been Thirteen.

It had been another slap in the face to Thorin that, even though he was the one calling a meeting of the dwarf lords for aid, there wasn't even a chair set up in recognition of Durin's line, the dwarf father who awoke alone and built his kingdom single-handedly. That slight had turned the ball of bitterness into acidic resentment and Thorin had practically feasted on that sourness the whole trip the first time. Now however…

Dís shifted beside him, tense and anxious, waiting for Thorin to possibly explode in a seething rage that he had just barely been able to contain when he stood there last. Now, all Thorin could think of was how in the name of Mahal was he going to get the pompous, haughty and aggravating King Thranduil to come to Erebor without the thrice damn barrel ride down the river.

Glancing at the gathered dwarrows uneasily, Dís subtly nudged Thorin in the side and he finally looked up.

Before him were the descendents and representatives of the six great lines of dwarrows alongside the line of Durin. He had wondered, even though this was the second time he was seeing them in the same situation, if it would be hard to see the western lords of the lost cities knowing how they had insulted him and his people.

Last time he had been barely able to look at them without growling and the two lords had known it. As they had known he could not call them on their trick. After all, they were gracious enough to allow the Durin's folk to live on what was still their land, no matter how uninhabitable it was.

This time, Thorin just gazed back at them, completely unruffled. After all, compared to Azog, Smaug and even Thranduil, they were irrelevant. Even Gandalf's glares held more bite to them then the dark looks he was receiving now. Thorin should know. The wizard graced him with them more often than not.

Lord Gruak's smirk faded slightly at Thorin's rather lack of reaction upon seeing them again. A descendent of Úri who was Father of the tribe that had settled Nogrod, the large dwarf had always resented the Durin line and had enjoyed their slow fall into desolation after Smaug, Azanulbizar and their entire exile to the western lands. Seeing Thorin's distracted state his eyes narrowed under heavy red brows and a suspicious look replaced the haughty one he wore before. His wife Ragon was as frosty as ever as she sent little frowns Dís' way every time Thorin's sister even moved.

The other Western Lord, Hábar of Linnar's Folk, the dwarf tribe that had seen Belegost to it's height of glory, seemed more amused by Thorin's apparent lack of interest than anything else. His
brother Herar was shooting Thorin superior looks even as he downed another mug of ale and practically spilled the whole amount into his lap.

Thank Mahal Thorin's own cousin was never that stupid. Even though this was the second time around for Thorin to attend this very meeting, he still could not believe Dáin brought his own son, also named Thorin, with him to this meeting. The boy was barely into his majority! He was younger than Kíli for Mahal's sake!

The younger Thorin seemed nervous to be attending such a meeting but was trying his best to look calm and composed next to his father. Thorin gave his cousin a small nod hello and the younger dwarf startled slightly before sending him a small nod back just as Morrund, as the eldest of the assembled dwarrows stood up with his son Bilgin's assistance.

"Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrór," the near ancient dwarf began. "You have called an assembly of the Lords, children of the Great Fathers who were fashioned under the hand of our creator Mahal. You have the floor, now tell us why we're all here."

Thorin gave a slight bow to the old dwarf as his son helped him back to his seat and began the heavily memorized speech he had given the last time around. He tried to present the same facts and concerns with as much passion and enthusiasm as he had the first time he had given it, but in truth, his heart wasn't in it anymore. The fact that these lords would not assist him and in turn, a whole tribe of kin, distant kin, but kin nonetheless, who were in desperate need of a safe home, made the speech feel like dust in his mouth.

Thorin would find no help here. He and his people were on their own, as they always had been since Durin woke under his mountain alone. Knowing how the vote would go, giving his plea felt more as if he were reciting a dull lesson back to Balin from their ancient history text then desperately asking for assistance for his people.

At the end of it Morrund, who decided against standing again, called for a preliminary vote on whether or not to assist Thorin in reclaiming the lost kingdom of Erebor. Without the worry and nervousness of the voting outcome, Thorin was able concentrate on the lords and few ladies themselves this time around and was shocked to see a few things he had missed the first time.

Hábar and Gruak were both a resounding no, to no one's surprise.

Next, Lord Dalum of Thulin's folk who also gave a firm no, while sending Thorin an apologetic look that he hadn't noticed the last time. Thorin was amused, however to see Dalum's wife, Simria, was as oblivious as ever as she concentrated on arranging her rings and bracelets perfectly in order to show them off. He could never understand what Dalum saw in that woman. Head as empty as Bombur's plate that one.

Lord Nalim, descendent of Var, actually hesitated for a moment on giving his vote before Gruak shot him a sharp glare and he shook his head at Thorin, voting no. His own wife Ovip, who was the complete opposite of the flighty Simria, shot Gruak a glare of her own, lips pressed tightly in carefully suppressed disdain.

Thorin's eyebrow rose in surprise. There clearly was some bad blood going on between those two tribes and Thorin couldn't have been more astonished. Whatever it was, it was clear that Gruak had something or other over Nalim to ensure his vote and Ovip was not pleased. 'Poor Nalim may be sleeping on a harder floor than I will tonight,' Thorin mused idly to himself.

Morrund of Vigdís' line was next, after a small prod from his son to alert him to this fact and the old dwarf immediately shook his head. "No plan, no preparation, no idea how to even kill the
dragon even if he is still alive. No my boy, I'm sorry but I do not have the number nor the provisions to help you in this venture." Thorin gave a slight bow to the old dwarf nonetheless. Morrund, at least, was simply being completely honest with Thorin in his assessment of the situation.

That left Dáin Ironfoot to cast the last vote.

Son of Náin, son of Grór brother to Thrór, Dáin was a firm, no nonsense dwarf who took his responsibility to his own people very seriously. He may have been a member of Sindri's folk through his grandmother's line, but he was still a Durin through and through. So Thorin had been shocked when Dáin had voted no to help with Erebor. Shocked and just a little betrayed.

Out of all the tribes, the Iron Hills were best suited to render aid to Erebor. Less distance to travel and better equipped with swords forged from their strong iron ore. One of the main reasons that they had come out of battle against the orcs at the end of the year as well as they did. Right now, Thorin couldn't hold this one particular decision against Dáin. He had come when it mattered… even if it was only after the threat of the dragon was eliminated.

"I am sorry Thorin, but we can not assist you any more," Dáin stated and Thorin could feel Dís' body standing beside him go lax with surprise. "We helped you all we could when your grandfather wished to reclaim Moria," Dáin continued. "We suffered tremendous loss then. How can we know whether or not this would be just another fruitless endeavor? How can you know it?" Dáin met Thorin's eyes squarely. "This quest is yours and yours alone."

Morrund nodded absently and looked back to Thorin. "The vote has been cast. What say you now, Thorin?"

Thorin said nothing for a moment, instead taking the time to look from one lord to another steadily. Some of the guards around the room shifted nervously but the expressions around the table were varied.

Hábar, Herar, Gruak and Ragon looked to be anticipating Thorin's reaction to the vote. Dalum regretful while Simria was still oblivious as ever. Nalim would not meet Thorin's eyes and Ovip was looking at her husband uneasily. Bilgin also looked remorseful even as his father was as blank as ever. Dáin looked unapologetic for his decision while the younger Thorin looked even more uneasy as the tension mounted.

Dís was clearly waiting for Thorin to give her some signal to make her appeal. She was always better and arguing and calling out any dwarf that needed it, the whole reason why she accompanied him. The last time she had argued brilliantly and had been able to knock both Hábar and Gruak down a peg, but Thorin had not given her the floor yet. He didn't need to.

With a small bow and a quiet "my lords, thank you for your time," Thorin snagged his sister's elbow and simply steered her towards the door. Even Simria seemed to be a little in shock that Thorin was leaving already. There was some slight murmuring among the crowded at this unforeseen event but Thorin was firm even as Dís hissed at him, wanting to know what he thought he was doing.

"What is this?" Herar bellowed behind them. "Not even going to bother arguing for your supposed 'noble cause'? So much for your wish to reclaim your second lost kingdom if you will not even bother to fight for it!"

"Silence Herar," Bilgin bellowed. "You do not hold the privilege to speak out here."
"So what?" Herar shouted back as Gruak called for the guards to stop Thorin from leaving. His guards complied immediately, blocking the door while the others hesitated and looked to their own lords, unsure of what to do.

"He called us out here, to plead for our assistance and now he acts as if it is we who are wasting his time," Ragon sneered before turning towards where Thorin and Dís were standing. "Are you so easy to run away whenever things don't go your way Oakenshield?"

"Why shouldn't he go?" Ovip finally snapped, jumping to her feet. "Our lords voted. The deed is done." Nalim tried to tug her back down into her seat but Ovip jerked out of his hold and turned to Thorin. "For what it's worth, I hope you make that dragon regret ever deciding to attack your land, despite the poor decisions made here today. Erebor was a glorious city when I visited it years ago. I can only hope it will be so again when I visit next."

Dís' mouth dropped open in surprise and Thorin's very near did the same as everyone at the table started yelling at each other at once. Dáin stood from the table and made his way around towards them while his son tried his best to keep Bilgin from hurling his mug at Herar's head.

"Thorin, what are you doing?" Dán asked as he reached them. "You asked for this meeting, you don't just leave because the first vote didn't go as you wanted."

Thorin turned to his cousin and gestured towards the table. "It is clear that no minds will be changed today. Why waste what little time I have left arguing over it?"

Dán stared at him baffled at that statement. "There is no urgency to reclaim Erebor just yet. Signs or no signs, a few more years won't hurt anything. You can get a solid plan of action. You don't even know how you're going to get into the mountain yet, your father's map or no!"

Thorin was already shaking his head. "No Dán, I have to have my people safe and behind fortified walls as soon as possible. There is little choice in this matter. I have to leave for Erebor now."

Dís' brows furrowed as stared at her brother. "Thorin? What is it? What haven't you told me?"

Thorin just shook his head. "We're running out of time as it is. Erebor must be reclaimed and fortified and soon if we wish for any of our people to remain safe."

"Safe from what?" Morrund's voice suddenly rose above the din of arguing dwarrows around him. One by one they all went quiet as they curiously watched Morrund and Thorin stare at one another. "You spoke of reclaiming Erebor to end your peoples exile and see their hallowed halls once more with no conviction when you make your plea to us yet you speak of the need for fortification with such urgency in your voice."

Morrund looked at Thorin curiously. "What is it that you are afraid of?"

Dís stiffened again at the implication that they were scared of anything but Thorin couldn't find the insult. He was afraid. If the dreams he had were even the slightest bit true in what was to come, he was very afraid.

Thorin hadn't thought of it on the way to Belegost, more worried about the journey to come itself, but shouldn't he at least try to warn the other dwarf lords, no matter how contemptible some of them were? Morrund, at least looked willing to humor him and Dalum would follow the oldest dwarf's lead.

Turning back around, Thorin faced the assembled dwarrows fully and some of them couldn't help but note he held himself taller this time, more confident in himself and the words he was speaking.
Not a young, untested dwarf lord, but the unyielding King he was suppose to be.

"Middle Earth is not the same as years past," he stated firmly. "Roads are no longer as safe to travel upon. Forests have become darker and more treacherous to navigate."

"What do we care about roads and forests?" Gurak challenged. "We are mountain folk. Why should we take note of things that happen to the outside world?"

"You should," Thorin finally allowed himself to glare at the dwarf. "The dragon coming from the North was just the first of many changes that have fallen upon our people and not the only one. Trolls are also making their way back south. Goblins are coming out of their holes again, the weight of their last defeat no longer cowers them. And they are not the only ones."

He looked at Morrund straight on. "Orcs and wargs are becoming as common over the land as rats. Their numbers are growing and their reach is far. My people are vulnerable on the mountainsides, exposed and spread out as we are. To take back Erebor means getting them in one place where they can be protected."

Dáin looked puzzled at this statement, as did Morrund, Bilgin, Nalim and Ovip. Herar sank slightly in his seat while Hábar and Gruak glared mutinously at Thorin.

"What are you talking about?" Simria finally asked in bewilderment. "Of course you're safe at the mountain. What a silly notion that any mountain would be unsafe."

Dís could not longer contain her silence. "You brainless simpleton!" she shouted, appalled. "Shows what you know of the outside world! We're dying on the mountain face! The land is barren! Our food is barely edible as it is and there's never enough of it to go around. We have no money to by from the humans and there's hardly anything we can spare for barter!"

"Outside the mountain? But Nogrod-" Bilgin began.

"Doesn't exist!" Dís interrupted him. "The mountain caverns are completely destroyed and even to attempt any excavating or mining would be sending our people to their doom. Nogrod is a deathtrap!"

"What's this?" Morrund demanded. "Hábar. Gruak. Is this true of the ruins of Nogrod?" Neither dwarf said anything.

"Perhaps our young lord is not seeing things as they truly are and is exaggerating the direness he so believes out of desperation?" Ragon suggested critically, trying to mitigate the situation, as a good political wife should.

"It no longer matters," Thorin spoke before anyone could say anything else. "Even in Erebor we will not be completely safe. The orcs are moving and soon they will encompass all of Middle Earth. The only thing left that we can do is be prepared for the worst."

Herar snorted. "He's lying! What can orcs do to us? Besides, we didn't encounter any such perils on our travels here, did we?"

"On dwarf paths," Dalum mused aloud, pondering Thorin's claims. "Old roads that only we use and many no longer on any human map." He looked at Thorin and Dís with interest. "Is it truly as bad as you say?"

Thorin hesitated, wondering how he could possibly explain his knowledge of the issue at hand. He couldn't very well tell them it came to him in a dream for Mahal's sake. "I have no cause to speak
to Rangers," he began slowly, "but I have heard rumors when in human towns. People gone missing between their house and market, homes mysteriously burned to the ground. As for forests..." He turned to Dáin this time. "You can not possibly say that Greenwood is the same as it once was."

Dáin paused. "I have heard... things in regards to Greenwood but I haven't seen any truth to it.

"You heard?" Thorin raised an eyebrow. "Tell me Dáin, did you travel here using the old forest road? Or did you come by way of the North Mountains of Ered Mithrin?"

Dáin glared at Thorin, furious at being put on the spot but he could not deny it. "If there is anything wrong with Greenwood, that's the elves problem not ours."

"It's everyone's problem. Human, elf, ent, eagle, hobbit or dwarf... we are all in danger if war comes."

"What does it matter if the humans go to war with the orcs or not?" Ragon demanded. "It has nothing to do with us."

"Can you grow wheat?" Dís asked pointedly, seeing where Thorin was going with his speech. Or at least hoping she was. "Or corn or any other crop at all?"

The other lady sniffed. "Of course not. I'm not a farmer."

Dís smirked. "Exactly."

"This is a farce," Hábar declared angrily. "There is no danger out there, certainly no war coming. The roads are as safe to travel as they've always been. The goblins are still in their dark holes fuming. As for orcs, they would never venture this far north away from Mordor. We have beaten their forces back before, we shall easily do so again. There is no threat to us. We are in no danger at all."

"Then there should be no difficulty in proving that, should there?" Bilgin drawled. "After all, there's no reason not to investigate Thorin's allegations. Dgo!"

As Bilgin spoke with his head guard, Thorin turned back to Morrund. "If this meeting is officially concluded, I would like to be on my way."

Morrund slowly nodded even as Hábar, Herar and Ragon protested. Gruak still looked as if he would love nothing better than to put his sword through Thorin's chest. Morrund ignored them all. "If it is as you say, and the roads are no longer safe to travel, then I heartily wish good luck to you Thorin, son of Thráin, son of Thrôr on your endeavor. To you and your people."

Thorin gave another bow along with Dís and turned to Dáin. "Good luck to you as well."

Dáin still looked angry, but he clapped a hand on Thorin's forearm nonetheless and walked out with them. "I still think this quest is madness, but if you do manage to throw out the dragon and take back your home, write to me. I can not spare any of my warriors currently, but perhaps I can assist you with something else."

Thorin nodded before he adopted a wicked grin as they reached the exit from the mountain. "Have any accountants you can't stand?"

Dáin barked out a startled laugh. "Is that a rhetorical question?"
"No, they are all horrible, aren't they?" Thorin chuckled. "But I may be in need of them incase the dragon raided the surrounding areas to add to the hoard he gained from us."

"Stole from who?" Dís asked bemused, still a little thrown from the unexpected way the meeting had gone in the end.

"Humans, elves… anyone who had a gold coin to their name. It wasn't just Erebor that Smaug attacked."

Dís' eyes went wide. "You're speaking of Dale. You want to help them Thorin? The humans?"

"Why not?" he demanded. "They lost their home same as us and had to start over somewhere else. A hard thing for anyone to do."

Dáin and Dís shared a look of amazement as Thorin tightened his pony's girth. Dís went to collect her own mount while Dáin stared at his cousin bemused. "You've changed since I saw you last at Moria."

Thorin paused, staring unseeingly across the mountain range. "Perhaps I have," he finally admitted as he mounted. "Hopefully it's for the better."

Goodbyes were exchanged and Dáin watched as the two younger dwarrows made their way back down the path away from Belegost. Dáin hummed in thought as his own Thorin approached. "What do you think?" he asked his son curiously. "Do you think Thorin spoke the truth?"

"About which part?" his Thorin asked incredulously. "Nogrod, Greenwood or the orcs?"

"Any of it."

Thorin thought about it for a bit. "I don't know. The thought that Orcs are infesting even this far north is a bit far-fetched, but the way he talked about it... it's as if he's already seen it happen."

"Do you think what he said about Nogrod was true?" Dáin asked.

"You could always find out," Ovip sated as she emerged from the doorway.

"How is it going in there?" Dáin asked curiously.

"Bilgin is organizing a scout party to investigate Thorin's statements with his father's blessing, much to Hábar and Herar's irritation. Dalum is speaking about sending his own out near his own territory."

"And Nalim?" Dáin asked pointedly.

Ovip sighed. "I don't know anymore. Gruak has spies everywhere in Ered Nimrais and his warriors now outnumber our own. We fear Gruak has whispered the right fears into the wrong ears and that might spark a rebellion at any moment. Nalim's regime has already begun to be put into question. Quietly, but questioned regardless. It has been tense in court to say the least."

Dáin nodded understandingly. "Perhaps you and your husband need to find a diversion for others to dwell upon rather than plotting?" he suggested.

Ovip glanced at him suspiciously. "Such as?"

Dáin frowned as he continued to stare down the path where Dís and Thorin had disappeared down. "Bilgin needs a destination, a road to travel down in order to investigate, does he not? Perhaps a
visit to Norgod is in order. I'm sure Dís would be very appreciative for any help while awaiting Thorin's success at Erebor."

Ovip smiled.

Chapter End Notes

--- NAME CHART ---
Thorin II & Dís - Brother/Sister ~ Durin's Folk (Longbeards)
Dáin & Thorin III - Father/son ~ Sindri's Folk (Ironfists)
Dalum & Simria - Husband/wife ~ Thulin's Folk (Stiffbeards)
Morrund & Bilgin - Father/son ~ Vigdís' Folk (Stonefoots)
Nalim & Ovip - Husband/wife ~ Var's Folk (Blacklocks)
Hábar & Herar - Brothers ~ Linnar's Folk (Broadbeams)
Gruak & Ragon - Husband/wife ~ Úri's Folk (Firebeards)

1) Names found at John's Dungeons and Dragons Utilities Dwarf name generator - http://jtevans.kilnar.com/rpg/dnd/tools/index.php (I had to snicker when Bofur came up :D)

2) In the scene with Thorin in Bilbo's dining room, he stated there were representatives of all seven kingdoms. I assumed this meant that (including himself) it was the seven main dwarf tribes (clans?).

3) growl_meow has already brought up this question and I hope this chapter explained why/how Dáin was all~llll the way in the west for this meeting when his mountains are further east than even Erebor. When I looked up a map of Middle Earth, I thought I had remembered wrong but in double checking the movie, Dwalin specifically said "is Dáin with us?" so I took that to mean that, yes, Dáin had been at the meeting.
Kíli was the first one to see Gandalf down the road heading towards them as they made their way through the White Downs a week later. Dwalin muttered something under his breath at the wizard's approach, but both of the boys waved enthusiastically.


"Evening," Dwalin nodded as the boys grinned excitedly. "Is everything worked out then on your part?"

"I'm very pleased to say that it is," Gandalf grinned. "The Shire is not far for you now and there should be plenty for a fine supper. Bag End has always had an excellent pantry." The grin faded, as he looked the three over before looking around the surrounding area. "Is Balin not with you?"

"We separated from him about three days ago," Dwalin confirmed. "We'll meet up with him today."

"He went to secure more supplies for us while we acquired the pack ponies," Fíli explained and Kíli illustrated the point by holding up the reins to the pony he was leading. The one behind Fíli seemed to have gone to sleep seeing as they had stopped.

The smile returned as Gandalf observed the ponies. "One of the farmers has graciously allowed us to stable our mounts in his far field when we reach the Shire. Have you seen any of the others yet?"

"Not as yet," Dwalin stated curtly from where he was now going over his small map. "Largest hill in the town is it?"

"Indeed. A fine establishment." Gandalf grinned.

"And there is a burglar's mark on the door?"

"There is," Gandalf said slowly as he watched Dwalin dismount. The frown returned. "Mr. Baggins is not an enemy you know. There is no need to scout ahead."

Dwalin shot the wizard a short look before tossing the reins of his pony to Fíli. "Wait for the other and ensure the ponies are situated before following."

Both boys nodded as Gandalf moved his own horse in Dwalin's path. "I'm sure it would be better if we wait for the others. We don't wish for anyone to become lost."

Raising an eyebrow, Dwalin just looked at the wizard pointedly.

"Don't worry Gandalf, if anyone gets turned around we're very good at climbing trees to get our bearings," Kíli stated even as he tugged the pack pony forward again as it stretched for a patch of grass just out of reach.

"I'm sure you are." Gandalf agreed. "However, with the sun setting it would be much more difficult in the dark." He turned back around just in time to see Dwalin ducked around his horse. "Master Dwalin! It's still quite a ways to the Shire by foot."
Dwalin just raised an arm to indicate he heard, but he still continued down the small path through the hills.

Fíli heard Gandalf let out a huff of air as he brought his pony next to wizard, practically dragging the drowsy pony and Dwalin's behind. "Dwalin will probably get there faster than us on foot anyhow if we have to wait for the others."

"That is what I'm afraid of," Gandalf mumbled and Fíli glanced at his brother to see if Kíli had heard the same small statement he did, but Kíli's attention was turned back the way they'd come, waving excitedly.

Standing in his stirrups Fíli saw Glóin and Óin already coming down the path. "Perhaps we'll catch up to Dwalin after all," he said helpfully.

"Fíli! Kíli!" Óin greeted as they approached. "Where is Balin?"

"Still behind," Kíli proclaimed.

"And Dwalin?" Glóin continued.

"Gone ahead," Fíli chuckled, ignoring the wizard behind him who was still looking in the direction Dwalin had gone.

"Of course he has," Glóin shook his head before turning to the third member of the waiting party who finally turned his attention back towards the dwarrows. "Wizard Gandalf. Good to see you again."

"Greetings Master Glóin." Gandalf pitched his voice a bit. "Master Óin."

Luckily Óin already had his trumpet to his ear and nodded back in greeting. "Are we the first to arrive?"

"Indeed. But-"

"Well, that's something," Glóin sighed in relief, cutting off whatever it was Gandalf was about to say next. "Thought we would be the last."

"Why?" Kíli asked curiously.

"We had a bit of a late start we did," Óin chuckled.

"Oh? What happened?" Fíli asked, though he wasn't quite as curious as his brother he was determined to stall Gandalf so Dwalin would be able to properly check the hole that the burglar called a home.

"Had to keep taking Gimli back home, didn't we?" Óin explained with a laugh while Glóin grumbled. "He still insists on coming even though he's yet of majority."

Now both Kíli and Fíli were grinning like fools even as Glóin began listing his dear wife's excellent qualities at great length.

Clearing his throat a bit, Gandalf soon interrupted Glóin's account of Drími's cooking abilities. "The Shire is some ways down the road yet. Perhaps we can talk as we ride?"
"But the others haven't caught up yet. They won't know where to take their ponies," Fíli reminded him. He turned back to Óin and Glóin. "Gandalf ensured we'd have a place to stable the ponies with the hobbits too."

"Excellent," Glóin grinned. "I can only hope that their prices are lower than if we had to move on to Bree to stable them. Outrageous what they charge."

Gandalf actually turned around at this statement. "There will be no need for payment Master Glóin. Hobbits are always very charitable folk. We need a place for the ponies and there is an unused field." He finished with a shrug.

Glóin's smile went wider. "Even better."

"Hello there!"

The small group turned in time to see three more ponies crest one of the hills, Ori waving at them excitedly. Dori was riding close beside him, but Nori seemed to be giving his older brother a wide berth as he lagged behind. Fíli couldn't tell if was because the dwarf was still unenthusiastic about his brothers going along on this trip or just the whole trip in general that made him drag his heels. Or it could be something else entirely as he watched Nori take in who was waiting ahead of them and quickly looked back down at his pony, a pensive look on his face. 'What is his problem?' Fíli wondered curiously before the others pulled his attention away as they greeted one another.

"Hello young Ori," Óin smiled at the younger dwarf. "How are you this fine day?"

"Hello Master Óin. Doing quite well, thank you." Ori greeted before his pony sidestepped suddenly to get away from Dori's pony that his brother was practically shoving over into them. "Oh… Dori, this is Masters Óin and Glóin, Balin's cousins. May I present my older brothers Dori," Dori could only nod courteously from pony back, "and Nori… uh…"

It took Ori a moment to point him out as Nori had moved his own mount to the other side of the group, almost hidden behind Gandalf's horse as he stared in the direction of the Shire. He simply raised a hand in greeting when his younger brother called out and Ori could hear Dori's small sniff of disapproval beside him. "Are we heading for the hobbit's house now?" he asked, desperate for a change in subject.

"We just have three more to wait for," Fíli swiftly informed him.

"Though we could probably start forward as it is," Gandalf added quickly. "I'm sure they'll be able to meet up."

"But they still won't know where to stable the ponies," Fíli pressed even as Kíli started a small tugging war with the pack pony that was still trying to reach the small patch of grass.

"They can't be far behind," Gandalf insisted. "We should start on."

"Who is it that we are waiting for?" Dori asked politely, but firmly. "Were we not supposed to meet on this day?"

"They should be on their way as we speak," Gandalf insisted, already trying to move his horse forward in a subtle gesture to get the others going. "Most likely Bombur wished to ensure that everything was properly stored."

"Bombur is in charge of the food," Kíli grinned.
"And who made that decision?" Glóin growled. Óin and Dori were mirroring his put out look while Nori finally looked interested in the conversation going on.

Both Fíli and Kíli straightened in their saddles and shared a glance before turning back to Glóin. "Balin," they managed to answer with straight faces. Even Gandalf raised an eyebrow at that as he lit his pipe, seeing as they weren't going to be going anywhere anytime soon.

Ori quickly added, "His cooking is wonderful," which brought back Dori's attention on him. "Truly, he would be the best to oversee the food."

"And when have you been at his table?" Dori demanded sharply.

"He works in the main hall where I study with Balin," Ori retorted just as heatedly. "He oversees all the food."

"It really is delicious," Kíli grinned. "We've snuck some food from Thorin when we're forced to attend the weekly grievances. Bombur certainly knows how to cook!"

"Knows how to eat too if that's him," Nori drawled as he gestured behind them.

Everyone turned back towards the small hill and ignored Gandalf's small "finally" as another three ponies coming down the path. Bofur was leading the small group with Bombur right behind. Bifur seemed to be lagging behind, but unlike Nori, he seemed to be doing so in order to keep look out on the surrounding area rather than simply being slow.

"Hello everyone! Fíli! Kíli! Are we the last?" Bofur called out.

"Balin still not here yet," Kíli stated. "He's gone to get the rest of our gear. Dwalin has gone ahead."

"Indeed," Gandalf interrupted. "But master Balin knows the way, shall we proceed?"

Fíli frowned but couldn't really say anything now that the majority had arrived and they started down the path Dwalin had taken. Bofur watched amused as Kíli tried to get the one pony moving again.

"You seem have been able to acquire those pack ponies with little fuss."

"And I see you managed to get your own!" Fíli chuckled.

"Indeed. Not a pony left back west! The advice was wonderful in dealing with the trader."

"That was Glóin's son, Gimli who told us," Fíli stated, indicating the other dwarf. Glóin smiled proudly at this as Bofur thank him in lieu of his son for the advice. Fíli took this moment to do his duty as Thorin's heir and started introducing everyone to each other.

"Hello," Bofur grinned at everyone. Bombur waved shyly and Ori tentatively waved back before Dori quickly moved his pony in front of him to block the other's view. Kíli snickered at Ori's aggravated huff while Nori rolled his eyes heavenward.

Bifur, who had, finally come up to the group gave Dori a long, scrutinizing look before a strange, unreadable expression came across his face and he said something to Bofur quite loudly.

Many didn't understand a word of what he said, but Gandalf was suddenly choking on his pipe while Bofur burst out laughing. Ori went wide eyed as he looked at his eldest brother and then for
some strange reason, seemed to look at the back Dori's saddle before he went red as a tomato and
quickly moved his pony to the other side of Óin and Glóin. Nori shot his younger brother a curious
look while Bombur groaned in embarrassment.

"Huh? What did he say?" Óin demanded loudly as he dug his ear trumpet back out from his
saddlebag.

Glóin shrugged while Nori was prodding Ori in the shoulder, an expectant look on his face. Ori just
went even redder, which Fíli didn't think was possible. Bofur was still laughing and it looked for a
moment as if he was about to fall out of his saddle from the force of it.

"What did he say?" Fíli asked, looking over at Ori for answers. Ori just shook his head and Fíli
turned instead to Bombur.

Bombur groaned again before stating, "I only got three words out of that."

They waited for a moment before Kíli pressed. "And?"

Bombur shook his head before he leaned over and whispered, "and they're not words one repeats in
polite company."

The two boys shared a puzzled look with each other while Bofur finally straightened up in his
saddle, his laughter calming down to mere chuckled and everyone looked at him expectantly for an
explanation. Bofur just grinned back at everyone. "What?"

"That's what we want to know," Glóin huffed.

"Oh it's nothing…" Bofur smiled. "Just an observation."


Dori was just as baffled as the rest of them when he finally looked over at the strange dwarf with
the axe sticking out of his forehead and caught his eye. He felt his own face go just as red as Ori's
when Bifur, and there was no other word for it, leered at him.

Everyone was able to understand that. Ori refused to look at anyone while Nori smirked as Dori
quickly moved his own pony to Nori's other side in order to get away from Bifur's gaze. Glóin for
his part just huffed exasperatedly and Óin muttered something about children as he stored his
trumpet again.

The rest of the ride was spent with small bursts of conversations as everyone tried to get to know
one another. Dori spent half his time trying to keep Ori away from everyone else while at the same
time trying to stay as far from Bifur as possible. Nori just looked amused about the whole issue, but
Ori seemed slightly distraught now that his blush had finally gone down and was watching his
eldest brother anxiously.

Bombur hesitatingly asked if anyone had any food preferences and Kíli was quick to answer him
with Óin asking his own questions about what herbs Bombur had brought. Bofur started a
conversation with Glóin about his tactics with bargaining with merchants and soon Glóin was
giving the toy maker advice on how increase his profit while maximizing his cost.

Conversation continued thus until they finally came upon the Shire's boarders some time later.

The full moon allowed them to see the Shire proper and Fíli frowned slightly as he took in the
landscape. It was a very picturesque view, but all Fíli saw was rolling green hills covered in
flowers and the occasional chimney poking out of the ground. It certainly didn't look like any town he had ever seen before. "How much further to the farm?" he called out.

Gandalf tapped out the ashes from his pipe before pocketing it. "Just down the road here. You can see the fence line as it is."

"Hey! There's already a pony there!" Kíli announced excitedly as they approached.

"Indeed…" Gandalf trailed off, as he looked the pony over. "It seems as if Balin has already gotten ahead of us."

Fíli frowned again as he tried to figure out what Gandalf was so upset about but Kíli soon distracted him as he pulled his ponies ahead. "Come on Fíli! We're almost there!"

It was a few moments later everyone was dismounting and taking care of releasing the ponies while Gandalf indicated a shed where everyone could place the saddles and gear. "Now, it's the topmost door at the highest hill," Gandalf directed and he waved a hand in the direction to the left of everyone. "It has the most charming green door upon which has the burglar's rune-"

Kíli was practically bouncing on his toes when he suddenly punched his brother's shoulder unexpectedly. "Race you!" he called out and took off across the field rather than back down the road.

Fíli didn't even hesitate, bolting after his brother as cries of surprise and some laughter followed after them. As they jumped the far side of the fence, leaving everyone else far behind them, he couldn't help but wonder. After meeting everyone else who was to be going on this quest, what sort of personality this so called burglar Gandalf found for them would have.

He couldn't wait to find out.

Chapter End Notes

1) And here is my explanation as to why everyone arrived at different times. Also, I know many people have them already in Bree before they go to Bag End and I'm not sure if this was mentioned in the novel but after looking at a map, I couldn't see them going through ALL four Farthings to Bree and then all the way back to West Farthing to meet up with Bilbo. :/

2) Yes, I named Gloin's wife Drimi. :) Again, all names gotten at John's Dungeons and Dragons Utilities Dwarf name generator
The Shire was spread out before him, looking quiet peaceful underneath the light of the full moon. And it was distinctly not on fire. 'Which is a good thing for any village to say,' Thorin supposed as he nudged Gyth into moving forward again.

He honestly couldn't even remember what the actual village of Hobbiton had looked like the first time he had visited, only keeping a vague notion of a lot of grass and flowering plants alongside the road in his memory. Of course he did have other things on his mind at the time, but that could be said of his current mindset. Granted, they were completely different concerns but concerns nonetheless.

Dís had been able to see that he was preoccupied when they had traveled and the encounter with the other dwarf lords had undoubtedly proven it. "I have never seen you so distracted," Dís commented as they had rode away from the disastrous meeting at Belegost with no aid from any of the other kingdoms. "But to actually dismiss the other lords! Thorin, what is wrong with you?"

"Hmm? I'm sorry Dís, what did you say?"

In retrospect, Thorin should have been paying some attention to his sister after the meeting as she had reached out and grabbed his pony's reins, pulling the animal to a stop along with her own. "Thorin!" She had practically bellowed, right in his ear. "You know things! Tell me!"

With the full force of his sister's worry and anger directed solely at him, Thorin had promptly surrendered. "Everything I said in there was the absolute truth," he finally confessed, gesturing back the way they had come where Belegost could no longer be seen. "When I sought work in the human villages… even just traveling from Erebor, you know the roads weren't safe."

"And you think it's only going to get worse?" Dís asked, concerned.

Thorin turned away from her, looking instead out over the valley and hills below the mountain trail they were on. Images of battles from the dreams were at the forefront of his thoughts – and the battle that was unfortunately not a dream still very fresh in his mind."I know so."

"Thorin," Dís had begun to sound anxious and Thorin quickly gave her another idea to focus on.

"I need you to go back to Nogrod and start getting everyone ready to make the journey back to Erebor."

"What? Do you really think you'll be able to defeat the dragon without any aid from the others? Thorin! Be reasonable!"

"I am sister," he had finally turned back to her so she could see his imploring look. "We need to start heading back home, we cannot delay any longer."

Dís frowned in displeasure but finally nodded. "You clearly have your reasons for pressing and I wish you would tell me since you seem to be so troubled about it but," she finished with a shrug. Thorin had rarely if ever divulged his worries to her and Dís clearly knew he wasn't about to start anytime soon. "I'll get them all started on packing up their homes and collecting supplies for the journey. We will be ready when your letter arrives telling us of your success at Erebor."
"No Dís," Thorin shook his head. "You have to start as soon as you can. Don't wait for a message from me."

Her eyes went wide with surprise. "But you don't even know when you'll even reach Erebor, let alone how long it will take to defeat Smaug, or if you'll even manage it! It would be far better to wait for sure than to simply assume."

"You can't," he interrupted her firmly. "We can't wait anymore. You have to start for Erebor as soon as you are able."

"But Thorin…" she'd frowned as she ran a few facts through her head. "We wouldn't get there until closer to winter. Even if you swiftly defeat Smaug, Erebor is in shambles. We won't have the supplies, the food, the lodgings…"

"We don't have any of that now," Thorin argued and Dís pursed her lips. A clear sign she was not happy with what he was saying, but regardless her brother had a valid point. Thorin knew she hated when that happened. "Hopefully we will have allies, real allies when we reclaim Erebor and without the dragon, Dáin will be able to help us more unreservedly without the worry of losing any of his own warriors."

Dís was still wavering and Thorin had leaned over and placed his hand over her own. "Please Dís," Thorin had implored her. "Promise me you will not delay in bringing our people home where they will be safe."

She had hesitated for one more moment before finally nodding. "I'll have everyone start packing as soon as I get back to Nogrod and we will follow you," she promised him.

They had parted on that promise.

Thorin knew his sister well and if she said they would follow, then his people will follow him to Erebor. He had also done his own calculations and getting such a large group of dwarrows, a kingdom full in fact, packed and moving would still take Dís time. They should be about a month or so behind Thorin and the others. Arriving at Erebor just at the onset of winter and more importantly, after the defeat of Smaug and the harrowing battle against the Orcs.

He wasn't sure if he was doing the right thing, having his sister and their people following right behind him, but unfortunately Mahal and Irmo didn't give him an exact timeline to work from. For all Thorin knew, the war had started right after he had died. He couldn't risk having his people trapped on the face of the Blue Mountains.

And if everything went according to his new plan, hopefully they will have help from Bard and the humans of Dale, if only from bartering with them if nothing else. Hard it was for Thorin to admit, the humans had the farming knowledge to fill the stores of both Erebor along with their own. Yet Thorin and his people had the building knowledge to help the humans erect shelters from the skeleton remains of their city. Between the two people, both Erebor and Dale should survive the winter.

Thorin knew better than to expect anything from Thranduil and the elves of Mirkwood by this point. Elrond was at least more approachable, but unfortunately Rivendell was too far away for anything but a yearly trading bazaar. 'Or semi-annual trading…' Thorin mused. The trip would be hard enough once a year two might be pushing it, but it could be doable until the war Irmo was still showing him truly began.

Those would be the first few things he would discuss with Balin when they were alone next, but he
had no idea how he was going to explain his sudden concern for things that won't happen until after the defeat of the dragon to his old friend.

Although considering he was now on his way to meet up with Balin along with thirteen others, it would probably be a bit before they could discuss it in depth without the chance of being over heard, by anyone other than Nori that was. Thorin had some time to come up with a credible explanation at least.

Finally pulling himself out of his deep thoughts, he looked about the small town of Hobbiton curiously as he traveled down the road, trying to get his bearings. He wasn't sure if he was early or right on time, which was to say as late as he had been the last time. From where he was, he could see the small pasture where fifteen other ponies and one lone horse were already snoozing in the grassy field and Bag End, high up on the hill in the distance.

How was it that he had missed it the last time?

Frowning, he dropped the reins and started digging about in his saddlebag, searching for the map Gandalf had handed him weeks ago. Gyth started veering off towards the grass at the edge of the small road and Thorin pressed with his knee to steer the pony back into the center of the path. Gyth decided the grass was just as good on the other side and started heading towards that side when Thorin pushed with his other knee.

Raising the map high so he could see it in the light of the moon, he glanced back up at the road he was traveling on before back down at the map. Then he looked over at where he knew Bilbo's green door was located. Then back down at the map. Then he looked to his right, where the map clearly told him to go – away from Bag End.

"What in Durin's name?" Thorin muttered, finally tugging on the reins and brining his pony to a full halt.

He turned the map around, thinking it was some sort of joke, but there was nothing scribbled on the back. Standing up in his stirrups slightly, Thorin took in the town critically.

The fact that Hobbits lived in hills meant almost all of the roads went in circles, literally. They wound around the hills, intersected by pathways or small staircases going up to connect them. The few roads that didn't go around weaved through the assorted hills at the base of them. Bearing in mind that the hills themselves were of significant height and that the roads curved meant you couldn't see what was around the corner until you actually traveled it.

And the map he had been given sent him in more circles, loops and… 'Is that a river?' Thorin frowned as he looked at the winding waterway. 'A river? There's only one river this close to the Hobbit's?' Which was funny considering that Thorin remembered crossing two.

"That manipulative wizard!" Thorin spat out, becoming progressively more enraged. No wonder he had been so horribly late the last time. Gandalf had sent him practically from one end of Hobbbiton to the other, looped it a few times before finally sending him back in the opposite direction. It also explained why he had finally had to climb a tree to get his bearings the first time.

"At least I know why I was so late," he grumbled sourly. Then his anger rose again. "And so lost! Honestly, didn't anything go according to plan that first time around?" Thorin groaned as he dropped his head into his free palm. "I'm to tired for this…"

Gyth was whickering under him and Thorin finally shoved the useless parchment in a pocket and steered the animal towards his friends, all the while his mind a whirl with thoughts as to what it
was Gandalf had possibly hopped to gain by stalling Thorin's arrival.

Given the fact that his first meeting with one Bilbo Baggins had gone spectacularly wrong, he couldn't figure out what Gandalf's objective was in delaying the introduction. Not that Thorin was going to make the same mistake twice. Irmo had decisively gotten his point across in regards to *that* little fact.

But what was Gandalf's reasoning for sending Thorin all over Hobbiton? That was the question he couldn't answer. There had to have been a purpose for the faulty map and Thorin was starting to become uneasier the longer he puzzled over it. Since he had been given the map well over a fortnight ago, that meant Gandalf had been plotting something since before they had even left Nogrod.

'*That's unsettling,'* he thought as he released Gyth into the pasture and tossed his saddle into the shed with the others.

With his pony seen to, Thorin turned and purposely set out for Bag End. He wasn't about to delay any longer, else what would be the point in going back to the beginning again if it wasn't to change things? He was going to do better this time, Mahal take it. He was a seasoned warrior, not some novice who balked at the first sign of trouble.

But then at the same time…

Slowing slightly, Thorin glanced back up at where he knew the round door was. The first time he had been introduced to Bilbo Baggins it had been an absolute catastrophe and Thorin knew that it was entirely his own fault for it.

He had not wanted the hobbit to go anywhere near his quest to reclaim his homeland let alone join it. The moment he had laid eyes on Bilbo he had just known that the hobbit was going to be a burden on the rest of them. Complaining of forgotten kerchiefs and lamenting on being without his soft bed to sleep on, Thorin could see no purpose for Bilbo even being there.

So, it went without saying that he was not pleased with Gandalf's decision to amuse himself by dragging someone along who had no skills in hunting, fighting or even camping and clearly not happy to be dragged along on what was, for Thorin, a very serious undertaking.

It was for the very lives of his people they had gone out to reclaim Erebor and Thorin felt that with all his griping, Bilbo Baggins was making a mockery out of everything that he was trying to do and had resented the hobbit for it. He would admit that while he wished no harm to befall Bilbo Baggins and would protect him while he traveled with the company, Thorin had tried everything he could think of to get the hobbit to throw up his hands in aggravation, turn around and go home.

Having it happen while huddled in a cave on a mountainside after nearly dying on the knees of a stone giant having a tiff with his kin wasn't exactly the most brilliant of timing on Bilbo's part, but he at least was turning around.

When he had heard the hobbit speaking with Bofur, Thorin grudgingly admitted that he had felt conflicted. True he was finally getting what he wanted, but the incident with Trolls had made Thorin look at Bilbo slightly differently.

Then came the goblins, and Bilbo reappearing out of thin air with a speech about helping them take back their home caused Thorin's perception of the hobbit to shift again. Perhaps the hobbit had some fortitude after all.
The battle with the pale orc had clinched it however. Given that Bilbo had been clearly terrified, the hobbit had still tackled Azog in defense of Thorin. Knowing it was Azog. Knowing everything that the pale orc had done at the battle of Azanulbizar thanks to Balin's retelling of the story, he had still come to Thorin's rescue.

Thorin remembered thinking, as he had watched that tackle, that it was either the most incredibly brave thing he had ever known anyone do for him… or the hobbit had finally lost it and gone completely feral.

Either way, that was when he finally looked at Bilbo Baggins and actually saw him. Not what he thought he saw when he looked at him, but actually realized that beneath the complaining and homesickness, Bilbo Baggins was someone who could stand firm beside Thorin and his fellow warriors against insurmountable odds with the drive and determination to endure anything that was thrown at them.

After that, they had started to develop a tentative camaraderie as they continued their journey through Mirkwood and then Laketown. 'And then I had to go and throw it away by nearly killing him by dangling him off a wall on top a mountain…' Thorin groaned to himself as he finally reached the lane that would take him to Bag End. It always seemed to come back to that, didn't it?

To be fair, it was a major blunder on Thorin's part in regards to their uncertain friendship and dragon sickness or no, he had done it. He couldn't use his illness as an excuse for his actions. And now here was his chance to try and make up for his mistake.

Despite the fact that he knew he could never truly atone for how he had treated Bilbo the first time around, Thorin could at least make the journey more bearable for the hobbit now that he knew he couldn't leave him behind in his hobbit hole where Bilbo clearly wanted to be.

He would also not try and push the hobbit into a friendship with himself. If Bilbo were so kind as to grace him with it again, he surely wouldn't decline it, nor would he make the same mistake and callously throw it away. However, it was going to be Bilbo's choice on whether or not they were going to go beyond mere acquaintance, not Thorin's.

With this thought firmly in mind, he trudged up the lane to the small gate and the stairs that led up to the green door with the glowing rune at the bottom of it.

Thorin was finally at Bag End. So why did he not want to go in?

'Mahal curse it. I haven't been this tense since father called Frerin and I to discuss why it was our cart goats were a lovely shade of plum," Thorin scowled up at the door. He could hear noise coming from inside as muted voices chatted with each other. The faint sound of laughter could be heard echoing in one of the larger rooms.

Thorin would have fallen over if he hadn't instinctively reached out and clutched at the little wooden mailbox to keep himself on his feet as shock swept over him.

It was just like the dream.

Though distinctly lacking the roaring flames, he was standing exactly where he was in the dreams. If that wasn't a sign from the Valar, Thorin didn't know what was. He had to do this.

Bustling up the Durin courage he was known for, Thorin released the mailbox and opened the small gate, making his way up the stairs just in time to hear Kili and Fili's voices burst out into song. 'That answers the question of my timing,' he thought to himself. This was the tune he had
heard ending the last time he reached the door so perhaps if he waited a few moments-

Then Thorin actually listened to the lyrics to the song and would have started banging his head against the green wooden paneling in frustration if he didn't think it would bring someone to answer the door. He didn't wish for anyone to question the look of sheer exasperation that he was surely wearing on his face.

'This certainly explains a few things,' Thorin thought to himself as another chorus of "That's what Bilbo Baggins hates!" started again. 'Like why Bilbo was already so affronted by the time I arrived along with his denial to even contemplate going with us.'

"We were destined to dislike each other from the beginning, weren't we?" he chuckled nearly hysterical. With a small glance over his shoulder at the full moon behind him he quirked an eyebrow. "Did you set that up?" No one answered him.

Thorin sighed and stood back up straight as he dug the crinkled map from his pocket while making a note to himself to reprimand his nephews by giving them a firm smack on the back of their heads when he finally got in there. 'Along with Bofur,' he added as the miner's voice rose above the rest.

The dratted song finally came to an end and roars laughter followed it. Thorin suppressed the urge to growl at that and focused instead on regaining his composure. Knocking firmly on the door, he heard the laughter die out and lifted the map-of-confusion up to his shoulder, waiting for the wizard to answer the door.

'For better or for worse,' he thought to himself as the handle turned and the door began to swing open.'Here goes everything.'

Chapter End Notes

Bilbo's next! Bilbo's next! I'm all excited! xD
"This map is worthless!"

Gandalf actually took a startled step back at Thorin's sudden announcement upon opening the round, green door. "I'm sorry?"

"The map!" Thorin clarified as he pressed forward entering the home proper, still waving the map at Gandalf. "I have been everywhere in this tiny town!" he proclaimed in aggravation. "I've been the left of the village, the right side of the village. I crossed the river, I crossed the other river-"

"There was a river?" Bombur's voice floated from somewhere in the hobbit's home and Gandalf made a small wheezing sound as confused murmurs came from the other dwarrows at this.

Thorin didn't bother to turn and meet anyone else's eyes as random questions were shouted out at him, instead keeping his gaze fixed firm on the taller man. It might have been a cowardly thing to do, but Thorin still wasn't sure if he could face anyone else just yet. He could already feel everyone's gaze focused on him even as he tried to stare down the wizard; who was looking more and more flustered, as the murmurs grew louder.

As a result, Thorin was having a very hard time keeping the smile off his face the more uncomfortable Gandalf seemed to get. "I've went over and around every single hill in this sleepy village!" he exclaimed, trying to keep his tone of voice angry and shaking the parchment violently to emphasize his point. Gandalf hemmed and hawed slightly, but Thorin was on a roll by this point. "I swear I did nothing but go in circles for the last hour!"

The map was abruptly plucked from his hand and Thorin sent Gandalf one last glare before he turned to make a comment at Balin, only for the words to dry up in his throat as he found himself looking down at a head of gold curls.

A rush of memories assaulted him. Of Bilbo caught in the troll's grasp, hanging from the edge of the mountain trail, looking so much like a near drowned cat after the escape from Mirkwood, dodging dragon fire. Bilbo dangling off the thrice-damned parapet as Thorin held him over it. Bilbo looking down at him in sorrow as Thorin lay dying.

The dwarf quickly shook himself out of his memories at that particular image, pushing them deep down in a small part of the back of his mind and instead tried to focus on the hobbit that was right in front of him in the here and now.

Bilbo Baggins looked just as Thorin remembered him. From the gold hair just brushing against the slightly pointed ears down to the large, oddly hairy feet. His blue eyes were staring down at the parchment while his brow crinkled in concentration, as he looked the map over. His small, thin mouth opening to say, "this map leads to the tannery!" with surprise in his alto voice.

Thorin's brain took a moment to catch up with Bilbo's statement and he pulled himself out of his examination of the hobbit when blue eyes looked up at met his own. "The tannery?" he asked shocked, sure he had heard that wrong. Unfortunately, Bilbo just nodded in confirmation, looking utterly bewildered and highly amused all at the same time.

He continued to stare down at Bilbo in astonishment for a moment before he finally turned and gave a long, sideways look at the wizard who still standing next to the open door, seemingly completely thrown by the sudden commotion that was occurring before him. "Wizard, I know my
sister has threatened to tan my hide on more than one occasion, but I did not think that anyone would ever take her literally," Thorin drawled.

There were a few squeaks somewhere behind him and Thorin didn't have to turn around to know it was his nephews. Dís had threatened to have their hides just as often, if not more so than his own.

"You gave him the wrong map?" Glóin spoke up incredulously as he looked over Bilbo's shoulders at the parchment.

"Oh well, ahem. I'm sure it was a mistake," Gandalf swiftly tried to wave off the accusatory looks being thrown at him. "Ensuring there would be enough copies, it would be easy enough to pick up the wrong one. Now, I do believe there is some food left if-

Thorin bit back a chuckle as Gandalf tried to rectify the situation and regain control over the conversation even as the whispers further back in the hobbit hole increased in volume. 'Heh, this is fun.' "Thank Mahal for the mark on the door," he suddenly proclaimed rather loudly, "or I would have never found this place."

"Mark?" Bilbo yelped and Thorin suddenly found the worthless map shoved unceremoniously into his own chest as the hobbit ran to the entryway. "There's no mark on that door. It was painted a week ago."

Gandalf was quick to shut the door before Bilbo could get a good look at it. "There is a mark. I put it there myself," he said, almost apologetically.

"Defacing private property now Gandalf?" Thorin made a tisking sound, knowing that he was losing the battle to keep his mirth at bay and was now smirking. "Can wizards get away with that these days?" he turned to ask Balin with false curiosity. His grin faded slightly as he found that Balin was staring at him rather stunned. "What?" he asked, uneasy at the sudden scrutiny he found himself under.

The older dwarf shook his head and blinked rapidly, as if trying to clear his vision. "Are you feeling all right laddie?" he asked tentatively.

"Other than annoyed that I've been traveling in circles for the past hour or so, fine. Why?"

Balin continued to stare at Thorin with an unreadable expression however Gandalf was already speaking and Thorin turned back just in time to catch the end of his own introduction. 

"Oakenshield," Gandalf finished with aplomb.

And just like that Thorin found himself the sole focus of one Bilbo Baggins.

'Don't mess this up. Don't mess this up. Don't mess this up.' "So, this is the hobbit." 'Damn it Thorin!'

This was Thorin's first opportunity to not only make amends to what was, and hopefully would be again, his friend, but also to try and set more favorable events in motion with this first meeting yet here he was making the same mistakes all over again. From the way Bilbo's eyes suddenly narrowed in the ensuing pause while chuckles echoed behind him, Thorin was not off to a promising start at paying the hobbit back for all he had done for them the first go around. 'Don't just stand there you lump;' a small voice inside his head snapped at him. 'Fix it!'

Gathering his confidence around him like a cloak, Thorin stepped forward and extended a hand, catching Bilbo's when he automatically raised his own in response. "I can not tell you how grateful I am for your agreeing to aid us with our quest, Mister Baggins."
Thorin didn't think anyone could conceivably choke on thin air, but Dwalin was currently making quite a good bid for it. Of course, it could also have something to do with Dori helpfully thumping the taller dwarf on the back, nearly propelling Dwalin forward onto his face. Dori muttered something to Ori about a glass of water and the young dwarf ducked back towards what Thorin assumed was the kitchen to fetch it.

More mutters of disbelief were going on behind him again and Thorin could hear Óin whispering furiously to Balin who was making some evasive noises in response while Fíli and Kíli were murmuring between themselves in amazement. Thorin, deciding it was the better part of valor to simply ignore his friends and companions, kept his focus on Bilbo and, on occasion, Gandalf who was actually looking thoroughly befuddled as he stared back at Thorin.

Bilbo's eyes meanwhile had gone quite wide as he glanced at the hacking Dwalin before looking back at Thorin uncertainly. "Um. I'm sorry?" he finally managed to ask.

"Your offering of help to us," Thorin continued, now himself becoming a bit confused as to what the misunderstanding was all about. "It is very kind of you."

Glóin seemed to have joined Dwalin in choking on air and Balin was suddenly right next to Thorin again, looking at him as if he were making absolutely sure it really was him standing there while there were a few unbelievable exclamations from the others at this seemingly sudden change in Thorin's attitude concerning the hobbit. He frowned back at his old friend, slightly annoyed by the look when there was a small tug at his hand and Thorin belatedly realized he was still gripping Bilbo's within his own.

With a small, rather embarrassed cough, he quickly released it as tried his best to salvage his well renowned composure. "I must say that had I known hobbits were so generous as to render aid to those in troubled times, I might have visited your people sooner," he continued to Bilbo as if nothing were amiss. "It is very noble of you to wish to help our people when no one else, not even our own kin, are willing to assist us."

"What?" Dwalin bellowed even as Ori appeared with the aforementioned glass of water for him. "The Iron Hills?"

Thorin winced. This was not truly the way he planed to break the news to everyone, however seeing as how he had already let it slip; "They said they will not help us," he confirmed remorsefully. "We are on our own in this endeavor."

There were a few cries of dismay while Dwalin let out a sharp curse and snatched the glass from Ori, drowning the content in two large gulps. Glóin seemed almost floored at the news and there was a sudden ruckus as everyone spoke over each other about what it meant now that they didn't even have the most basic of assistance from the other dwarf clans.

"Which is why Mister Baggins' support is so noteworthy," Thorin bellowed over the din before he turned back to Bilbo, "and why he has my fullest appreciation."

Stunned silence.

"Um, I'm sure you're welcome," Bilbo began, sounding rather exasperated more than anything else and Thorin was bewildered as he notice Gandalf looking fairly alarmed as Bilbo crossed his arms in front of his chest almost protectively. "But I'm afraid that I have absolutely no idea what it is you are speaking about."

"I'm sure it's all just a slight misunderstanding," Gandalf began and made a small movement as if
to coax the hobbit out of the room. "Bilbo, perhaps if we could speak for a-

"What do you mean 'no idea'?" Thorin asked incredulously, purposely interrupting the wizard, a small suspicion suddenly beginning to form. "You're agreeing to aid us with reclaiming our home. Gandalf said it was all arranged."

"What?" Bilbo yelped somewhat horrified. "You're the adventure he was speaking about, aren't you? Oh no!" he angrily whirled about to face the wizard. "I told you this morning that we do not want any adventures here! I was very clear on that. I distinctly remember telling you to try Across the Water for someone to go adventuring with."

Thorin looked between hobbit and wizard baffled at this, but luckily it seemed as if Balin had finally managed to get a hold of himself and he stepped forward to catch Bilbo's attention. "Just this morning ye say?" he asked the aggravated hobbit.

"Yes," Bilbo actually growled this before shooting a small glare at Gandalf. "And I declined the invitation."

"But that's impossible. Gandalf told us well over three weeks ago that you were joining us," Thorin blurted out in surprise.

"Three weeks-?" Bilbo's eyes went wide again as he turned back to the dwarrows in his home.

"Aye lad. Why else would we have maps leading to your home? And your, err, tannery?" Bofur helpfully pointed out. Thorin once again resisted the urge to bang his head against a wall.

"What?" Bilbo cried out again. "But I haven't seen Gandalf since I was a fauntling! A child!" he clarified at the more bewildered looks. "This morning was the first I had even heard of anything even slightly regarding an adventure." Thorin cringed as the word was practically spat out in loathing. "And I told you no! Then he-" and here Bilbo turned from Gandalf and pointed an accusatory finger at a stunned Dwalin, "shows up at my door and starts eating my supper!"

Thorin groaned as he was beginning to get an idea where this was headed. He knew what must have happened. Even without a kingdom, Dwalin would never allow Thorin or the boys to enter a situation that he hadn't thoroughly investigated. And that included checking for possible poisons.

"The next thing I know," Bilbo continued angrily, "the rest of you arrive, barging into my home without so much as a by-your-leave and then proceed to consume everything from my stores! That was everything from this spring's harvest! There's nothing left from it!"

Now most of the dwarrows were looking somewhat distressed and appalled all at once upon hearing that. It was bad enough to enter someone's home without permission, never mind that they thought they had received it through Gandalf and that Bilbo had to be expecting them, but to essentially steal from the small hobbit who, as they thought back on it, really had tried to stop them from emptying his pantry was a besmirch to their very honor. Bombur looked downright horrified at the notion and Fili and Kili had both dropped their heads in shame. Even Dwalin was looking somewhat contrite as he remembered it was only the one simple plate he had found upon entering the hobbit's tiny kitchen.

"And still no one has even told me anything about anything as to why all of you are even here and I would very much like to know what the hell is going on!" Bilbo finally finished, his voice nearly echoing in the small home as his voice had gotten progressively louder the more he spoke.

Thorin let out a small sigh as the pieces were starting to fall into place for him. It appeared as if the
purpose of his rather backwards map had been so Gandalf would have the required time to actually convince Bilbo to even travel with them to Erebor in the first place and then have it seem as if that had been the agreement the whole time with none the wiser as to the trickery. Which explained so much about the first time Thorin had gone through this with Bilbo Baggins.

When Bilbo had emphatically refused to accompany them the first time around, Thorin and Balin had assumed that the hobbit had simply reflected over his decision in the weeks after Gandalf had obtained his agreement and was now trying to weasel out of a basic verbal contract by refusing to sign the actual, physical one once they had finally arrived. The fact that the hobbit was apparently not a person of his word had given Thorin and the others, specifically Dwalin, Balin and Glóin, a rather low opinion of him and they had not made any effort to hide their belief. As such, the other dwarrows had acted accordingly and Bilbo had been practically ostracized from the onset. At least until the incident with the trolls had started to sway some opinions, Thorin's included though he had been more stubborn about it.

Now that Thorin realized that it hadn't been the case at all he was feeling rather regretful over his actions while at the same time put out at the wizard's trickery. They had practically sprung this entire ordeal on the hobbit without any notice. No wonder Bilbo was so aggravated about their appearance. It was just one more thing to add to the list of slights he had given the hobbit on that first dismal trip. And the wizard was talking again, Durin take it. Thorin had to get himself out of his reminiscing and start paying closer attention to the current goings on.

"I'm sure that it can all be readily explained," Gandalf was reassuring Bilbo. "There might have been some misconception somewhere along the line."

"Indeed. One that should be resolved without delay," Thorin drawled heavily and the mutters once again went silent as Gandalf and Bilbo both turned towards him rather surprised as if they had forgotten he was even there. Thorin just raised an eyebrow at the man pointedly before he turned back to Bilbo. "Is there perhaps somewhere where we might discuss this in more depth?"

"Oh but…" Bilbo looked towards Gandalf anxiously, but Thorin wouldn't allow the wizard the opportunity to make himself the main focal point again.

"It's as Gandalf said. I am the leader of this company and as such I feel that it would be best if I were to clarified things to your satisfaction," Thorin insisted.

Bilbo shifted on his feet slightly, uncertain. "O-oh. I suppose that would be best, wouldn't it?"

"Come now Thorin, you haven't even taken off your cloak yet nor have you eaten," Gandalf persisted. "I'm sure I can explain to Bilbo what-"

"I'll eat after I have explained things to Mister Baggins. It's only right that I answer any questions he might have about the motive for our journey," Thorin concluded as he finally went about removing his outer cloak.

The movement seemed to snap Bilbo out of his daze and he reached forward to take the garment. "Goodness, I'm sorry, I'll just-"

Thorin pulled back slightly with a small smile, holding the cloak just out of Bilbo's reach. "It's quite all right, if you could just tell me where…?"

Bilbo froze for a moment before he finally dropped his arms from their aborted attempt to take Thorin's cloak. "Just through here then."
Still very much aware of all the disbelieving stares he was receiving, Thorin was sure to thank him as he followed, placing himself directly behind the hobbit so Gandalf could not pull him aside and start meddling again. As he hung up his cloak, he glanced at the other cloaks and weapons scattered about and heaved a sigh before turning and lashing out with the palm of his hand. His aim was, as always, impeccable and Kíli let out a surprised yelp that had Dwalin spinning around in alarm as Thorin smacked the back of his nephew's head.

"What was that for?" Kíli yelped affronted as he rubbed at his head more out of habit than to actually sooth an injury.

Thorin just frowned at him and Kíli actually shrank back a bit before Thorin finally said, "What was the last thing I said to you before we parted?" Kíli frowned and looked towards his brother for aid before turning back to Thorin at a loss. "When entering someone else's home…" Thorin trailed off and waited expectantly for Kíli to continue.

"We, uh…" Kíli glanced at Fíli nervously again before haltingly replying, "We wipe our feet?"

Thorin quickly reached out and smacked the other side of the dwarfling's head with his other hand. "And not on the furniture!"

A small flush graced Kíli's cheeks as a few of the others chuckled at his embarrassment and he turned to a rather bemused Bilbo in order to mumble a halfhearted apology. As he did so, Thorin reached out and managed to get Óin on the back of the head. "What did I do?" Óin yelped and there was some more laughter as the tension, while not fully gone, at least had finally eased some.

"You were suppose to watch your brother," Thorin clarified. "And not watch him spoil someone else's belongings."

Fíli ducked his head as well and turned to make his own apologies to the now rather flustered hobbit. "Oh no, it's just some mud," he hastily reassured them. "I'm sure it will easily be cleaned up."

"They'll be able to let you know after they've done it," Thorin announced and both suddenly let out cries of dismay at the notion of cleaning anything. Everyone was laughing by this point and Thorin turned to look at Bilbo expectantly as Bofur and Nori started teasing the two princes.

"Right," Bilbo was shuffling apprehensively again. "I suppose my office would be the best place," he mumbled before turned to lead the way.

Thorin nodded as he started to follow only to realize that practically everyone else was also tagging along, minus Fíli and Kíli who had slunk off to presumably gather hot water for their cleaning duties. Bilbo had paused when Thorin did and he reared back in surprise at the sight of everyone still clustered behind them.

"Don't you have perishables you should be eating?" Thorin asked pointedly. "I highly doubt mister Baggins wishes to return home to fungus growing out of his stores."

"Here now! I haven't agreed to anything yet," Bilbo protested though admittedly it was half hearted.

"Oh, of course Mister Baggins," Ori quickly tucked his hands back behind his back as if to keep himself from touching anything and Thorin watched as Bilbo crumbled.

"Oh might as well," he waved his hand dismissively. "There's barely anything left as it is. Best to do a proper job of it."

"What was the last thing I said to you before we parted?" Thorin finally said, "When entering someone else's home…" Thorin trailed off and waited expectantly for Kíli to continue.

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"Oh might as well," he waved his hand dismissively. "There's barely anything left as it is. Best to do a proper job of it."
There was still some hesitance on the dwarrows part, but they did start to disperse throughout the home. Thorin turned to Bombur however before the other dwarf could make good his escape. "See if there's anything left that could be used for a proper supper for myself and Mister Baggins," he asked politely and found himself at the receiving end of another wide-eyed stare as the large dwarf let out a surprised choking noise. Now concerned, he turned to Bofur.

Snagging his brother's arm, Bofur just gave Thorin a large smile as he hustled Bombur down the hall. "We'll be sure to scrounge up something for you to eat, no worries about that sir."

Shaking his head at the miner's rather jubilant reassurances, Thorin then turned back to Balin who had still yet to leave. "I can handle this on my own you know," he stated rather amused.

Balin looked at the still hovering Bilbo critically before he looked back at Thorin. "I'm sure you can, but perhaps-"

"Balin, I'm certain. Go sit down and have a smoke," he leaned forward and added under his breath so Bilbo couldn't hear them. "And watch the wizard. Who knows what else he hasn't told the hobbit. Or us."

Balin narrowed his eyes and carefully glanced back to see that Gandalf was still watching both Thorin and Bilbo critically. He finally acquiesced to Thorin's request and made his way back into the dining room, easily bringing Gandalf's attention back to the others as Fíli and Kíli lugged a bucket of soapy water towards the cloakroom, forcing the wizard to move out of the way. With Gandalf distracted, Thorin turned and entered the room that Bilbo had indicated.

Bilbo followed and closed the door soundly behind him and Thorin suddenly realized that he was very much alone with Bilbo for the first time proper since he had banished him from Erebor. 'By Mahal, Thorin,' that small voice inside his head groaned. 'Next time, thoroughly think things through before you do them.'
The sound of the other dwarrows giving Fíli and Kíli a hard time easily drifted through the door, but inside the office, it was a quiet as a tomb.

Bilbo was refusing to look at Thorin as he fiddled with his suspenders in what seemed to be a long time nervous habit while the dwarf glanced about the office curiously. It appeared more like a library than an office to him, but of course his grandfather's office was rarely, if ever, used and Thorin really didn't have anything else to go by. In Bilbo's however, there were parchments and books everywhere. Filling not only the bookshelves, but also stacked up against them as well as piled on a small side table, the desk and both the chairs.

"Oh!" Bilbo followed Thorin's line of sight and quickly started collecting the books from the lone chair shoved into the corner next to the desk. "Sorry. Wasn't expecting company– err…" he quickly peeked back up at Thorin under his bangs before looking back down at the books he was gathering. "But you already knew that I suppose."

"Understandable," Thorin nodded. "It seems as if this our arrival was quite the surprise for you."

Bilbo let out an irritated huff as he dropped the large toms onto one of the shorter stacks on the floor. "That's putting it mildly," he muttered as he went to clear off his own chair in front of the small desk. Adding them to the heap already on the wooden surface, Bilbo gestured towards the now cleared chair. "Please, sit."

'Ever the polite hobbit,' Thorin thought amused as he took the offered seat. "Thank you." Bilbo plopped down in the desk chair and started wringing his hands together anxiously, staring back at Thorin. "Um, right." Thorin coughed uneasily. He was not use to having to explain things. Usually if someone didn't know something, Balin or another would promptly fill the person in and so he wasn't quite sure how best to proceed. "Let's just start over from the beginning, shall we? Thorin Oakenshield, at your service," he gave a slight bow from his seat, hoping to at least calm some of Bilbo's nerves at being alone in a room with, to Bilbo at least, a complete stranger.

"Bilbo Baggins at yours," Bilbo returned. Thorin noticed that his knuckles were still white from where he was clenching his hands together. "So… what is this quest you were speaking about?"

Thorin startled slightly as the hobbit went right to the heart of matter. 'Best get it over with,' he thought and decided to start with the basics. "A little over a hundred and fifty years ago, the kingdom we hail from, known as Erebor, was overrun by a dragon." Bilbo's eyes went spectacularly wide, but it didn't seem as if he was going comment on this sudden statement of fact so Thorin kept going. "We were, of course, forced to leave and have been wandering Middle-earth essentially homeless ever since."

"Homeless?" Bilbo asked, completely taken aback by such a declaration. "But surely you had relatives who could take you in!"

"Some of our kin did, indeed, try to help but to help an entire kingdom full? When they have their own kingdoms to worry about feeding and clothing?"

Bilbo shifted in his seat restlessly as he processed this. It looked as if he were having a hard time
believing Thorin. "But they're your family."

"Distant at best," Thorin informed him. "And they did help. To a point." Bilbo's eyes widened again at Thorin's slight growl but didn't press for details. Thorin was grateful, as his mind had turned back to Gruak's and Hábar's rather satisfied smirks when he first entered the meeting at Belegost, looking rather worse for ware.

"Which brings us to today," he shook himself out of his frustrated thoughts and turned his attention back to Bilbo, refusing to dwell on what was essentially a smaller matter in comparison to the larger scale of things. "It's been sixty years since there's been a proper sighting of Smaug-"

"Smaug?"

"The dragon," Thorin replied and Bilbo nodded for Thorin to continue. "As such, there have already been rumors that the beast has finally passed away or perhaps left the mountain completely."

"But you don't think so," Bilbo guessed, interrupting again.

Thorin shook his head, hate and anger already starting to well within him once again at the thought of the beast. "No, I don't. However, that does not mean others aren't already looking to our mountain, calculating the odds and weighing the risks."

"And you want to get there before they do," Bilbo deduced. "So they can't lay a claim on it?"

"It is our home, regardless that we were forced out of it. It was our ancestors who carved it out of the very mountain it's built in. It was we who crafted the halls and the homes from the walls themselves. We were the ones who mined the gold and gems from it's depths and I'll be damned if I allow another to steal it out from under us. Again."

There was a small quirk of Bilbo's lips as if the hobbit wanted to smile, but was reluctant to do so and Thorin realized he had gotten a bit passionate there at the end of his speech. He quickly sat back down.

"So, what is it that you need me for?" Bilbo asked, genuinely curious.

"Your accompaniment is actually two fold," Thorin told him. "The minor one is due to an old time Dwarf custom. Thirteen is considered an unfavorable number to us." He could see Bilbo was trying to do a swift count of all the dwarrows currently in his home. "Gandalf has claimed that he would not be able to travel with us the whole way and so it is left to the thirteen of us and that has caused some worry. To Óin in particular."

"Óin?"

"Ear trumpet. He's our healer."

"Ah." Bilbo, it seemed, knew a thing or two about healers and their obstinate way of clinging to superstitions. He bit his lip for a moment though before asking "and the second purpose?"

Thorin was the one who now shifted uneasily in his seat, unsure of how well Bilbo would take this next bit of news. He certainly hadn't the first time. "It is as you said, I do not believe the dragon is gone, or dead."

Bilbo's gaze had gone wary as he watched Thorin. "And what has that got to do with me exactly?"
Thorin grimaced. "It is a delicate matter, figuring out how best to defeat the beast so we would need someone to… essentially scout the terrain as it were."

Bilbo leapt up from his chair in alarm. "What?"

The noise on the other side of the door went quiet for a moment before there was a flurry of hushed whispers. Thorin released a small groan while Bilbo started to pace, only to realize he couldn't go very far with the books scattered throughout the room. He stopped in front Thorin again as if going to say something before resuming his three steps of pacing again, muttering under his breath.

"And why can't one of you do this?" Bilbo suddenly demanded sharply. "Surely as warriors, you're all much better qualified to- to scout!"

"We would be if not for the fact that we are dwarves," Thorin admitted and Bilbo stopped pacing, now confused.

"I don't…"

"Smaug has been in a dwarf mountain all these years. He has essentially become accustomed to our scents."

"But…" Bilbo faltered slightly. "What about a human? Surely a ranger—"

"It is likely that the dragon would know the scent of a human as well," Thorin countered.

Bilbo started to pace again in the short space in front of the desk. "Perhaps an elf?"

Thorin was already shaking his head. "The elves near Erebor could have helped us the day the dragon arrived, but in the end, they didn't do anything."

Bilbo seemed rather surprised at this and Thorin guessed he was trying to compare Thorin's recount to what he had read about elves. "But what about an army? Surely if you all go together, you could overwhelm the dragon- err, Smaug."

Thorin was already shaking his head no. "No one will help us. No humans in any of their kingdoms have ever offered us any such aid since our exile and the elves, as I said, would not even help us flee Smaug's arrival. Even our own kin from the other dwarf kingdoms have refused us aid. They will not risk facing a dragon." He spread his hands out before him. "We are, regrettably, on our own."

Bilbo paused in his pacing and looked down at Thorin, torn. "But why me?"

"For that, you must look to Gandalf. I simply asked him to find us someone with the skills to be able to sneak into mountain with the least possibility of being discovered. He was the one who brought up your name."

Bilbo seemed to consider this for a moment before the tension in his shoulders suddenly dropped and he lowered his head into his hand. "I should have know when he-"

Thorin raised an eyebrow and was about to ask about the curious statement when Bilbo looked back up and caught his gaze. "There is no one else? Can you not hire someone in Bree or such?"

Thorin shook his head. "Not someone I would put my trust in," he admitted. "It would take time to try and find someone and then go about determining his reliability. As it is, we are pressing a strict timeline. Taking into account mishaps along the way, we truly cannot delay for long. It is why I
put my trust in Gandalf to vouch for someone. I had no more time to find anyone else."

Bilbo dropped back into his chair as if his knees could not hold him up anymore. Remembering how Bilbo had fainted dead a way upon reading the contract in the first place, Thorin leapt to his own feet concerned. He reached out as if to steady the hobbit, but was reluctant to actually touch him without permission.

"I'm all right," Bilbo assured him after a few deep breaths. He glanced up again at Thorin through his bangs. "Why is it you're the leader of this group? Why do you care so much about your old home if you've never been?" he paused. "Or had you been? I know dwarves age differently than hobbits…"

"I was there," Thorin admitted quietly. "I remember facing the dragon as he broke through our gate and killed my fellow dwarrows."

"But why does it have to be you to reclaim the mountain? What do you gain from this?"

Thorin gave him a small smile. "My grandfather was king when the dragon came," he said with a note of irony in his voice.

"You're a prince?" Bilbo gapped. He jolted upright in his chair. "Oh! I didn't- I had no idea-"

Thorin waved him off. "You understand then, why I feel rather responsible for what happens to my people."

Bilbo slumped slightly in his seat. "O-oh… yes, I guess you would if you're a member of the royal family." Thorin frowned in at the acceptance in Bilbo's tone at that, but Bilbo had looked back up at him. "There truly isn't anyone else you could ask for aid?"

"It's you or no one," Thorin confirmed, almost apologetically.

In retrospect, it was probably because he was so remorseful about the situation that Bilbo sighed resolutely and nodded. "I can not believe I am doing this…" he mumbled.

"You will accompany us then?" Thorin asked, trying to keep a note of relief out of his voice.

"What choice do I really have?" Bilbo groaned.

"Well." Thorin gave a sharp nod in approval and fought to keep a smile from his face. "Thank you. We will, of course, be in your debt."

Bilbo waved a hand in dismissal. "I personally think that I'm going mad by agreeing so I'm not sure how much help I'm going to be."

Thorin chuckled. "I'm sure you'll do fine. There is the matter of the contract, but it's more a formality than anything else. Balin does love to make sure everything is covered."

"Oh, does he?"

"Mmm," Thorin nodded as he headed for the door. "Um, I should probably tell you that the others seemed to have come into the belief that you're a burglar."

"What? Why I've never heard of anything so silly. I've never stolen anything in my life!"

Thorin shrugged before opening the door and poking his head out. Dwalin was, of course standing next to the door and Thorin could see Balin with the others in the dining room. He waved off his
friend and looked towards his old teacher and friend. "Balin could you send in Ori with the contract for our burglar please?"

Ori jumped at the sound of his name and Dori let out a strangled noise but Balin was already standing, most likely getting ready to tell Ori to sit back down. "Honestly Balin, there's no need for you to get up," Thorin called out before he could say anything. "You wrote the blasted thing, you know there's nothing to negotiate. Ori can just as easily answer any questions Mister Baggins may have."

Balin looked dubious and Ori rather wide eyed. Dori looked torn about allowing his baby brother out of his sight. Thorin glanced about for the third brother and caught Nori watching him suspiciously. Even Dwalin was giving him a strange look. Leaning towards his friend, he explained in a hushed whisper, "I'm trying to keep the hobbit as calm as possible, not provoke him further. You know Balin can interrogate with the best of them. And he doesn't even have to say anything. Just sit there and glare."

Dwalin let out a burst of laughter, much to his brother's annoyance. Thorin's whisper apparently had carried. He handed Ori the contract however and the young scrivener quickly hurried towards Thorin. Dori looked as if he wanted to join his brother, but technically it was Ori's job, especially as it was a direct order from Thorin so he could not conceivably protest.

Ori shuffled quickly past both Thorin and Dwalin and into the office as Thorin held the door open for him. Giving a small wave at those who were watching him, which by this point was everyone, Thorin returned into the office where Bilbo and Ori were now both staring at each other anxiously and closed the door firmly.

"Mister Baggins, may I present our scrivener for this journey, Ori. Ori, Mister Baggins," Thorin introduced. Ori squeaked out an "at your service" so fast it almost sounded like "twuhtir vice".

Bilbo blinked in surprise and sent Thorin an inquisitive look before he smiled gently at Ori. "Bilbo Baggins at yours. And just call me Bilbo if I'm going to be traveling with you."

"You're going to come then?" Ori asked excitedly before he closed his mouth so fast his teeth clicked and he glanced at Thorin fretfully.

Thorin made a show of leaning against the wall and looking at the books scattered about on the floor in a bored manner. Ori looked back at Bilbo at a loss, but it seemed as if Bilbo realized what the problem was because he smiled at Ori again. "Being a scrivener must be quite exciting," he stated. "Imagine all the history you have access to."

"Oh it is. Though most of it was lost with Erebor, there are still some texts and there are those we've done ourselves since coming to Ered Luin. This is going to be my first chronicler undertaking."

"Congratulations," Bilbo praised.

"Being a writer himself perhaps Mister Baggins would be willing to assist you with your notations," Thorin suggested and looked up confused at the sudden silence to find himself the subject of two surprised stares once more. "What?"

"How did you know I was a writer?" Bilbo asked in a strange, uncertain voice.

Thorin floundered. He couldn't very well say that Bilbo had mentioned it before when they had gone on this journey the first time around. Instead, Thorin gestured towards all the books and the
"No I am, I'm just surprised you could tell," Bilbo admitted as he looked about at the parchments. Ori actually chuckled at this, but Thorin shrugged indifferently and went back to leaning against the wall.

"The contract?" Thorin pressed.

"Oh!" Ori quickly held out the contract for Bilbo to take. "It's a base coverage of... well, everything I suppose. Expectations, expenses, requirements um... funeral arrangements."

"Funeral arrangements?" Bilbo gasped.

"Balin is nothing if not very through," Thorin drawled. Bilbo just hummed in thought, but Ori looked as if he were about to fall over in fright from the way he was shaking. Thorin belatedly realized that this was really the first time Ori had been in his presence without either his brothers or Balin. The boy was completely panicking over some imagined slight he might make. 'Something else to do while traveling,' Thorin thought as the young dwarrows shaking became more pronounced. "Oh for Mahal's sake, Ori, sit down before you fall down." Thorin leaned forward and pulled out the chair he had been sitting in earlier and Ori flopped into it gratefully as Bilbo went over the contract.

"Lacerations... evisceration... incineration?" Thorin sighed as Bilbo shot him a disbelieving look.

"It's a dragon," Thorin said, as if that explained everything. And in a strange way, it did. "Balin tried to think of all difficulties when drafting the contracts." Bilbo sighed again and went back to looking over the parchment before finally digging under the mass pile of parchment and fishing out a quill.

'That... was almost too easy,' Thorin thought surprised as Bilbo added his signature to the bottom underneath his own and Balin's as Ori clapped his hands in excitement.

Bilbo turned to Thorin and he gave the hobbit a grateful smile. "Thank you."

"Oh! It's... no trouble at all. I guess..." Bilbo trailed off at the end as he held out the contract.

There was another moment of tension in the air before Thorin cleared his throat and pocketed the parchment. "Now that it's official, I suppose you have your own things you would like to get in order?" he asked.

"Hmmm? Oh I suppose I do have to let Hamfast know that I'm leaving and he'll have to watch Bag End for me," Bilbo agreed coming out of his daze. "And that he has to collect the rent for me while I'm gone, of course. You don't happen to know how long this journey is going to take to complete off hand, do you?"

"Rent?" Thorin and Ori asked together in surprise.

"You collect the rent?" Thorin asked in disbelief. "You're a titled lord? You a Lord?"

Bilbo didn't get a chance to respond however as there was a sudden thump from outside the window. "What was that?" Ori asked, wide eyed.

Thorin just groaned. "More than likely your brother," he stated.

"What?" Ori yelped and rushed towards the large bay windows, clearly the main reason why Bilbo...
had chosen this room for his office, and flung open the shutters. "Nori!" he exclaimed and leaned practically out of the window before he came back up, clutching Nori's shirt firmly and consequently dragging his older brother back through the window with him.

"Geroff Ori!" Nori tried to tug his shirt out of his brother's grasp and they started an impromptu game of tug-o-war.

"How did you know it was him?"

Thorin startled as Bilbo asked the question from right next to him. He hadn't even heard the hobbit move. "Simple. If it weren't, we would have been in much more trouble. Besides, Nori's the only one who comes in through the window." Looking at Bilbo, Thorin completely missed the sharp look said dwarf shot him.

"But why the window?"

Thorin let out a snort. "The day Nori comes in through the door is the day we know the world is coming to an end. Either that or it's a room with no windows." Bilbo let out a small laugh at this and Thorin couldn't help, but smile back, feeling pleased for some unknown reason. He leaned over to explain, "Nori's our pickpocket. In case we run into that sort of trouble and need emergency funds or information if we find ourselves in a bad situation."

Nori, meanwhile, finally got free of his younger brother's grasp and turned towards the hobbit. "You don't look like a lord," he announced without preamble.

"Nori!" Ori yelped aghast.

Bilbo just stared back at Nori flatly. "That's because I'm not."

All three of the dwarrows were now confused. "But you said you collect the rent."

"Of course. I have tennents and such. Mostly in the surrounding hills, but by no means am I a lord."

"You own the land around your own, correct?" Thorin asked.

"Well, yes, but I don't have a title or anything. We hobbits don't have such things."

"Oh," Thorin glanced over and Nori caught his eye, looking just as disbelieving as Thorin was at Bilbo's explanation. To have land, especially enough to rent, one must be a lord, there was no other possibility. If Bilbo didn't wish the others to know he was a lord though, then Thorin would oblige him.

"What about family?" he asked instead, hoping to change the subject before Nori could start anything. Nori and lords normally did not mix well and now that they knew Bilbo was one, despite his claiming to the contrary, it would probably take the thief some time to warm up to their burglar-trolls notwithstanding. "Or is there anyone else you should notify to your leaving?"

"I suppose I should write to the Thain as well," Bilbo sighed as he started to rifle in his desk, presumably for blank parchment. "Though I don't think he's going to be too surprised with my leaving."

"Why not?" Ori asked innocently. "I thought hobbits never left their home, so why would you leaving not be?"
"What's a Thain?" Nori asked at the same time.

"The Thain isn't a what, it's a who. Currently it's Gerontius Took. I suppose he's what you would call the chief hobbit. He handles the disagreements and decides who is in the right, though he's rarely called upon to handle disputes anymore as the mayors handle the majority of them nowadays." Bilbo answered Nori as he pawed through a drawer.

Nori let out a snort at this while Thorin nodded slowly. 'So a judge,' he figured as he watched the hobbit lean further into the drawer.

Bilbo, still searching for a clean piece of parchment and not seeing the comprehending looks, then decided to elaborate further. "Also, if there's ever an issue where we had to fight anyone, not that we ever will mind you, we don't go looking to start any fights, but just in case someone decides to start one with us, he organizes the Bounders. Our version of rangers if you will." Bilbo finally sat up, leaving the drawer as a loss and looked up to find three dwarrows staring at him in shock.

"So… he handles legal affairs and orders your military?" Thorin asked.

"In a sense, I suppose so," Bilbo agreed.

"He's your king then?" Thorin asked, already feeling a headache coming on. 'Mahal, the politics,' he groaned to himself. Just what had this meant when Bilbo accompanied them the first time around? Bad enough they practically absconded with Bilbo off on an adventure, Thorin knew no king liked having his subjects spirited away in the dead of night.

"King?" Bilbo laughed. "Nonsense. He's just the one we go to when we need something resolved."

"That's a king," Thorin announced.

"What? No! He's just oversees the council of mayors and so forth. Our leader of leaders I guess you could call him."

"A king," Ori agreed.

"He's not our king," Bilbo insisted.

"Who was King- Thain before him?" Thorin asked suspiciously.

Bilbo didn't have to think about it, but he looked between the dwarrows warily. "Fortinbras the first."

"Any relations to the current Thain?" Thorin pressed.

Bilbo gained a rather mutinous look. "His father."

"And who's going to be Thain after this one kicks the bucket?"

"Nori!" Ori censured.

Bilbo looked as if he didn't want to answer but finally admitted reluctantly. "Isengrim the third will more than likely gain the position." He paused before adding grudgingly, "his eldest son."

Nori shot an exasperated look at Thorin. "Their king," he agreed and Bilbo rolled his eyes. Thorin was already wondering how he should handle the sudden unexpected complication.

"Why won't he be surprised to your leaving?" Ori asked again when it looked as if Bilbo wasn't
going to say anymore.

"I suppose because my mother did the same thing," Bilbo gains a small, soft smile. "She left the Shire on an adventure when she was young. She's also probably why Gandalf thought of me when you asked for a fourteenth member," he added to Thorin.

"Your mother went on a journey?" Ori asked, amazed.

"Our family has a history of adventuring, but mother was the only one to leave beyond the Shire borders and into the outer lands."

"Your mother's family?" Thorin asked for clarification.

"Everyone said that it was her Took blood finally showing itself." Bilbo took a moment to let out a large sigh. "I suppose they're going to say the same of me after I leave."

"Took?" Thorin gasped. "Any relation to the k- the Thain?"

Bilbo nodded, unsure of where Thorin was going with his question. "His eldest daughter."

A long pause followed.

"Your grandfather is the king?" Ori asked excitedly

"Your grandfather is the king," Thorin groaned despondently. Things just got complicated.

"He is not a king," Bilbo insisted indignantly.

Nori laughed as he dropped a friendly hand on Bilbo's shoulder. "Whatever you say-" he agreed good-naturally.

"Thank you," Bilbo said appreciatively, thoroughly annoyed by this point.

"-Your highness," Nori finished with a wide grin.

"Not a king!"

Chapter End Notes

1) The dwarf's are thinking of the feudal version of the term Land Lord. When kings granted lands to their nobility and so forth.
Gandalf puffed on his pipe as he stared hard at the closed door separating him from Bilbo and Thorin. 'What could Thorin be saying in there?' he wondered apprehensively.

Balin suddenly appeared next to him, a full mug of ale in his hand. Much to the Wizard's displeasure, the old dwarf sat back and started sipping at his drink, all the while staring at Gandalf expectantly. Gandalf tried his best to ignore the dwarf, but Balin was just as patient as he was thorough so Gandalf finally turned to the dwarf and gave him a charming smile. "Was there something you needed Balin?"

"Why didn't you tell us you hadn't spoken to the halfling?" Balin questioned directly. "Hoping he wouldn't be able to get out of it if we were here?"

Gandalf focused on keeping his smile from slipping. Balin, it seemed, had an uncanny knack for hitting the nail on the head. "Of course not," Gandalf assured him. "One has to be subtle and careful when bringing up distressing subjects such as leaving the Shire with Hobbits."

Balin didn't look as if he believed him, but Gandalf's point was suddenly illustrated as Bilbo's voice suddenly carried through the closed door with an indignant, "What?"

Everyone went quiet as they all went quiet and eagerly waited for anything else to be heard. The noise behind the closed door quieted down and the dwarves quickly started chattering excitedly.

Balin looked at Gandalf disapprovingly. "It's not a good idea to start a contract with deceptions, no matter how innocent the reason being."

"Trust me Master Balin. I have dealt with Hobbits before and they are rather sensitive creatures. It's best to approach them delicately…"

"And we're not, is what you're saying?"

Gandalf made a small noncommittal noise and shrugged.

Balin's frown deepened before he turned to speak with Glóin, pointedly turning away from Gandalf which was fine with the wizard, as this left him to his contemplations.

Wanting to speak to Bilbo before any of the dwarves could interrogate him was the main reason Gandalf had been put out by Dwalin taking off ahead of them at the border. When he learned that Balin had also arrived before him, Gandalf had worried that Bilbo had actually succeeded in explaining his unwillingness to the journey and sent the two away.

Upon finally arriving and seeing that no one had bothered to explain their presence to the flustered hobbit, Gandalf realized that everything was still going as planned. He could hopefully endear the dwarves to Bilbo and persuade him into giving them a chance before Thorin's arrival and subsequent standoffish attitude managed to offend the hobbit's more delicate sensibilities.

Then Thorin had arrived and in one rather swift blow, had crumbled Gandalf's well-laid plans with the subtlety of a dwarven hammer. He hadn't expected Thorin to call him out about the map leading to the other side of Hobbiton, causing the other dwarves to have some misgiving about
himself and he certainly didn't expect Thorin to turn to Bilbo and ever so gratefully thank him for agreeing to help.

'Just what happened at his meeting with their kin?' Gandalf wondered with a frown. Thorin's personality seemed to have done a complete turnaround and he couldn't for the life of him come up with a plausible explanation for it save for that. The only thing that had happened since he had last seen the banished king was apparently this meeting with the other dwarf lords.

However, according to Thorin, the meeting had gone rather poorly, with the other lords refusing him any assistance. 'So why was he so cheerful upon arriving at Bag End?' That was what Gandalf for the life of him couldn't figure it out.

Suddenly the door opened and his eyes snapped towards the dwarf as he asked for Ori to bring the contract. Ori rather than Balin! 'That's different,' he thought as Thorin's voice carried over about Balin's glare and wanting to put Bilbo at ease. 'Something has happened to our dear leader,' Gandalf mused as Ori quickly did his king's bidding. 'But what is the question.'

Everyone went quiet again as Ori disappeared behind the door before the assumptions and wild speculations started flying throughout the rooms. Gandalf gladly left them too it.

If Thorin was asking for the contract that meant he had at least managed to convince Bilbo to at least hear him out on the quest. With any luck, if Bilbo rejected the arrangement Gandalf would have the opportunity to convince the boy into changing his mind. That was if Thorin didn't decided that they would immediately leave upon Bilbo's possible refusal.

Another thing that had surprised Gandalf was how easily Bilbo capitulated to Thorin's request to a private meeting. Though considering Thorin not only listened to Bilbo's grievances, but also actually deemed to answer his questions, it really shouldn't have been all that surprising. Hobbits liked to have straight answers and unfortunately for Gandalf, Thorin was giving them to him.

He looked back at the door critically.

'Just what is Thorin thinking right now?'

'I am so dead.'

Thorin groaned silently to himself as Ori started chastising Nori, who was still grinning rather unrepentantly at the thoroughly annoyed Hobbit. However, if Bilbo's king-grandfather was anything like Thorin's king-grandfather, death was the least of his problems. 'Why was it this never came up before?' he wondered furiously. 'Gandalf, at least, should have said something about our burglar being a prince!'

"-As you say, your highness," Nori was laughing somewhere in the background.

"Thorin!"

"Pardon?" he jolted out of his thoughts as Bilbo snapped his name. Bilbo just glared angrily and pointed at Nori. Glancing at the other dwarf, Thorin took in his rather wicked grin and sighed. "At least allow our burglar some decency and respect when with the others," he pleaded.

"Thank you," Bilbo sighed.

"At least until we all get to know one another better," Thorin finished.
"What?"

Thorin turned to the affronted hobbit. "That, unfortunately, is going to be the best arrangement you're going to achieve when it comes to this lot," he told him, jerking a thumb in Nori's direction. "A little teasing never hurt anyone," he shot a sharp look at Nori, "as long as it's friendly."

Nori held up his hands in a surrender position even as he smiled widely. "Didn't mean any offence."

Bilbo was still glaring at Thorin. "I can only do so much with what I'm given," Thorin insisted helplessly.

"Hey! What is that suppose to mean?" Nori yelped and Ori snickered behind him.

Bilbo just groaned as he rubbed his forehead in an indication of a headache. "Dwarves…"

Thorin shot Nori another glare and the thief actually managed to look somewhat apologetic. It became complete remorse when Ori leaned over and punched him in the arm. "Ow!"

Bilbo glanced up in time to watch Nori rub at his wounded arm and frowned at his younger brother, who was giving his own version of an irate glare, before the he turned back towards Bilbo. "I apologize."

Collecting himself, Bilbo nodded. "Apology accepted," he replied and Ori's glare melted into another happy smile.

"Thank you." Nori's smile became a bit warmer as he added gently, "Your Highness." Bilbo looked exasperated but didn't object to the title again.

"I should have warned you we're not the most tolerable lot," Thorin gained Bilbo's attention away from the two brothers with his confession.

"You can say that again," Bilbo drawled.

"Oh don't say you're going to change your mind," Ori pleaded, now worried again. "Nori's just an idiot, don't mind him at all." He ignored his brother's indignant "hey!" and looked beseechingly at Bilbo. "Please say you'll come with us."

"It doesn't make a difference, I already signed the contract."

Thorin hesitated at this. He knew it wasn't what the Valar wanted but- "I could tear it up, you know," he reminded them.

"And leave you with only thirteen and a displeased healer?" Bilbo asked with mock horror before he went back to his resigned look. "I'm just saying that it is going to take some time for me to acquaint myself with all your… personalities."

"We are an eccentric group to get use to," Nori agreed. Thorin raised an eyebrow. "I know what 'eccentric' means, thank you very much!"

"Mostly due to my influence," Ori informed Bilbo in a stage whisper. It worked as Bilbo let out a laugh.

"I'm sure I'll endure. Better than my pantry for sure." Bilbo succeeded in getting some laughs from the dwarrows this time and he went back to searching for a clean piece of parchment.
Watching him, Thorin became apprehensive again as worries over the Thain's reaction to Bilbo leaving with a group of dwarrows arose. "Would your grandfather forbade you from traveling with us?" He finally ended up blurted out, causing Bilbo to look at him surprised. "I mean as your ki-Thain, he does have that power."

"He doesn't have any power over me," Bilbo countered with a small frown. "I'm of my majority and can do as I wish. Even if he doesn't like the idea, he can't really say anything about it."

"Would it help if I wrote to the Thain, your grandfather as well?" Thorin offered. The last thing he wanted to do was cause a rift between Bilbo and his family. "Reassure him that you are in good hands?"

Bilbo looked up in surprise. "Well, I suppose it couldn't hurt," he mused. "But you don't have too. I'm just letting him know that I'm leaving Hamfast Gamgee in charge of Bag End while I'm gone and that there won't be any reason to drag the river for my body when it's noticed I'm missing."

Nori suddenly shot the Hobbit a sharp look as Bilbo added something under his breath, but Thorin only registered it briefly at the back of his mind, as he was too busy trying to not look rather horror-struck at the notion.

"Why would they drag the river?" Ori asked alarmed.

"Hobbits are not the best of swimmers," Bilbo told him simply.

"You can't swim?" Nori was now the one who was taken aback.

Bilbo shook his head. "I can barely float," he admitted rather sheepishly. "I know the basics, but when I get into the water, the information just seems to leave my head."

The image of a sopping wet Bilbo bent over the shore of the river near Lake Town coughing and wheezing flashed before Thorin's eyes. 'No wonder he had been so terrified,' he realized as he thought back to that harrowing barrel ride. Bilbo had been clinging to Kíli's barrel not so they weren't separated, but rather so he wouldn't drown! "You are going to learn how to swim!" he proclaimed firmly, startling the other occupants in the room. "We will teach you."

"What?" Bilbo yelped surprised. "But that's ridiculous. Why would I need to-"

"You will learn how to swim!" Thorin maintained. "There will be other rivers that we will have to cross, wider and deeper than those here in the Shire. The best way to survive is to be fully prepared for any obstacle."

Ori suddenly looked rather panicked. "But I can't swim either!"

"You can't?" Thorin looked to Nori for confirmation only to see the other dwarf looking just as surprised.

"What do you mean you can't swim?" Nori asked incredulously.

"Dori never had the time to teach me," Ori admitted forlornly.

Thorin groaned into his hand while Nori was quick to reassure his baby brother that everything would be fine. "I'll see about having my nephews teach you when we come across the rivers, weather and time permitting."

Nori and Ori looked at Thorin surprised but Bilbo just looked confused again. "Which ones are
"The one's who are now currently cleaning your mother's glory box if they know what's good for them," Thorin answered with a smirk. "Fíli is a gifted swimmer and, while not as good as his brother, Kíli is adequate. I'm sure they'll be able to teach you both enough so you will at least be able to keep your head's above water."

"Oh, I see." Bilbo nodded before he gained a puzzled expression. "How did you…?"

"Hmm?"

Bilbo blinked at Thorin for a few seconds before he shook his head. "No. Never mind."

The room went silent for a long moment as the four looked at one another.

"Is that everything then?" Nori asked curiously. "Or does his highness have another surprise he's not telling us?"

"I'm not keeping anything from you!" Bilbo protested adamantly. "At least not intentionally!"

Thorin startled, as there was a sudden knock at the door he was still leaning against, causing the wood behind his back to vibrate with the force of it. With a frown, he opened the door to find Dwalin standing there, Bombur just behind him looking uncertain. Dwalin meanwhile seemed as if he was gearing up for some sort of argument and before, Thorin would have given him one for dare disturbing them, but Thorin had sworn to himself that he wasn't going to be that dwarf anymore. Plus he was actually relieved for the interruption. "Yes?" he asked politely.

Dwalin had already opened his mouth, more than likely in order to defend his interruption, but now it just hung there in surprise as he stared at Thorin. "Are ye okay?" he finally asked.

"Of course," Thorin huffed before he glanced at Bombur then back to Dwalin. "Was there something you needed?"

Dwalin leaned back and jerked a thumb back towards Bombur. "Supper's ready if you want it," he announced.

Thorin raised an eyebrow before he turned to look back in the office. "Meeting adjourned for now?"

"Oh yes!" Bilbo exclaimed thankfully.

"There probably are a few things that need to be addressed," Ori surprised Thorin by saying, "but more than likely we can cover those things as we travel."

"Undoubtedly," Thorin agreed as he stepped aside so Bilbo could leave the room.

"I'll have to see if there's some blank parchment from my bedroom for those letters."

"After supper," Thorin scolded automatically, use to getting after his nephews for not showing up at the dinner table on time.

Bilbo didn't seem to take offense however as he laughed. "Of course!"

Thorin was still standing on the other side of the doorframe so he was in a perfect position to see Dwalin's look of utter disbelief as Nori exited after his brother. "How did you get in there?" Dwalin bellowed in disbelief.
"Wouldn't you like to know?" Thorin heard Nori reply as he followed after Bombur and the other two to the dinning room. He wasn't about to stand around to mediate between the two. Dwalin and Nori were going to have to learn how to get along on their own. For now, Thorin was hungry.

There was a bowl placed both at the head of the table where Thorin remembered sitting the last time as well as to the right of it. Gandalf was already seated in the chair to the left, puffing away at his pipe rather earnestly.

Thorin could see Balin was looking thoroughly vexed so Thorin could only assume that he and the wizard had shared some fervent words. Hopefully he could make it up to Balin later for distracting the wizard as he had asked.

He started heading towards the seat to the right of the head of the table, especially now that he knew Bilbo's position in the Shire, rather than taking the prominent position. He was also a guest of Bilbo's so it was only right-

Bilbo scuttled past him and plopped down into the seat beside Bofur nearly sitting at the very corner of the table. It really wasn't a tight squeeze as Thorin would have thought, but then, Bilbo didn't truly take up much space did he?

'That settles that,' Thorin thought bemused as he took the offered seat at the head. He looked down the table to see most everyone was in the same seats as before when he suddenly stopped on Glóin and was surprised at the sudden likeness to the dwarf from his dreams. 'Gimli!' he realized as he thought back to the dwarf warrior fighting off Orcs in a mountain pass. No wonder he thought he recognized the dwarf.

'It is a dream of the future then,' and Thorin nearly slumped in relief. Gimli still hadn't even reached full adult status and the one who fought in the dream beside the elf and human was a blooded warrior. There was time! 'Everyone can get back to Erebor safely!' he thought elatedly. 'They'll have time to build proper defenses!'

Glóin was starting to look uneasy and Thorin belatedly realized that in his astonishment and following insight, he was still staring at the dwarf. 'Blast.' Looking for somewhere else to turn his gaze, he glanced down at his bowl and was suitably surprised.

The last time he had been given a soup due to his late arrival and the fact that there hadn't been much, if anything, left. This time around, it seemed as if Bombur had actually managed to scrounge up enough for a stew. There were more vegetables than meat, but Bilbo made a pleased noise so Thorin swallowed his pride and took a bite of his mostly vegetable stew, taking the time to dunk some bread into it. 'There was bread left?'

Ori was dragging Nori towards where Dori had saved seats for them and Dwalin was stomping his feet as he followed, taking his own place between Gandalf and Bifur. Once everyone was settled, Thorin found himself suddenly the center of attention once more.

"We have our burglar then do we?" Balin asked. Bilbo frowned down into his stew but refrained from commenting.

"We do," Thorin confirmed. "After hearing the details, Mister Baggins has agreed to assist us with our quest."

"I'm very pleased to hear that Bilbo," Gandalf declared happily before turning to Balin. "You see it all came out right in the end."
"Despite some disagreeable interfering, yes it did," Thorin drawled. Gandalf's frown was back and Thorin felt slightly vindicated. After everything the wizard had put him through the first go around, he wasn't going allow the man to manipulate everyone into doing what he wanted this time. Though Rivendell was still a sore point, Thorin still couldn't see a way around the visit. 'Blast it.'

"It's official then," Dwalin said, "We are on our own in our quest reclaim Erebor?"

"Unfortunately, we are," Thorin confirmed regretfully. "None of the envoys from the other kingdoms would render us any aid to fight for Erebor. Not even Dáin."

"Where exactly is Erebor?" Bilbo's voice spoke up timidly in the ensuing silence.

Gandalf started searching in his pockets. "Bilbo, my dear fellow, let us have a little more light."

"He's still eating," Thorin announced before Bilbo could rise from his seat. "Bofur, go get a candle."

"But I'm drinking!" Bofur protested, offended. Thorin gave the dwarf a pointed look before he slowly turned and looked to Bifur. Bifur said something in rapid Khuzdul and Bofur got up and fetched the candle.

"On the shelf around the corner," Bilbo directed him helpfully.

"Thank you," Gandalf said to Thorin rather dryly as Bofur brought back the now lit candle and held it aloft. Thorin shrugged and they all turned back to the parchment Gandalf had brought out.

Clearing his throat, Gandalf began. "Far to the east, over ranges and rivers, lies a single, solitary peak."

Bilbo rose up out of his chair slightly to get a better look at the map. "'The Lonely Mountain'," he read aloud.

Thorin just sighed as Glóin started speaking about Óin and portents. He had really been hoping to avoid this bit. He glanced over as Bilbo sat down and caught the hobbit's eye as Óin went on about ravens and rolled his own in exasperation. Bilbo was able to hold back a laugh by taking another bite of his stew.

"-the reign of the beast would end," Óin finished.

"There was a foretelling about the dragons defeat?" Bilbo asked. Thorin was unsure if it was from politeness or genuine curiosity.

"Aye," Óin smiled, pleased that at least someone seemed to be taking him seriously. Balin was shaking his head again in exasperation.

"It won't be as easy as that though," Bofur drawled. "Smaug the Terrible is the greatest calamity of our age. Teeth like razors, claws like meat hooks." Thorin distractedly wondered if he could manage to reach over and smack Bofur and be out of range before Bifur could react.

"I know what a dragon is, thank you," Bilbo replied stonily and he went back to his stew as Ori stood up and declared that he wasn't afraid of any dragon. Thorin frowned as everyone cheered him on.

It wasn't the dragon Thorin was worried about anymore. He wondered how well Ori had faired in that last battle. He really didn't know what happened to most of the company when he had regained
conscious those few hours before he had died. He just remembered Balin telling him that the boys had died and then bringing Bilbo in so Thorin could make amends.

"The task would be difficult enough with an army behind us, but we number just thirteen-" Balin started to say.

"Fourteen," both Thorin and Bilbo corrected simultaneously as Bofur retook his seat.

Balin glanced at the two surprised before his brows furrowed. "Aye, and not fourteen of the best. Or the brigh-"

"Yes, thank you Balin," Thorin interrupted quickly as he finally remembered what it was that Balin had said before. He wanted to actually finish his supper this go around. "I'm sure that every one of us will be able to contribute in our own, unique way."

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

"And you forget we have a wizard in our company," Kíli added excitedly. "Gandalf will have killed hundreds of dragons in his time."

"I very much doubt that," Thorin muttered under his breath as everyone turned to Gandalf expectantly. Thorin was very pleased to see Gandalf nearly choking on his pipe smoke as Dori called him out, asking for a number.

And then chaos commenced.

Thorin sighed as Bilbo looked at the arguing dwarrows in alarm. With small huff, he clambered to his feet and shouted, "silence!"

Bilbo startled a bit at the shout and Thorin belatedly realized that again, he had shouted it in Khuzdul word "atkât" and cursed at himself slightly. He'd have to remind himself more often to speak in Westron when Bilbo was present. Shooting the hobbit a quick, apologetic look he turned back to the rest of those seated at the table. "If we have read the signs, do you not think others will have read them too?" he began and proceeded to repeat his speech from the last time until Balin brought up the front gate again and Gandalf revealed the key.

Thorin took a deep, calming breath as he stared at it. "My father's key."

"Indeed," Gandalf agreed. "It was given to me by Thráin. For safekeeping. It is yours now."

Thorin had to admit it felt good to have his father's key once more. At least until Fíli's rather obvious statement about there being a door if there was a key and Thorin repressed the urge to roll his eyes again. He really should have the boy study with Balin more about thinking before speaking in public.

The runes and the hidden door were discussed as well as Gandalf's plan. "-if we are careful and clever, I believe it can be done."

"That's why we need a burglar!" Ori realized and everyone turned to Bilbo who looked to be trying to disappear into his empty bowl at the sudden attention.

"Mister Baggins knows his task in helping us with the dragon," Thorin proclaimed and was so focused on Balin that he missed Gandalf's sharp, calculating look. "We are lucky we found anyone to agree at all." Bilbo gave him a small, grateful smile.
"He hardly looks like burglar material," Balin criticized.

"You'd be surprised at how adept he is at not meeting certain expectations," Nori called out from the other end of the table and Ori turned his face away to hide a smile. Dori quickly hushed his brothers and turned to Balin apologetically for the interruption.

"He still doesn't look like he could withstand the journey alone," Dwalin stated. He turned back to look Bilbo over appraising. "The Wild is no place for gentle folk who can neither fight nor fend for themselves."

"And yet we all have to learn sometime, don't we Dwalin?" Thorin rebuked. "Who are we to criticize if the Hobbits tend to start later in life? And besides, just by being a hobbit, Bilbo brings his own uniqueness to the quest."

He was getting the disbelieving stares again. Thorin pointedly returned to his stew and the others broke out into chatter about hobbits and how useless they were perceived. Thorin could see Bilbo shrinking back down into his seat again but this time allowed Gandalf to end the chatter.

"Hobbits are remarkably light on their feet," Gandalf told them. "In fact, they can pass unseen by most, if they choose."

'Understatement of the year,' Thorin snorted to himself, tuning out Gandalf and instead remembering Bilbo ferreting them out of Thranduil's dungeon. 'Completely invisible is more like it.' It was for this reason that he was unaware at Bilbo's piercing gaze as Gandalf brought up hobbit's scents verses a dwarf's and how Smaug would not be able to recognize it.

"You asked me to find the fourteenth member of this company," Gandalf spoke to the table at large this time rather than directly at Thorin, "and I have chosen Mister Baggins. There's a lot more to him than appearances suggest and he's got a great deal more to offer than any of you know." He paused to look at the hobbit across from him. "Including himself."

"It is as Gandalf said," Thorin backed him up. "We put our trust in him to find our fourteenth member, and he has. Who are we now to question him?"

"He read the contract fully then?" Balin demanded to know.

Now all the gazes were back at Bilbo, but he didn't shy away this time and instead he gave Balin a wary smile. "As much as I could stomach," he grudgingly admitted. "Got a bit distracted at the 'incineration' part."

"Oh aye, he'll melt the flesh off your bones in the blink of an eye," Bofur announced rather cheerfully and before Bilbo could even so much as whimper Thorin leaned forward over Bilbo and closer to the miner.

"Bofur, just how fond are you of keeping that hat right where it is?" Thorin growled.

Bofur's mouth shut with a click of teeth and Thorin sat back in his seat satisfied and went back to polishing off the rest of his supper.

-Even if it was filled with vegetables.

Chapter End Notes
So wow! Nearly 100 pages and we haven't even left the Shire yet! How do my fics end up these monstrosities? Yet it seems you all are enjoying it as this fic has over 400 kudos and over 100 bookmarks! Thank you everyone!
The discussion after that had been rather muted, some looking forward to the trip such as Fíli and Kíli, while others were still more apprehensive about the whole issue, such as Balin. Thorin simply enjoyed the moment of pace that had settled over the table as he and Bilbo finished their meals.

Gandalf was still looking slightly put out, but Thorin paid him no mind and enjoyed the quiet. Already the trip was starting out much better than it had before. They had their burglar and Bilbo wouldn't have to chase them down to join them. He chuckled slightly to himself as he remembered Bilbo running after them, contract waving behind him like a banner. At the time he had been both aggravated and grudgingly impressed that after all his arguing to the contrary, the hobbit had actually had gone with them in the end. He could have done without having Bilbo complaining about all he had forgotten such as his handkerchiefs, but when Thorin thought about it, it showed that Bilbo really had dropped everything to join the company.

Thorin paused on his last spoonful as the implications of what he just thought of hit him. Bilbo had literally dropped everything, meaning he packed in a hurry and simply took off. 'No wonder he had been unprepared for such a journey,' he realized. 'Do hobbits even have traveling gear?'

Bilbo had arrived with a small pack when he had met up with Thorin and the others, but he barely had taken anything that would last. It was more for a day trip rather than months of provisions.

Finishing his last bite on that thought, he turned to Bilbo. "Do you need any assistance packing?" he asked as Bilbo stood to take their bowls.

Startled slightly, Bilbo froze in the act of reaching for Thorin's. "Pardon?"

Thorin absently realized the table had gone rather quiet once more, as he shifted slightly uneasy, not quite sure how to go about his inquiries. "I understand that Hobbits rarely if ever travel. If you do not have any of the necessary equipment, we will need to know so as to obtain them in Bree."

Bilbo finally took Thorin's bowl as he thought about it. "Oh, I suppose so. I have a light knapsack and a such for trips to Tookborough but for such a long journey…"

"Perhaps you can get what you have and we can find out what it is that needs to be added to it," Gandalf suggested as he stood and took one of the bowls from Bilbo before the hobbit could protest. "Allow me to help you."

That seemed to be the signal for everyone to disperse as they all stood and stretched, some taking out their pipes while others went to get more ale. Thorin just watched as the wizard and hobbit headed towards the kitchen. He could only imagine what it was that Gandalf was saying to him.

A throat was cleared behind him and he turned back to find that both Balin and Dwalin had stayed at the table and were watching him closely. "What help can this hobbit offer us?" Dwalin demanded to know the moment Bilbo and Gandalf were out of earshot. "Seems a bit puny to me."

Thorin glared at him but Balin was already speaking. "Why are you indulging Gandalf in this? The hobbit has no experience, no training, is completely unprepared and seems to be a rather timid thing."
Turning away from Dwalin he focused on answering Balin's question. "Its simple. We need all the help we can find."

"But why?" Dwalin insisted.

"Because I believe that we have one chance at this," Thorin announced. "If our fight against the dragon goes wrong, Smaug will be more prepared for the next time we try to reclaim Erebor. If we even could attempt a second try."

"What do you mean?" Balin asked him.

"We barely have the resources for this expedition! Glóin and Óin have already gone out of their way paying for practically this entire trip," he exclaimed. "And as the other lords have already turned us down once, do you think they would be more likely to agree with one failed attempt behind us?"

Balin furrowed his brows as he mulled over Thorin's words. "But why the hobbit? Surely someone else-?"

"Who?" Thorin demanded to know. "Has there been anyone offering?" Balin went notably quiet. "We have but one chance and it has to go right the first time. And mister Baggins, in spite of Gandalf meddling, has agreed to try and help us. Who am I to turn him away?"

"The odds are against us," Balin declared. "We're hardly the stuff of legends."

"And what good are legends to us now?" Thorin claimed before he gestured towards the rest of the home where the other dwarrows were milling about. "Everyone here answered when I called upon them. Despite their different backgrounds, professions, personalities they all have shown loyalty, honor and a willing heart. I can ask no more than that."

Dwalin seemed thoughtful, but Balin was shaking his head again. "You don't have to do this-

"Yes I do Balin," Thorin interrupted. "We may have peace at Nogrod, but we are by no means safe."

"What do you mean?" Dwalin sat back up alarmed. "Safe from what?"

Thorin turned to Dwalin and his friend took in his sober expression with surprise. "Everything," Thorin told him flatly before standing up from the table himself and leaving the two to their astonishment.

He headed towards the kitchen, worried what Gandalf was saying to Bilbo. He could already hear Gandalf's voice as he approached and he slowed slightly as he heard Gandalf asked, "but why Bilbo? As much as I am pleased you are joining us, why is it you agreed to an adventure when this morning you were so set against it?"

There was the sound of cutlery clinking slightly for a few moments before Bilbo answered him so quietly Thorin had to strain to hear. "Because he asked Gandalf. No one had ever asked me for help before. Me! And not even his own family was going to help, his family Gandalf! How could they do that?" The sound of clinking became louder for a few moments. "And no one should have to lose their home." Bilbo finished softly.

Gandalf said something that Thorin couldn't hear but Bilbo chuckled. "The last thing I would like to happen is the Sackville-Baggins getting a hold of Bag End. Worse than a dragon that lot."
"Who are Sackville-Baggins?" Thorin wanted to know as he finally entered the kitchen.

Gandalf was sipping a small cup of tea and narrowed his eyes slightly at Thorin's entrance, but Bilbo's back was turned as he put away the now clean bowls so he missed the short exchange. "My cousins," he answered. "Greedy lot."

"Greedy relatives. I don't think any family would be complete without those," Thorin laughed.

Bilbo smiled as he wiped his hands on a small towel. "Let's go see what I have for traveling then, shall we?"

Thorin nodded and followed Bilbo back out into the hallway, well aware that Gandalf was watching them leave. He tried not to think about it however as Bilbo led him to a closet further down the hallway where he pulled out a rather familiar knapsack. "I have a blanket and a few metal utensils with a canteen. Tinderbox and candle holder-"

"Candle holder?" Thorin asked disbelievingly.

Bilbo gave him a rather curious look. "For reading at night of course."

"Oh, of course," Thorin murmured. "However, since we are traveling in a large group, we will have larger fires so there will be plenty of light to work by."

Bilbo looked rather embarrassed as he pulled out the candle holder and shoved it back into the closet. "I'm not going to take it this time," Bilbo told him. "That would be impractical."

Thorin suppressed a smile. "Perhaps we should pull it out and go through it properly."

Nodding, Bilbo pulled out the pack and the two headed back towards the now empty dining room to spread the contents out on the table. Thorin frowned at the few things that Bilbo pulled out. Along with the eating utensils and blanket there was a mirror, and comb and not much else. Enough for Bilbo to travel the next town over, but not nearly enough for an extended trip.

"What are you doing over here?" Thorin and Bilbo turned to find Ori watching them inquisitively. "Oh! Are you packing now?" Ori continued excitedly. "I would love to see what it is Hobbits use."

Bilbo ducked his head rather mortified. "Not much it seems. It looks like I need to get more supplies in Bree," he mumbled.

Ori had picked up the mirror and examined the gilding on the back intriguingly. "Was this your mother's from her journeying?"

"It is actually," Bilbo began before he cut himself off with an exclamation of surprise. "Oh! I still have all her equipment, don't I?"

"Really?" Thorin asked, just as thrilled as Bilbo at the notion. "Do you know where it is?"

Bilbo was giving him another baffled look again. "In her Glory Box, of course."

"Is that what a Glory Box is for then?" Ori asked.

"A Glory Box is something the ladies of the household would keep their precious items in. Usually it's their wedding dress or things they've made for their children," Bilbo told them as they headed back down the opposite hallway now. "However, my mother always looked back on her traveling days fondly so that's where she kept her mementos."
Thorin was fascinated. "Your mother sounds like an incredible individual."

Bilbo looked back with a fond smile. "She was," he agreed before he turned forwards again. "More so that I ever was. Here we are." He smiled before he glanced back at Thorin. "Seems your nephews did a good job of it."

Thorin could agree as the mud had been wiped off and the scuffs cleaned out. "I am sorry Kíli did that though, he means well, but he doesn't always think things through."

"It's all right," Bilbo reassured him. "There wasn't any harmful damage done," and he opened the box.

Thorin's eyes went wide as the first thing he saw, right on the very top of the pile, was a bow and quiver of arrows. "I thought hobbits didn't use weapons," he asked amazed as he lifted the bow to inspect it.

Bilbo ducked his head embarrassed again. "Yeah. She taught me a bit when I was younger but father never approved. I haven't done anything with it since I was a fauntling myself."

Thorin frowned as he saw the one of the bow stave and string locks had snapped off and the string was entirely missing but the bow still looked serviceable. "We could repair the bow for you if you'd like to take it along."

Bilbo's eyes went wide. "Oh no! I couldn't. I was rather dismal at it to tell you the truth and…” he trailed off as he looked at the bow in Thorin's hands. "It was my mothers. I couldn't take it along."

"What of the arrows?" Thorin asked. "I hate to say this, but we could use anything we can get for this journey."

"Oh…” Bilbo looked back at the quiver. "I suppose. Though they are small…”

"It can't hurt to ask. Kíli!" Thorin barked out. There was a yelp from further in the hole and the pounding of feet as Fíli and Kíli scrambled at their uncle's summons.

"Inspecting our work?" Fíli asked as he and Kíli came around the corner and saw Thorin and Bilbo at the Glory Box.

"We cleaned it, we swear!" Kíli claimed. "If we knew where the polish was we would have done that too!"

"We can still polish it if you want," Fíli quickly added.

"No, no! We're just getting my mother's things," Bilbo quickly reassured before Kíli could continue. "We just had a question for you."

The two brightened. "Really? A question?"

Thorin gestured to the quiver of arrows Bilbo was pulling out of the box and looked at Kíli. "Can you use those?"

The two looked at the quiver in surprise and Kíli pulled one out in awe. "Wow! These are light."

"That's a no, then?" Thorin asked impatiently.

"I didn't say that," Kíli shook his head. "I bet these would be great for distance but I'm not sure how strong they would be." He frowned as he gently ran his thumb over the tip. "Could use with a
bit of sharpening and the feathers need to be re-done, but on the whole, they would be great for hunting small game like pheasants or small animals. When I got those rabbits before, my arrows almost went completely through them."

"Then you can have them," Bilbo said with a smile. "However, do you suppose we could leave the quiver here?" Thorin looked over the detailed tooling work the leather supported. Mostly flowers and such but done with such attention detail. He could see why Bilbo wouldn't want to chance losing one of his mother's beloved items.

"I can add them to my own quiver," Kíli agreed with a smile and he accepted the arrows happily.

"These your mother's traveling things then?" Nori suddenly appeared on the other side of the box as he looked over the contents.

Bilbo nodded as he pulled out a large piece of light brown cloth. Standing he shook it out and Thorin could see it was a coat. A traveling coat to be precise. A leather-traveling coat that looked as if it had been filled with down, though it had lumped together in some places after time and had more pockets than Thorin had ever seen.

Thorin thrust the bow over at Nori and reached out to take the coat when Bilbo offered it, thinking Thorin just wanted a closer look. Therefor Bilbo was genuinely surprised when Thorin held it up against him with a critical frown. It was a long coat, coming just below Bilbo's knees and the shoulder looked a bit small but…

"The shoulders might be snug, but it looks as if it would fit. Try it on," Thorin held the coat back out.

"What? But it's a lady's coat!" Bilbo yelped in surprise. There was some chuckling from the others, but Thorin continued to hold out the coat at Bilbo. "And I already have a coat."

"It's a travel-coat," he persisted. "They're tailored for easy movement, should be cool in the warmer weather and warm when it's not. It looks to have been treated to keep out the rain. Try it on."

"But it's a corset style-" Bilbo tried again.

"Then take the ribbons out. You can use a coat like this on such a journey as ours. The pockets alone are worth taking it," Thorin maintained. "Try it on."

Frowning, Bilbo snatched the coat out of Thorin's hands and reluctantly slipped it on. The sleeves were slightly too short and the waist was small, but Ori was already helping Bilbo untie the ribbons that held the material closed so it shouldn't be too tight. On the whole the coat looked to fit. Bilbo, it seemed, took after his mother in more ways than just a inclination for journeying.

Nori let out a low whistle. "Looking good there Mister Baggins."

"Ignore him," Thorin commanded. "How is the shoulder movement?"

Bilbo rolled his eyes but reached out in front of him with both hands before back out to the sides then behind him. "Other than the short sleeves… it actually fits," Bilbo muttered as he looked down at the coat. "I still look ridiculous however."

Thorin chuckled. "Look at it this way, it will be easier to clean. The mud and snot should wash right off." He looked the coat over critically. "The pockets will help you from losing anything vital," he continued.
Fíli seemed to shake himself out of a sort of bewildered daze that the other four were still supporting and looked at Thorin inquisitively. "What's that suppose to mean?"

"It means if his pack is lost, then he won't be completely without supplies," Thorin explained. "It's always best to have the more critical items on your person at all times. If you can't live without it, best make sure you know where it is at all times." Fíli and Kíli shared a surprised glance while Ori seemed to be writing down what Thorin was saying in his small book.

Nori was actually nodding in approval. "If the coat's got inner pockets, that would be the best place to keep some coin as well. Especially if you keep the coat closed at all times. Thieves would have a harder time of it," he added. Then he smirked. "Or if there isn't, you could do what our illustrious leader does and keep some coin in your boot."

Thorin looked at the other dwarf surprised. "You could tell?"

Nori laughed. "The best thieves would," he enlightened them. "And I'm one of the best in the business."

"Oh," Bilbo shuffled at bit. "Thank you. There do seem to be inner pockets so I'll do that."

"What's this?" Fíli asked as he pulled out another knife from the box. "Doesn't look like a hunting knife and you already have one of those."

"It's a patch knife," Bilbo told him, shrugging out of the coat and draping it over his arm. "Used for cutting cloth."

"Really?" Ori now came over and took the knife from Fíli, examining it intently.

Fíli was digging through the box again, but Thorin let it go as it seemed Bilbo didn't mind the dwarfling pawing through the contents. He pulled out a larger pack along with a much thicker bedroll and a strange, flat piece of metal.

"What's that?" Kíli asked, staring at the object in awe.

Bilbo chuckled. "Hold it by the handle."

Looking skeptical, Fíli lifted the handle and yelped as the bottom suddenly dropped to become a cooking pot. Kíli's eyes went wide. "That was amazing!" he proclaimed and whirled to Thorin. "Why don't we have anything like that?"

"I must admit, I've never seen such an item before," Thorin admitted.

"We have got to take this!" Fíli claimed.

"Bombur already has a large cooking pot," Thorin argued. "And it won't suffice to feed all of us, now would it?"

Fíli slumped. "I suppose not."

Bilbo looked at the dejected dwarfling and turned to Thorin. "As you said, it can't hurt to ask master Bombur if he could use it." Fíli and Kíli perked back up again and Thorin couldn't help but capitulate.

With the matter of the pot seemingly settled, Fíli started digging through the box again finding some necessities such as a small shovel and such. There were some ladies clothing along with what
had been the woman's clay pipe, but Fíli put those back into the box at Bilbo's direction. They did keep out the herb and healing books however and Thorin suggested Bilbo show them to Óin to see if they would be worth taking with.

What was going to remain at Bag End was put back in the box as Bilbo gathered the sack and bedroll. "I'll just fetch the items from the table and head to my room and start packing then."

Thorin nodded absently as he watched Fíli and Kíli go off in search of Bombur to show him the amazing folding pot and Ori had wandered off with the books. Nori however had stayed behind and Thorin waited for him to speak. "Yes Master Nori?" Thorin finally asked, as it seemed as if the other dwarf wasn't going to speak any time soon.

Nori shrugged. "Nothing. You're just… not what I expected is all."

Thorin finally turned and looked at Nori curiously. "What did you expect?"

There was a slight pause before Nori gave a rueful smile. "Not so sure anymore." With those puzzling words, he headed back into the main room where most of the others were situated around the fire smoking their pipes. Still slightly confused at the strange statement, Thorin gave the Glory Box a cursory glance before he followed. Balin and Óin were going over the books Ori had brought out while Bombur was looking at the pot in disbelief as he folded it and unfolded it.

With a soft smile he headed towards the fireplace and as he looked down at it he found himself humming the old song. 'Well, it wouldn't be our journey if we didn't sing it,' he decided and he began. The other's joined in one by one until they were all singing, filling the hobbit hole with their deep, reverberating voices. Thorin wouldn't think it before, but it felt good to sing it again.

He happened to glance up as the line about the roaring pines and was surprised to see Bilbo hovering slightly in the doorway, watching them. The hobbit must have felt his gaze and he stepped back, further into the shadows as they finished. The others had gone quiet after the song and Thorin quietly made his way to where the Hobbit had ducked back around the corner.

"Did you need something else Mister Baggins?" Thorin asked upon finding Bilbo leaning against the wall near the door.

Bilbo startled. "Oh! I was actually bringing you something."

Thorin looked down at the parchment and writing supplies Bilbo held out along with a small stick of wax. "You said you wanted to write to my grandfather."

"Indeed. The last thing I want is to be accused of kidnapping," Thorin chuckled. Bilbo just rolled his eyes before he looked back at the doorway where the glow of the fire spilled out. "Was there something else?"

Bilbo just smiled. "You know. If I hadn't already agreed, that song would have made me at least reconsider."

Thorin stared at him stunned. 'A song?' he wondered in disbelief. 'That's what made him change his mind last time? The song?'

Bilbo stifled a yawn. "I do fear I'm not going to get much sleep tonight," he admitted softly and Thorin pulled himself out of his thoughts.

"Not many of us are," he agreed. "We'll leave not long after sunrise. Do we need to stop somewhere so you could notify this mister Gamgee?"
"Oh no. He's right next-door and is up with the sun. Professional gardener. They're always up at strange hours."

Thorin nodded. "I'll have the others tidy up your home tonight as well. Do you mind if I have Bombur go through the rest of your pantry for anything we could take along with us? We'll throw out the rest."

Bilbo gave a relieved sigh. "Thank you." He stifled another yawn. "I still don't know how much help I'm going to be."

Thorin chuckled. "Gandalf did say that you were a master of stealth. It should be most helpful when sneaking about right under Smaug's snout." He gave Bilbo a small sideways look. "Especially seeing as you can go completely invisible," he teased.

"What are you talking about? Invisible?" Bilbo snorted. "Ridiculous. We're simply quieter than most. We don't go invisible."

Thorin found that bewilderment was becoming his permanent state of mind. He could clearly remember Bilbo being completely invisible when escaping Mirkwood and in the treasure room. He was not dreaming that bit 'What-

"Well, if you'll excuse me," Bilbo pulled Thorin's attention back. "I have more packing to do and my own letter to write. Good night."

Thorin returned the farewell and moved to the other room, his thoughts still slightly a whirl. Perhaps he had remembered wrong? But no, Bilbo had been invisible so what was it Thorin was missing? 'Yet another thing to puzzle out tomorrow,' Thorin sighed to himself.

Speaking quickly to Dwalin and Bombur about what he had promised the hobbit, he allowed them to usher the others into working to clean up the place as he headed towards one of the free chairs with a side table. Pulling the table slightly forward, he began composing the letter as Balin brought his own chair closer.

"We'll leave at first light then?" Balin asked.

"Just after," Thorin replied. "Best to get some sleep while you can. It will be a long day tomorrow."

"First of many," Balin agreed as he re-filled his pipe and took another long puff from it.

"Oh before I forget. I'll need the royal seal."

"Whatever for laddie?" Balin asked surprised.

Thorin just pointed at the parchment with his quill. "Writing to Bilbo's grandfather expressing how grateful we are at Bilbo's assistance along with a few reassurances."

Balin took a long drag on his pipe. "Rather strange for you to be writing the family," he acknowledged.

"Normally I wouldn't, but that was before I learned that Bilbo Baggins is part of the hobbit royal family," Thorin chuckled.

Balin's eyes went wide. "Is he now?" He glanced back towards the door the hobbit had gone through. "Well now, that puts a whole new light on things, doesn't it?"
"Indeed," Thorin drawled. "Though why Gandalf didn't decide to mention that is anyone's guess."

"I'm sure he had his own reasons in his mind," Balin said as he dug though his pockets and brought out a metal stamp. It would have been solid gold, but that one had been left behind in Erebor during the flight. "Do you wish for me to go over the letter for you?" he asked in a rather neutral voice. "There may be something you might have forgotten."

"I think I have everything covered," Thorin assured him as he folded the letter. Holding a candle and the red stick of wax over it, he allowed the flame to melt the wax into a puddle over the flap. Setting both back down on the table, he accepted the stamp and pressed his seal into the soft wax before passing it back to Balin who brushed pieces of cooled wax off of it.

"I'd best go check on my brother," Balin gave Thorin a small nod. "See how he's doing with that bathroom."

"Good luck," Thorin called after him as he sat back in the chair, feeling rather relieved.

It had been a long day, but Thorin felt as if he had accomplished most of what he had set out to do. Bilbo was joining them and the others seemed to be in good spirits. Though how long that would last was anyone's guess. For now however they were prepared as much as they could be and anything they needed would easily be gotten in Bree or, reluctantly, Rivendell.

And Thorin had a plan. He wasn't fully prepared, but he had a tentative idea for dealing with the trolls and orcs afterwards. The Stone Giants he hoped they would be able circumvent and the Goblins he was adamant about avoiding. On the whole, rather sound strategy in his opinion. Even Mahal and Irmo themselves couldn't argue with it.

No. Thorin had it all planed out. Down to the last detail.

The cave was dark. There was barely any light but Thorin could make out shapes. There was a small river flowing in the center of the cave with high outcroppings of rocks situated above it.

On the very top of one of the rocks was a figure. Hunched over and rocking back and forth, muttering at itself. Surprised that anyone would even be in such a dismal place, especially without any torches or such to brighten the way, Thorin stepped closer.

He could just make out the mutters the closer he got and he frowned at the repeated statement puzzled.

"It came to me, my own. My love. My precious."

The figure seemed to be looking at something in it's hands and Thorin tried to get closer to see what it was that the creature held. That's when his foot slipped and the creature's head snapped up, clasping its hands together in surprise.

Thorin reared back horrified. It was a fowl creature. Gray, leathery skin pulled over a skeletal frame while large, wide eyes cast about for Thorin. "Hello?"

Thorin's eyes snapped open to find a face hovering just inches from his own and before he could think about it, Thorin did the only practical thing he could do in the situation.

He screamed.
Chapter End Notes

1) In looking up Colonial & American Revolutionary war gear I found out that soldiers really did take Candle holders with them. Who knew?

2) Some examples of Belladonna's coat I envision: Image 1, image 2 and Image 3

3) The Gollum scene is from the opening of The Fellowship of the Ring
It took some time to calm everyone down after Thorin's scream. At the sound of it, everyone had come charging in from other areas of the house in a frenzy, some alarmed that something was attacking them and others just wondering what it was that had happened to cause Thorin to scream so loudly.

Dwalin had come charging in at Thorin's shout, both his axes out and at the ready to lend Thorin aid against an attacking foe. Of course, it didn't help that Hobbit doors were round and rather short as he had gotten one of them, Keeper Thorin believed, stuck in the overhead arch of the door frame. Naturally that was when Bilbo had come running from the back of the house and had shoved through the other dwarrows just in time to see Dwalin tugging the axe out of the door frame, taking a rather large chuck of the wood with it and Bilbo was practically sputtering in fury.

Gandalf appeared from one of the other rooms and took in the scene with a glance. "Oh dear. Is everything all right in here?" he asked as he knelt next to the dwarf on the ground.

Balin didn't reply immediately as his attention was still fixed on Thorin. It was good thing that Balin's reflexes were still as sharp as ever. He had been able to avoid Thorin's wild swing, but unfortunately hadn't been able to keep his feet and fell back onto the floor anyway.

Thorin fidgeted guiltily. "Sorry," he mumbled. What was it about Balin that made everyone feel as if they were thirty years old again?

"Goodness me," Gandalf chuckled as Balin finally stood up. "I'd best see if I could be any assistance to Bilbo."

Dwalin had managed to escape the now fussing hobbit still muttering about the old wood thanks to the wizard and started towards them, watching Thorin avidly. "What was that all about?" he asked, Fíli and Kíli appearing behind him.

"Are you all right Uncle?" Fíli asked distressed.

"Are we under attack?" Kíli wanted to know, eyes casting about the room in search of any danger.

"No, Balin just startled me is all," Thorin explained.

"I can believe that," Fíli muttered under his breath and Dwalin reached out and thwacked him on the head.

"Didn't realize I had fallen asleep," Thorin continued. "I just closed my eyes for a second. Sorry for that," he apologized.

Balin looked amazed for a moment before he nodded. "Quite all right laddie. I wasn't sure if you really were asleep or just resting. I should have said something."

Thorin nodded as his thought turned back to his dream. 'What was that thing?' he wondered, rather disgusted. 'Why would Irmo show me such a foul thing? And what had it been holding?' He sighed tiredly. 'What does this one mean and what does it have to do with us? We never encountered such a creature the first time, I'm sure."

Opening his eyes, Thorin saw the others hovering about the room and he frowned at them. "I take it you're all done with your tasks?"
There was some shuffling and a few disappeared. Bombur, however, approached Bilbo who was still looking up at the large missing chunk of doormframe. There was a small discussion and Bombur smiled pleased as he headed back towards the kitchen.

Bofur came over grinning. "It looks like we'll have some spice on our trip."

"Is that what that was about?" Thorin asked as he finally rose from the chair. Who knew hobbit chairs were so comfortable?

"Aye," Bofur nodded. "The hobbit let Bombur take practically his whole spice rack," he proclaimed before he pulled the boys off to rearrange the furniture back the way it was.

Thorin was actually relieved at Bofur's announcement. "Anything would be better than gruel."

"Agreed," Balin added sourly.

"I like gruel," Dwalin sulked slightly.

"You would," Thorin chuckled and reached over and punched his friend in the arm. Dwalin gave him his own shove and they would have continued had Balin not cleared his throat.

Giving Dwalin one last punch, Thorin glanced at the window and wasn't surprised to see that it was starting to lighten outside. "Best start gathering our things."

"Aye, that's why I came to fetch you," Balin drawled.

Thorin winced at the stern frown he was getting. "I am sorry about that." Balin just continued to frown at him and Thorin desperately searched for an excuse to leave. He found one, but he wasn't sure if it was much better as Gandalf returned.

"Bit of excitement first thing in the morning," the wizard chuckled.

Thorin tried to look as if the small dig didn't bother him as much as it did. Balin and Dwalin made good their escape and Thorin watched them go enviously before turning back to Gandalf. "If we disturbed your sleep, I apologize."

Gandalf just chuckled. "Nothing to be sorry for. Even the most attentive of us can be surprised a time or two."

"Of course there's a "but" in that sentence,' Thorin thought.

'However, I was wondering how the meeting with your kin went? You said they did not agree to lend you any aid..."

Thorin became wary. He hadn't been expecting that sort of question. Something to do with Bilbo or Thorin's rather boisterous start of the day, those questions were more plausible than this. "They are worried for their own people. An understanding stance considering it is a dragon we are going after," Thorin finally told him flatly. "Dáin was rather apologetic and a few of the heirs and spouses seemed rather sympathetic to our plight, but on the whole, the vote did not surprise me."

'Especially since they had voted once before.'
"Hmm…"

Thorin tried not to shift uneasily under Gandalf's searching gaze. "I should see how far along everyone is," Thorin made bid his escape and thankfully Gandalf let him go.

The rest of the time as the sun rose was spent returning the furniture to their rightful places and taking out the few rugs there were and beating the dirt the dwarrows had tracked in out of them. Most of others seemed rather surprised at Thorin's help, but no one said anything about it and the work went quickly.

It was just as the sun was half way over the horizon that Thorin looked up from beating a small throw rug from the bathroom to find a hobbit standing on the other side of Bilbo's gate staring at himself and Bifur agog. "Here now!" he called out when he saw Thorin had spotted them. "What are you doing to Master Bilbo's rugs?"

"Airing them out, actually," Thorin explained as he set aside the small rug and made his way down the stairs. "May I help you?"

The hobbit took a quick step back, putting some distance between them. "That depends," he said slowly. "What are you doing here? Where's Master Bilbo?"

Thorin frowned, an idea coming to him. "Are you Mister Gamgee then? The gardener?"

The hobbit jerked in surprise and nearly fell backwards had Thorin not quickly reached out and snagged his vest, pulling him back onto his feet proper. "I-I am sir!"

"Excellent. Bilbo wanted to speak to you before we leave." Thorin brushed out some of the wrinkles his grip had created in the fabric.

"Leave? Leave for where? What-" Gamgee the gardener cut of with a choke and Thorin looked behind to find Bifur had come down the stairs. The hobbit's gaze was fixed on the orc axe in his forehead.

"Ah… Perhaps you should fetch Mister Bilbo," Thorin suggested. Bifur did a quick signing of acknowledgement and headed back up towards the door, snagging the two rugs on the way and Thorin turned back to the hobbit. "Would you like to come in?" he asked, holding open the gate.

"Oh… I suppose…” Mister Gamgee seemed slightly overcome and Thorin made sure to stay behind the hobbit on the stairs in case he lost his footing. The other hobbit seemed fine however as he all but ran up the stairs and into the hole. Thorin followed behind to see that the gardener didn't get far as apparently he had bumped into Glóin who was now staring down at the hobbit.

"Who's this then?" Glóin asked suspiciously and a few of the other dwarrows walking by slowed down to stare at the newcomer. Gamgee squeaked.

"Hamfast!" Bilbo's surprise voice carried over to them and they turned to see Bilbo being prodded forward by an insistent Bifur. "Excellent timing! I have to speak to you."

"It's going to have to be quick. The sun is already rising and we do have to go and collect our ponies," Thorin reminded him.

"I'm sure Hamfast wouldn't mind taking a walk with us for a while," Bilbo insisted. "Hang on and let me get my gear."

Thorin watched as Bilbo ducked back into the home. He had simply meant for Bilbo to be quick in
explaining things to one Hamfast Gamgee, but still, they had better press on. Especially as everyone seemed more alert than they had been an hour ago. He had asked if anyone else had gotten any sleep as they had worked and it seemed as if a few had done some quick naps, but everyone was too excited now to be tired.

’Worse comes to worse, they can always sleep as we ride,’ he figured. The last go around, Thorin found he could practically fall asleep anywhere and had fallen asleep in the saddle a time or two before they had lost the ponies at Trollshaws. ”You heard him!” he called out at the milling group. ”Get your things! We’re off!”

Fili, Kili and Bofur let out a cheer and the group quickly dispersed to gather what things they had. Dwalin joined them at the door, putting Keeper away. Thorin could see he had sharpened it since the door jam incident.

Poor Mister Gamgee must have seen it too for he had suddenly gone quite white. Thorin wondered if he should ask if the hobbit needed to sit down, but Bilbo was already coming out from the back and instead Thorin turned his attention to their burglar. He was pleased to see the hobbit was wearing the coat. The stays had been removed and it seemed to fit much better in the waist like Thorin had suspected. A much improvement over the burgundy evening coat the hobbit had worn before. Bilbo seemed to have replaced his yellow vest with a more practical brown one and now wore serviceable trousers instead.

Gamgee's color returned as he took in his friend's appearance with surprise. ”Are ye leaving Master Bilbo?” he asked in amazement.

Bilbo gave him a wide smile. ”I am. Like my mother did.”

Gamgee looked him over. ”Oh aye! You're even wearing her coat.”

Bilbo let out a huff as he turned to Thorin. ”You see?”

Thorin just shrugged unrepeated. ”I still maintain it's a nice, practical coat for traveling.”

”For a lady, yes,” Bilbo sighed but he didn't remove the garment.

”Ah! Young Hamfast Gamgee. How nice to see you again,” Gandalf greeted as he approached.

Gamgee for his part just stared up at the wizard and Bilbo quickly stepped forward. ”Hamfast, you remember Gandalf don't you? Had all those lovely fireworks?”

”Oh! Oh y-es, I d-o. Hello again,” Gamgee stuttered slightly in surprise. Cloaks and weapons were quickly collected and the group headed out the door, a still slightly stunned Gamgee leading the way as he was still in the doorway.

Thorin quickly went about fetching his own cloak and weapons to join with the others and took one last quick glance around Bag End. It surprised him just how much of it he had missed the first time he visited and he wanted to remember it better this time. He had to ensure that Bilbo would be able to return to it one day.

He was just heading for the door when he happened to spot a piece of cloth laying on one of the hallway tables and quickly snatching it, he stuffed it in his pocket and hurried his steps to catch up to everyone.

The two hobbits were waiting just outside with the wizard and much to Thorin's amusement, he realized that Gandalf was doing a quick head count. As he finally exited the doorway, Bilbo
stepped forward to pull the green door shut, locking it firmly. Bilbo paused slightly, pressing his hand against the wood briefly before he turned around and handed Gamgee the key, following Gandalf down the stairs.

"I'm going to be gone for a long while," Bilbo explained to Gamgee. "We're going to see about getting the dwarves back their home."

"What happened to it?"

"Well it was… it was…" Bilbo was suddenly hesitating and Thorin was about to answer in his stead when Bilbo continued. "It was infested," he finished.

"Infested? By what?"

"Um…"

"By a dragon!"

Thorin groaned as Kíli suddenly appeared at the back of the line with them, Fíli not far behind and Kíli threw an arm over Bilbo's shoulders.

"A- a dragon you say?" Gamgee gasped.

"That's right! Bilbo's going to help us chase the dragon out!" Fíli added just as excited. "That dragon better not get too comfortable for we're going to show him a thing or two about messing with us dwarrows!"

Kíli cheered and Thorin could see Gamgee's stunned expression as he turned to stare at Bilbo beside him in disbelief.

Bilbo cleared his throat. "Well… yes… all right." He shrugged Kíli's arm off and the two dwarflings ran back forward towards where Dwalin was leading the line before running back to speak with Bofur and then running ahead of Dwalin this time, causing the larger dwarf to shout after them. Thorin wondered if he had ever been such full of energy at their age.

"So, as you can see," Bilbo continued once the two were gone again. "I'm going to be gone for quite some time and I need you to look after Bag End for me"

Gamgee nodded, his head moving so quickly Thorin feared it might snap off. "But what shall I tell anyone if they come asking? You don't," here he glanced back at Thorin and Thorin quickly pretended to be thinking of something else and not paying attention to the two hobbits. Gamgee lowered his voice slightly. "That you're with dwarves fighting a dragon! No one would believe me!"

"Tell them whatever you wish," Bilbo shrugged. "Though I highly doubt anyone would even notice I was gone."

Thorin's head snapped up at this. Who wouldn't notice if Bilbo had gone or not? He was rather… memorable. Nori, who was just in front of them glanced back at Thorin and Thorin saw him giving Bilbo a considerable look before turning back ahead. Thorin made a quick note to ask the company thief about that look and what it meant at a later date.

"Oh Miss Lobelia would, in a heartbeat if it meant getting her hands on Bag End," Gamgee countered rather disgruntled.
"Who?" Thorin couldn't stop himself from asking.

Gamgee startled, but Bilbo turned to grace Thorin with a knowing smile. "Sackville-Baggins."

"Ah!" Thorin chuckled. "After your property are they?"

"And would use any trick in the book to get it too," Bilbo agreed.

"And how am I suppose to keep her out then?" Gamgee demanded to know. "I'm not family. I have no claim-"

"Oh! I have a letter for the Thain explaining everything," Bilbo quickly pulled out a folded piece of parchment with a green wax seal keeping it closed and passed it over to the other hobbit. "It will let him know that I have left you in charge of the rents and so forth." He turned around slightly at the waist and gestured towards Thorin. "Master Oakenshield has one for him as well."

"Please call me Thorin," he insisted as he reached into his own pocket and withdrew the letter, handing it to Gamgee.

"Only if you call me Bilbo," the hobbit countered.

Thorin couldn't help but smile. "It would be an honor."

Gamgee looked back and forth between the two anxiously. "Oh… okay then."

The group had reached the bottom of the hill and Thorin could see Fíli and Kíli running towards the fenced in field where the ponies were clustered. Sighing, he turned back to Bilbo. "I'd best stop them from starting a stampede," he announced and was surprised to see Bilbo looking at the ponies in shock.

"When you said ponies I assumed it was just pack ponies," Bilbo insisted. "I don't… I don't ride."

"Unfortunately, you're going to have to," Thorin told him gently. "They are very well trained, 'when my nephews aren't riling them up.' "and very gentle."

"But Hobbits walk everywhere," Bilbo continued sounding rather panicked which brought Gandalf's attention to them. "We're very adapt at walking long distances on any given day."

"I'm sure you have walked many miles," Thorin conceded, "and we will be walking most of the way once we hit the mountains, but until then, we will be covering not only more than three times the distance you have ever walked daily, but for days on end. It would be better to ride the ponies while we can. I'm sure your feet will thank you for it after a week or so."

"I know it is against hobbit custom," Gandalf agreed, "yet it truly would be faster and the dwarves do need to get to Erebor rather promptly."

Bilbo's eyes had gone wide as he watched the other dwarrows collect the ponies. "I-I guess so."

Gamgee looked appalled at the notion, but Bilbo shrugged at him and the gardener sighed. "Better than being left behind I suppose," he admitted.

"Mister Boggins! Here's a nice pony we have for you!" Kíli called out, pulling one of the pack ponies forward. Thorin recognized it as the one Bilbo had ridden before.

"Oh he's…"
"She," Kíli corrected.

"S-she's very nice," Bilbo smiled at the young dwarf. "What is her name?"

"Name?" now Kíli was the one who was confused. "She hasn't got one."

"Perhaps as the one who will be riding her, you could name her," Thorin suggested.

"I'll have to think of something then," Bilbo agreed and Kíli smiled and held out the lead for Bilbo to take. Bilbo looked at it as if it were a snake rather than a rope but as no one else was reaching out to take it he reluctantly accepted it.

Thorin gave him an approving nod and headed towards where the others were already tacking their individual ponies and ensuring the packs were sufficiently secure on the other two.

It was a surprise however to see Ori had his own items spread out before him and was separating his personal possessions into two separate piles. Dori seemed to be just as baffled as he made his way over to his brother. "What are you doing Ori? You're going to get your clothes all dirty!"

Ori just smiled up at him. "Separating out the vital necessities from the things I could do without," he explained.

"What? Why?" Bofur asked curiously and Thorin watched as Nori bent down to help Ori sort through his things as the younger turned to explain.

"So I won't be caught unprepared. If I need it for my survival, I should keep it on my person so it won't be lost." He frowned then. "I don't have too many pockets though."

"I have enough for the both of us if your pack becomes lost," Nori told him and Ori smiled brilliantly at his brother.

Fíli and Kíli were nodding as they pulled out their own packs. "A good traveler knows that you keep the more important items on your person at all times," Fíli declared.

"If you can't live without it, then you're a dead dwarf if it's lost!" Kíli finished.

"I didn't say it quite like that," Thorin drawled, but the other dwarrows were already pulling their own packs back off their ponies and going through them. Thorin sighed exasperated while Bilbo and Gandalf just watched in amusement.

Kíli just grinned unrepeated as he dug into his sack. His eyes suddenly went wide and he started to shuffle the items rather frantically. "Mahal's hammer! Fíli! I forgot my oilskin!" he cried out in alarm.

"What?" Fíli looked up in surprise before he started going through his own bag. "Hang on! Maybe mother put it with mi- Mine's gone too!"

"I have them," Thorin called out in exasperation at his nephew's frantic babbling and everyone watched as he lifted up his saddlebag and removed the sought after items. "As I said. If you can't live without it, know where it is at all times," he repeated as he tossed them at the boys.

"I don't know how vital oilskins would be thought," Balin stated as he watched the boys shove them into their own packs. There were a few chuckles at this and some teased the boys at their forgetfulness.
Thorin just shrugged. "You never know when it might rain for a seven day straight." Balin rolled his eyes while a few other dwarrows close to them laughed at this. Thorin just tried his hardest not to burst into laughing himself, but for an entirely different reason.

Soon enough there was a large pile of odds and ends situated next to the shed. Most were books from Ori and Balin along with some extra towels that Dori had been bringing for some unknown reason. Glóin, it seemed, had an extra pair of boots and Balin suggested he wear the sturdiest of the pair, leave the other one behind.

Thorin looked at the assortment and sighed. "We can't leave this all here," he reminded them.

"It can go into Bag End," Bilbo quickly offered as a solution.

"We don't have the time to haul it back up the hill, we're wasting daylight as it is," Dwalin declared from where he was already seated atop his own pony.

"I could do it," Gamgee surprised everyone by volunteering. "I can get my wheelbarrow. It's not a problem."

"Thank you master Gamgee," Thorin sighed, relieved. "If you write to my sister Dís in Ered Luin, the Blue Mountains, I'm sure she could send someone along to fetch them."

"Oh it's-it's no trouble at all."

With the luggage situated, Thorin had Fíli show Bilbo how to tack his pony while he went about saddling Gyth. He watched critically as Fíli practically threw Bilbo into the saddle and was about to say something, but Bilbo was already sitting in the saddle proper so Thorin let it go.

Gamgee was standing a little ways off watching disapprovingly. "Never in all my years," he muttered. "A hobbit riding a pony."

Bilbo just smiled sheepishly and Fíli started showing him how to hold the rains and coax the pony into going the way Bilbo wanted it to as Kíli shouted tips from where he was repacking his and his brother's satchels. Thorin watched as Bilbo started riding slightly in circles, Fíli walking along beside and frowned. "Fíli!" he called out to catch the boy's attention. "Shorten the stirrups for him!"

He nodded approvingly as Fíli quickly did so and Bilbo relaxed slightly as his feet were now firmly against something and not just hanging. With the hobbit situated, Thorin took stock of his company. Gandalf was sitting contently on his own horse watching Bilbo fondly and Glóin was showing Bofur the girth trick with Dwalin watching intently. Ori was already on his pony so Thorin pulled Gyth behind him and made his way to Dori's side. "Double check the girth."

Dori jumped at the sound of Thorin's voice, but Thorin just tilted his head towards where Ori was twisted around in the saddle to speak to Bombur. The other dwarf quickly stepped forward to do so and was surprised when the girth went up another full three inches. Ori had turned back around and was looking down at his brother in surprise. "What are you doing?"

Thorin didn't hear Dori's response as he had turned around and pulled Gyth's girth. Feeling that it was a tight as he was going to be able to make it, he quickly mounted and turned back to watch the few still on the ground follow his lead.

"If we are all set?" he called out.

"Everything is ready master Thorin," Gandalf called out.
"All right then. Let's go," Thorin announced and turned to lead the way down the road.

"Good bye Hamfast!" Bilbo called out behind him.

"Goodbye Master Bilbo," Gamgee replied. "And good luck to you!"

Thorin silently thanked the hobbit for his well wishes. They certainly were going to need it.

Hamfast looked down at the pile of dwarf items left behind and sighed. It would probably take two trips, but he could get it all into Bag End before second breakfast. But first he needed to find a Bounder who was awake enough to get the letter started towards Tookborough. Letters to the Thain, especially of this importance, were not to go by way of standard letter carrier.

He found one soon enough and the Bounder quickly headed off towards the next post of Bywater. From there the letter made it's way to Three Farthings before finally made it's way to Tookborough and the door of Gerontius Took some two days later.

His wife Adamanta accepted the letter from the breathless Bounder and quickly went to her husband's study. "Dear! We have a letter from Bilbo!"

Gerontius looked up from his ledger in surprise. "From Bilbo? What on earth could he want?"

"I don't know," Adamanta smiled. "But we have a letter from him and someone else."

Gerontius frowned as he accepted the two pieces of parchment. Looking at the green Baggins' seal, he quickly broke the wax and opened the letter.

"Dear Grandfather," the letter began.

"I know this seems rather sudden, but I am leaving Hobbiton for a good while. In fact, you'll be surprised or not so surprised to learn that I'm actually leaving the Shire entirely. Some friends of Gandalf's had asked for my help with a small problem and I've agreed to assist them in any way that I can. I think mother would approve. Of both my assisting Gandalf's friends as well as my traveling to see the world, wouldn't you agree?

My neighbor Hamfast Gamgee is going to be collecting the Hobbiton rent for me while I'm away as well as looking after Bag End. I've left him with full authority over my property and I hope you would lend assistance to him if anything should happen while I am away.

Farewell and May the Valar bless you.

Your grandson,

Bilbo Baggins."

Gerontius stared at the letter aghast. "The boy's left!" he exclaimed stunned.

"What?" Adamanta shouted and took the letter from her husband to read herself. "Well, at least we now know that he takes after his mother after all," she mused. "What of the other letter?"

Gerontius pulled the second parchment forward and studied the seal. It was one he had never seen before. A sword and an axe, crossed over what seemed to be a single mountain in the background. 'That's not a hobbit seal,' Gerontius realized as he broke the wax apprehensively.

"To Gerontius Took, Thain of the Shire," the letter began stiffly.
"I am Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thráin, son of Thrór and King of the lost dwarf kingdom of Erebor."

"By the Great Garden! A king!" Adamanta, who by this point was reading over Gerontius' shoulder exclaimed.

"I know that this is very short notice," the letter continued, "but you grandson has graciously agreed to assist us with the reclaiming our lost home. I would like to now promise you that Bilbo Baggins will be safe in our keeping. We will not allow any harm to befall him and will do our up most to assure his safe return to Bag End.

I shall not lie to you that the journey we are embarking on is not without its dangers, however I swear on my sword that I shall personally do everything I can to ensure Bilbo's well being.

Should I die before this promise is completed then my heir and eldest nephew Fíli son of Fártri son of Kíltri will ensure that my will is carried out and that Bilbo Baggins will be returned to your family whole and healthy.

If you have any questions, my sister Dís, daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór and mother to Fíli will be passing through your Shire in a few months as my people make their way from the Blue Mountains home. She shall be able to reaffirm my pledge that your grandson shall be protected while he travels with us, as well as vouch for her son's ability to see Bilbo safely home.

Our kingdom is indebted to your grandson for his willingness to help us with our plight and our kind does not take these things lightly. The name of Bilbo Baggins will be praised for years to come and all will speak of the gentle hobbit that braved leaving his home to help those who needed him.

He is a credit to his mother, whom I hear was quite the adventuress herself, and a credit to you and yours. You should be very proud of him.

Yours graciously,

Thorin Oakenshield, son of Thráin, son of Thrór"

"Goodness," Adamanta shook her head as they finished the letter. "Bit stiff this one."

Gerontius just sat back deep in thought. The tone of the letter was… off.

Full of assurances that Bilbo would survive while at the same time making contingency plans if Thorin was unable to fulfill said promise. This Thorin sounded as if he wasn't sure even he would survive such a journey. How was it then, that he could guarantee Bilbo's survival?

And if this Thorin was a king who lost his home, wouldn't that mean he lost his whole kingdom? How did one go about losing that?

Gerontius' leapt out of his chair, startling Adamanta and shouted for his fifth son who was working in the other office of the large hobbit hole. "Isembold!" he called again as he headed out of his own to find him. Gerontius needed to learn what exactly it was that his grandson was tangled up in and the only way he was going to get any answers was at Bag End.
It was a lovely morning for a ride. The sun was still low over the horizon so the temperature was still slightly cooler while there was a gentle breeze blowing down from the north. All in all, a gorgeous day to start out on a quest, it should have been a fortuitous sign.

Balin wasn't paying any attention to the scenery however, or conversing with any of the other dwarrows as they rode away from the Hobbit's home in the hill. He was, instead, focused on one particular rider ahead of him. Perhaps Dwalin was right, Thorin did seem different.

When they had left Ered Luin, Balin had taken Thorin's smiling demeanor as a sign that he wasn't worried about the upcoming meeting with the other dwarrows lords. That Thorin was feeling positive about the outcome that the other lords would lend aid to them.

Then Thorin had arrived at the meeting place and had announced that they had been turned down by each and every one of them, and he was still smiling. Well, not smiling per say but strangely… cheerful? Perhaps optimistic was a better term. It was as if there was nothing that could upset him anymore.

What in Durin's name was going on with the lad?

And what in the world was he thinking by baiting the Wizard? Granted, it seemed as if Gandalf had been up to something in regards to the hobbit and delaying Thorin's arrival with the misleading map, but it didn't seem as if the Wizard was going to explain his reasoning any time soon. If Mister Baggins were to be believed, Gandalf had truly given him no warning as to who the dwarrows were or even why they were arriving at his door. What was the purpose of springing such a thing on the hobbit?

Gandalf apparently had a greater opinion of the small halfling than even Mister Baggins himself, though it seemed as if Thorin's opinion was even higher than Gandalf's. Which in itself was odd considering Thorin had heard the same rumors as everyone else in regards to the hobbits of the Shire and was not exactly thrilled to learn one might be joining them.

Prone to keep to their own kind, they were not known for what it was that they did, but rather what it was that they didn't do. Hobbits didn't travel outside their own borders, didn't do business with any of the outer lands and hobbits certainly didn't fight anyone let alone learn to fight.

It was as if Hobbits were the only creatures of the world that had absolutely no ambition to do anything whatsoever. They stayed in their Shire content with having no interaction with the outside world at all. Which Balin considered such a shame considering there was so much that the world could offer, dragons and other nastiest notwithstanding. As a scholar, there was always this thirst to know more about anything and everything and during his younger days, he had always traveled to other lands to discover new things.

Hobbits, meanwhile, didn't go anywhere at all. 'Well, that's not true now, is it?' Balin corrected himself as he glanced back over his shoulder at Bilbo who was still struggling a bit with the rains of his pony. Fíli apparently had been appointed his riding instructor and had his own pony next to Bilbo's so he could correct him. Kíli was on Bilbo's other side but, he was regaling some tale or other to Bofur in front of them. And if what Ori told Balin about the healing books he had brought
himself and Óin was true, Bilbo's mother was one of the few if not the only Hobbit to leave the Shire boarders in its entirety prior to that morning.

Bilbo suddenly let out such a sneeze that Fíli actually reared back in surprise while it caught the attention of Kíli and Bofur. "Wow! That was some sneeze!" Kíli laughed.

"Horse hair," Bilbo muttered rather despondently as he started going through his many coat pockets. "I'm having a reaction… now where in world did I put that blasted thing?"

"What is it Bilbo?" Gandalf asked from behind them. "Did you drop something?"

"I can't figure out which pocket I put my blasted handkerchief in…" Bilbo muttered as he started checking the inner pockets.

"That's because you didn't!" Thorin called back rather suddenly as he reached into his own coat. "You left it on the table as we were leaving." He took out a square piece of white cloth and handed it to Glóin to start passing back. "I expect forgetfulness from my nephews Mister Baggins, not from you."

Balin glanced back to see Bilbo had started to flush slightly in embarrassment and even Fíli and Kíli were looking away from everyone as Bofur nudged Kíli with his elbow snickering. Looking back towards the front, Balin managed to catch a glimpse of a smile on Thorin's face before he turned back forward once again.

'What in Mahal's forge was that?'

It was official. Something categorically strange was going on with Thorin.

He was almost excited now that Bilbo Baggins had joined their merry band of misfits. Balin would freely admit that dwarrows were not exactly friendly to the other races that encompassed Middle Earth and after Erebor Thorin personally was downright hostile and defiantly mistrusting of anything or anyone.

But he had greeted Bilbo Baggins with such... delight? Relief? Hope? There had been so many emotions playing across Thorin's face that Balin didn't think he was able to identify all of them in those few moments. And the way he interacted with the Hobbit. It was the same way he would expect Thorin to be with Dwalin when they were still in Erebor.

Thorin was, dare he think it, gracious to the Hobbit. Though considering that Thorin explained that other than the hobbit and one rather tricky wizard, they were on their own, perhaps he could understand Thorin's attitude that anyone, anyone, understood their plight and was willing to help after being turned down by his own kin.

Added to it that after Thorin had elaborated their reason for not only being in Bilbo's home, but that they needed his help, Bilbo had actually become quite the courteous host ensuring that everyone had enough space for sleeping and so on and so forth. Proving that Thorin's tactic of simply speaking with the lad had gained him further with Bilbo than even Gandalf had achieved. 'Now how had Thorin known to do that?' Balin wondered. 'He was never one for long conversations.'

"What has your beard in a twist?"

Balin frowned at his younger brother as he brought his pony up besides Balin's. "Just thinking is all."
Dwalin shook his head. "I know when your just thinking and when something is bothering you and right now you look to be trying to solve a puzzle with only half the pieces."

Glancing about to see if anyone was paying attention to them, he leaned over. "I think you might be right about something going on with Thorin."

"You think so?" Dwalin snorted.

"I thought his manner before heading to Belegost was simply Thorin being optimistic. Now I'm not so sure."

Dwalin frowned as he stared at his best friend's back. "I don't know what he's thinking anymore. If he were acting like this six months ago, three months ago, I would be relieved that he was finally moving on with his life but now?"

"Now that we are finally going after the dragon. Aye, Thorin should be even more anxious than he was."

Dwalin nodded and they continued on in silence for a while before he asked, "What do you suppose Thorin meant when he said we weren't safe?"

"Haven't the foggiest," Balin admitted. "Have you tried asking him?"

"Not sure I want the answer. He didn't even tell us what he was worried about."

"Hmm. We'll have to see about catching Thorin alone for a bit and getting some sort of explanation from him."

"Good luck. You know how hard it is to get a straight answer from him let alone the details. We'll be lucky if he tells us anything at all about that statement."

Balin hummed again in agreement as he too looked in Thorin's direction. There was more to the story here, but he couldn't for the life of him put his finger on it. Then there was that dream. Thorin had been shifting uneasily in the chair he had fallen asleep in an hour or so before. Both Balin and Dwalin had checked on him a time or two, but when Balin saw his eyes moving rapidly under the lids, that's when he decided to do something about it.

Balin had expected Thorin to be startled and lash out, but the last thing he had been expecting was the apology.

Ever since he finally accepted the role of King when it was clear that Thráin was not coming back, Thorin did not apologize. A king never had to apologize for anything and most of those who had known Thorin since he was young did not take it personally. Thorin had not only apologized to Balin once, or even just twice but three times.

"Do you know if Thorin's spent any time with Glóin recently?"

Dwalin's question startled Balin out of his thoughts. "What? Yesterday?"

Dwalin shook his head. "I mean before we left Nogrod. That girth trick he showed us and the boys that day, Glóin was showing it to Bofur."

"Did he now?" Balin sighed to himself. He had noticed that when they had all sat down at the table the night before, Thorin had seemed rather surprised about something in regards to their cousin yet once again, Thorin hadn't said anything of the matter.
Balin was going to have to start a list. There were too many pieces to the puzzle and no clue as to how any of them fit together.

And he wasn't the only one to see the puzzle. Gandalf was watching Thorin just as closely as he was. It seemed as if he too was surprised by Thorin's rather shift in manner. 'This,' Balin mused as he watched Gandalf watch Thorin, 'could be a problem.'

Bilbo winced as moved about the campsite. Thorin had not been exaggerating about how long they were traveling. They had not stopped until the sun was just a hand span over the horizon and only then did they even start looking for a suitable spot to make camp. They had even had lunch while riding. When he had inquired about second breakfast and elevenses, Bilbo had found himself the complete center of attention as practically everyone wanted to know how it was that Hobbits could eat seven meals a day and remain quite tiny things.

Bombur had shyly approached him after that conversation and had apologized for eating admittedly a majority of Bilbo's food. "We didn't know anything about seven meals," Bombur had told him. "Gandalf had told us that you lived alone and seeing that much food, we assumed it had been purchased in anticipation for our arrival. We had no idea that it was for your own personal consumption. There was just so much of it."

Bilbo had interrupted the large dwarf by that point with reassurances that there was no harm done and left Bombur feeling much better about the situation. Bilbo however couldn't get over what Bombur had said about the quantity of Bilbo's larder. Bilbo's pantry was actually quite meager compared to the hobbit standard. When his parents had been alive, the had been two whole other shelving units in the tiny room that Bilbo had taken out and placed in his library for more books.

He didn't even want to know what the dwarves would have thought upon seeing either of his grandparent's larders. With so many children, Gerontius had three whole pantries and even a cold cellar. His grandmother Laura Baggins pantry was almost double the size that Bilbo's was.

The fact that the dwarves thought Bilbo's pantry was so bountiful laid credence to Thorin's account on how they had fallen on hard times.

Thorin was an odd one. Or at least very different from the dwarves in his company, but that could be due to his position as a royal prince. 'King,' Bilbo corrected himself with a small frown. With Gandalf giving Thorin what seemed to be his father's key, Bilbo could only assume that meant his father was no longer alive, meaning Thorin was currently King; unless he had an older brother which was entirely possible. Bilbo hadn't exactly exchanged family trees with the dwarf.

So strange to think he had entertained a possible king in his tiny office. No one would have believed him, not even Hamfast had he told him.

Thorin was certainly different from what Bilbo had read about them, which admittedly wasn't a whole lot. Dwarves weren't known as one of the friendlier species in Middle-Earth as proven by most of those that showed up at Bilbo's door. At least until Thorin had arrived, and then everyone had followed his lead and were, while still not exactly friendly, at least more open around Bilbo and willing to answer any questions he had.

'Speaking of, there he is,' Bilbo caught sight of the dwarf making his way around the camp and speaking with someone here or there for a moment before moving on. As Bilbo watched, he saw Thorin make his way towards where Ori was sitting and pulling items out of his small satchel.

Ori was a very nice young dwarf and Nori seemed, while highly obstinate, kind in his own way.
With a shrug, Bilbo made his way over, delighted to finally be able to see what it was that Ori had removed. Perhaps he wouldn't be quite the outsider after all?

Thorin would be the first to confirm that when Ori had apprentices of his own, he would be a wonderful teacher. He was very patient and explained his words clearly and only gave Thorin the slightest nudge into the correct direction whenever he strayed. Unfortunately for Ori, Thorin just could not knit for the life of him.

After checking to see if everyone was situated and handing out tasks to certain individuals such as having Glóin start the fire and having the boys settle the ponies, Thorin had spotted Ori sitting off to the side and decided this was the perfect opportunity to start trying to get to know some of his company better. Dori had been utterly shocked that Thorin had made his way towards their corner of the camp, but Nori, in true Nori fashion, ignored him completely.

Unfortunately, his inquiring about what it was Ori was knitting somehow ended up into an impromptu lesson. Thorin could feel the stares directed his way but again paid them no mind. It also helped that Bilbo had approached them and he and Ori were now discussing the different knitting techniques.

"Socks are particularly difficult," Ori was explaining to a fascinated Bilbo. "You actually have to knit them using more than three needles at a time."

"Three?" Thorin blurted out and he held out what was supposed to be the start of a scarf out at arms length. He was doing quite well destroying all of Ori's hard work with just two currently.

"Goodness, that sound's rather difficult," Bilbo mused with a frown.

Ori nodded. "My mother never quite got the hang of it. One of the reasons she started teaching me. I actually picked it up quite fast. Unlike most."

Both of them turned at that to glance at Thorin who was trying to get a particularly stubborn piece of yarn through and equally obstinate loop. "Give me a moment," he muttered before the point of the needle went completely through the yarn and Thorin snarled. Bilbo and Ori chuckled at that and even Dori had to cover his mouth to smother a laugh.

"Uncle! What are you doing?" Fíli and Kíli seemed to have returned from tending to the ponies if Kíli's screech was anything to go by.

"Destroying Ori's yarn," he muttered as he tried to make another loop, but only succeeded in creating yet another knot.

"But... but that's woman's work!" Fíli blurted out sounding rather appalled.

Thorin could feel both Ori and Bilbo stiffen slightly beside him and Nori was sitting up from his slouched position, but Thorin was both quicker and closer. Fíli let out a rather high pitch screech as Thorin managed to get his nephew in the shin with one of the needles. He sat back in surprise, as Kíli tried to help his brother balance on one leg and stared at what he had thought was a blunt needle.

"Surprisingly efficient," Thorin stated to Nori in some surprise before he reached out again and managed to get Kíli's screech was anything to go by.

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"Surprisingly efficient," Thorin stated to Nori in some surprise before he reached out again and managed to get Kíli. His younger nephew leapt away from them with a yelp of his own, leaving Fíli to fend for himself and the other dwarf toppled over. "You're never to old to learn something new." He told the two wincing dwarrows. "Believe it or not, this is harder than it looks and I think you owe Ori an apology."
Fíli and Kíli looked stunned, but not as surprised as Dori or even Ori himself. Nori just let out a huff and went back to lounging against a tree trunk as the boys apologized to Ori before hobbling away.

Thorin shook his head as he watched them go. "We're going to have to see about instilling manners in those two," he muttered under his breath.

"Who's 'we'?"

Thorin went back to trying to untangle the latest knot as he answered Bilbo. "Balin and I. When we get Erebor back, they're going to have to start acting like the kings they're going to have to be."

Focused as he was on the yarn, he missed Bilbo's rather baffled expression, but Ori had turned his attention back to Thorin's work and the focus shifted back again. "Too bad I didn't bring any of my crocheting," Bilbo said instead. "It's actually much simpler than knitting as you only use one hook to-"

"Hooks?" Thorin looked up in abject horror, interrupting the hobbit. "There are hooks for-? Right, that did it. That's enough for me." He passed the rather mangled scarf back to Ori. "Sorry for the destruction. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm going to sit back over by Dwalin, where things make sense. Hooks indeed." Nori's laughter followed him across the camp as he settled himself next to his friend. "I highly suggest staying on this side of the camp," Thorin told his rather bemused friend without preamble. "Those two are scarier than they look."

Chapter End Notes

1) I'm not so sure that they had socks in the middle ages but I had to bring up the knitting aspect. EDIT 08/17: Thank you to GinnyofQueenscove who explained the oldest socks were found in Egypt and everyone else who answered this for me!

2) Professional knitter Stasia informed me that it's four to five needles for socks. The above corresponding sentence has been changed. :D
There was a rather large crowd blocking their way.

Gerontius frowned at the mass of hobbits all pushing each other, vying for a better position to watch the goings on. It almost seemed as if the entire population of Hobbiton was situated at the end of Bagshot Row and from the sound of raised voices, they were getting quite the show.

Glancing at his son who accompanied him, Gerontius was glad to find the same expression of puzzlement on Hildibrand's face. At least he wasn't the only one completely at a loss as to what could possibly be going on.

Straightening his posture, he tapped the shoulder of the nearest hobbit at the back of the crowd. The hobbit was clearly annoyed by this until he saw who it was behind him and with wide eyes, yanked presumably his wife and child out of the way with a murmured "Thain Took". Soon many hobbits were turning around to see why it was they were being pushed to the side, but when they saw Gerontius and his son making their way down the clearing path and they quickly stepped aside voluntarily.

When they finally reached the front of the crowd, Gerontius was not surprised to see that the hullabaloo was taking place on the steps to his grandson's Smial. There was a young hobbit, which could only be the Hamfast Gamgee of Bilbo's letters, standing in the doorway with his arms and legs spread out, blocking the entryway from two hobbits that were clearly eager to get past him.

"You can't go in, Master Bilbo isn't at home now! You'll have to come back later!" Hamfast was saying rather frantically.

"Exactly why we should," the female hobbit on the steps sniffed haughtily. "Bilbo hasn't been seen in nearly a week, which means he's gone and this Smial now belongs to us."

"Master Bilbo isn't dead!" Hamfast yelped appalled and Gerontius had to bite back a snarl of his own at the thought. "He'll be back!"

"Oh? When?" the female cooed.

Hamfast hesitated and the male hobbit on the steps puffed up, a smug tone in his voice. "There now, you see. Even you do not know when he's due back."

"Master Bilbo didn't know when he would be back either!" Hamfast snapped irritably. "The dwarves didn't tell him!"

There was a ripple throughout the crowd and murmurs began to increase in volume as the two hobbits on the steps glanced incredulously at one another. Clearly, the mention of dwarves was news to the.

In the ensuing pause, Gerontius was finally able to identify the pair as Otho Sackville-Baggins, Bilbo's rather pretentious cousin, and his odious fiancée Lobelia Bracegirdle. He was beginning to understand his grandson's reasoning for asking Gerontius to lend assistance to Hamfast should he need of it because clearly, he needed it.
"Even if he does come back, it won't matter," Lobelia declared loudly. "He's abandoned the property and therefore ownership reverts to Otho, isn't that right darling?"

"Quite right my peach flower."

"Actually, it doesn't," Gerontius called out and watched as both Otho and Lobelia's spines straightened at that announcement.

"Who dares to-" Lobelia began furiously as she spun around, nearly whacking Hamfast in the head with her parasol. Her mouth then dropped open in surprise as she saw who it was at the open gate at the bottom of the stairs.

By this point, there was a rather large space around Gerontius and Hildibrand and the whisperers grew louder with their appearance. Otho seemed rather green and shifted uneasily as Gerontius made his way up the stairs. Lobelia's mouth made a few aborted gestures to say something before she finally frowned. "Otho is the next male relative in the Baggins line after Bilbo," she contested firmly. "Bag End goes to him."

Gerontius shook his head. "The way I see it, you have two things against you Miss Bracegirdle. One is that Bag End is still most decidedly my grandson's. He has not abandoned it as I have a letter right here from him stating the reasoning's behind his departure as well as his instructions regarding its care and upkeep while he is away. Secondly, even if something should happen to my grandson while he is assisting the dwarf king, Bag End can not revert to Otho Baggins as it is not entailed property."

"Dwarf king?" Otho gaped.

"Not entailed?" Lobelia yelped. "What do you mean not entailed? It belongs to Bilbo Baggins, Otho is the next male Baggins."

Gerontius gave Lobelia a disapproving frown, but it was Hildibrand that answered her. "It would be if it was built as part of the Baggins estates if not for the fact that Bungo built it for Belladonna, as her dower home."

Shock rippled through everyone upon that announcement as both Otho and Lobelia's eyes went wide and Gerontius nodded. "You might wish to speak to your grandmother, Laura Baggins as to why it was that your father Longo inherited the main Baggins Smial rather than Bungo who resided here at Bag End with his wife instead. The fact that Bungo did live at Bag End however does not negate the fact that it was given to Belladonna to keep even after Bungo's death as was settled in the marriage contract. The Baggins family has no claim to it. Therefore, should something happen to Bilbo without out will, it reverts to his next closest relative on either side of the family. And I'm sorry to inform you that that would be me."

Lobelia glared mutinously, but Otho grabbed her elbow before she could say anything. "Not that we do not believe your claim Thain Took," he began, "but we'll have to look at our records just to confirm. You understand how it goes."

"Of course," Gerontius acknowledged. "I can provide a copy of the marriage contract if you like. Hildibrand, make a note to have a copy sent to the Sackville-Baggins."

Hildibrand glared at the two younger hobbits but nodded anyway. He had been the closest in age to Belladonna and the two had been best friends growing up. After Belladonna's passing Hildibrand became just as protective of his favorite nephew, one of the reasons he had insisted on coming to Bag End when he heard from his brother Isembold about the two strange letters that had shown up
at their parent's door.

Lobelia let out a huff again, but allowed Otho to lead her down the stairs and push their way through the throng of hobbits under Hildibrand's critical gaze. With the show apparently over, many of the hobbits dispersed back to their own homes as Gerontius and Hildibrand turned back to the one currently leaning against the doorway to Bilbo's home seemingly exhausted.

"Thank you for your timely arrival Thain Took," Hamfast wheezed. "I don't know how much longer I could keep them out nor how I would possibly get them out once they'd pushed their way in."

Gerontius gave Hamfast a sympathetic smile. "Bungo never did like his nephew. I'm beginning to understand why."

Hamfast let out a small huff that could have been a laugh at that before he stood up out of the doorway. "Would you both like to come in? Or we could go to my Smial for tea if you like. Bag End is, err... rather empty."

"Empty?" Hildibrand echoed stunned.

Hamfast nodded as he stepped aside to let the older two hobbits entry. "I was surprised myself when I checked the place over proper. The larder is completely bare, but I can understand it since Bilbo is going to be gone for quite sometime."

"What is this?" Gerontius prodded a large mound of items just inside the doorway with his toe.

"Those actually belong to the dwarves Bilbo left with," Hamfast explained hurriedly as Hildibrand bent down and lifted up a rather large pair of boots. "Something to do with traveling light?" he finished with a shrug showing he was just as bemused as they were. "Apparently one of the dwarf’s sister is going to be passing through and he said she would pick them up. I didn't really get much of the details. I thought that would be mentioned in the letter."

"I know who they were referring to," Gerontius nodded. "Perhaps we should sit down and you can enlighten as to just what it is my grandson has gotten himself into."

"Very well sir, but you probably have more of an idea than I do. What did you mean when you said he was helping a dwarf king? Were those knights from one of the dwarf kingdoms? They were armed but seemed rather," he struggled to find the appropriate word, "gruff to me. Certainly not how I would expect knights to look."

"According to the second letter I received, the one they called Thorin was their king," Gerontius declared pulling out said letter.

"What?" Hamfast gasped agog as he stared at the signature at the bottom of the parchment. "He was? But he was the one with the rug. How could he be a king?"

"Rug?" The Tooks glanced at one another.

"Perhaps you should start at the beginning," Hildibrand suggested as they seated themselves at Bilbo's dining room table and Hamfast launched into his tale, talking about the strange dwarves who were airing out Bilbo's rugs and how he conversed with the dwarf called Thorin to seeing Bilbo in his mother's traveling coat. Hildibrand couldn't suppress a laugh at that. He knew which coat Hamfast was speaking of.

Gerontius was more concerned at the news that Bilbo was actually riding a pony across Middle-
Earth. All it would take was one slip and Bilbo would be under those hooves rather than over them. He was going to have words with Gandalf the next time they say each other. Gandalf has always been a good friend, but the wizard really had to stop absconding with Gerontius' family at the oddest times and for the most bizarre reasons.

"What exactly did they need Bilbo for though?" he asked curiously. "Considering Gandalf was accompanying them, what would the dwarves need a hobbit for?"

Hamfast's sat back slightly looking from Gerontius to Hildibrand and back again in surprise. "You mean you don't know?"

Gerontius shook his head. "It was mentioned something about reclaiming the dwarves home but there were no details given. It's strange. How does one go about losing an entire kingdom? Did they say anything to you about it Mister Gamgee?"

"Oh! Oh I say. Um well… That is to say… uh…" Hamfast shifted nervously.

Gerontius' eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"Um…" the young hobbit was turning a rather alarming shade of red. "I was told it was infested," he mumbled.

"Infested?" Hildibrand frowned. "Dwarves live in mountains though. What could infest that?"

The reaction to Hamfast's rather nervous answer to Hildibrand's question practically shook the windowpanes.

There had been quite a few hobbits lingering outside of Bag End, chatting away with their friends and neighbors about the latest clash in the notorious feud between the Baggins and the Sackville-Baggins and what the Thain's sudden involvement could possibly imply when the livid bellow echoed from out of the Smial on the hill. That small group of hobbits wasted no time dispersing to spread the most unbelievable news of the day, even more astounding than Lobelia's showdown with the Thain himself.

By that evening, everyone in Hobbiton and even a few in neighboring Overhill and Bywater had heard the news. Not only was Bilbo Baggins traveling with a dwarven king, but also that he had gone with them to do the unimaginable. Bilbo Baggins had gone off to fight a dragon.

Thorin wasn't use to fine, detailed work but he was giving it his best attempt. He guided the knife carefully and slowly, knowing patience was the key. He was doing pretty well so far, only having to be corrected around four times or so. Considering he was more accustomed to working with heavy metals, this was more difficult than he had first imagined. It required a light touch and Thorin was used to putting his entire weight behind his work. Of course, forging metal did take more pressure than what he was currently working on. Who knew how soft some wood could be?

Once Thorin had finished assigning tasks throughout the camp, Bifur had planted himself next to his king and had dropped a half-carved piece of wood with a small whittling knife in his hands, stating something in the archaic version of Khuzdul. It had been far too fast for him to follow and he asked Bifur to repeat himself slowly, which the other dwarf did along with adding some Iglishmêk. Managing to catch the words wood and shape in it, Thorin could only assume that Bifur wanted to see what he could do with a block of wood.
Thorin shouldn't have been all that surprised considering all the knitting lessons he had been receiving. Ori had been rather persistent about having Thorin give knitting another go and who was he to turn down those pleading eyes? Two ruined mittens to go with the mangled scarf later, it seemed as if Bifur was interested in seeing how skilled, or rather lacking in skill, Thorin would be at woodcarving. Apparently, after seeing how he had yet to turn down Ori, Bifur must have felt that Thorin wouldn't be put off by the request.

Bofur had returned from gathering firewood and was thunderstruck to see Bifur guiding Thorin's hand with the knife over the wood. He was even more amazed to learn they had been at it for some time with little to no trouble communicating.

In the previous year, Thorin had become rather adept at understanding Bifur by listening, not to the words, but rather the tone of his voice and watching his hand gestures. He could more often than not follow a basic conversation with the other dwarf, and so he had little trouble following the miner turned toy-maker instructions while holding a simple conversation with the other dwarf. Which had apparently stunned Balin if his expression was anything to go by.

With Bofur's help in explaining how to hold the knife along with Bifur moving his hands here or there to get both the wood and the knife into the correct position, Thorin thought he was doing a fairly decent job carving out a wing in the malleable wood. The only thing that had really surprised Thorin about these new lessons however, was Bilbo had joined them. Bilbo wasn't carving like Thorin was, even though Bofur had offered to let the hobbit try his hand with his own whittling knife, but simply sat beside Thorin and watched him work. Occasionally Bilbo would ask the other two about their time as toy makers and what sort of items young dwarrows were usually gifted growing up compared to hobbit toys, but on the whole, he seemed rather content to just sit and watch.

Thorin would have thought the hobbit would have preferred to stay by Gandalf's side or even sit with Ori and Balin rather than simply watch Thorin painstakingly try whittling. Bilbo nonetheless seemed interested in listening to Bofur's tales and Bifur as well, watching the other dwarf's hands at the signed out words rapidly as Bofur translated. Thorin briefly wondered if hobbits had any type of sign language.

With a start, realization dawned that he actually could ask Bilbo, seeing as he was no longer confining himself to mold of an imposing royal that he had been forced into by his father and grandfather. Remaining standoffish was not a habit he wanted to fall back into this time, as it would only put him at odds with his company. So, he asked, surprising not only Bilbo with his question but Bofur and Bifur as well.

After pulling himself out of his shock, Bilbo smiled warmly at him and informed them that hobbits did indeed have a sign language, showing them a few of the gestures. "I only know the base symbols," Bilbo explained as he showed the sign for wood that Bifur copied flawlessly. "Most hobbits learn the rudimentary ones at an early age."

Working over the wood, Thorin found himself actually relaxing. Everyone was chatting amongst themselves and enjoying the beautiful night. Bombar was working over the large supper pot while Fíli and Kíli were speaking to Dwalin as they looked over the maps. Glóin would occasionally join them before going back to his own pipe and simply relaxing as Óin and Dori were doing.

Ori was currently writing about the first few days of traveling enthusiastically in his traveling journal as he chatted with Balin. What he could possibly be writing about Thorin couldn't imagine as they had only been traveling for less than a week and all they had done was ride all day and camp out at night so far. Nothing truly worth writing about had happened as of yet.
Nori had disappeared from time to time, but if there was anyone in his company that Thorin didn't have to worry about, it was the thief. Focusing instead on outlining the second wing, Thorin reveled in the calm atmosphere. It was surprising that he had never noticed such peacefulness before. Had he truly been so self-absorbed the first go around that he hadn't even been able to simply relax at night?

Thorin felt shame that he had allowed his own determination and stubbornness to drive him forward, blinding him to anyone and everything else. He was not going to allow that to happen this time. He was going to ensure that they were not only prepared for what really lie ahead of them, but that they were able to work more cohesively as a unit. They were not warriors as Balin had said, but there was nothing that said they couldn't learn. Even if he wasn't going survive the coming battle at the end of his one year, he would be damned if anyone else died with him.

Thorin's wrist flicked sharply with that thought and he watched wide-eyed as the head of the duck he was carving went flying through the air, before finally landing with a soft plunk.

There was a stunned silence from everyone in the camp for a moment before Bofur burst out laughing, soon followed by practically everyone else. Even Gandalf was chuckling and Thorin felt his face heat up with a blush. Shaking his head, he stood and with all the composure he could muster, held out both the whittling knife and beheaded duck back to Bifur with a small bow. "Carving is a delicate art," he stated graciously. "One that seems to have eluded even myself. I bow to the better dwarf." Bifur guffaw at that, but he accepted the ruined carving anyway as Thorin re-took his seat.

Bilbo just gave Thorin a reassuring smile. "At least you gave it your best," he soothed as he patted Thorin's arm.

Thorin couldn't help but smile back at him. "It's not the first duck I've beheaded. It probably won't be my last."

They both looked up as Bombur approached them, two bowls in his hands. With a rather mischievous smile, the larger dwarf held out one to Thorin. "Your dinner, my king."

Thorin groaned at the wooden duck head, bobbing about in the stew as a fresh round of laughter started, his nephew's clear above everyone else's. Thorin's aim, as always, had been impeccable.

"I hate you all."

Chapter End Notes

=> I never do review shout-outs but I had to. To Almne: this duck ain't quacking no more. >8D

1) Is it just me, or is Otho and Lobelia the original version of Vernon and Petunia Dursley? :P So after bringing up Lobelia in the last chapter, there was some debate going on about how young she was, or if she had even been born yet and whatnot. I know she was old enough to be married to Otho as they had been living in Bag End and auctioning off Bilbo's personal items at the end of the book but it is true that she was quite young. Therefore I decided to make it where they're only engaged at Bilbo's time of departure and newlyweds upon his return. (Perhaps that's why she's so put out with Bilbo? He didn't even show up at their wedding. xD)
2) "Indirect dowry (or dower) is the property given to the bride herself by the groom at the time of marriage and which remains under her ownership and control." - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dowry

I think I read that right. O.o? Everyone is adamant that Bungo built Bag End for Belladonna. I take that to imply that it is not going to a Baggins but to the next closest relative, meaning grandfather before cousin. If I am wrong about this feel free to throw a property law-book at my head. :P
Review and Reprimand

Thorin sighed as he leaned back against the large boulder and closed his eyes. He was exhausted but he was, frustratingly, also wide-awake. The soft sounds of the others around him murmuring quietly to one another as they prepared for sleep themselves were a hushed din as the fire cracked and popped in the center of the ledge they had claimed a worthy campsite. It was a rather relaxing atmosphere, but Thorin still couldn't bring himself to rest.

The past week of traveling had gone much the same way the first had, consisting of a whole lot of riding and getting to know one another better. Thorin had eagerly took these first calm days to fully embrace his chance to learn about everyone who had answered his call after achieving such success with both Ori and Bifur in that first week.

In the second week of travel, he had a long conversation with Glóin in regards to how to go about tallying and cataloging everything in the treasury. How the value of the different gems and precious metals had increased or decreased over the past decades since the loss of Erebor as well as how the prices of goods in the different human towns had increased since the heavy export tax filtered out from Gondor over the past few years, impacting everyone.

Glóin told Thorin that if he was planning to re-establish trade with the human cities, he would have to acquaint himself with the newest tax laws the humans had implemented since their exile. Thorin wasn't thrilled at the notion, but agreed that he would have to since he knew better than to try and once again established a trade with elves of Mirkwood. They could rot in their forest for all he cared.

After speaking with Glóin, Thorin had gone on to ask Óin about the more common healing practices, dragging both Fíli and Kíli into the lesson. That simple request had ended up with Óin giving practically everyone some quick demonstrations on setting a bone, stitching up wounds and how to ground certain plants into a healing paste. Bilbo, Bofur and surprising Nori had been fascinated by the demonstration while Dori had looked quite nauseated at the whole prospect.

Thorin had then gone on to speak to Bombur about the different ways to prepare pheasant when Kíli had managed to strike one with one of the arrows he had acquired from Bilbo and Bilbo in turn gave both Thorin and Bombur a quick lesson on the different herbs that the Shire boasted that could not be found near the mountain region.

Another new aspect with Thorin becoming more acquainted with the others was Nori trying to snatch the money pouch off his belt at random intervals. Rather than becoming infuriated, Thorin took this to mean that he was becoming closer to the thief, if they weren't friends already.

When it became clear Nori was not going to be able to acquire the small leather pouch, he had gone on to pilfering small things from the other members of the company. Thorin frowned his disapproval the few times he caught the thief's eye, but didn't deign to warn the others of Nori's attempts to keep himself entertained. Especially considering Dwalin and the boys seemed to be his favorite targets. Thorin could only tell his best friend he had no idea where Dwalin's pipe had disappeared to with a straight face so many times. Kíli was at least getting faster at making arrow fletching.
With his sudden keen interest and interaction with the others becoming routine, Thorin knew that both Balin and Gandalf were watching him rather closely. His actions and attitude had become completely uncharacteristic of him, but Thorin simply shrugged it off whenever either one approached him. These were going to be some of the few peaceful days of traveling and he was going to use them to his fullest advantage.

The tentative plan to become more of a close comrade rather than a reticent leader to the others was working so far as he could tell. Bofur had included him in some of the jokes and Ori even rode along side him a time or two asking questions about Erebor. After the whittling incident with the duck, Bombur no longer hesitated when bringing Thorin his bowl and even engaged in a small conversation or two.

Even Bilbo had relaxed with the others as he and the dwarrows got to know one another better. He assisted not only Ori with his notes, but had offered to help Bombur during the larger dinner meals and had long conversations with Balin about the books he had read.

All in all, it was going quite better than the first go around in Thorin's opinion with the bonds of friendship being forged much sooner. He was being included more in the conversations and goings on as he showed he was not above doing the smaller tasks around the camp and was beginning to learn what it was that motivated the other dwarrows and what their dreams were of the future after Smaug was defeated.

He briefly wondered what impact his unexpected involvement was going to have on the events later on in the quest but ultimately decided he didn't care. It could only be for the better, after all.

The only perplexing thing Thorin found himself discovering was whenever Bifur managed to catch Dori's eye, he would grin at the other dwarf before saying something to his cousins, causing Bofur to laugh, Bombur to roll his eyes and Dori to go quite red before heading to the farthest point in the camp away from the old miner. Bifur would then watch his retreating form rather appraisingly, as if Dori was an unpolished sapphire that just needed shining up.

'Now when did that happen?' Thorin wondered, taken aback. Clearly, he had missed quite a lot during that first journey.

The only sticking point for Thorin insofar had been the dreams.

He was still having the strangest dreams about that blasted creature in the cave and he had yet to understand the meaning for it. He had contemplated it over and over as they rode throughout the day, but he had yet to comprehend what the foul creature had to do with him or the quest for Erebor and upcoming war. Thorin would swear they never encountered such a being.

Irmo certainly wasn't giving him any hints and it was starting to irritate him. Especially seeing as he found he couldn't get back to sleep after jolting awake in the early pre-dawn. On the brighter side of things, it allowed Thorin a rare glimpse into the inner workings of the camp.

Usually in the early mornings, he awoke to find a rather exhausted Nori or Bofur struggling to stay awake in order to finish their shift. On the rare times he woke in the middle of the night it was to see Dori or Bombur struggling to remain awake and in those times it took longer for Thorin to even get to seep it was to see Fíli and Kíli or even Balin trying to fall asleep in order to get some rest before their own turn at watch.

Consulting with Dwalin on how the shifts had been determined, he learned that the first evening shift was split between Óin, Glóin and Bifur, the night shift was split between Bombur, Dori and Dwalin with the boys and then the morning shift was rotated between Nori, Bofur and Balin.
On the whole, it was understandable with each group switching off every other night yet considering how early Bombur had to get up to start breakfast and the fact that Óin and Dori seemed to be early risers along with both Bilbo and Ori they would be the better group to keep lookout in the early dawn hours. Nori and Bofur seemed to be complete night owls on the whole and Balin, while he used to be an early riser in his younger years now tended to work late into the evening.

In the end, Thorin had the shifts switched to practically everyone's surprise. He honestly couldn't blame them as he had barely ever gotten involved with anything having to do with the day-to-day life the first time. The early risers were given the morning shift while the night owls were given the midnight shift and those who tended to just stay up late chatting or working on certain projects were given the first shift after dinner.

Everyone was pleased with the changes and even Dwalin had to admit that the shifts seemed to go much smoother and with far less complaints. Thorin was just glad that Dwalin hadn't taken offense to him taking over what was essentially Dwalin's job.

Fíli and Kíli were much happier staying up late rather than going to sleep, getting up and then trying to fall back asleep again. They were less than pleased however that Thorin had pulled Balin aside and suggested that it would be a wonderful time to reinstate their court lessons seeing as they were all up anyhow. Kíli had been horrified, Fíli resigned and Balin rather excited. Ori had even sat in a few lessons as Balin tried to teach dinner etiquette to the boys, who was seated where at a table according to rank and title and so on.

Bilbo tried to look as if he wasn't listening in on Balin's lectures about the Durin history, but by the second night of lessons, Thorin purposely sat next to Bilbo and filled in the gaps that the hobbit was missing, elaborated certain aspects to the hobbit that dwarrows usually learned on their parent's knees. Balin gave Thorin a disbelieving glance and Dwalin was downright staring at him stunned, but no one said anything against him educating their hobbit companion.

Nothing Thorin was telling him was forbidden for others to learn per say, such as Khuzdul, but it still wasn't done by unspoken rule. Thorin ignored the stares being thrown his way as well as the hushed whispers between Óin and Glóin, Dwalin on occasion joining in with the arguing, and tried not to let it get to him. With the future seeming to hinge on how well all the races of Middle-Earth got along, Thorin hoped that his precedent would encourage Fíli to continue the practice after he died.

With a sound that was more a groan than a sigh, he shifted again against the boulder trying to find a more comfortable position for his aching body, reminding him that he needed his rest just as much as anyone else. He was reluctant to close his eyes though, not exactly eager to see the foul creature anytime soon.

What did the small, skeletal creature have to do with him? 'Better question,' he thought contemplatively, 'what does it have to do with the coming war?'

One would think that the Valar would give him a little more to go on. He allowed one eye to crack open just a bit and glared at the moon. 'Some additional information would be helpful, rather than just showing me the same image again and again,' he thought at it in exasperation.

There was a sudden, small sound to his left and he turned his gaze towards the others resting around the camp. Bombur was snoring away quite contently while a few others were slowly succumbing to sleep themselves. There was one that was shifting rather restlessly on his sleeping pallet however and Thorin felt himself focusing rather quickly on the form of the hobbit that seemed to be just as awake as he was.
Feeling a smirk begin to form, Thorin chuckled to himself quietly as he remembered the day before when he had called the company to a halt before the sun had even reached the highest point in the sky. The reason was a shallow river, more of a stream than anything and Thorin found it the perfect opportunity to have Kíli start with the swimming instructions for Bilbo and Ori.

The lessons started well enough and Kíli started by showing the two how to tread water. Ori picked it up well enough, but Bilbo was prone to panicking when his feet couldn’t reach the bottom. It took some time for Kíli and Fíli to get Bilbo to finally relax and float for a moment or two. "After all," Kíli had told him, "the tenser you become, the more likely you're going sink."

It took a while before Bilbo could sufficiently keep his head above water without either of the boy's bracing him, but it was still a large achievement. It was the only lesson of the day however as a water fight between the instructors suddenly erupted and neither noticed when their students escaped to the shore where everyone had been watching the lesson, Dori and Thorin in particular attentively so.

It had finally taken Thorin wading into the water to drag the boys back out before they finally could continue on. Dwalin had been surprised as he had been all set to fetch them himself, but Thorin knew that he had to be more involved with the boys if he was going to get them to stop being juvenile and begin behaving in accordance to their status. Bilbo had actually smiled at him as waded out of the water, shoving the boys ahead of him, and Thorin could not for the life of himself figure out why.

With that puzzling memory in mind Thorin returned his gaze to Bilbo currently shuffling around on his sleeping roll trying to get comfortable. There was a few more moments of soft curses before the hobbit's head suddenly popped up and looked directly at the large sleeping lump directly beside him.

Thorin sympathized. Bombur could snore with the best of them.

Bilbo continued to stare for a bit before he finally stood up and stretched before making his way towards the ponies. Thorin instantly tracked the small hobbit, ensuring that he didn't wander too far away from the camp, but seeing Bilbo feeding his pony an apple, he settled down and tried his mother's trick of counting imaginary diamonds to lull himself into a light rest.

That's when he heard them off in the distance and with a jolt finally realized what night it was. He groaned and sank further into his coat as he heard Kíli's response of "orcs" to Bilbo's inquiry as to what had made the sound.

He was going to have to do something about this. Fighting Orcs and Wargs was no laughing matter. Especially with the knowledge that it was Orcs that dealt the killing blows for both his nephews.

With a snarl, he stood up just as Kíli said "Quick and quiet, no screams. Just lots of blood." Bilbo was visibly shaking as he looked out into the distance, as if he could see the Orcs out in the valley below them and the boys could not contain themselves any longer and started to laugh.

Thorin was furious. It was clear that the hobbit was frightened at the notions yet the boys didn't seem to notice as they grinned at each other, pleased with Kíli's trick.

"You find this funny?" he growled and watched as both boys instantly became somber.

He scowled at them as he struggled to reign in his temper. It would not due to slip back into old habits and allow his temper to rule him. It took him dying to finally realize that succumbing to his
anger was not a trait he should be proud of and was instead something he should never aspire to do again. He had been trying, but by the maker did his nephews test him. It wasn't as if he had enough on his plate with the upcoming dragon, ensuing battle and the thrice-damned visions that told him nothing.

"You'd best keep hold of that humor then, for when you do face the orcs and wargs in battle," he told them outright. "Because when you're surrounded with enemies on all sides as your friends and family lie dying around you." He paused and took a deep breath. "It's the most horrific place you could find yourself in and you're going to need that humor to get you through the days, years that will follow." He looked the both in the eye, one then the other pointedly, "should you be lucky enough to survive it at all."

A deep foreboding silence settled over those still awake in the camp as the two young dwarrows stared disbelieving at their uncle. Thorin may have called them untested children before now, but never had he criticized their skills in combat. He had trained them himself alongside Dwalin for their entire lives. There was no question that they could battle just as well as the rest of them and would come out victorious.

Kíli glanced back at Fíli nervously. Wasn't there?

Amazingly, it was Bilbo who stepped forward and tentatively reached out and tugged at Thorin's sleeve. "Do you really think that was necessary?" he murmured quietly. He had probably meant for only Thorin to hear him, but with the camp so still and quiet, everyone heard the small admonishment.

Still, staring at his sister's sons, Thorin nodded. "They're young," he stated, leveling them with a look. "They'll learn. Just as I did when I was their age- younger in fact." He turned away from them and glanced down at Bilbo. "They will learn. Or they will die. Battle is no laughing matter." He shot his nephews a look once more. "And though they meant it mostly in jest, listen to what they said about Orcs. Most of it, after all, is very true."

Bilbo swallowed nervously. "And what was it that they get wrong?"

"If the Orcs attack us, there will be plenty of screaming."
"Is he serious?" Bilbo's voice gasped out behind Thorin as he went to check on the ponies just as he had done previously. The wargs still howling in the distance were causing the animals distress and the last thing any of them needed was the ponies bolting too soon.

"Very," Balin confirmed as he joined the others by the fire. "Thorin has more cause than most to hate Orcs."

Thorin barely paid any attention as the older dwarf went into detail of the nightmarish battle of Azanulbizar to his enraptured audience.

The first time Balin had recounted the story, Thorin had been too caught up in remembering the screams echoing in his ears. The feeling of sweat pouring down his brow and back, and feeling of his blood rushing through his veins as his heart beat ever faster while he struggled to meet each blow and stay alive on that horrid battlefield.

Now, he focused on those he had lost during that dark day. His grandfather, not as a severed head, but as he was in those earlier days of Erebor before the Arkenstone. He remembered his father, standing tall and solid as the mountain itself.

And of his brother Frerin, the laughing ray of sunshine in the family, life ending far sooner than it should have. Frerin should have never been on that battlefield. Thorin shouldn't have been on that battlefield,, but as members of the royal family Thráin had them right in the thick of things.

It was a mistake Thorin repeated when Fíli and Kíli had joined the battle at the gates of Erebor and died beside him.

His jaw tightened at the though. He was not going to let that happen a second time.

Composing himself, Thorin turned just as Balin finished his tale and once more found everyone staring at him in amazement. His gaze swept over the stunned dwarrows before he sighed. "Best not follow me too closely," he called out to Balin as he made his way around the others and back to the fire. "One never knows when I might be using a wizard's map."

Gandalf huffed in displeasure, but everyone was still in too much awe to respond to Thorin's jibe. Shaking his head, he turned to Bilbo whose eyes were just as wide as everyone else's. "Do not let Balin's grand telling fool you," he cautioned. "I was rather brash in those days, as Fíli and Kíli are now. And I must admit there was probably just as much young idiocy in there as well."

"How old were you, if you don't mind me asking?" Bilbo asked puzzled. "You keep referring to yourself as young, but if you were in the battle..."

Thorin actually had to think for a bit for a response to that question. "Frerin was forty-eight when he was killed so I was... fifty-three. Mahal I was nothing more than overconfident child." He gave Bilbo a wry smile. "I've learned since then."

"Fifty-three?" Bilbo was still looking rather lost.

"Dwarves reach their majority at seventy," Gandalf informed him helpfully. "Thorin, I believe,
would have been considered a tween at the time."

"Young and dumb," Thorin agreed, but Bilbo seemed thunderstruck at the news, as were a few of the other dwarrows, strangely enough.

Thorin couldn't figure out why. Everyone knew the story. The date of the battle was known to all of the Erebor citizens and as a royal prince everyone knew when Thorin had been born.

Bilbo, meanwhile, had shaken himself out of his stupor. "Seventy?" he repeated in a rather strangled voice and glanced at Fíli and Kíli questioningly.

"I'm eighty-two," Fíli answered the unasked question. "Kíli's seventy-seven."

Bilbo stared.

"My own son is only sixty-two," Glóin offered with a nod. "Else he would be here with us since was very eager to join. As he is not considered an adult yet however, he remained behind with my wife and the rest of the citizens of Erebor."

"How old are Hobbits when they are considered a full adult?" Ori asked after watching Bilbo's stunned expression for a few moments.

"Thirty three," Bilbo replied absently as he mulled over the new information. He had known that Dwarves lived longer than hobbits, though not as long as the elves, but he hadn't realized just how much longer. It was quite a revelation hearing it from the dwarves themselves.

"What?" many dwarrows yelped in surprise causing Bilbo to look up in surprise at the shocked voices.

"Then how old are you?" Bofur asked.

"Fifty-one," Bilbo told the stunned group with a shrug.

"Bilbo is considered to be in his prime," Gandalf informed them as Bilbo shifted uneasy at the sudden stares.

Determined to ignore the scrutiny, the hobbit instead turned back to Thorin, "If you were not part of the majority then what were you doing in the middle of a war?" he asked, looking rather appalled and confused at the notion.

"Grandfather decreed we take Moria back from the Orcs who had overrun her. My place was by his side fighting for our people along with my father and brother."

"Frerin?" Bilbo questioned, but it was more of a guess than anything. "The one you mentioned before?"

Thorin nodded. "He was just a strong a warrior as I was, both quick and clever to overcome anything thrown at him, but in the end those did not matter when a lucky strike caught him in the back unawares."

Bilbo winced. "I'm sorry," he started to apologize, but Thorin stopped him.

"He died fighting for the lives of our people," he explained. "I would think Frerin would have been content with that."

"Still..." Bilbo began.
"Fate does not care how old you are or if you are ready to face the horror of war," he interrupted. "When you find yourself on the field of battle it does not matter how you came to be there. The only thing you can do is fight to the best of your abilities and pray you are both hardy enough and sharp enough to live through the ordeal. And even then, you might not make it through if destiny decrees otherwise."

"No," Bilbo said quietly. "I suppose it wouldn't."

Thorin was now the one to give Bilbo an inquiring look.

"I was lucky to have survived Fell Winter," Bilbo explained. "Many of the Shire… didn't."

"'Fell Winter'?" Bofur, who was still focused on Bilbo, repeated.

Bilbo gained a haunted look in his eye and Thorin felt his breath catch. He had never before seen that look on the hobbit. Not even when he was banishing him from Erebor.

"Some thirty years ago we suffered a very hard winter," Bilbo began in a quiet, bleak voice. "It wasn't so much the deep snow that fell, but rather the freezing temperatures. It was the coldest winter felt in decades."

"I think I remember that," Fíli shuddered. "Thought I would never be warm again."

Bilbo nodded in agreement. "It was cold enough to allow the Brandywine River to freeze over."

"The river froze?" Balin asked in surprise. "Completely?"

"Solid," Gandalf picked up the story, "and that allowed the wolves to descend."

"They were starving just as much as we were and so they did not fear entering the towns. It was devastating," Bilbo told them. "They attacked anyone that was out on the road and while we've had to set traps for wild animals before, we are not hunters by any stretch of the imagination and the sheer number of wolves that came across the river was too many to count."

"It was determined to be at least five packs in total," Gandalf added. "Though the lead ranger thought there might have been as many as seven spread throughout the Shire."

"We were essentially trapped inside our own homes. Venturing out, even just outside our doorstep, was inviting danger. Most soon ran out of firewood and out of food quicker."

"With seven meals, unsurprising," Thorin agreed.

Dwalin looked stunned at Thorin's tactless statement and Balin shot him a rather reproving glance, but Bilbo took no offense, instead nodding in agreement.

"That was one of the main factors, yes." Bilbo confirmed. "May died from starvation while others froze to death or were eaten by the wolves as they emerged to look for food. The only reason my father and I were able to come out of it as well as we did was all thanks to my mother and what she had learned during her travels."

"I'll just bet," Nori murmured somewhere in the background.

"As soon as the bitter cold started she instantly had us, not only gathering more firewood that we ever used before to the point that we had to keep some in father's office, but also started to cut back our food portions," Bilbo told them. "She started by having us partake in four meals in the
beginning before cutting that down to two as time went on. As it was, our larder was near empty by
the time Gandalf and the Rangers arrived."

Bilbo ducked his head momentarily as he recalled those bitter cold days where he and his parents
were huddled together under blankets around the main fireplace. In the end, they had been living
out of that lone room, their own bedrooms too cold to stay in.

Pulling himself out of his reminiscing, he returned to the story. "Even when it was more rumor than
fact that the wolves were being spotted in East Farthing, Mother had me help her board up the
windows, from both sides and she was never without her bow and knife. She also ensured that my
father and I carry around the sharper kitchen knives."

Bilbo shook his head sadly. "My father was furious with her in the beginning when she closed off
the windows and refused to open them for either light or air, but as the wolves started to appear
more and more frequently, he was grateful for it. We were only lucky we live in West Farthing,
furthest from the river. North and South were not so lucky and the East…" Bilbo swallowed down
the lump that had formed in his throat.

"The hobbits in East Farthing came out far worse," Gandalf told the dwarrows levelly. "They not
only had to contend with the wolves, but even a few Orc attacks as well."

Thorin instantly shot Fíli and Kíli a sharp glare and both boys shrank down in shame. It was now
understandable why Bilbo had been so distraught at the sound of the warg howls and Kíli's teasing
had not helped.

"It got so bad that Buckland sounded their Horn, warning the rest of East Farthing of the invasion,"
Bilbo told them. "A lot of familys lost loved ones those last few days."

"I am sorry," Thorin said quietly.

Bilbo managed to gave him a wan smile. "As am I."

A hush fell over the campsite before Balin broke the silence by clearing his throat deliberatly. "It's
been a very long day for all of us," he declared. "And we need to get an early start in the morning.
We should all get some rest."

Thorin echoed the statement, but asked if Glóin and Nori would be willing to stay up with Bifur
and Bofur for the midnight shift as an extra pair of eyes to watch the perimiter. It was not their
night for watch, but with both stories still resonating in everyone's ears and the sound of warg
howls in the distance, the two readily agreed, unsure if they would be able to sleep in such a
setting.

While the others dispersed back to their own bedrolls, Thorin returned to his gear intending to
ensure he had everything he would need for the next few days ready when Bilbo approached.

"May I ask one more question?" he asked quietly.

Surprised, Thorin nodded his permission.

"The pale Orc," he began haltingly, "the one you faced in battle. What happened to him? You said
you cut off his arm, but…" Bilbo trailed off uncertain.

Thorin paused in the act of removing his oilskin for the beginning of the Week of Eternal Wet. "A
year ago, I would have told you that he had died from his wounds from that battlefield," he
admitted quietly. "But now…" he shook his head. "It seems as if my past has been coming back to
haunt me more often than not these past few months. I would not be surprised at anything anymore."

Thorin was focused on Bilbo's sympathetic gaze and so missed the wide-eyed surprise on both Balin and Gandalf at his quiet confession.

Instead, he watched Bilbo give him a small nod of understanding before giving Thorin's arm a small squeeze and turned back to his own sleeping pallet.

He watched the hobbit for a moment before shaking his head and returning to his place against the large boulder. Ensuring that his Oilskin was within reach for the early morning rain, he bid everyone a good night and tried once again to get some rest.

The fighting before him was both fierce and desperate all at the same time.

Humans and elves were in a frantic bid to push back the orc army and as far as Thorin could see, they were winning as they pressed the advantage.

Where was this? When was this?

Thorin pulled his gaze away from the fighting and tried instead to focus on the landscape. It was a different battle then the ones he had seen previously. Not the one in the human city carved in the mountainside, nor was it the one on the large field with the Oliphaunts. There was a large mountain landscape to the left of him and he didn't think they were the Misty Mountains.

This was a new battle vision and he quickly turned back towards the fight, rapidly trying to take in as much as he could so it could be contemplated over during the day.

The fighting was escalating, but suddenly there was a ripple in the orc ranks. A path was slowly opening up, but rather than press the advantage, both humans and elves shrank back and away from the clearing, fear evident in their eyes.

'What could they possibly be afraid of?'

A tall figure stepped forward into the battle and Thorin felt his whole body begin to shake as an unexpected ripple of fear ran through him.

This fighter, whoever he was, was deadly. Standing shoulders above even the elves, he practically radiated with both power and strength along with sheer brutality and viciousness. Thorin wasn't so sure that even he would be able to face this particular warrior without some struggle.

Whoever he was, Thorin knew with out a doubt that he was pure evil.

The scene shifted and he suddenly found himself again in the cave with the gray creature cooing at his closed fists. The image of the warrior flashed back before becoming the creature again.

They flickered back and forth for a bit before finally settling on the gray being.

That was… disturbing. What did the hunched figure have to do with the battle? What was the connection between them and Thorin's company?

"It came to me, my own."
Thorin growled in aggravation and started making his way towards the hideous creature on the water’s edge. What in the world did it have to do with the warrior? It couldn't possibly be the warrior nor had Thorin seen it on the battlefield. It wasn't an orc either so what-?

"My love," it continued to purr as Thorin finally managed to make his way to the gray thing's side. Feeling rather annoyed, he looked down as the creature finally opened his hands-

"My precious."

-and Thorin finally was able to see the small band of gold within them.

Chapter End Notes

1) In my research at the Lord Of The Rings Wiki, I discovered that the battle of Azanulbizar took place in TA 2799. Thorin was born in TA 2746. A quick calculation 2799 – 2746, and I learned that he was only 53, meaning he was not even considered of age yet since he was under 70 at the time of the battle. Stunned, I did another quick subtraction and found out Thorin was only 24 when Smaug attacked in TA 2770... Also, given that Frerin was five years younger, that means he was 19 when Smaug arrived and only 48 when he died. So they were… what? Oh gosh, Dwarf reverse dog years... Between 9 and 11 for Smaug and 14-16 at the battle? Is my math right on this? (I barely passed those classes so I could very well be completely wrong.)

2) Bilbo was only 21 during Fell Winter. All my references agreed that the shire was most definitely attacked by the white wolves but only a few confirmed the Orc attacks. So I decided to compromise and have them only attacking East Farthing. I hope this is all right.
The rain began before dawn had even crested the horizon. The abrupt downpour had caught everyone by surprise and they hurried frantically to pull on their oilskins over their rapidly dampening clothing.

Well, *almost* everyone.

Thorin had been amused to see that Bilbo had not only noticed him removing his own oilskin from his pack the night before, but took the initiative and slept in his own protected travel coat. He wondered if Bilbo would still continue with his complaint about the fact that it was a lady's coat now that it was keeping him dryer than his old coat.

Thorin was just glad that he had managed to convince Bilbo to bring the coat along. The burgundy velvet dinner coat he had worn before was never meant for anything more than evening wear and especially not meant for any extended usage. By the time they had arrived at Laketown, the coat had been rather... fragrant, even by dwarf standards. Hopefully this new coat would fare much better throughout the rainy week they were suffering through, Thorin now for the second time.

On the first day of rain, everyone still had a positive outlook. It was just water after all and they were dwarrows of Durin. They could survive a little water. Thorin tried desperately not to laugh.

By day two, some were starting to grumble a bit while one or two of the others were shooting Thorin curious looks. The clouds did not seem to be moving anywhere anytime soon. In fact, it didn't look like they were moving at all. However, most everyone was still in rather high spirits.

Day three, the clouds still had not moved and even more than just Balin and Gandalf were throwing curious glances towards Thorin. Conversation had been notably lacking throughout the day and dinner had been more hard tack, as there was hardly a dry spot for them to build a fire for either cooking or warmth.

It was now the fourth day since the rain had begun and *everyone* was in a rather foul mood and no one was even trying to hide their stunned stares anymore as they all kept glancing towards Thorin. Fíli and Kíli, the last holdouts on trying to keep some form of conversation had finally stopped talking and it was now a parade of mute misery.

Thorin just shook his head and glanced at his nephews. "You're welcome."

Fíli finally looked up at his uncle just ahead of them and frowned. "Pardon?"

"I'm assuming you are glad that I remembered your oil skins," Thorin chuckled.

"Thank you," Kíli said promptly and Thorin could hear the note of true gratitude in his voice.

"Thank you," Fíli followed suit. "Really," he continued earnestly. "I would hate to think how this would have gone if we didn't have them."

"Miserably," Thorin told them truthfully.

"But the rain has to let up soon, right?" Kíli asked rather optimistically. "It's not *really* going to last
Thorin wasn't about to say anything to that so he settled for shrugging again and both boys, along with Bofur and surprisingly Glóin, wilted at the noncommittal answer. Óin was shooting Balin looks again and Thorin's old teacher calmly moved his pony around to the other side of Bofur's; who did not look happy to suddenly middle of... whatever it was going on between those two.

'Family squabbles,' Thorin shook his head. He certainly wasn't about to ask. For all that Balin had helped Thorin and his own family catastrophes, Thorin knew better than get involved in Balin's. Didn't mean he wasn't brimming with curiosity. 'Perhaps I can prod Dwalin later for the gossip.'

With a sigh, Thorin maneuvered Gyth around a fallen tree branch and allowed his thought to wander back to his current conundrum. The ring.

Thorin had been surprised to see a ring in the gray creature's palm and finally realized that it was the ring that had been the reason for the dreams and that meant it was not any ordinary ring.

'A ring of power,' Thorin thought with a small curse. 'Has to be.'

Why would Thorin be seeing a ring of power though? Clearly, it was important and with the visions of the battles young Gimli had participated in, Thorin suspected it had to do with the future war. So, what was Thorin to do with the information?

There must have been some reason as to why Irmo was showing him the small band of plain gold however. Was Thorin supposed to find it? Had he come across it the first time he had lived this year and, not knowing what it was, passed over it and changed something?

Perhaps it was even in Erebor's treasure room even now? His grandfather's gold lust had been in a fevered pitch when they had left even such a plain circle band would not have escaped his notice. Or perhaps it was even during the journey itself that they would find the ring.

Thorin made a mental note to himself to thoroughly check the Troll's cavern when they found it again. It could even have been in that little treasure box Glóin, Nori and Bofur had buried.

Maybe he could say something to Nori, ask the thief to keep an eye out for a plain gold band. If anyone could spot it when Thorin couldn't, it would be the thief. He'd have to come up with a plausible reason as to why he wanted Nori to keep an eye out, but he was sure he would think of something in good time.

Nori would be the only one he would speak to however. He knew better to bring it to Balin's attention, as his old friend would undoubtedly ask more questions than Thorin could answer. And he certainly wasn't going to mention anything to Gandalf!

With a sigh, Thorin began contemplating where the ring could have possibly have originated from. Practically every single ring of power save for the three the elves wore were lost. Even the ring of Durin, the last known dwarf ring, had been lost with Thorin's own father at Moria. The other six rings had disappeared throughout time.

Some said they were eaten by dragons and with Smaug currently ensconced in Erebor's walls, Thorin could believe it. Others said they were perhaps buried with beloved family members. Then there were the ones that were simply lost.

Was it possible it was one of the lost dwarf rings? Could that be the reason Irmo was showing Thorin a Ring of Power? The rings of Norgod and Belegost had both had been lost with the cities centuries ago. One of the many reasons Hábar and Gruak had resented the line of Durin that
Thorin's ancestors had been able to keep hold of their ring where the other dwarf clans could not.

"Wouldn't it be funny if it was one of their rings?" Thorin thought with a snort. "It would serve them right."

Though, if he did come across the ring, Thorin would be obligated to verify which dwarf clan it belonged to and return it to the correct family.

"Still, would be funny to see their expressions if it was."

Maybe it wasn't a dwarf ring at all, but rather one of the nine rings the humans had worn? It would also explain why a knight from the dream would have one. It certainly hadn't been a dwarf warrior wearing the ring.

Was that one of the human kings from the past that he was dreaming of? Or was that a warrior from the future again? Someone who would use it to fight in the impending war?

Thorin groaned and rubbed a hand over his tired face. He'd have to find the ring before he could decide what to do with it and he was not going to find it in the middle of the current downpour.

"You don't suppose we'll be able to find shelter any time soon, do you?"

Thorin glanced over at Bilbo riding on his left, opposite Dwalin. "Not for some time yet," he answered honestly. "There's only forest ahead of us and nothing in the way of a shelter large enough for all of us."

Dwalin once again shot Thorin an unbelieving look, but Bilbo simply hummed in agreement.

"Here, Master Gandalf," Dori's voice suddenly rose from further behind them, "can't you do something about this deluge?"

"It is raining, Master Dwarf and it will continue to rain until the rain is done." Gandalf called back and Thorin could hear the exasperation in his voice. "If you wish to change the weather of the world, you should find yourself another Wizard."

"Would if we could," Thorin thought exasperated as Bilbo asked if there even were other wizards. "Though if the others were anything at all like the wizard on the rabbit sled, perhaps it was just as well we're stuck with Gandalf."

He turned his attention back to the conversation just in time to hear Gandalf admit that he had forgotten the names of the two blue wizards.

"Morinehtar."

"What?" Gandalf actually turned back in his saddle to look at Thorin and only then did he realize he had spoken the word that had popped into the forefront of his mind aloud.

Thorin shifted uneasily in his saddle, but he could not pretend he didn't say anything with everyone looking at him. "Morinehtar," he repeated louder, "and Rómestámó. He frowned for a moment. "At least I think that's how you pronounce them."

Gandalf, along with practically everyone else, continued to stare.

"Have you met them then?" Bilbo asked, awed at the idea, but Thorin shook his head.

"Must have heard the names at some point."
When it was clear Thorin was not about to elaborate on his statement any further, Bilbo turned back towards Gandalf. "And the fifth?" he prompted, allowing Gandalf to pick up the conversation where it had trailed off.

"That would be Radagast the Brown," Gandalf proclaimed and explained how the other wizard preferred to be in his forest with the forest animals rather than with other people.

'And his overgrown rabbits,' Thorin thought with a small chuckle. 'Just one of those rabbits would keep Dís, myself and the boys feed for a week. Perhaps even two.'

The conversation went quiet for some time after that for a while.

Gandalf had turned to face forward again, but Thorin could see him glancing back every so often and Thorin berated himself for the slip up. The names had just come to him. As if they belonged to someone he once knew, but hadn't seen in years suddenly being brought up in conversation, he had just known who Gandalf was talking about. For that, he blamed Mahal and Irmo - meddling busybodies.

Bilbo suddenly sneezed beside him and Thorin gave him a rather sympathetic look. "The rain can not be helping your allergies."

Pulling his handkerchief from his pocket, Bilbo gave him a wan smile. "What can one do, but endure?"

Thorin nodded in agreement and they continued on in silence for a while before he heard Bilbo's speak up again, this time quietly to himself and Thorin strained to hear what he was saying. "What are you muttering?"

Bilbo looked up in surprise that he had been caught before ducking his head slightly embarrassed. "A rain prayer."

"A rain prayer?" Dwalin asked exasperated. "We already have rain."

"Not a prayer for more rain, but for less," Bilbo quickly reassured him. "I'm sure the rain had to have accomplished whatever it was Ulmo wanted it for by now. He's might just allow it to ease up."

Balin nudged his pony forward and came up on Bilbo's other side. "You're praying to Ulubôz?" he asked surprised. "Why would you pray to him?"

Bilbo looked just as baffled at Balin's question as Balin was that Bilbo was praying to a Valar not his own. "He's the lord of water," Bilbo replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

Balin mulled over this for a moment. "I thought it would be Yavanna that hobbits would pray to."

"Of course we pray to her as well," Bilbo stated with a small frown. "Whenever our crops or such are having a hard time we pray to her for aid. Just as we pray to Ulmo when they are in need of watering. Or… less watering as the case may be."

"But…" Balin looked completely flummoxed and Thorin could sympathize. Hobbits it seemed were more complicated creatures than they had ever given them credit for.

"Are you saying you only pray to Yavanna occasionally?"

Thorin looked up to see that Gandalf had halted his horse completely and was staring at Bilbo as
their ponies approached. The wizard looked just as stunned as Balin.

"We pray to her when we need her assistance," Bilbo confirmed. "I'm sure she's quite busy elsewhere tending to the world."

"You do not claim Yavanna as your patron. Why have I never asked this question?" Gandalf mumbled half to himself.

"Then whom do you normally pray to?" Thorin asked curiously. "I mean in general. Which of the Valar claim your kind?"

Bilbo looked bemused at this. "I'm not sure I know what you mean by 'claim'," he began slowly. "But we pray to almost all the Valar at one point or another."

"Even Mahal? Aulë?" Dwalin looked just as surprised as Thorin felt.

Bilbo nodded. "Not all the time mind you, but we do give offerings to him during our festivals along with the others."

"What sort of offerings?" Kili spoke up and Thorin glanced back to see the some of the others were suddenly riding much closer to their little group in order to listen in.

"Um…" Bilbo hesitated. "We don't really know what would please him most, you understand. We simply offer best rock we find when tilling our gardens."

"So, it's only at festival time?" Fili asked curiously.

"We rarely have cause to pray to him otherwise," Bilbo shrugged.

"Who do you have cause to pray to?" Balin questioned.

"If you ask who it is we pray to the most then it would be Vána, keeper of the golden garden."

"Considering you take such pride in your gardens, that's understandable," Thorin chuckled. Bilbo smiled at him and Thorin suddenly felt rather awkward. "What was the prayer you were saying to Ulubôz?"

Bilbo hesitated for a moment before he finally spoke:

"God of power, God of might,  
I bid you now, stop this plight.  
Stop the rain, we need no more,  
Let it fall, nevermore."

"I've never heard a prayer like that before," Glóin muttered.

There was some muttering throughout the traveling party and Thorin chuckled. As strange as the conversation had been, it seemed to have lifted up the spirits of the group.

That was when the rain suddenly eased up before stopping completely.

Thorin halted Gyth stunned as he looked up at the clouds still hovering overhead.

"It worked!" Óin called out triumphantly.

Thorin was now the one to twist in his saddle to stare back at the old healer in disbelief. It worked?
What had worked? The prayer?

"Ulubôz really had caused the rain?" He looked back up at the clouds shocked. 'Another Valar?, but why? What was the reason to drench us for a week solid?"

There were cries of elation throughout the group as Thorin puzzled over this new development and the few stragglers in the back finally caught up to the main group where they had stopped their ponies in celebration.

"What's all this?" Dori called out as he watched Kíli and Fíli's rather lopsided hug as their ponies shuffled away from each other and the boys were forced to let go or fall off.

"We got the rain to stop!" Kíli cried.

"Really?" Ori asked amazed. "How? Gandalf?"

"It was not I, young Master Ori."

"Then how?" Bombur asked curiously.

"We simply asked Ulubôz to stop," Fíli grinned excitedly back at them.

"He did?" Ori asked amazed.

"How did that come about?" Nori asked curiously and Bofur quickly filled him along with Bifur and Bombur in on the goings on.

"Ori, don't pay any attention to them. They are teasing you," Dori ordered firmly as he rode up. "Ulubôz would never pay any attention to us no matter how much we pray."

There was an ominous rumble and most of the dwarrows looked alarmed, but Dori continued undeterred. "You shouldn't let them fool you Ori. No Valar save Mahal would ever bother with us."

The skies opened.

"DORI!" Thorin yelped along with a few of the others as they were pelted with rain once more.

Dori looked baffled at the sudden shouting at him. "What?"

Thorin just glared. "Right. Dwalin!"

"Yeah?"

"Next bridge we come across, remind me to throw Dori off of it."

There were multiply mutters of approval throughout the group with a small "I'll help" from Nori. Bifur shot Thorin a sharp look, but Dori for his part simply huffed pretentiously and proceeded to ignore them all.

The rain continued.

Chapter End Notes
1) The “prayer” was found at [[site no longer avalible]] I was actually looking for an actual prayer or even just a poem but a majority I found were for rain. (Or a whole page and I didn’t want that)

2) The blue wizards go by a few names but I chose these as they were the ones Tolkien gave them. :)

Okay. Apparently kitchen twine and a pointy stick really CAN kill spell check because something happened to my Microsoft Word and it couldn't find the spelling or thesaurus dll files! O.O! Took me a while to figure out what to do about it as re-installing didn't help but it's fixed now. ... sorta
Thorin was exhausted.

Who knew that traveling could be so draining? Just from the past few weeks alone he was ready to crawl into his bed and not come out again until the next spring thaw.

He was fed up with it. From the ponies to the roads that had become overgrown from centuries of not being used to the blasted weather!

Thorin looked back out at the dark, ominous clouds spread out over the valley. He did have to admit that it was an impressive sight to say the least, but very daunting. Barely a river or even a tree could be seen under the thick gray mass and it had been almost a week since it had first appeared. There hadn't been any sounds of thunder, which was fortuitous, but the rain clouds were dark and heavy with moisture, meaning it would continue on for at least another day, if not two.

'I pity anyone who is under that,' Thorin thought to himself with a small shake of his head.

A voice behind him suddenly bellowed out his name. "What are you doing just standing there? Come help us!"

With a sigh, Thorin turned away from the mountain ledge he was standing on and moved back towards where the others were trying to lift one of the wagon wheels out of a large hole. "Coming!"

"Walk faster," one of the other dwarrows bit out, "and grab the other corner. We're going to have to lift the whole back end."

"Stop lollygagging about," Dáin admonished as his son hurried his steps and took his position on the other side of the wagon. "We've got to keep moving less there be any other Wargs out there."

Thorin nodded and between himself, Bilgin, Dgol and Thorin's own guard Nalbar, they were finally able to lift and push the wagon of supplies back onto the road proper. Ovip and her maid Ketola quickly clambered aboard to see how well the dried foods and extra clothing collected had survived the attack while his father and the others went to meet up with the two scouts just returning.

Thorin alternated from watching the others deliberating over their next move to the road behind them, his hand clenching and unclenching on his sword hilt periodically.

Today's had been the fourth attack since they set out for the ruins of Nogrod and there was talk about finally leaving the wagon behind and cutting their losses. Ovip was not pleased, but Dáin was arguing that they could always return with some additional dwarves from Nogrod – or Dís'
entire guard.

Despite the older Thorin's warnings, they had been woefully unprepared for this journey. No one had truly believed that there were Wargs on the old mountain roads, let alone Orcs themselves. The trip had been treated at first as more of a normal outing then an investigation of possible enemy activity. As if they were doing no more than going to the marketplace or simply out for a day's hunting.

There had been no warning the day the Wargs found them. Grokk hadn't stood a chance as he was pounced on from a ledge above him, knocking him off his pony. The Warg was quickly disposed of, but there had been no saving Dáin's loyal guard and friend. The appearance of the rest of the Warg pack and their orc riders gave them no time to mourn as they were suddenly engaged in a swift and vicious battle.

Thorin had been shaken after the fight and had gone off into the bushes when he thought no one was looking to empty the contents of his stomach until there was nothing left, but bile. It had been quite embarrassing when he had emerged and found Nalbar leaning against a tree waiting for him.

Expecting a lecture about wandering away from the group from the surly old dwarf warrior his father had assigned to be his guard, Thorin had been surprised when the only thing Nalbar had done was hand him his canteen and a cloth to wipe his mouth out.

After the third attack Thorin was finally able to go through the rest of the day without a trip to the bushes.

Was this what his cousins had to go through time and again, just to travel down the road? Dwarrows in general always loved a good fight, but the continual life or death battles were starting to wear on Thorin's nerves.

He was starting to gain more of an understanding and respect for his cousin who was always lauded as a highly skilled warrior. Having practically grown up with the story of how Thorin had received the second name Oakenshield, he himself had always thought he could take his cousin down in the few times he had seen Thorin participating in a spar. After all, his older cousin was... well, old. Older than his own father for Mahal's sake!

But young Thorin didn't think he could possibly endure the stress they were currently under on any sort of long-term basis. The constant anticipation of an imminent attack was driving him to distraction. He was starting to jump at the slightest of sounds. Continually looking for any sort of movement that may be the only warning they would receive before a Warg would leap out at them. And the howls...

Thorin shuddered and forced his thoughts to turn into another direction as he rejoined the group that were currently unhitching the two ponies from the wagon. Ovip was muttering as she and her guard Haáin secured the heavy tarp over the top to try and keep the wild animals out. "There won't be any food left when we return," she muttered.

"There will be no us if we don't leave it," Bilgin retorted sharply, already mounted on his own pony and watching the stretch of road behind them for any sign of movement. "There won't be any food left when we return," she muttered.

"We wouldn't be able to get the wagon through further up on this road anyhow," Farur, one of the scouts, explained to her.

"After that, there's a good length of flatland," his companion Munzad informed them. "We'll need that advantage if we wish to arrive before nightfall which means the wagon stays here."
Ovip snarled slightly, but mounted one of the un-harnessed ponies nonetheless.

Without the wagon, they were able to navigate the rocky terrain much easier. The first roads they had come across that had been obstructed by a rockslide had caused them to spend countless hours backtracking and re-routing their path to accommodate the large vehicle. Now they were able to simply weave through the narrower paths whenever they came across yet another rockslide.

They had barely ridden a few hours when the sound of Warg howls echoed off the mountain walls.

"Again?" Thorin yelped, eyes darting to the outcrops of rocks above them.

"Do we chance it? Or stop and prepare ourselves?" Dgol shouted from the back of the line.

Bilgin hesitated, but Dáin shook his head. "We have to try and press on. We're trapped otherwise."

Thorin looked down at the steep cliff that dropped suddenly just ahead and to the side of the road. He had to agree with his father. There was no surviving falling off that.

Suddenly he whipped his head back around and narrowed his eyes, listening for the sound to come again. "Did anyone hear that?"

Nalbar frowned at him before he too heard a sound that was not made by anything in nature and let out a curse as the sound of metal clashing and shouting voices reached them just around the bend in the road.

"Looks like someone else found the Orcs first," Haáin contradicted as he drew his sword.

"Or they found someone else," Farur countered, bringing his axe around.

"Who else would be out here?" Bilgin demanded incredulously.

"Who do you think?" Ketola snapped, already dismounting and grasping her pernach. "What are you doing just sitting there? We have to help!"

Some hesitated, but Thorin was already dismounting and drawing his sword, used to obeying that tone of voice from his mother without question. Ovip had also dismounted and Dáin let out a curse of his own as he quickly reached for his trusted red axe and followed suit.

"We can't go back, not on that path," Haáin pointed out to the others. "There's no room to turn around even if we wanted to. It's forward or nothing."

Leaving the ponies where they were, the group quickly rounded the bend, weapons high and bellowing war cries at the top of their lungs.

Thorin would have stopped his charge as he came around the corner and finally saw the battle proper had Munzad not grabbed his arm and shoved him forward. There was no time to think after that as Wargs and Orcs whirled in surprise at their sudden appearance let alone gawking. At a shout from one of the Orcs, three of the four Wargs rounded on the newest threat and the battle began.

Thorin swung his sword, trying to aim for the next of the closest Warg while at the same time avoiding the snapping jaws of the beast. He managed to graze it, but it simply swung back around for another swipe.

Leaping away, Thorin nearly backed right into another Warg that was going after Dgol. Flipping
his blade he shoved backwards, pressing the metal into the beast's hindquarters, all the while watching the first Warg leap for him. He had to time this just right.

The second Warg whirled around, fangs bared just as the first one was reaching them and Thorin put everything he had into his legs to propell him in the opposite direction of the sharp teeth. The second animal crashed into the first and Dgol, Ketola and Munzad were on them, stabbing down at their vulnerable bellies and throats.

Taking a second, Thorin glanced over to see that Nalbar and Ovip had dispatched the third Warg. An arrow not made by dwarrows hands had displaced the fourth and all that was left were two of the Orcs.

One of the Orcs charged at Dáin who was just slightly separated from the others and alone. Not missing a step, Dáin whirled around and ducked just under the swing before heaving his own axe upward in an arc.

Thorin felt his stomach rebel as the head went flying.

The last Orc had already been disposed of by Farur, Haán and Bilgin so Thorin allowed himself to catch his breath as he leaned against his sword.

"You going to live lad?" Nalbar asked at the sight of Thorin almost hunched over. "Try and keep it down in yer stomach where it belongs. Least in front of company."

Thorin nodded and took a deep breath to steady himself before glanced back at the two who had been ambushed by the Orcs.

One was removing a saddle from a dead horse while his companion was looking over the asembled dwarrows curiously. "Would either of you by chance be Princess Dís, Daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór?" he inquired, eying Ovip and Ketola's barley discernible skirts.

Ketola made a noise of approval as Ovip stepped forward. "Lady Ovip of Ered Mithrin, at your service," she introduced herself with a nod. "We are on our way to lend assistance to Princess Dís."

"May we ask what two Rangers are doing this far in the mountain?" Dáin questioned pointedly at the end of Ovip's announcement. "What business do you have with Dís?"

"We carry a message for her," the Ranger explained. "Master-?"

"Dáin, Lord of the Iron Hills." He gave a slight bow, never taking his eyes off the humans. "At your service."

Thorin watched as the two Rangers shared a surprised glance before the second returned to sorting through the saddlebags on the remaining horse and the first turned back to Dáin and Bilgin who had finally made his way to his and Ovip's side.

"Allow me to introduce myself," the Ranger smiled. "I am Adan at your service and this is my partner Wyn."

Wyn gave a greeting of his own as he finally approached the group. "Lady Ovip, Lord Dáin." He looked at Bilgin curiously.

"Prince Bilgin of the mountains of Withered Heath at your service."

The now named Rangers Adan and Wyn exchanged another look.
"Pleased to meet you," Adan spoke again. "As we all seem to be headed in the same direction, I suppose we shall be traveling companions for the last leg of this journey." He gestured to the dead Orcs. "Safety in numbers and all that. We're lucky to be traveling by the North path. The one from the south is far worse."

Any argument about the possibility of them traveling together died with that last statement. "What do you mean 'worse'?” Bilgin demanded.

Adan didn't seem offended by Bilgin's rudeness, but rather surprised at the question itself. "I mean it's infested with Orcs of course. We've been keeping them off of the Great East Road as well as the North-South Road, but they've become sneaky and are traveling up the coast through Eryn Vorn and crossing over at Forlond rather than risk traveling so close to the Gray Havens."

Thorin felt himself staring at the Ranger in shock. He was grateful that he wasn't the only one as practically all of the others were doing the same.

Adan shifted on his feet restlessly as the dwarrows continued to stare. "Was it something I said?"

Ovip was the first one to find her voice. "We do not travel outside of our own mountains very often and are simply surprised at how much the world has changed since we last ventured in it."

There was that look again. That disbelieving look, as if the Rangers couldn't believe what they were hearing.

"We're not going to get any safer standing around talking about it," Nalbar drawled and he looked pointedly at the dead Wargs and Orcs around them.

"Indeed," Dáin agreed, shaking himself out of his thoughts. "Thorin, get the ponies with Munzad and Ketola."

"Thorin?" Wyn asked sharply and the Rangers gazes were suddenly focused on Thorin. "Dís' brother?, but I thought-"

"You're thinking of my cousin," Thorin spoke up before his father could answer for him. "It's a family name."

The Rangers seemed to accept this and Thorin quickly went with the others to retrieve the ponies. In no time at all they had mount back up and were on their way.

"Is there a particular reason why are you visiting your cousin?"

Thorin looked over where the two rangers were riding double next to him on the remaining horse looking at him expectantly. He hesitated for a moment and noticed his father turning slightly to give him a warning look out of the corner of his eye. He knew his father didn't want him to say anything about investigating the allegation the older Thorin had made at Belegost, but Thorin wasn't sure what he could tell the Rangers a lie without it sounding utterly false. So, he went with a half-truth.

"My cousins are preparing to return to their homeland in the East," he explained. "We're here to lend them any assistance they need in the returning trip."

"We had a wagon of supplies," Ovip brought her pony back to Thorin's other side. "However, we had to leave it behind after the last Orc attack."

"Ah… the kingdom of Erebor in the Lonely Mountain." Wyn nodded.
Thorin looked at him in surprise. "Yes. How did you know that?"

"Your cousin Thorin's journey isn't as secret as you may believe it to be," Adan chuckled. "We found out the story when we were asked to deliver the letter we carry."

"The letter you have for Dís?" Thorin inquired.

"Just who is the letter from that you risk traversing down Orc infested roads?" Bilgin wanted to know. "Or is that something you can not tell us?"

"No secret," Adan smiled again. "We were sent by the Hobbit Gerontius Took, Thain of the Shire." He suddenly let out a chuckle as Wyn rolled his eyes behind him. "He was most insistent we deliver the letter as soon as possible. He has some questions he would very much like answered."

Ketola looked back at them curiously. "Questions? What sort of questions?"

Adan let out a full laugh this time and Wyn was the one who finally answered. "He would like to know exactly why King Thorin of the lost city of Erebor has made off with his favorite grandson to go dragon hunting."

Thorin was stunned, but apparently not as much as his father.

"What do you mean, Thorin kidnapped a hobbit?"

Chapter End Notes

--- NAME CHART THE SECOND ---

From Chapter 8:
Ovip - Lady of Var's Folk
Bilgin - son of Morrund of Vígðís' Folk
Dgol - Bilgin's head guard
Dání - Lord of Sindri's Folk
Thorin III - Dání's Son & Thorin Oakenshield's cousin

New Dwarrows:
Ketola - Ovip's Maid & Personal Body Guard
Haáin - Ovip's Travel Guard
Farur - Bilgin's Scout
Munzad - Bilgin's 2nd scout
Nalbar - Thorin III's bodyguard
Grokk- Dain's bodyguard + Deceased

Rangers:
Adan
Wyn

1) From what I understand, Dáin had beheaded Azog in the book during the battle at Moria. As Peter Jackson has Azog running around and most definitely alive (Unless he's some sort of Orc Zombie in the movie, and with today's movies, it is completely plausible), I gave Dáin his moment in the spotlight here. (... dear lord. Zombie!Azog. What a horrifying thought.)

2) Pernach - "A pernach is a type of flanged mace originating in the 12th century in the
region of Kievan Rus' and later widely used throughout Europe." Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pernach

3) According to One Wiki to Rule Them All, Forlond was a port at the Gulf of Lune. As Orcs were in boats during Return of the King, I thought it would be feasible for them to use this method to circumvent the Rangers. Again, if I am wrong, feel free to chuck the book at my head.

The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey Extended Edition hit's USA stores on the 5th! xD /IS ECSTATIC/ Only once again there are Three awesome covers -- and I want them ALL! Do I need multiple copies of the same movie? Yes. Yes I do. Do I have the money for multiple copies? No, no I do not. :(
Thorin Oakenshield was not in a better mood after the rain had finally come to an end though everyone else, including the wizard, were all clearly ecstatic.

His dreams had changed again and he was not pleased with the direction they were now going. He would be "meeting" Lord Elrond soon enough, he didn't have to dream about the haughty elf.

If Thorin started having dreams about Thranduil, he would turn right around then and there and go home, just see if he didn't.

It was clear that Irmo was trying to show him something important in regards to the Lord of Rivendell though and with a sigh Thorin went over in his mind what it was he had seen.

In his dream, Elrond certainly didn't look like any other elf Thorin had been in the company of before, including Elrond's himself.

Covered in grime and dirt, the dark haired elf was clambering up a rocky path with a human Thorin had never seen before and into what looked to be a rather large cave, more of a cavern really. Thorin could tell at a glance that it was an old one at that, given how worn down the path the two were on.

There was an eerie glow, illuminating the elf's features from below as Elrond turned to the human and Thorin standing just a few steps behind still shrouded in darkness.

"Cast it into the fire!" Elrond shouted. The urgency in his voice startled Thorin briefly before he looked at the back at the knight just before him.

The human continued to stare at Elrond for a moment before he looked down upon the ring in his hand held just in front of his face.

A ring Thorin recognized from the previous visions of the gray creature.

"Destroy it!" Elrond continued, but the human just looked at him.

"No."

And Thorin awoke covered in sweat and actually wishing for the rain to return in order to cool his fevered skin.

Bifur, who was taking his rotation of the midnight shift, was next to him in a heartbeat, surprise and confusion in his eyes as he whispered something out in the archaic Khuzdul. Thorin had reassured him that nothing was wrong and that perhaps the next night he shouldn't lay his bedroll so close to the fire.

The other dwarf had eyed him for a moment, his brow furrowed around the axe, but in the end he simply nodded and returned to his post and his whittling. Thorin was just glad it was the old miner who was on the midnight shift rather than say Dwalin or worse, Óin. Or come to think about it, any other member of the company for that matter. Nosy, the lot of them.
Bifur would keep his silence even with those who could understand him.

A human had the ring. Or was going to have the ring. Was it one of the nine rings of the human kings? 'But those were lost long before even the first of the seven rings of the dwarrows disappeared.'

Questions. All he had were more questions and barely any answers and what answers he got, Thorin was ready to admit, frightened him.

With a sigh, Thorin glanced about the small road they were currently traveling on trying to get his bearings. If he remembered right, they should come upon the remnants of the burned out farmhouse that had marked the edge of the troll's currently location at any moment now.

'If not today, then surely tomorrow,' Thorin thought with a frown. He fervently hoped it would not be until the next day, as he still had not come to a decision in regards to the foul creatures.

On the one hand, Orcrist was in that cave along with Glamdring and Sting. On the other hand, did he have the right to put his company knowingly into danger? It was one thing that they happened upon the trolls by chance the first time, it was completely different for Thorin to know that they were there and not steer his little group around the known danger.

Perhaps he could have them camp further on, then slip away later in the night and double back? Would he have enough time however to sneak into the troll cave and return before the Warg scouts were upon them?

Thorin groaned as his mind spun in its endless circles.

"Are ye all right there Thorin?"

Glancing at Balin Thorin suppressed a sigh and nodded tightly. "Just trying to figure out how much further to go before breaking for camp."

"Would you like to look at the map?" Balin asked, even as he was already pulling out the parchment from his saddlebag.

"Thank you, but no, I think it's coming back to me," Thorin waved him off and it was true. He remembered this particular grove of trees and large boulders. The farmhouse was not far ahead.

Actually it wasn't even far, it was right there before them as Gyth carried Thorin up the incline. With it's sagging roof and rotted frame rising ominously from the ground, it was strange how Thorin had missed the signs the first time around and thought it to be an abandoned dwelling rather than some poor human's last stand against the might of three mountain trolls.

The fact that the front of the house had been pulled away and was leaning against what use to be the front trellis gate should have been a bigger clue.

"Laddie?"

Thorin glanced over to find that in his examination of the house, he had stopped Gyth, causing the others to halt behind him.

'Dear Mahal, we're here!' he thought frantically. 'And I still have no solid plan on what I should do.'

"Urk." Quickly clearing his throat, he faced all the expectant gazes looking back at him. "We'll
"We'll do it!" Kíli offered rather exuberantly, already dismounting. "As long as someone doesn't mind bringing us dinner when it's done." He grinned cheekily and Thorin repressed the urge to refuse either one of his nephews to leave from his sight. The last thing he had expected was the boys volunteering to do their already pre-assigned chore.

He should have expected it however. Ever since Balin recounted the battle of Azanulbizar, the boys had become increasingly compliant. Not perfectly obedient, the sun would stop shining before that happened, but more than willing to help around the camp and quick to listen to Thorin or Dwalin when given precise orders.

Kíli had even come to him one night with a small question about Frerin's preferred weapon of choice. Thorin had been so surprised that he had answered without thought, describing his brother's long lost Falcata sword. Kíli had paid rapt attention that Balin and even Dwalin had glanced over in surprise and suspicion at the young dwarf before Thorin finished. At the end of the explanation Kíli had simply returned to his brother's side, leaving Thorin to wonder what it had been all about. Neither of the boys had ever shown an interest about learning of their long dead uncle before.

"Are you going to dismount any time soon?"

'Speaking of,' Thorin sighed as he finally got down off his mount and handed the rains over to the already waiting Fíli. With ease born of practice, Thorin removed the saddle and dropped it and the rest of his gear next to one of the larger rocks that scattered the area. With a glance, he could see Glóin already gathering wood that Óin was started to light as Bombur removed the large cooking pot from behind the saddle of Bilbo's mount.

"I think it would be wiser to press on."

Thorin startled to find Gandalf was already standing in the old doorframe, staring at him pointedly. Glancing at the rest still dismounting, he quickly moved towards the frowning wizard before the others could notice them speaking and badger their way into the exchange he was about to have for the second time now.

"We could make for the Hidden Valley," Gandalf continued as Thorin entered the old homestead.

Thorin could not repress the annoyed snort at that notion and he could see Gandalf preparing himself for an argument that would likely go nowhere. Thorin interrupted before he could start. "You are bound and determined to see that we cavort with those long legged leaf eaters, aren't you?"

The sentence seemed to startle Gandalf momentarily before he nodded. "We can seek their advice in solving your grandfathers map-

"I'm certain there are other ways if you just put your mind to it."

"There is also food," Gandalf tried a cajoling tone this time.

"No, there are leaves and plenty of them. Wonderful fare… if you're a horse."

"Rest would not be out of the question," Gandalf was back to chastising him.

"We can rest here."

"But why rest on the ground when you could take advantage of nice, soft beds?"
"I trust the worms in the dirt more than I trust those pointed eared walking sticks of fluff."

Gandalf blinked at Thorin as he chewed over that sentence for a moment. No matter how many times he thought it over, he still could not make heads or tails of it.

"They're like the growing stems of cotton," Thorin elaborated. "With nothing, but bits of fluffs in their ears that block any words that are contrary to what they believe to be the truth."

"They are set in their own ways, I shall admit," Gandalf stated slowly. "Like others I could mention."

Thorin shrugged unabashed. "We're made from rock. It takes a heavy hammer to sway us. Not shafts of arrows or smug words."

"Then I shall speak plainly," Gandalf announced. "We have a map that we can not read. Elrond has forgotten more languages than I have bothered to learn. He can help us."

"Help seems to be a relative term to the elves."

"Thorin."

"The dragon, Moria, our own exile into the wilds. Where was their good will then? Where was their help? They did nothing, but watch and cluck their tongues at the sad, terrible fate that befell us, but never did they help."

Thorin took a deep breath, trying his best to calm his temper. He had succeeded in keeping it reigned in thus far; he was not going to lose it now. "The feud between Thranduil and my grandfather was just that, a feud between them. By what right did the Woodland King have to turn away from helping innocents and tend to the dying children?"

"Elrond was not part of that," Gandalf argued. "The elves of Rivendell are quite different from the woodland cousins."

Thorin gave him an incredulous look and he could see Gandalf's cheeks flush red in anger.

"Your clinging to the past is blinding you to the truth," Gandalf snapped, "and I did not relinquished the map and key to your keeping for you to turn a blind eye to future possibilities."

"Just like Mirkwood, Rivendell did not send us any aid, any offer of aid or even a note with their condolences to my grandfather or father. It would have been the polite thing to do. They have been sequestered in that valley far too long in my opinion. They have forgotten just how cruel the outside world can be, random Orc packs notwithstanding."

The image of Elrond, in blood covered armor and hair and face streaked with dirt rose again in Thorin's mind. Past or future, the Elrond of now that Thorin met a year ago was not the elf that Irmo showed him. In Thorin's opinion, the noble could use the same treatment his father gave the old dwarrow councilors of Erebor. A good swift kick to the arse.

"The elves of Rivendell have seen their fair share of sorrow, Thorin. Understanding each other does not happen in a moment, but rather gradually over time," Gandalf was back to the coaxing tone. "I'm sure he will welcome us and while we may have to resort to a bit of misdirection in regards to the map, we will have answers that we did not have before and are sure to-"

"Oh cease with your infernal urging!" he finally burst out, wanting the conversation over with more than antagonizing the wizard. "We are going to Rivendell and your elf friends, I never said
that we weren't. Knowing you, we would find ourselves guests at the elf's dinner table whether we wished it or not."

Gandalf's jaw dropped.

"But not before I am ready to face them. And I shall be dammed if I am not at least somewhat rested and presentable before you foist me into their immaculate presence. As a visiting king, I should do my best to arrive with some of my dignity intact before I go begging them for favors."

"Besides," Thorin continued as Gandalf's teeth clicked shut. "The others need their own rest before I foist them into a situation they've never encountered. Just look at what happened at Bag End. The only one's who I am not expecting to make a complete arse of themselves are Balin, Dori and Bilbo! Don't get me started on the boys! I'm already shuddering at the notion that their first dignitary appearance as heir's apparent are going to be with an Elven Lord." Thorin frowned. "I have to speak to Balin to see if the one lesson in proper etiquette will be enough." Thorin then dropped his head into his hand and groaned.

"What now?" Gandalf demanded.

"Manners," he moaned.

"What about them?"

"Bofur doesn't have any." He rubbed his forehead with his fingertips. "It's going to be a political nightmare. And I don't have any of my own council to foist blame on."

Gandalf stared. He opened his mouth as if going to speak before closing it again, but a few moments later, the process would repeat itself. Thorin finally just raised an eyebrow in askance. The wizard continued to look down at him for another moment before he shook his head and turning, strode out of the old house.

Thorin watched him go. "Well, that went better than expected," he mused to himself as he heard Bilbo call after their taller companion.

"To seek the company of the only one who makes any sense these days."

"And who's that?"

"Myself, Mister Baggins."

Thorin emerged from the farmhouse just as Gandalf swung upon his horse with all the speed of an unruly child in a pique and took off down the road.

"Is he coming back?" Bilbo asked Balin.

"Eventually," Thorin sighed as he re-joined the group. "He's just irritated that I would not adhere to his specified timetable."

"Did he say where he was going?" Balin asked curiously.

Thorin shook his head. "But I have a pretty good idea."

'No wonder those elves had been patrolling so close to where we were,' he realized. 'It couldn't have been by any coincidence.'
Gandalf was riding to Rivendell to alert Elrond of their imminent arrival.

Chapter End Notes

1) Falcata - "The falcata is a type of sword typical of the pre-Roman Iberian Peninsula (modern Spain and Portugal)." [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falcata](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Falcata)
"Why do you think Gandalf left?"

Fíli looked up at the sudden question and turned towards where Kíli was sitting on the ground tightening his bow, his brow furrowed in thought as he examined the string locks. Fíli didn't think it was his bow his brother was worried about however.

"He and Thorin had a disagreement, that much is clear," Fíli said slowly.

"A row you mean," Kíli retorted, finally setting aside the bow. "But what about? Did you hear anything?"

"I was just as far back as you with the ponies, how would I?"

Kíli rolled his eyes. "I meant from the other," he drawled. "Balin was closest with the hobbit. Did he hear anything?"

Fíli shrugged. "It has to be about something though," he agreed. "Thorin's stubbornness has caused even Balin to go stomping away in anger more than once but…"

"Thorin hasn't been himself this entire trip," Kíli huffed. "And he hasn't lost his temper once!"

"That's not true," Fíli countered gently. "He argued with Gandalf when he arrived at the hobbit hole."

"But he didn't actually lose his temper, remember? He was upset but he wasn't angry." Kíli frowned as he thought back. "Actually, I don't think he was even upset."

Fíli slowly nodded as he remembered the argument. "He was more amused than anything else."

"You see!" Kíli sounded triumphant. "And he hasn't lost his temper with any of us! Not even when I played that small joke on Bilbo."

"In retrospect, it was in poor taste," Fíli chastised.

"Well, I know that now," Kíli pouted. "But that's just my point. After hearing Balin's recount of the battle, wouldn't you think Thorin would have been angrier with us? He was displeased, but he wasn't shouting at us."

The younger of the two flopped back onto the ground. "It's not normal."

"Do you suppose Thorin has been trying to hold back his temper on purpose?" Fíli asked.
"What for?" Kíli raised his head enough to peer at the other dwarf. "He's never done so before, what would be different now?"

Fíli mulled over it for a moment, brushing aside his first absurd thought and going with the one that seemed more reasonable. "This is a serious undertaking," he began slowly. "It's no place to allow your temper to get the best of you."

"Not that it's ever stopped him before," Kíli snorted as he dropped his head. "I still think he's possessed by a ghost."

"He is a bit more relaxed."

"'Relaxed' isn't the word for it. He's learning how to knit!"

"At least it gives him something to do other than brood," Fíli shot back.

The two lapsed into silence for a bit, the only noise being the sound of the wind over the trees and the soft nickering from the ponies.

"Do you suppose that's what he's doing?" Kíli asked quietly. "Trying his best to keep himself from thinking about… everything."

Fíli thought about it for a second. "Thorin is never one to allow himself to be sidetracked. But," he continued when Kíli sat back up and looked as if he were about to interrupt. "But he seems to be trying to keep himself distracted on purpose."

Kíli studied him for a moment. "What are you thinking?"

"It's just a thought." He squirmed under the hazel gaze before finally relenting. "What do you think he dreams about?"

Kíli was now the one to look down at lap. "Nightmares are more like it. I think I've herd him stifle a scream or two."

"And he did scream back at Bilbo's," Fíli nodded.

"Memories?" Kíli guessed.

"I'm not sure. They worry him though."

"He's gone quiet more than once and do you see the way he stares at us?"

"What?" Fíli looked at his brother in askance. "Stares at who?"

"Us!" Kíli insisted. "Like at any moment we're going to disappear from his sight."

"He worries for us. Mother would have his head herself if anything should happen."

"That doesn't explain that sad look he gets sometime."

"Whatever is bothering Thorin, Balin will have it sorted out soon enough," Fíli claimed. "He and Óin have been having rather hushed discussions these past few weeks. They'll sure to figure it out."

"I hope so," Kíli sighed, lying back down on the ground once again.

Fíli watched him stretch out his tired limbs and found himself smiling as he set aside his own
sword and whetstone before clambering to his feet.

Kíli peeked one eye open when the warmth of the sunlight he was bathing in was suddenly blocked by a cool shadow. Fíli stood over him, his gaze trailing from Kíli's booted feet and upwards before they finally locked eyes.

"You do realize this is the first time we've been out from under of Uncle's watchful eyes since we've met up at the Shire."

Trying not to look too interested, Kíli simply closed his eye and leaned back against his hands as he tucked them under his head. "Oh? What about it?"

Fíli knelt down on knees next to his brother's stretched out form. "Seems a shame to just spend the whole time chatting."

"And did you have something else in mind?" Kíli asked, even as his body began to shiver in anticipation.

"We could go for a run," Fíli smiled.

Kíli tried to keep the grin from forming. "We're suppose to be watching the ponies," he argued.

Fíli made an exaggerated sigh. "I suppose we'll just have to find something to do here."

"We could spar," Kíli teased, even as he moved one foot enough to prod at Fíli.

"We could," Fíli replied, sounding as if he was seriously contemplating the idea. "You need all the help you can get."

"Oy!" Kíli started to sit back up. "I'm not that ba-"

Fíli's mouth swallowed the words as he leaned forward and caught Kíli's with his own.

Kíli groaned, bringing his arms up to wrap around Fíli's shoulder so gravity would drop him back to the ground and away from the wicked tongue twining with his own.

He needn't have worried however as Fíli followed him back down, stretching out above and beside him. Taking the opportunity, Kíli tugged at Fíli's surcoat, pulling the fur away from his own rapidly heating body as Fíli's hand trailed down his sternum and grasped the hem of his tunic, tugging it up just enough to slip under it and press below the line of fabric on Kíli's hips.

Kíli groaned in appreciation as fingertips just brushed the base of his length, his belt keeping Fíli's hand from going any lower. Pushing the other dwarf back Kíli finally managed to get the furred coat off Fíli completely before his hands went to his own clothing, freeing himself of the bothersome belt and shoving his trousers down.

Clothing wasn't removed, but rather shifted aside in their haste as Fíli managed to turn the other dwarf over onto his stomach and lifted Kíli's hips up until he was on his knees. A jar of grease was retrieved from the discarded coat and soon the sound of Kíli's panting and groaning joined the other soft sounds in the small clearing.

They were some distance from the camp, but still within hearing range and so he brought his arm under him in order to bite on his leather bracer as he felt Fíli's fingers leaving him and something much larger take their place.
"Fíli," he gasped as he felt his brother push into him. He could feel his hair being brushed aside and a kiss pressed to the base of his neck.

"Kíli," Fíli groaned as he leaned back up and pulled back slightly.

The two moaned as they started to move against one another, taking a few moments to find their rhythm as Kíli tried to quicken his pace, but Fíli grip was firm as he held him still and moved unhurriedly, wanting to savor the feel of his brother and lover's heat surrounding him, urging him in further in.

"Fíli," Kíli whined needing, his cheeks flushed. He had gone too long without the feel of Fíli pressed against him and now was not the time to savor it. "Faster. Please."

Growling, Fíli hefted Kíli's hips higher and snapped his hips forward, burying himself in the wiggling body beneath him.

Kíli gasped encouragingly as he got his way as usual and Fíli started slamming into him. It took some wiggling before Fíli was finally pressing against that small spot that made Kíli see stars and the archer was practically shoving his fist in his mouth to keep himself from crying out. It didn't help that Fíli's hand had left his hip and snaked around to grasp at his own neglected length.

Having to hold themselves back for months, it took no time at all for Kíli to let out a loud keen as found his pinnacle. Gasping for air, he felt Fíli's fingers milking his length before releasing him and moving back to his hip.

The force of Fíli's thrusts practically slammed him forward into the ground as his brother worked to find his own release. Kíli tried to press back to help him, but Fíli was having none of it as he leaned forward and practically draped himself over Kíli's back. So, Kíli did what he could and clenched his muscles at every thrust.

Fíli could not hold back any longer and he snarled as he snapped his hips forward once more before holding completely still as his seed poured into his brother's welcoming heat.

He nipped at his brother's ear. "Minx," he gasped.

Kíli turned enough to look back over his should to smile unabashed. Mouths met and breath mingled before they pulled back, one long string of saliva tying them together just as much as the rapidly hardening length still buried in Kíli.

"Again?" Kíli asked with a grin. Fíli's kiss was all the answer he needed and they began to move again.

Bofur had sent Bilbo off with the boy's food some time ago and Thorin waited a few more moments before he started to put his plan into action.

This was it. Things were finally in motion and he could only pray he was doing the right thing.

He had plotted and pondered all afternoon as he assisted everyone setting up the small camp in the ruins of the old farmhouse. In the end, he decided his first idea was really the better plan and there was no more time to come up with a new one. Sending Nori after the boys in order to bring back the news of trolls that much faster meant that he could give the others their orders in what they were expected to do, rather than allowing everyone to simply attack as they may.
Practically inhaling the brown stew, he stood to take his bowl back to Bombur. ‘Best get on with it then,’ he concluded.

As he handed it to the larger dwarf, he glanced over to where he had seen Nori eating with his brothers only to find that the thief was no longer there. Surprised, he looked out over the camp, wondering if Nori was pilfering from the others again while they ate, but the dwarf was nowhere to be seen.

It was then that he realized Dwalin was missing.

Groaning, he dropped his head in his hand, ignoring Bombur's concerned look for the moment. 'Why now?' he groaned to himself.

Finally, he looked up as Bombur placed a hand on his arm. "Would you mind horribly having to fetch more water to douse the fire with?" he asked.

Bombur's worried expression turned into one of surprise. "No, not as much. Why?"

"I'm going to have to break up a fight," Thorin sighed as he reached for the pail of water on the ground beside the cook.

Taking in the camp at a glance Bombur gave his king a sympathetic gaze and Thorin slipped out of the camp and into the darkness.

He went the opposite direction of where the boys were watching the ponies and out behind the old fireplace and into the small grove of trees. Everything was quiet but Thorin wasn't expecting loud shouting. Both Nori and Dwalin were too good at what they did to alert the camp of anything wrong.

He didn't take any precautions to muffle his steps as he searched around the area for the missing two. Hopefully it would be enough to alert them of his presence and they would hold off on their fighting until a later time. He was getting rather tired of their small barbs at one another and if it had finally dissolved into physical brawling he was going to have to take drastic action.

Thorin had known of their hostility towards one another the first time around, but now that he was actually interacting with the group as a whole, it was easy to catch the two snipping and snarling at one another whenever they happened to be riding close to one another. Dori tried to keep his younger brother in check, but Balin had long ago removed himself from interfering in his brother's life.

Dwalin was supposed to keep order. Nori was determined to descend it into chaos. Thorin was just grateful he hadn't recruited the boys yet to his cause.

Stomping forward, Thorin increased his pace. Every moment he wasted searching for the two was another moment Bilbo and the boys were with the trolls. 'We're going to have to figure this out,' he thought angrily. 'I can't have distention within the camp and their dislike of one another is-

Thorin stepped out from between two trees and froze.

He had found them, but it was clear that they were completely unaware of his presence-

-And it wasn't because they were fighting.

'Oh Mahal,' Thorin instantly grabbed the bottom of the pail and flung the water over the two figures against one of the sturdier trees. 'That certainly explains a few things,' he thought as the two
yelped and sputtered. Nori scrambled up off his knees and whirled back around, two knives in his hands while Dwalin moved to pull the slighter dwarf back and out of potential harms way.

All their anger, annoyance and irritation disappeared as they spotted Thorin, watching them warily. "I thought you hated each other," he drawled as Dwalin quickly turned away to tuck himself back into his breeches. Nori just shrugged as he dragged the back of his forearm over his mouth.

"Was that really necessary?" Dwalin barked as he was finally presentable and turned back to his king and oldest friend.

Thorin glanced down at the pail hanging limply from his fingers and shrugged. "Yes."

"Damn it Thorin," Dwalin growled.

Smirking at his best friend, Thorin turned to Nori. The knives had disappeared and the thief was trying to wring the water out from his braids.

"Would you please go check on the boys for me?"

Nori paused mid-wrung and eyed him warily. "What for?"

"Slacking off are they?" Dwalin grumbled as he fixed his belt. "If that's the case, I'll go put the fear back into them."

"Actually, I don't think they are," Thorin countered, stepping in front of his friend and blocking his path. "I just would feel better if someone were to check in on them."

"And not let them know that their uncle was worried enough about them to actually send someone to check up on them," Nori guessed.

"You heard the wargs a week ago," Thorin agreed. "I just…"

"Worry about them," Nori nodded as he finished wringing out the water. "I would be the same if Dori wasn't already keeping such a close eye on Ori."

Dwalin looked back and forth between the two slightly baffled. Understandable as he himself was the youngest in his family. There was never the need to worry about younger relatives underfoot.

"Thank you," Thorin told him sincerely as Nori started to pass him.

Nori just nodded and melted into the darkness like the professional that he was and Thorin wondered if any of his possessions would still be where he left them when he returned.

He turned back to look up at Dwalin who was still staring at the spot where Nori disappeared. "I am sorry."

"No you're not," Dwalin replied.

"Okay, no I'm not," Thorin chuckled as they finally started back the way Thorin had come.

The two walked compatibly for a while before Thorin snickered. "So when you said the thief should be locked up, I hadn't realized you meant in your bed chambers."

Dwalin had no qualms at cuffing Thorin on the back of his head. "I can not believe you brought a bucket!"
"I thought you were fighting!" Thorin protested. "I didn't realize you're association had become one of a carnal nature."

Dwalin instantly went serious as he stopped walking.

Thorin continued on for a step or two before realizing Dwalin had paused and he turned back to his friend curiously.

"It's not like that," Dwalin declared gruffly.

Thorin took in his friend's stance with one look. Dwalin was nervous, but clearly determined. "Then what is it?" He watched his friend for a moment, allowing Dwalin to find his words. The taller dwarf was never really good with expressing himself, and Thorin waited patiently.

Dwalin finally raised his hands in a shrug and declared, "Together, we are One."

Thorin's eyes went wide in surprise and the two stood there staring at one another for a few more moments.

"All right then," Thorin finally replied and the two resumed their walking. "Congratulations," he offered after another stretch of silence.

Dwalin fidgeted before he nodded his thanks.

The camp was just in sight when Thorin glanced at his friend. "Have you spoken to Dori for the family's blessing? What did he have to say about it?"

There was a small grumble and Dwalin's fidgeting became more prominent.

Thorin's gaped at his friend in realization before he burst out laughing. "Oh please! Please let me be there when you do! It's bound to be hysterical."

Dwalin shoved him and the pail flew as the King Under the Mountain landed in the bushes, still snickering.

Chapter End Notes

I really wasn't so sure if I should include Fíli and Kíli's scene or not. I debated it for three days but my friend assured me that a little smut goes a long way. ...Then again, she's just as depraved as I am. Please let me know what you think.
Sneaking and Strategies

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Nori slipped from shadow to shadow with practiced ease as he made his way around the old farmhouse and the relaxing dwarrows seated around the fire.

There was a moment where he wondered if he should take to the tree branches to ensure he was fully cloaked in darkness, but since he was only checking up on the two young princes, he doubted they would notice him either way.

Not that he minded checking on the two younger Durins, but he wished Thorin could have spared him the impromptu shower.

Rolling his shoulders in irritation, he reached behind him and pulled the damp cloth away from his back trying make his tunic dry faster. 'Haven't even been dry a full day,' he thought in irritation before continuing on towards the small area the ponies were gathered.

He wasn't sure how he felt about being caught in the act with Dwalin by their leader and king.

On the one hand, it was better than being caught by Dori – or Mahal forbid, Ori. Anyone else who might have stumbled upon them, Nori would have simply ignored and continued on worshiping the hard, muscular body he'd had backed up against the tree.

On the other hand, Thorin was the only one in the group, in the whole kingdom, with the power to truly make Nori's life miserable if he wished it. In that regard, the sudden cold shower was probably getting off lightly. Especially considering Dwalin and Thorin were the best of friends.

Thorin had made it clear that he would defend those closest to him against any perceived threat or wrongdoing and both Dwalin and Balin fell into that small sphere of protection along with the dwarf's nephews.

Strangely enough however, Nori felt as if he was just hovering outside that strange circle of support and friendship. Like he was skirting the edge, just inches away from crossing the imaginary line that separated himself from Thorin's close confidence.

Nori was no fool however. He knew he and Thorin were not going to be close friends like Thorin was with Dwalin, but there had been some sort of camaraderie between them ever since Ori had hauled his ass into the hobbit's personal office through the window.

Thorin had even allowed Nori to go on nicking small items from the others from time to time. Even when Nori tried to snatch that tempting money pouch Thorin had on his belt, the king had done nothing more than give him an amused look before sending him off.

It was almost like Thorin was simply waiting in that small circle for Nori to make a decision and take that fateful step over nonexistent barrier.

Which was ridiculous as far as Nori was concerned. What king, even a crown-less one, would ever be friends with a paltry thief? Even if the thief was sleeping with the king's best friend. Traveling companions was already a stretch that many of his acquaintance would never believe, let alone Nori and Thorin becoming close comrades.
However, if Nori wanted Dwalin in his life on a permanent basis, and Nori very much wanted the dwarf in his life, then that meant Thorin would also become a big part of it as Dwalin's best friend.

'What other thief can say they got a king as an indirect in-law?' Nori pondered as he approached the old ruins of the barn where Kíli and Fíli were watching the ponies.

Or rather, suppose to be watching the ponies.

Nori stopped in the shadow of a large tree and took in the scene with a raised eyebrow.

Kíli was circling the ponies with a rather determined look about him while Fíli was staring off back down the road they had come critically. The hobbit was standing off to side with a rather anxious expression on his face, still holding the two bowls Bofur had sent him off with before Nori and Dwalin had snuck off to have their bit of fun.

"Daisy and Bungo are missing," Kíli announced as he finished his circuit around the paddock.

Nori groaned in exasperation. The last thing he wanted to spend the rest of his evening doing was hunting down two meandering ponies.

One job. The two youngest had been given one job and while they had been better about their duties as of late, they were, after all, still very young dwarrows just into their maturity.

"Shouldn't we tell Thorin?" Bilbo was asking as he followed the boys over to what looked like a downed tree.

'Wait a moment.' Nori squinted slightly to try and get a better look at the roots and the dirt clinging to the uprooted trunk. 'That looks fresh.'

"Let's not worry him," Fíli was telling Bilbo. "As our official burglar we thought you might like to look into it."

Nori groaned. This was going nowhere good.

Bilbo was already making his excuses and a few surprisingly accurate observations about the downed tree and how it would take something big to knock it over when Fíli suddenly crouched down.

"There's a light. Over here," he gestured to Kíli to join them.

Nori straightened and followed the other three as they crept closer to the soft glow of firelight.

Voices echoed from the direction of the light and Nori instantly tensed and shifted further into the shadows at the pitch of the voices. 'Something big indeed,' he realized even as Kíli answered Bilbo's question with the single word "trolls".

The thief then found himself jerking in surprise as Fíli and Kíli suddenly leapt over the log they were hiding behind with out warning and darted in the direction of the voices.

'What in the name of all that is gold are those boy's doing?' Nori thought irritably as he followed close behind, ensuring not to be noticed by Bilbo who had quickly doubled back to retrieve the two bowls he had left behind.

The small group stopped just in time as a troll suddenly appeared from the other side of the trees, two ponies struggling beneath each arm.
"He's got Myrtle and Minty!" Bilbo hissed, sounding outraged rather than frightened as Nori thought he would be at the prospect of trolls camped just on the other side of the small tree grove from their own.

'Perhaps the hobbit has a backbone after all.'

Having seen enough, Nori turned and started back towards the farmhouse in order to fetch Thorin and the others.

Trolls, while not Orcs, were no joke and very hard to incapacitate. It was going to take the whole company to bring them down. That was unless Thorin wanted to write the now four ponies off as a loss and head further down the road before the Trolls became aware of their presence.

Glancing over his shoulder, Nori nearly tripped on his own feet when he saw that both Kíli and Fíli had disappeared from view and Bilbo was actually following the one troll towards the firelight, rather than going back for help.

Sliding to a stop, Nori found himself torn. He alone wasn't enough to grab the troublemakers and pull them back from heading headfirst into danger, but on the other hand, if he left all three princes with the trolls, Thorin would have his head, Dwalin's lover or not.

Finally coming to a decision, he turned and practically thundered towards the dwarrows camp.

Thorin watched the tree line where his nephews and Bilbo were with the ponies, and the trolls, anxiously. Uncertainty was beginning to creep up on him and he wasn't sure if allowing the group to find the trolls the second time around had been a good idea. The longer he found himself watching for any sign of Nori, the more convinced he was that it had been a mistake.

'Stop doubting yourself,' he told himself firmly. 'The trolls, while dangerous, are still not as smart as Bilbo. They'll be fine…'

He glanced back at the dark edge of the woods. 'Probably…'

It had been unclear as to when it was that the three had found the trolls so it might be some time before Nori returned.

'If he returns at all,' he fretted. There was no guarantee that Nori would return to fetch help. It could very well be that he would join in whatever it was that Fíli had originally planed. And Thorin knew it had to have been Fíli who came up with the ridiculous idea to send Bilbo after the ponies. Kíli wasn't one for subtlety, but Fíli could be quite shrewd when he wanted to be.

Thorin firmly blamed Dís for that inherited trait. He and Frerin had never been one for subtlety either, but Dís was as shrewd as they came.

He could hear Bofur behind him ribbing on Dwalin who had moved towards the fire to try and dry his tunic while Bombur had graciously reclaimed the pail from Thorin. The large dwarf cocked his head at the new dent that had happened when Thorin had released the pail as he fell into the bush.

Thorin could only duck his head, slightly embarrassed, but Bombur said nothing of it and simply gave him a smile before he turned to head down to the water hand pump in order to refill the pail.

'Which is back down by the old barn where the boys, ponies and trolls are!' Thorin suddenly realized.
"Um, maybe I should just go ahead and re-fill that for you," he quickly darted in front of Bombur and reached out to reclaim the pail. "I was the one who used it after all."

Bombur looked surprised at Thorin's sudden appearance in front of him, but he didn't relinquish the pail. "Thanks all the same, but it's no trouble for me at all. I'll even be able to collect the boy's dishes while I'm down there."

Thorin bit down on a groan and reached out to take the handle from Bombur again. "Really, I insist. I think-

"TROLLS!"

Nori burst into the small clearing, running right for them as if the trolls were right behind him.

Dwalin reacted instantly, leaping over the fire and pulling out his axes as he eyed the darkness behind Nori. Glóin was at his side before the others had even managed to clamber to their feet.

"Here now, what is all this then?" Dori called out as Nori finally reached them and bent over, trying to catch his breath.

"Where are they?" Dwalin demanded before Nori could answer his brother. "I don't see anything."

"Back the other way," Nori waved a hand behind in the general direction of where the trolls were camped. "They didn't see me."

"Are you sure its trolls?" Balin questioned.

"Saw one clear as day," Nori reported. "Stole four of the ponies they did and the idiot dwarflings are going after them!" He paused for a beat before adding, "and they sent the Hobbit in to steal them back!"

"Nothing to do about that now," Thorin proclaimed as he set the pail aside and turned back towards the group. "If we charge in now, we'll alert the trolls that they're there and could get them caught or worse. We have to have a plan already set before Fíli gets here to fetch us."

"Fetch us?" Dwalin frowned at him.

"What do we do?" Óín asked.

"There are three trolls," Thorin began, missing Nori's sudden sharp look as he snagged a stick and started sketching in the dirt. "Our best option is to surround them and come at them from all sides. The ponies would most likely be corralled next to an outcropping of rocks to the back and side of them here," he drew an X at the top of the crude circle he drew, "so we only have to concentrate on three fronts. Glóin, Bifur, Bofur, and Dori, I want you to go to the far side here." He jabbed at the dirt. "Dwalin, Nori, Bombur and Óin on this side here," he pointed to the bottom of the circle, "while Balin and I will meet up with Kíli and Bilbo most likely on this side."

"Troll skin is almost as tough as leather," Thorin reminded them as he looked up from his sketching. "It will do us no good to simply stab at them. We're going to have to go the weak spots. The back of the ankle and the gut if you can reach it," here he looked to Dwalin who nodded. "However, our best chance of achieving this is to try and get them closer to our level. Bombur, Bofur and Nori, I want you three to aim for their legs; the back of their knees and ankles specifically. Try to get them drop down onto their knees. Dori, see if you can't get them to trip with your bolas. When they're down, that's when the rest of you jump in."
"What about me?" Ori asked, a slight tremor in his voice, but he was looking at Thorin resolute. "I have my slingshot. I can aim for their eyes if nothing else."

"You are going to be snagging Bilbo as soon as you get close enough and getting the hobbit out of there before he gets stepped on," Thorin ordered. "Balin, you're going cover them."

"And what are you going to be doing during all of this?" Balin asked incredulously as he eyed the crude map Thorin had drawn.

"I'm going to be strangling a couple of nephews," Thorin snarled.

"Oh that sound far more fun," Bofur snickered. "Why do you get all the good jobs?"

"The perks of being king," Thorin drawled as the group quickly fetched their weapons. Or ladle in Bombur's case. "We'll head out now. Hopefully we'll meet up with the boys before anything."

"TROLLS!"

"-happens," Thorin finished as Fíli suddenly appeared on the path. Hefting up his own sword and axe, Thorin started jogging down the road to meet up with his frantic heir apparent, the others close behind him.

"Uncle! There are-"

"Yes, yes. Trolls. We know," he interrupted as he snagged the younger dwarf's arm as he passed, hauling Fíli after him. "What possessed you to send Bilbo after the ponies? No, don't answer that. Tell me why you decided not to let us know there were trolls camped just down the road from us?"

"I-I-" Fíli stuttered as he struggled to keep his feet as Thorin practically dragged him along.

"You're both grounded for a fortnight!" Thorin hissed. "Which means no hunting on your own and you will be in the company of someone at all hours of the day. Whether it be myself, Balin, Dwalin or Nori."

"Nori? Why Nori?" Fíli yelped.

"Yeah, why Nori?" Nori demanded.

"Because Nori actually came back and warned us about the trolls," Thorin declared to the group at large. "Along with the fact that I had to interrupt his personal down-time to have him go check on you brats."

There was a small choking sound from Dwalin, but Fíli was too busy staring at Thorin in disbelief.

"Don't worry about that now," Thorin shook the boy's arm again to ensure he was paying attention as the light from the troll's campfire came into view. "Forget your sword. Use your hammer and help Bombur, Bofur and Nori bring the trolls down while I strangle Kíli."

"Eep!"

Thorin gestured to the dwarrows behind them and the two groups split up to take their positions. With his grip still firm around Fíli's arm, he dragged the boy to the far right, Balin and Ori just behind them.

"Drop him!" Kíli's was saying just as they came up to the side of the camp. Thorin released Fíli's arm and searched the far side of the clearing, trying to see if the others were into position. They
were practically out of time.

"You what?" the troll holding Bilbo stared down at Kíli.

Dwalin gave a small whistle indicating that he was already in position and Thorin had to trust that the others had reached their designated places.

"I said drop him," Kíli repeated and the troll snorted before he gave in to Kíli's demand and hurled Bilbo at him.

"Now!" Thorin shouted bursting from the bushes brandishing his old, trusted sword.

The fight against the trolls began again.

Chapter End Notes

1) In the scene where Fíli and Kíli are staring at the ponies, explaining to Bilbo about the number difference of how many ponies they should have been watching versus the actual amount of ponies, there really is a hand pump in the foreground.

2) According to the DVD booklet, Fíli apparently has a throwing hammer in addition to his sword all those knives he gave Bilbo back when they first arrived at bag end. (He even had two in his boots! Talk about armed to the teeth.)
Thorin wondered if it was possible for the citizens of Erebor to live a normal life if he passed a law stating that all burlap sacks burned. It really shouldn't make that much of a difference in every day living if it weren't for the fact that he was considering issuing the same order for all large wine barrels.

With a sigh Thorin glanced over at where half his company was being slowly rotated on a spit over the large fire and wondered where everything had gone wrong.

They had fared much better this go around than the last time they had battled the trolls in the beginning. With the plan Thorin had worked out during their travels, the company had been able to inflict deeper wounds on the trolls tougher hides and it had seemed as if they were gaining the upper hand when there had been a sudden shout behind them.

Whirling around, Thorin couldn't believe it when he saw that one of the trolls had snatched Bilbo off the ground and was now threatening to bash Bilbo's head against one of the large boulders unless they surrendered.

Blain had told him as they were being shoved into the sacks that the hobbit had gone back for the ponies in the chaos while Balin had been pulling Ori out of the way of a vicious swing from the troll in the apron. Bilbo had the grace to look apologetic when Thorin shot him a look.

Now with the trolls focusing on the cooking spit he glanced down at where Bilbo was lying just to the left of Thorin's feet next to Bombur.

"Why didn't you run when you had the chance?" Thorin demanded as he tried to shuffle himself off a rather sharp rock that was digging in his backside instead of trying to untie the sack with his teeth this time. It hadn't worked before and with Gandalf already on the way, he figured it wasn't worth getting rope fibers between his teeth.

"What?" Kili craned his neck to look back at Thorin.

"Not you, Bilbo." Thorin attempted to resist the urge to kick his nephew. Then he realized it was entirely their fault to begin with and stopped resisting.

"Ow!"

"Because I couldn't just run away and do nothing," Bilbo hissed back as he shuffled in his sack. "You were all fighting and I was the reason you had to jump in to begin with. The least I could do was get the ponies." He wilted. "And I couldn't even do that right. I ended up being caught again and now we're all going to be eaten!"

Thorin tried to keep his scowl, but it faded in the face of Bilbo's miserable disposition. "You did get the ponies loose at least," he grudgingly admitted. "Hopefully they've rejoined the others and we won't have to track them down once we get out of this."

"You think we're going to get out of this?" Balin asked from the other side of Bilbo.

"Ye of little faith Balin," Thorin whispered. "Give it a minute."
"Hey! Be quite over there!" One of the trolls suddenly hollered. "Nothing worse than food that never shuts up."

Thorin gave the troll a bale look, but it was lost in the shouting from the rest of the company and the troll finally just let out a loud bellow at them, causing Thorin to roll his eyes.

"Don't bother cooking them," one of the trolls stated. "We should just squish them into jelly. Won't take as much time and they'll stop nattering on."

"Oh come off it," the troll in the apron snarled. "You know nothing of cooking. A sauté and grill, with a sprinkling of sage."

"Ooo! That does sound quite nice."

"Do they even know what sage looks like?" Thorin herd Bilbo mutter and he couldn't help, but chuckle at the statement even as he wiggled down lower against the rock he was leaning on. Kíli was giving him an odd look again.

Ignoring his nephew, he stretched just enough to be able to prod the hobbit with his toe. If he remembered right, this was about the time Bilbo had jumped up and started the fuss about the proper way to cook dwarrows the first time.

Puzzled, Bilbo glanced up at him and Thorin jerked his head in the direction of the trolls. Now extremely baffled, Bilbo managed to shrug within the confines of his sack to show he had no idea what it was Thorin wanted. With a small growl, he prodded Bilbo in the side again with his foot and jerked his head a bit more forcefully in the direction of the trolls.

"What do you-?" Bilbo began before the third troll started speaking again.

"Never mind the seasoning," the third troll was griping. "Dawn ain't far away. Let's get a move on."

Bilbo stopped trying to wiggle away from Thorin's prodding foot and glanced up at him as he jerked his head in the direction of the trolls a third time just as the third one finished with "I don't fancy being turned to stone."

Realization dawned and Bilbo now turned to Thorin with a look that was both comprehension and disbelief.

"What are you waiting for?" Thorin hissed. "Stall them! They won't listen to us."

Nodding, Bilbo turned towards the trolls and called out "Wait! You are making a terrible mistake."

Ignoring the shouting coming from the roasting spit, Bilbo quickly struggled to his feet the best that he could while tied up in a sack and hopped further into the light.

"I meant with the seasoning."

"What about the seasoning?" the one troll leaned forward to stare at Bilbo.

"Well, have you smelt them?"

Thorin didn't remember that line and couldn't help, but let out an affronted yelp. Bilbo glared back at him before returning his attention to the trolls and told them that sage was not a strong enough seasoning for dwarrows.
Ignoring the affronted shouts from the others, Thorin simply sat back to enjoy the show this time.

"The secret to cooking Dwarf is... um... It's uh..."

As Bilbo quickly scrambled to answer the troll's question Thorin wondered why it was that Bilbo had come up with the response:

"It's to skin them first!"

"What? Skin us?" Nori bellowed.

Thorin let out a small sigh, but honestly. Where in the world would Bilbo get such a notion as to –

"By Mahal's beard! That's why!" Thorin bellowed outraged as it suddenly dawned.

The entire camp went quiet as everyone, including the three trolls, turned towards him.

"Why what?" one of the trolls demanded.

"Huh? Oh, nothing," Thorin tried to answer as blithely as he could. "Its just that I finally realized why it was that wizard once tried to send me to a tannery."

Everyone stared.

Thorin could only stare back even as he cursed the wizard in his mind with every foul word he knew. Gandalf had to have shown Bilbo the map at some point the first time they traveled. It was the only explanation as to why it would be the first thing to pop up to the forefront of Bilbo's mind when trying to distract the trolls.

"If you was sent to a tannery," the troll continued slowly, "why is it you're still here?"

Thorin glared up at the giant creature. "Well, it was the middle of the night," he told it bluntly. "They were closed."

"Anyway..." Bilbo tried to get the trolls attention back to him. "Now you know. Even wizards know the correct way to cook dwarf. You've been doing it all wrong."

"What a load of rubbish," the troll turning the spit declared. "I've eaten plenty with their skins on. Scarf them I say, boots and all."

The smaller of the trolls agreed and marched over to snag Bombur up off the ground and made to bite his head off.

"Not that one!" Bilbo cried out slightly panicked. "He's infected."

Thorin choked back a snicker.

"What?" the troll gasped.

"Yeah, he's got worms in his... tubes."

The troll yelped and tossed Bombur at the group on the ground. Thorin couldn't help, but smirk as the large dwarf fell directly on top of Kíli.

"In fact, they all have," Bilbo continued earnestly. "They're infested with parasites. It's a terrible business. I wouldn't risk it. I wouldn't."
The troll turning the spit eyed Bilbo suspiciously just as Óin and Kíli started putting up a fuss that they were not infected with parasites, thank you very much.

Thorin gleefully kicked Kíli again and the group changed their tune.

The one troll was now staring at Bilbo suspiciously and Thorin decided to help their hobbit out. It couldn't hurt and could give Gandalf more time to get into position. "Why else would we be traveling with a burglobbit?" he called out and all the focus was shifted back to where he was now glaring up at the trolls. "Have you ever seen dwarrows traveling with any other creature save other dwarrows?"

"He's right about that he is," troll number two nodded. "Dwarves ain't never with nobody, but themselves they is."

"But why a Burguburobit?" the first troll demanded.

"Burglobbit's are experts when it comes to parasites," Thorin explained. "He's our specialist."

The troll looked from Bilbo to Thorin then back to Bilbo again. "What would you have us do then?" he demanded. "Let them all go? You think I don't know what you're up to?" Jabbing Bilbo in the stomach with a large finger, he glared down at the hobbit before heading back towards the spit.

"This little ferret is taking us for fools," he announced.

"Ferret?" Bilbo shouted angrily.

"Fools?" the troll sneered back.

"The dawn will take you all."

Looking towards the largest of the boulder, Thorin watched as Gandalf appeared at the top of it. He couldn't help, but laugh as one of the trolls asked if they could eat him too.

With a mighty thump of Gandalf's staff, the boulder split in half, allowing the rays of the early morning sun to pour into the small clearing.

The trolls shrieked and turned away, but the sunlight was already shining on their skin, causing it to harden and crack as they turned into stone causing their movements to be slow and jerky. It took perhaps all of three heartbeats before the trolls were frozen forever and there was a large cheer from everyone at the sudden victory.

Thorin didn't bother joining in. Instead, he glared up at the wizard still standing on top the rock, gazing down at them.

"What took you so long?" he bellowed.

Gandalf frowned at him even as Bilbo threw back his head and let out a peel of laughter.

When Dís first heard that there was an approaching party just as dawn was cresting the horizon, she had been confused. It was obvious that the small group was headed for Nogrod; it was the only dwelling on the mountain this far south, but why would anyone be visiting them? No one ever had in the years they had been living outside the ruins of the ancient kingdom.
Then she heard that the group consisted of eleven ponies and one horse and she leapt into action. Heart in her throat, she left Drími in charge and quickly headed out on her own pony along with a small number of armed guard and what healers she could grab on such short notice.

Thorin couldn't possibly have a reason to be back this soon, not with how confident and prepared her brother had been. Meaning that something must have happened on the way to cause them to return this quickly and it had to have been something terrible.

The fact that it was only eleven ponies frightened her even more. What had happened to the other two? Were her son's all right?

'*If something happened to them I'm going to throttle, Thorin,'* she thought, more worried than angry at what could have possibly have happened.

As they approached the group however, Dís was surprised to find she only recognized a few of the dwarrows riding towards them and it was not the wizard on the horse, but rather two Rangers. *'What in Durin's name?'*

"Dís!" Lady Ovip waved at the approaching group and Dís could see the blood on her clothing while her hair and beard were a complete mess of tangles. Dáin and the younger Thorin were there as well, along with Bilgin and whom Dís assumed had to be their small contingent of guards.

"What are you lot doing here?" Dís demanded as her pony reached them.

"We were coming to help you," Ovip explained dejectedly.

Dís eyed Bilgin critically. "And to see if Thorin's claims of our plight held any weight to them," she declared flatly.

Ovip slouched even further. "We had to leave the wagon behind to avoid further Orc attacks."

"I'm sure," Dís drawled.

Bilgin and Thorin dropped their gazes slightly chastised, but Dáin pointed at the Rangers accusingly. "Yes, yes! We were daft idiots for not believing you about the Orcs, but never mind that. They claim that Thorin has run off with a hobbit!"

"The burglar Gandalf found for them?" Dís asked surprised. "What about the halfling?"

"You mean he didn't kidnap him?" young Thorin blurted out.

"Kidnap?" Dís yelped. "Where in the world would you get that idea?"

As one, the dwarrows turned to stare at the Rangers. "Um... I'm afraid that the Thain of the Hobbits might have misunderstood somewhere along the line," the lead rider declared as he pulled out a rather crumpled piece of folded parchment.

Dís nudged her pony forward so she could snatch the letter out of his hand. Ripping the seal without even looking at it, she was surprised to find a second sheet of parchment hidden within the first. Recognized her brother's rather thick handwriting she gasped and quickly scanned the contents of the first letter.

"What has that blasted wizard gotten my brother into?" she bellowed upon finishing and she pulled out the second sheet to pursue while passing the first to Dáin who had been trying to read over her shoulder, a task not made easy on the back of a pony.
Thorin moved his own next to his father and looked over the sharp text.

"To Princess Dís, Daughter of Thráin, son of Thrór,

I would like to understand just what makes your brother, King Thorin, believe that he can trick my grandson into traveling outside our boarders to take on a dragon of all things. He didn't even deign to mention that it was a dragon they were going off to reclaim your homeland from!

That is not even bringing up the journey itself! We hobbits are not the best of travelers and the outside world is dangerous enough for our kind without the threat of a dragon at the end of it! I find it very unlikely that your brother is truly capable of protecting my beloved grandson, as he himself doesn't seem to be of the opinion he will even survive the trip!

Instead, he has passed the responsibility of seeing my grandson secured home to his heir, your eldest by the name of Fíli.

Just what sort of 'adventuring' is he doing? All we have been able to learn is that they're traveling to practically the other side of the world. Oh yes, and he may be eaten by a dragon. Let us not forget that small point of fact.

I would be eternally grateful if upon your passing of the Shire that you could find a moment to visit and explain, in detail, exactly what is going on as your brother said you could do.

Gerontius Took, Thain of the Shire."

Beneath that, there was an address and a crudely drawn map pointing to what looked like a hill.

Young Thorin looked back up at Dís who was staring down at the second parchment, her face practically red with fury. "WHAT IN MAHAL'S FORGE IS THIS?!" she finally burst out furiously as Dáin plucked the page from her hands and Thorin quickly looked over the second letter that his cousin had apparently written to the Thain.

He was almost ready to say that the letter was a fake if not for the royal seal in the bottom and Thorin's more than recognizable handwriting. His cousin never sounded like that!

The praise he was heaping on this "Bilbo" was almost over exaggerated and outlandish. There idea that a dwarf, let alone a kingdom full, would praise such a creature to the extent Thorin indicated in his letter, no matter what he did to assist the reclaiming Erebor, was absurd.

'Aren't hobbits those little creatures with big feet and elf ears?' Thorin wondered absently as Dís and Dáin burst out into an argument in Khuzdul. 'What on Middle-Earth could one have possibly done to earn such reverence from Thorin?'

Chapter End Notes

1) If you look closely, in the quick shot of the group tied up in the sacks between the sentences "that sounds nice" and "never mind the seasoning" Thorin really is pulling at the rope with his teeth.

Why yes, I did avoid the entire fight with the trolls. Eh-heh. And we also get another glance at Thorin Stonehelm with Dís and Dáin. Poor Thorin O., he's got a lot of explaining to do...
Thorin felt much better once he was released from the foul smelling sack and managed to scrounge up his personal clothing.

Not an easy task as the trolls had simply tossed everything into one large pile once they had pulled it off the dwarrows and it had taken a while for everyone to sort out their own belongings from the others.

The only item Thorin hadn't found was the one money pouch from his belt. Strange considering that his other two were still lumped together with his coat and boots. Eying the ground for a bit he finally sighed and glanced over at where the 'Ri brothers were separating their own items between each other.

It didn't take long for Nori to glance up and meet Thorin's eyes.

Thorin cocked his head and raised an eyebrow at the dwarf. Nori instantly gained a look of defiance, as if daring Thorin to make something of it. Holding his gaze for a few moments longer, Thorin finally allowed himself to shrug and gave a slight nod of his head in Nori's direction, acknowledging the theft before he tucked the two remaining bags away and headed back towards the other side of the group to check on the others.

'Let Nori have his victory,' he chuckled to himself. 'Especially since we're going to be raiding the troll's hoard as soon as everyone's settled. Speaking of…'

"Everything all right Bilbo?" he called out as he found Bilbo standing off to the side staring down at his coat in disgust. As Thorin got closer, he could see that the troll mucus had dried on the garment and was flaking off in nauseating clumps.

"That was probably the most disgusting thing that has ever happened to me," Bilbo grumbled as he turned the coat away from him and shook it out. More mucus flakes fell off the soft leather. "Hopefully there will be a river soon so I can wash this out."

Thorin chuckled. "I told you it would be easier to clean the leather than one of those velvet coats you hobbits are so fond of."

Bilbo let out a bitter laugh as he finished shaking out the garment and draped it over his arm. "I suppose you did tell me that."

Bilbo stopped speaking suddenly and looked up at Thorin in shock.

Confused at the sudden scrutiny, Thorin simply stared back puzzled waiting for Bilbo to say whatever it was that he had suddenly thought of. It wasn't long before his puzzlement turned into concern as Bilbo continued to remain silent, just staring at him.

"Are you feeling well?"

"What?" Bilbo shook himself out of his stupor. "Oh, yes. Yes. Just… just…" Bilbo trailed off, looking down at the coat and stroking the clean parts gently before continuing. "I hadn't realized just how handy wearing my mother's coat could be during our journey." He glanced back up at
Thorin through the fringe of his bangs. "Thank you then."

Thorin couldn't help, but returned the smile Bilbo gave him. "You're welcome. Now if you'll excuse me, I have some nephews to yell at."

Bilbo caught his arm as he started to turn away and he looked back in surprise. "They really didn't mean any harm," Bilbo told him quietly. "I think they were more scared of disappointing you than they were of being hurt."

"I would have been less disappointed in them had they simply admitted they lost the ponies and fetched me rather than putting not only themselves, but you in danger as well."

Bilbo didn't seem to be able to argue with that and he nodded as he released Thorin's arm.

Giving the hobbit one last reassuring smile, he made his way back towards the group of dwarrows digging through the mound of clothing. Raising one booted foot up he shoved Fíli's rear, pushing the dwarf headfirst into the pile. "What possessed you to go after those trolls by yourselves?" he bellowed as he managed to boot Kíli before the dark haired dwarf could turn around.

"Uncle! We're sorry!" the boys yelped, trying to clamber out of the mass of fabric as everyone else froze in the middle of putting their clothes back on to watch the proceedings.

"Not as sorry as you would have been had those trolls actually managed to eat us!" Thorin roared reaching over to cuff Fíli's head. "And what of Bilbo?" he gestured towards the hobbit off to the side of the group watching with a worried expression. "You could have gotten him killed before the rest of us had even realized there was something going on!"

"We didn't think anything would happen," Fíli protested.

"Exactly your problem! You didn't think!" Thorin snapped. "It's one thing to be able to come up with a plan to solve your problems, but it's a whole other thing to ensure you don't end up into trouble in the first place! Not to mention any plan, even the most thought out ones can go sideways in an instant. Look at what happened to my plan to drag you two out of trouble. We still ended up in the sacks!"

Looks of confusion were passed thought the dwarrows, but Fíli could only look back at Thorin completely mortified. "We didn't know it would go that far," he admitted in a small voice.

"Well, it did," Thorin huffed. "You're very lucky that Bilbo was able to stall them long enough for Gandalf to arrive. You owe him a debt of thanks and a very large apology to everyone."

"Yes sir," the boys chorused miserably.

"Good." Thorin looked over at Balin. "Anything to add?"

"I believe you covered everything quite sufficiently laddie," Balin told him before turning to the two with a small frown of his own.

"I might have a word or two to say to them," Dwalin growled and Thorin honestly couldn't say he felt sorry for the boys as they shrank away from their fighting instructor who was glaring down at them. They deserved anything the large dwarf put them through, all in the name of training.

Thorin left his friend to it and started heading towards where Gandalf was watching from the other side of the trolls. "And where did you go to if I might ask?" he repeated his old question to the wizard who was now studying the petrified trolls.
"To look ahead," Gandalf told him candidly and Thorin suppressed the urge to let out a rather disdained snort.

"And what brought you back?"

"Looking behind." Gandalf's tone became one of exasperation and Thorin did snort then.

"Lord Elrond couldn't take your meddling either I take it then?" he drawled and had the privilege to see the old wizard go slack jawed in shock.

"What? No, it is not what you-" Gandalf began rather hastily before Thorin waved him off.

"I said we would go to the elves you're so desperate to visit," he reassured him. "Though… I was hoping it was not smelling of trolls."

"Nasty business," Gandalf agreed. "Still, they're all in one piece."

"No thanks to your burglar."

Gandalf eyed him critically. "I thought I distinctly heard you praising him for his ability to stall these three."

"Oh I'm not arguing that it was thanks to his quick wit that kept us from being eaten," Thorin interrupted with a nod. "But had he allowed Balin and Ori to pull him from the battlefield as I had ordered, we might not have gotten caught at all."

"Or you may have been caught and eaten before I had arrived," Gandalf pressed. "You never know how things will play out until they do."

Thorin bit the inside of his cheek to keep himself from snorting as Gandalf looked back at the trolls and stated that he believed they had traveled from the Ettenmoors.

"Have you ever seen mountain trolls this far south before?" Thorin managed to curb his amusement long enough to ask. He perked when Gandalf finished his observation with "not since a darker power ruled these lands" and wondered if it had anything to do with the dreams and why it was Thorin was living his last year all over again.

'A darker power;' he wondered. 'The upcoming war? The orcs and trolls were the first sign, Goblins and Mirkwood spiders the second. How could I have been so blind when I traveled here last?'

Pulling himself out of his musing, he glanced up to find Gandalf watching him curiously and he realized that the wizard had mentioned how trolls didn't travel in sunlight.

"Then if they could only be out at night, that means there must be a cave near by," Thorin nodded. "Best we look into that."

"Yes, we probably should," Gandalf mused even as Thorin was walking away, issuing orders that Bombur, Óin, Balin and Ori fetch the ponies and their gear. Óin looked rather gleeful at the prospect of fetching the ponies, which struck Thorin as odd, where as Balin looked rather resigned as he shared a look with their healer.

Disregarding the strange exchange between the cousins, Thorin ordered the rest of the group to spread out and start searching for any signs of a cave.
Thorin could have led them to it easily enough, but not with Gandalf watching him so closely. In the end, it was Glóin who discovered the cave once more and after taking a small lungful of the foul air, both Kíli and Fíli were very willing to volunteer for guard duty. Bilbo also made a show of finding a rock to sit on, indicating that he would leave the exploring for the dwarrows to do.

Asking Bifur to watch the boys as they were still very much grounded, Thorin found himself entering the cave with the same five of his company as he had the first time plus one wizard.

The troll cave was just as dank and dour as Thorin had remembered it. Now if could only keep himself from going right to his lost sword and making it seem as if he simply stumbled upon it once again.

Dwalin remained at the bottom of the path down into the cave as Bofur started toeing the scattered gold coins.

"Seems a shame to leave it just laying around," Bofur began slowly. "Anyone could take it."


Thorin rolled his eyes as Nori quickly scuttled back topside for the requested item. "After you've finished burying your treasure," Thorin called out, catching Glóin's attention. "See if there are any small money pouches and fill them. Enough for everyone in the company, including myself and Bilbo."

"What, really?" Bofur looked up from digging through the gold surprised.

"As you said, no one else is going to claim it any time soon," Thorin shrugged. "You lot can pay your own way for a while with this. Not to mention if you all have your own money, I won't have to pay for any damages that you may incur out of the bulk of the travel expenses. Pay your own damage fees."

"Sound idea," Glóin was nodded slowly just as Nori returned. "I'll see that it's done."

"See that what's done?"

"Oh, you don't have to worry about Nori," Thorin called over his shoulder before Glóin could elaborate. "He's already got a full pouch."

Dwalin shot Nori a look while Nori himself just looked baffled until Bofur cheerfully filled him in on the news. Gaping at the miner for a brief moment, Nori then whipped his head around to just stare at Thorin in shock. Tipping his head at Nori once again, Thorin ventured deeper into the cave.

Snickering slightly to himself Thorin began to take his time exploring the cave, trying to take in the things he had missed the first go around. It would not be good to only leave with three swords when there was the possibility of more hidden treasures in the rubble.

That's when he saw it and had to fight to swallow down the bile creeping up his throat. "Nori!" he called out, his voice rather hoarse as he swallowed thickly again. "When you're done with the shovel, give it to Dwalin."

"What for?" Dwalin asked, making his way towards where Thorin was standing. "What did you find?"

"We might never have met them, but their house gave us shelter and no one deserves to be left like
Dwalin looked at him puzzled before turning to see where Thorin was pointing. "Mahal's Hammer!"

"What? What is it?" Bofur jogged towards them before he too spotted the woman's head mounted on what looked to be an old wrought iron bed frame. Her hand, severed at the wrist, was also mounted on one of the spikes, was curled slightly, looking almost as if she were beckoning them further into the cave and into their doom.

"She has no eyes!" Bofur gagged before heading back to where Nori was now leaning against the shovel. He didn't look as ill as Bofur did at the sudden discovery, but he did look rather disturbed.

Glancing back at the head again, Thorin noted that maggots and other insects had indeed eaten her eyes and he quickly looked away again.

"The farmer's wife," Gandalf announced sadly as Dwalin went to search for something to place the head and hand in. "Muriel. A fine woman."

"Poor lass." Dwalin said as he returned with yet another sack, the only thing he could probably find in the chaos of the cave. "We'll see her properly buried."

"Let's not linger longer than we have to," Thorin announced grimly. "Glóin, you and Bofur finish up with the money pouches. Nori, help Dwalin with the head- I mean, Lady Muriel."

Shuddering slightly at the gruesome discovery, Thorin decided that it was defiantly time to move on and headed towards the small arsenal of weaponry, covered in dust and spider webs.

Not bothering to look among the other swords, Thorin instantly pulled out Glamdring and Orcrist, passing the longer sword over to Gandalf as he approached.

"These are elvish blades. Forged in Gondolin," Gandalf stated in amazement. Thorin hesitated as he looked over his own sword, a thought occurring to him just as Gandalf snapped, "You could not wish for a finer blade!"

"It's possible," Thorin agreed neutrally. "But you do not suppose Lord Elrond would wish them returned when see him?"

Gandalf seemed startled at Thorin's question before looking down at the sword in his hands. "They might, but it was you who found the blades. I do not think that Lord Elrond could dispute your right to keep them."

He held out Glamdring for Thorin to take, but Thorin shook his head. "You probably know how to wield that one better that I do.

That calculating look was back on Gandalf's face, but he nodded and kept Glamdring firmly in his grasp.

With two swords now situated, Thorin began searching through the rest of the swords. 'Now where could it possibly be?'

Pulling aside sword after sword, Thorin started searching the ground. 'He got it from here, I know he had to have…'

"Missing something Thorin?" Gandalf asked curiously even as he started backing up when Thorin's
search expanded outward.

"Just ensuring that we're not missing anything before we leave."

"I'm sure that there's nothing else that could possibly-"

Gandalf cut off when there was a distinctive clink beneath his heel.

Thorin's head shot up and he watched as Gandalf curiously brushed aside the leaves that littered the ground with his staff to reveal a rather familiar hilt.

Relief washed through Thorin at the sight of it and he hefted Orcrist. "Are we all set then?" he called out while Gandalf bent to retrieve the small sword.

"Aye," Glóin answered where he and Bofur were standing with an assortment of money pouches next to a fresh patch of overturned dirt. Nori and Dwalin seemed to have already made their way out of the cave to deal with poor Muriel's remains.

"Let's get out of this foul place then," Thorin declared and the group made their way up the small incline and back out into the fresh air.

Fíli was instantly at Thorin's side as he emerged from the cave. "Was there really a dead woman down there?"

"Aye, there was," Thorin nodded as he stepped aside to allow Gandalf to exit the cave calling out Bilbo's name as he held out Sting towards the hobbit. As much as Thorin would have liked to listen in on the conversation the two were having, he had a rather upset nephew that needed all of his attention.

Fíli was looking quite stricken as he quickly glanced over to where Kíli was speaking with Bifur about something or other to ensure his younger brother was still all right.

"Now do you understand how the outcome could have been far worse than it was?" Thorin asked gently.

"I really am sorry uncle Thorin." Fíli's voice had dropped to practically a whisper.

"As long as you learn from this," Thorin told him.

Fíli nodded before he turned away and started back towards the group with slumped shoulders. Thorin could only hope that this was the wake up call that his heir needed to become serious about the dangers on the road.

His nephew's hunched posture straightened however as a sound echoed out of the forest and everyone jumped to attention. Thorin didn't feel it rather necessary to call out a warning however as he already knew what it was heading in their direction, but Dwalin was already shouting out orders, the tension still hanging in the air since the troll fight.

'Best not look too unlike myself,' Thorin mused as he pulled both old and new swords out and held at the ready as Gandalf called out for them to arm themselves and they all scrambled to gain better footing and space for the perceived fight ahead.

Within seconds, rabbits the size of small dogs burst from the bushes, dragging the rickety old sled behind them where the rider was shouting about thieves, fire and murders.
The rabbits came to a skidding halt even as Gandalf sighed. "It's Radagast the Brown."

Thorin had already sheathed his sword while Gandalf made his way to his long time friend and asked why the other wizard had sought him out.

"It was on the tip of my tongue," Radagast bemoaned before he brightened. "Oh! It's not a thought at all. It's a silly old stick insect."

Thorin stared at the small creature that was now dangling from Gandalf's fingertips. "Well," he muttered more to himself than the dwarrows around him. "There are worse ways to start the day I suppose."

Dwalin just stared at the rabbits before turning to give Thorin an incredulous look. "Yeah?" he drawled. "So far we've dealt with trolls, severed heads and a sled being pulled by huge rabbits maned by yet another barmy wizard. I'd like to see anything top that!"

Chapter End Notes

1) In the scene where they are descending down into the troll hoard, to the far right as the camera pans is the head and hand. As I doubt Middle-Earth had mannequins or even Greek statues (which is what I think the prop actually is suppose to be) I went with the notion that it's the poor farmers wife.

2) Kíli actually was "speaking" to Bifur about something when Gandalf emerged from the cave with Sting. From what I could see, it looks as if Bifur is showing him an antler. /shrugs/
Thorin stared infuriated down the small incline where the two wizards had moved off to speak in private.

The incident with the trolls, while truly hadn't been any worse than before, certainly didn't go any better. They managed to escape again and the trolls were now once again rather grotesque statues in the middle of nowhere, but Thorin had been hoping for something a little bit different from the first go around.

It had still gone completely awry, despite Thorin's knowledge of the incident and hurried preparations. As a result, he was starting to wonder if letting everything play out as it may might not the best course of action after all.

The last thing Thorin wanted to do was second-guess himself yet he found himself doing just that as the more treacherous parts of the journey began.

Especially after finding the poor farmer's wife. How in the world had he missed her the last time?

The only good thing to come out of the day had been the return of his sword along with Bilbo's and Thorin wasn't about to push his luck that something else could happen. With they way things had been progressing, the warg scouts approaching their position might actually manage to take a bite out of someone.

With that thought in mind, Thorin swallowed his pride and approached Gandalf about perhaps speaking with his long time friend as they traveled. Preferably far away from where they currently were.

"You were the one who was so insistent that we travel to Rivendell," Thorin had protested. "Now you wish to loiter about catching up on the wizarding gossip?"

"It won't take but a moment of our time," Gandalf told him firmly. "Whatever it is to cause Radagast to search me out must be of some importance else he would have never left Greenwood."

"What is it then, that is so important that you do not even want to meet up with your pointy eared friends?" Thorin challenged.

Gandalf stared at him disapprovingly. "Wizard business."

"Then talk about it on the road," Thorin burst out in frustration. "We can not dally any longer."

"It will not take very long Thorin. We'll be on our way soon enough." And with that, the two wizards wandered down the incline to have their little chat.

A chat Thorin was now straining to overhear.

It had not occurred to him before when he had first woken up in his old room at Ered Luin, but now that he was living through the sudden appearance of the brown wizard all over again it struck him that whatever news Radagast had brought Gandalf could possibly have something to do with his dreams and the warning of the war ahead.

Were things moving faster than Thorin thought they would?
Judging from the appearance of an adult Gimli in his dreams, Thorin had assumed that the war was still decades if not centuries off.

'But what if that's not the case?' Thorin wondered uneasily. 'What if it was simply how long the war had raged?'

That thought sent a spike of fear through Thorin at the idea that a war had lasted centuries.

Was it even possible that the battle outside Erebor's doors had been the start of it all rather than just a precursor to the war as Thorin has assumed? Had things really dissolved that badly from that one battle? Was Erebor the beginning of everything?

And if that were true, just how badly had he done the first time around to have what seemed to be the whole of Middle-Earth going to war?

'Why the battle of Erebor though?' Thorin pondered. 'There was really nothing really world changing about it. It was Azog trying to fulfill his vow of destroying the Durin line. … Which apparently he succeeded in doing.'

Glancing at where his nephews were now standing close together whispering to each other, Thorin couldn't help but feel a sudden tightness in his chest. They would survive this time if Thorin had to lock them in a closet to keep them out of the battle to do it.

He looked back down at the two conversing wizards. Could it be the destruction of the Durin line that was the catalyst for everything?

'That's impossible though,' Thorin shook his head. 'Why would the end of one royal dwarf line have such an effect on the world?'

While the Durin line was one of the last few direct lineages from the seven fathers still left in Middle-Earth, it was absurd to think that was the reason for anything.

'So, then what in the world is so significant about this journey specifically that had such an impact on an entire war?'

Thorin jumped as a hand suddenly fell on his arm and he turned to find Bilbo looking up at him with worry. "Are you all right?"

"Shh," Thorin hushed him, glancing back at the two wizards. So far they had only been speaking about the spiders in Mirkwood, but they were too far away for Thorin to get anything but every other word or so.

Thorin was ready to scream as came to the realization that Gandalf had had prior warning about the giant spiders that nested in the old forest of Mirkwood.

Would it have been too difficult for Gandalf to even mention the fact that there were giant spiders in the woods between them and Erebor? The wizard could have easily shared that little tidbit of information at any time during their travels. It wouldn't have taken any time at all to say "by the way, you'd best be on the look out for giant spiders in Mirkwood and don't wonder off the path."

Thorin could have saved himself the frustration of trying to herd his company through the cursed forest with a warning such as that and he might have not ended up in the barrel in the river at the end of it.

He groaned again and could practically feel the concern from Bilbo beside him. Thankfully, Bilbo
refrained from trying to strike up a conversation with him.

Dwalin had already tried to draw Thorin into a discussion regarding the boy's punishment when he had brought all of Thorin's gear at his leader's request, but Thorin had fended him off with a few mentions of Nori and assorted containers of water. Dwalin was now on the other side of the group clearly sulking.

Bilbo wasn't saying anything though as he realized that Thorin was trying to spy on the wizards. Thorin did receive what the hobbit probably considered a fierce disapproving scowl however.

To Thorin, it just seemed as if he was pouting and even in that he was failing miserably, looking more like an affronted child than a censuring adult.

Despite his displeasure, Bilbo didn't wander away when it was clear that Thorin wouldn't be engaging in conversation any time soon. Instead, he leaned against the tree that Thorin was standing rather conspicuously beside and began fiddling with the short cuffs of his inherited jacket while he waited.

Shrugging at Bilbo's strange conduct, Thorin went back to trying to hear what it was the wizards were saying to one another. Something about an old fortress called something-or-other.

What words Thorin had been catching were now dropped to nothing as the two wizards lowered their voices while conferring about whatever it was regarding the old fortress that had captured Gandalf's interest.

Sighing, Thorin gave up his eavesdropping as a loss and turned back to Bilbo curious as to why it was he had sought him out.

But he found that Bilbo wasn't playing with his cuffs anymore. Rather he had such a look of concentration about him that Thorin was reluctant to interrupt whatever it was Bilbo was thinking about. Clearly, it was something that required all of the hobbit's attention because he wasn't paying one lick of attention to Thorin as-

Bilbo's hand suddenly shot out and grasped at Thorin's forearm, his hand squeezing as tight as he could make it while his eyes widened even further. In wonder, shock, or fear Thorin couldn't say.

Worried, Thorin opened his mouth to ask what was wrong when Bilbo suddenly tilted his head ever so slightly and Thorin abruptly understood what Bilbo was doing.

Glancing at the pointed ears just hidden by Bilbo's mass of curls, it dawned on Thorin that while he himself couldn't hear whatever it was the wizards were discussing, didn't mean that no one could hear them.

Elves were know for their keen hearing along with their superior eyesight and Thorin wondered if this trait had been passed on through the rumored elfin ancestry the hobbits might posses or if it was simply something inherited with pointed ears. After all a fox had pointed ears and could hear for –

Bilbo's grip tightened even further to Thorin's surprise and he now found himself desperately wishing to know what it was that the two Maiar were speaking of. Whatever it was, it had alarmed Bilbo enough that he was nearly cutting off the blood circulation in Thorin's arm.

Torn between wanting to pull Bilbo's attention away from the discussion down the incline and wanting him to hear everything he could so Thorin could interrogate him about it later, he instead tried gently prying the fingers off his arm so he could feel his own fingers.
Bilbo finally tore his attention away from the wizards and gave Thorin a rather sheepish expression as he allowed Thorin to remove his hand from his arm.

Thorin waved him off as he glanced back behind him to see Gandalf was sharing his pipe with his old friend who looked just as apprehensive as Bilbo did. *What in the world could frighten a wizard so?*

It was then that the Radagast pulled something out of his pocket and handed it to Gandalf. Thorin couldn't see what it was, but Bilbo's hand began to shake in his own and when he glanced down he found Bilbo staring up at him alarmed.

That's when the warg howl reached them.

Pulling Bilbo to his feet and shoving him back, Thorin reached for Orcrist just as the first warg appeared on the ridge above them and leapt for Bofur and Dori who were staring out into the woods opposite.

"Kili! Get your bow!" Thorin shouted as he and Glóin finished off the first warg.

Ducking out of the way, Thorin could practically feel the breeze as the arrow zipped passed him and into the warg behind. Dwalin was upon the beast before it could clamber to his feet and twisted his axe at the base of the beast's head.

"Warg scouts," Thorin announced as he shot Gandalf a rather infuriated look. "Which means an Orc pack can not be far behind."

"Orc pack?" Bilbo echoed.

Thorin nodded, still glaring at Gandalf. "I told you we shouldn't dally."

"It would not have mattered," Gandalf retorted sharply. "You are being hunted."

Bilbo let out a whimper as the dwarrows cursed to themselves scanning the higher rocks frantically.

"Who did you tell about your quest beyond your kin?" Gandalf bellowed at Thorin who just shook his head.

"No one."

"*Who did you tell?*" Gandalf repeated heatedly

"No one, I sw-"

"My grandfather!"

Gandalf whirled around to stare down at a horror-struck Bilbo. "Thorin, we wrote my grandfather telling him where I was going! Gandalf, the Shire!"

"They would not be there," Thorin cut through Bilbo's panic. "I doubt there's anything in the Shire that would interest them. It's me that they're after."

"He is most likely right, master Bilbo." Gandalf soothed the hobbit before shooting a sharp look at Thorin.

"We have to get out of here." Dwalin stated.
"We can't!"

Thorin turned to where Ori and Bifur were returning with the news that the ponies had bolted.

"I'll draw them off," Radagast declared and Thorin tuned out the small argument between the wizards as he turned to the group and ordered everyone to salvage what they could from the ponies small stampede before he turned to collect his own gear.

Tossing one saddlebag over his shoulder before crossing it with the second in order to keep his axe hand free, he glanced down at where one of the rabbits was sniffing at his boots.

"You better be able to keep all the Orc's attention this time," he growled down at the furry animal. "Or they'll be Rhosgobel Rabbit stew in Rivendell."

The rabbit looked at him curiously before getting back in line with the others as Radagast clambered onto the sled. Paying it no mind, Thorin reached down and snagged the long stick that Bilbo had used as a walking staff the last time they had fled and tossed it at him.

"Get ready to run," he told him as he hefted his axe.

"I can't do this," Bilbo stuttered as he stared down at the staff. "I was never the fastest during the festival games, they're going to catch me before I can even-"

Thorin grabbed Bilbo's arm with his free hand and shook him out of his growing panic. "Bilbo. Bilbo, look at me."

Wide, blue eyes locked onto his own, alarm clear in their depths. "I will not let that happen. Do you understand me?"

The eyes got wider, if it was possible and Bilbo nodded.

"Now stay with us and follow my lead and we'll be in Rivendell in time for dinner before you know it," Thorin told him as they started up the incline to meet with the others, Dwalin trailing behind ever the loyal guard to watch Thorin's back.

"Even if it is nothing but vegetables."

The ponies had already been tacked up when they had bolted and what hadn't been loaded into the saddlebags had almost all been trampled on. It was a scramble for everyone to retrieve their packs and fill them with the items laid scattered about.

"Don't worry about what belongs to whom," Thorin called out. "Grab what you can and we'll sort it all out later."

That statement broke most of the confusion and everyone began focusing on the area surrounding them rather than looking for lost items. The collecting proceeded much faster and soon they were headed for the edge of the woods and the rocky plains beyond while Radagast waited behind to wait for the pack to get closer so he could lure them away.

"Now stay close to each other," Gandalf was saying to the group in general.

"We know what we're doing," Thorin growled at him as they burst out of the forest. "Just make sure you remember where that hidden entrance to the valley is."

"At least there's places to hide," Nori stated from Thorin's other side as he looked out at all the rock
outcroppings.

"Visually, yes. But the wargs and orcs can still smell us," Balin countered.

"True," Bofur nodded. "But they'll be sniffing for Dwarrows, not trolls."

"At least they came in handy for something," Glóin muttered irritably.

Thorin couldn't help it; he snickered.

"Quiet!" Gandalf snapped.

Thorin clicked his teeth shut and the group began to weave around the large boulders and further away from the forest and the wargs within.

They had only been running for a few minutes before the warg howls echoed off the rocks and they knew that the pack had come across Radagast.

"Faster," Gandalf ushered them along.

Thorin glanced around one of the boulders before gesturing the group to continue on.

It became a dash for survival. Evading the wargs who were following Radagast's erratic circling became priority and Thorin had to snatch Ori again before the young dwarfling ran right out into the open.

He looked back up at Gandalf sharply as the others ran past. "You do remember where that entrance is, right?"

Gandalf pursed his lips before running after the group and Thorin found himself once again rolling his eyes before dashing after them.

The sled cut across the direction they were traveling in and for the second time, Thorin found himself pressed against a large boulder that had an orc and his mount prowling on top of it.

Biting back a curse, he looked over at Kíli before looking pointedly at his bow. His youngest heir got the message and pulled out an arrow.

Going to notch it, Kíli suddenly paused before thrusting the arrow at Thorin. Shocked, Thorin could only look at Kíli questioningly, but Kíli was already reaching into his quiver again.

Kíli instead pulled out one of the smaller arrows from Bilbo's mother's collection.

Completely baffled, Thorin could only trust that Kíli knew what he was doing as he watched the boy dart out from their cover and whirled around to let the arrow fly.

He was completely stunned when the warg fell in front of them dead, the smaller arrow protruding from its eye.

The orc came tumbling after it and Dwalin was on the creature before it had even bounced off the ground, followed quickly by Bifur.

Thorin quickly shook himself out of his stupor and dashed over to help. He wasn't in time however as the orc let out a piercing shriek before it died.

Not even bothering to wait for the howls from the wargs he roared, "run!"
"Move!" Gandalf shouted and they were sprinting in the opposite direction of the howls now echoing off the stones.

It didn't take the wargs very long to catch up to them as Gandalf began leading them in another direction.

Thorin glanced at the surrounding rocks and snagged the wizard's arm, hauling him slightly to the left of their current heading. "You're going the wrong way!"

"We can't out run them," Dwalin growled as he caught up with Thorin. "We're going to have to find a place to make a stand."

"We can make it!" Thorin snarled back. "We just need to find the right path!"

"A path to what?" Dwalin demanded. "Where are we going?"

"Towards help!" Gandalf answered.

"What help?" Glóin demanded.

"Gandalf alerted the elves that we were coming. More than likely they're already out here patrolling to make some sort of elaborate show of strength in an effort to intimidate us," Thorin bellowed back. "We don't have to out run the wargs, we just have to evade them long enough and then they're the elves' problem! Woah!"

Thorin skidded to a halt as a warg suddenly appeared on the hill in front of him.

"There's more coming!" Kíli shouted and Thorin felt his chest tightened as he saw how far away from the group Kíli had gotten.

"Kíli! Fall back!" Thorin snapped. "Gandalf, where is that blasted tunnel?"

"We're surrounded!" Fíli called out.

"Obviously!" Thorin shouted back. "Gandalf!" Whirling around, Thorin was not at all surprised to see the wizard gone and Thorin finally recognized the large boulder with the six smaller ones standing in front of it like teeth.

At first glance, it almost seemed as if there was nothing between the grouping of stones, but more ground but Thorin knew better.

"Where's Gandalf?" Dori cried out.

"He's abandoned us." Dwalin declared as they all started converging to make a stand and Thorin resisted the urge to roll his eyes again as he snapped Dwalin's arm and spun the taller dwarf around.

"There, a tunnel! Bombur! To your left behind the smaller rocks." he directed.

Startled, the larger dwarf looked behind the boulders surprised. "There is a tunnel!" he shouted back just as Gandalf appeared from behind the boulder again.

"This way!" He called out as Bombur already was sliding down the incline beside him.

"Quickly! All of you," Thorin shouted.

He stood at the top of the incline, making sure all his company made it to the entrance and took on
the warg that broke from the pack to snap at him.

Thorin had to admit, Orcrist was a fine blade and it cut deep into the wargs thick hide, killing it instantly.

Kíli was closer than he had been the last time, but he was still shooting at the approaching orcs, trying to buy the others the time they needed to make it to the tunnel.

"Kíli! Run!" Thorin shouted even as he snagged Fíli by the scruff of his collar to keep him from dashing to his brother's aid. Thank Mahal Kíli was always a swift runner.

Making sure his nephews were down the tunnel, Thorin actually stopped from following and waited at the top of the ridge just in case. They had gone down the tunnel quicker than the first time and he had no idea how far away Elrond's patrol was. He could not afford to let the orcs follow down into the tunnel where cramped quarters would make fighting difficult.

"Uncle!" Fíli shouted up and there was the sound of someone scrambling up the tiny incline.

"Stay down there!" Thorin bellowed over the alarmed cries and protests. He could hear Dwalin yelling at the boys to move out of the way and Thorin let out a huff. "I said stay down the-

The sound of a horn reached them and Thorin let out a breath of relief as the orcs whirled around to focus on the new threat. "About time," he muttered as he saw the first glint of sunlight on elf armor.

He turned to the tunnel just as Dwalin reached him.

"Down! Get back down!" Thorin pushed him back and slid down after his friend.

The sound of fighting could be heard from the hole above them and Thorin was already pulling Kíli back before the orc came tumbling down the incline.

Reaching down, Thorin yanked the broke arrow shaft out of the orcs throat and glared at it before pointing at Gandalf with it.

"When we get to Rivendell," he began as he pushed through the group and headed towards the pathway Dwalin was investigating. "I am going to have a serious talk with Elrond about his timing!"

Gandalf took the arrow that Thorin shoved at him as he past, a thoughtful look on his face. Thorin didn't have time to wonder about it.

"I cannot see where the pathway leads." Dwalin told him as he approached. "Do we follow it or not?"

"Follow it, of course," Bofur called out.

Thorin remaining at the turn to verify no one was being left behind and as well as make sure no more orcs followed after them clearly hear the wizard mutter, "I think that would be wise."

He shot the taller wizard a sharp glare before he caught Bilbo's gaze and rolled his eyes again.

Bilbo let out a small giggle that sounded borderline hysterical and Thorin smiled back and gestured to the path. "After you."

"Does this path really lead to Rivendell?" Bilbo asked curiously.
Gandalf nodded. "You'll be in a warm bed with a full stomach before you know it."

"Even if it is nothing but vegetables," Thorin repeated and blinked as his voice mixed with another. He and Bilbo caught each others gaze again and they couldn't help it. They burst into laughter and Gandalf was the one to roll his eyes this time.

"What's all the laughing about?" Bofur's voice called back to them.

"Someone is having far too much fun back there!" Balin stated loudly. "Boys!"

"It's not us, we're right here," Fili called back.

"Is that uncle Thorin?" Kili gasped.

"Impossible," Dwalin countered. "There's nothing to laugh about."

"I thought it was fun," Nori told him.

"That wasn't fun in the least," Dori said and the group dissolved into small arguments and bickering.

Thorin practically had to shove a fist in his mouth as he and Bilbo continued to snicker like children as they followed behind.
The corridor through the high stone walls was clearly made by elves. If it had been a dwarf to carve such a path, it would have not only been straighter but most defiantly wider.

As it was, the dwarrows had to travel single file through the narrow pass between the rock face, pausing a time or two when Bombur got stuck. Bifur was apparently helping his cousin by giving him a harsh shove, propelling the large dwarf forward.

“Gandalf, where are we?”

Thorin glanced back at Bilbo confused by the question he’d asked Gandalf. He was surprised to find Bilbo slowing down as he searched the walls around them methodically, as if trying to spot something hidden in the rock.

“Rivendell,” Thorin repeated in a perplexed tone before Gandalf could speak. “I thought I had told you.”

“No, you did tell me and I understand that’s where we are going but …”

“You can feel it?” Gandalf asked sounding surprised yet not all at the same time.

“Feel what?” Thorin now turned back, looking at Bilbo in concern as the other two stopped and he retraced his steps to join the conversation. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, it feels like…” Bilbo let out a small incredulous huff. “Well, like magic.”

Thorin blinked before he sighed and turned back to follow the others who were now some distance ahead muttering, “Of course he feels it.”

“What? What is it?” Bilbo asked sounding slightly worried.

“Magic is exactly what it is,” Gandalf told the hobbit gently. “A very powerful magic.”

Thorin couldn’t help but snort. “Elf magic,” he clarified as Bilbo scrambled to catch up to him. “I assume we just crossed the border into their territory?”

“Indeed,” Gandalf confirmed as they continued on.

Thorin nodded before looking back at Bilbo. “You must be sensitive to it. No dwarf has ever felt elf magic. Or at least no dwarf has ever willingly admitted it.”

Bilbo blinked at him. “Oh…”

Thorin gave his shoulder a small reassuring pat when he spotted Gandalf’s expression out of the corner of his eye.

‘*Oh that can’t be good for us,*’ he realized as he took in the wizard’s thoughtful look as he stared down at Bilbo appraisingly.

Thorin suppressed the urge to push Bilbo ahead of him and out from under Gandalf’s eyes. He did not like the look of that gaze.

Glancing at Bilbo himself he pondered over what Bilbo had said about feeling the magic and tried
to determine why Gandalf would be so interested in the sudden revelation.

‘Perhaps it’s another Hobbit thing,’ he mused as Glóin announced he could see light ahead and he gave Bilbo’s shoulder one last squeeze before he moved on to meet up with the others on the plateau at the end of the corridor.

He reached them just as they came to a grinding halt outside of the tunnel and took in the full view of Rivendell below. Some stared down at it in disbelief, some in disgust and in Dori’s case, slight awe.

It shouldn’t have been that surprising to them really. Gandalf had been going on for weeks about visiting the elves and Thorin hadn’t opposed the wizard whenever he brought them up.

“The Valley of Imladris,” Gandalf boldly announced. “In the common tongue, it’s known by another name.”

“Rivendell,” Bilbo translated for him, sounding to be in as much awe as Dori was.

Thorin couldn’t help but scoff as he finally looked over the valley city proper rather than immediately turning around to argue with Gandalf. “No wonder they’re so uptight,” he muttered more to himself than to Bilbo next to him. “All those waterfalls. They probably have to take a piss all the time.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo hissed scandalized as Gandalf continued listing the city’s many names.

“What? It’s probably true.”

“What is?” Gandalf asked.

“That the elves will not be pleased with our appearance,” Thorin said smoothly. “Even with your warning of our imminent arrival.”

“The only ill will to be found in this valley is that which you bring yourself,” Gandalf stated, a tight edge to his voice.

“And you think the elves will give our quest their blessing?” Thorin scoffed. “You know they will try to stop us.”

“Of course they will,” Gandalf agreed and Bilbo looked up at the Wizard in surprise. “But we have questions that need to be answered.”

Thorin just sighed at that reminder.

“If we are to be successful,” Gandalf continued, “this will need to be handled with tact. And respect. And no small degree of charm.”

“You do the talking.”

“Which is why you will- what? Oh. Yes, yes of course,” Gandalf quickly composed himself after Thorin interrupted him with his flat statement.

Bilbo hid a smile behind his hand again when the wizard strode away in a slight huff. Thorin gave him a smile of his own as he trailed after Gandalf and Balin soon joined him as he headed towards the front of the group to lead the way down.

“What are we doing here laddie?” the older dwarf asked as they all started down the trail. “I
“We were just chased by an orc pack,” Thorin reminded him as they picked their way down the slope. “We lost our ponies, half of our gear was left behind and the sun will set sooner than I would like. We need food, rest and some way to restock our supplies. The fact that it comes from elves is just an unfortunate detail.”

There was a small, quiet burst of laughter behind them and Thorin glanced over his shoulder to find Bilbo directly behind them with the rest of the dwarrows slowly trailing behind. Dragging their feet in the case of Glóin who was more than livid about the current turn of events.

“The fact that Gandalf believes they may be able to translate father’s map is also a boon,” Thorin added.

Balin was eyeing him critically but Thorin simply pointed towards the sprawling Elvish city. “We’re already here, why not take advantage of it? If you wish to leave however…”

“No laddie, I’m just… surprised you’re taking this so well.”

“Oh believe me, I am raging on the inside,” Thorin reassured him. “Elves know nothing about good stout ale.”

Dwalin suddenly let out a grunt of agreement from behind Bilbo who had to cover his giggles with his palm again.

“They do have excellent wine,” Gandalf proclaimed, proving that he too was listening in on the conversation.

“If you don’t mind it being watered down,” Thorin countered as they reached the last turn before the courtyard. Looking ahead, he couldn’t help but smile before he called out over his shoulder. “Dori, look there. A bridge.”

There was an affronted gasp behind him as Nori and Bofur burst into laughter.

“Come on Dori, shouldn’t be that much of a drop,” Nori snickered.

“Actually it is,” Thorin told them as he remembered looking down at the small river the last time he crossed into Rivendell proper. “At least the water should break your fall.”

“I’m sure that will make a fine first impression to the elves,” Balin drawled. “Killing off one of your own Company practically on their doorstep.”

“Dori’s fault,” Thorin instantly defended.

Glancing over his shoulder again, he was surprised to see that Dori had actually taken refuge from Nori and Bofur’s teasing behind Bifur. The old miner turned toy maker looked torn between being angry with Thorin’s joke or grateful for it. Thorin just gave him a small wave before turning forward again.

“Playing matchmaker are we?” Bilbo whispered suddenly appearing at his elbow opposite Balin.

“You noticed too?”

“We all noticed,” Bilbo chuckled.

“Among other things,” Balin drawled but when Thorin turned back to his old teacher curiously it
was to find that instead of looking at him with suspicion, Balin was shooting Bilbo a rather thoughtful look.

‘Now what could that be all about?’ Thorin wondered as they finally reached the bridge and started across to the small courtyard.

Not bothering to take in the scenery a second time, Thorin simply waited with Gandalf for the appearance of Elrond’s subordinate. A name starting with an “L” that Thorin couldn’t have bothered to remember the last time they had visited.

Instead, he spent his time glaring at the two elf guards on the entryway steps above them. The elves were either not impressed or very good at their job as they maintain their stoic visages without flinching.

“I don’t like this,” Dwalin muttered as he came to stand next to him.

The last time Thorin had discussed the possibility of elvish treachery and subsequent attack with his head guard but this time he simply shrugged. “We don’t have to like it, we just have to endure.”

Dwalin growled slightly and Thorin gave him a sound thump on the shoulder with his fist. “Best hold that anger in,” he told his friend. “There will be plenty of time for fighting elves later on in this journey for you to test your mettle against them.”

Giving Thorin an indecipherable look, Dwalin growled, “I’ll hold my temper but I will not allow these pointy-ears to try anything untoward.”

“You sound as if you expect the elves to tie you back to the Troll’s roasting spit.”

Thorin jumped slightly and turned to find Bilbo had once again approached he and Dwalin without Thorin even hearing him. How was it that hobbits could move so quietly?

“King Thranduil would in a heart beat,” Thorin told him flatly. “Lord Elrond I’m not so sure yet. We’ll have to wait and see.”

A voice called out for Gandalf in Sindarin and the dark haired elf appeared on the stairs already coming down to greet them.

“Ah. Lindir,” Gandalf greeted and the two began conversing in the elf tongue.

“Who’s that?” Bilbo whispered curiously to Thorin curiously.

“Elrond’s steward I would assume.”

“How do you know that?” Dwalin asked unbelieving.

“He greeted us.”

A horn sounded behind them before Dwalin could respond and the taller dwarf whirled about, raising his axes instantly at the sight of the approaching horses galloping straight towards them.

With a small growl, Thorin snagged Bilbo’s arm and began hauling him through the group as everyone scrambled about in a panic.

Horses were intimidating to begin with due to the difference in height but horses with elves mounted on them just made it that much worse in Thorin’s opinion. Being surrounded by horses ridden by elves… well Thorin was not going to go thought that again.
He managed to catch Ori’s collar as the young dwarf passed and hauled him along while Dwalin and Glóin got the others into a defensive circle.

Gandalf raised an eyebrow questioningly as he spotted Thorin’s approach, clearly bemused.

Ignoring the wizard, Thorin simply herded his charges onto the bottom steps of the staircase to ensure they weren’t run over. Bilbo couldn’t help but look exasperated at the treatment but Ori just seemed puzzled by the whole experience.

Thorin ignored them too. Instead he turned his attention to where the elf stood, watching the proceedings on the stairs with rapt fascination. “Is it Lord Lindir?” he inquired as he turned to watch the approaching scout party from the safety of the bottom step.

“What?” The elf seemed surprised at being addressed and he glanced at Gandalf for some sort of direction before turning back to Thorin. “No. Just Lindir. I’m my lord’s minstrel.”

“Nice to meet you,” Thorin greeted absently as he watched the riders crossing the bridge and begin surrounding his company.

“Hello,” Lindir replied after a short pause.

Bilbo and Ori were watching the circling elf riders in wonder again while Thorin kept an eye on the rest of the dwarrows who were all busy growling and snarling at scout party.

He knew exactly when Fíli and Kíli noticed him missing for they instantly began looking about in alarm. He waved when they finally spotted him on the stairs, well out of the way of the horses circling.

Realizing the boys were distracted by something, Balin followed their gaze inquiringly. Thorin waved again and to his amusement, Ori and Bilbo waved as well. Then to his utter astonishment, so did Lindir.

Fíli’s mouth dropped open.

“You would think they would have gotten out of the way at the sight of a dozen horses headed right for them,” Thorin drawled in amusement.

Bilbo choked on another laugh and there was a slight snicker from Thorin’s right. When he looked though, the elf was the very picture of calm serenity.

“Gandalf,” yet another voice called out, this time from the courtyard, and Thorin turned to find Elrond already looking over the small group at the bottom of the stairs perplexed.

He glanced at Lindir but the other elf could only give his lord a small shrug.

Thorin wondered if Elrond was bewildered because Thorin had moved to the staircase instead of remaining in the courtyard growling at him, or if it was Bilbo with them that had surprised the elf lord.

Ori darted behind Bilbo as the horse in front of them nickered and tossed his massive head and both of them took another step back and up the stairs as Elrond and Gandalf conversed. The elf riding gave the two a gentle smile only to drop it at Thorin’s sharp glare.

“Strange for Orcs to come so close to our borders,” Elrond was saying as he approached Lindir to hand him the Orc weapon he was carrying. Looking at Thorin inquisitively he continued,
“Something or someone has drawn them near.”

“Ah, that may have been us,” Gandalf admitted.

“It was us,” Thorin spoke up as he made his way back down the stairs to stand on the ground before the foreign lord lest the elf take insult. “You said it yourself that they were hunting us. Though I have yet to understand why they would bother with such a small traveling party.”

“Ah well…” Gandalf cleared his throat and took a step back as Elrond gave Thorin his full attention.

“Welcome, Thorin, son of Thráin.”

Thorin remained silent for a moment before he sketched a small bow. “Lord Elrond. I apologize for our abrupt arrival but as I said before, we were being hunted and had to make haste to somewhere… less hostile.” He ended the bow and met the elf’s eye. “I must admit it was thanks to your… timely arrival that it was not as bad as it could have been.” He gestured to the weapon Lindir was holding away from his body in disgust.

Elrond, Lindir and Gandalf all turned to stare at him in shock at the praise. They weren’t the only ones as pretty much all of the Company were as well, save for Bilbo.

Thorin couldn’t understand why. They knew he could be civil when he wanted to. He had been courteous upon meeting Bilbo again for the second time and look how much better that had gone. He figured the same tactic could work on the rather uppity elves.

Gandalf sent Thorin a small glare but again he ignored the wizard. While he agreed to let Gandalf do all the talking, Elrond had spoken to Thorin directly. What was he suppose to do? Not answer the elf?

“Gandalf imparted to us of your vast generosity and I apologize again that we are in need to take advantage of it,” Thorin continued diplomatically. “My Company and myself are weary and in need of rest and shelter for the night. We shall not infringe on your hospitality longer than that and you have my utmost thanks for this kindness.”

He bowed again, just to drive the point home.

Elrond continued to stare before he looked over at Gandalf disbelievingly. Gandalf simply shook his head and Elrond turned to Lindir who looked to be just as lost at this odd turn of events.

Finding no help from any of his allies, Elrond turned back to Thorin. “You may remain within Rivendell for as long as you need,” he declared.

“Thank you,” Thorin said with as much sincerity as he could muster given that he knew the elf did not want him to leave before his Council of White or whatever it was they called themselves had a chance to convene.

Setting that small problem aside for the moment, Thorin instead gestured to Bilbo who looked alarmed as everyone turned their attention to him. “Lord Elrond, may I introduce Bilbo Baggins of Hobbiton from the Shire. Another kind being who has agreed to help us with our current journey.”

Bilbo stepped forward nervously before he gave a bow of his own with a small “Lord Elrond.”

“Bilbo is the grandson of the Hobbit’s Thain,” Thorin continued, pretending not to notice Bilbo’s sharp glare as he leaned closer to Elrond. “The ‘Thain’ is what they call their king,” he informed
the elf in a conspiring tone. “Though apparently calling him such seems to be an insult in their culture.”

“Not a king,” Bilbo snapped automatically and Thorin looked back to Elrond.

“As you can see,” he continued in a normal voice.

Elrond looked highly amused by this as he bowed to Bilbo in the way a lesser lord would to a traveling royal. Thorin didn’t bother to comment on how he didn’t receive one.

“Wait, you’re a prince?” Kíli gaped staring at Bilbo.

“You never told us,” Fíli continued stunned.

“Why didn’t ye say anything laddie?” Bofur asked, saddened that Bilbo would hide such a thing from them. “You could have told us.”

“Not a king,” Bilbo repeated louder.

“Of course he’s not your highness,” Nori snickered again.

“You knew?” Dori gasped as he stared at his brother. “All those times, I thought you were talking to Thorin.”

“Of course we knew,” Ori frowned from where he was still standing on the stairs. “It’s all documented for the chronicles.”

“Ori! Don’t write that down. It’s not true,” Bilbo rebuked.

Ori looked to Thorin anxiously who waved it off with an “it’s fine.”

“It is not fine, it’s just not true,” Bilbo argued irritably.

“If you say so,” Thorin appeased.

Bilbo huffed again before he realized that the elves still mounted were chuckling softly and his face went bright red in humiliation.

Taking pity on the hobbit, and to head off any retaliation that might be aimed at him for the embarrassment, Thorin then turned back to Elrond. “Bilbo is not the only prince to travel with us as my nephews and heirs are also present.”

He turned to indicate Fíli and Kíli who were now staring at him completely horrified. Thorin frowned and gestured them forward impatiently but the boys remained rooted to their spots either from shock or simple nervousness, Thorin couldn’t tell which.

Balin helped in that regard by shoving them forward.

Kíli looked as if he wanted to hide behind Dwalin but Fíli finally composed himself enough to step forward, snagging his brother’s arm and pulling him along with him until they were in front of Lord Elrond.

“Lord Elrond, may I introduce my dear sister’s sons, Prince Fíli and Prince Kíli, sons of Fártri son of Kíltri,” Thorin introduced.

The two bowed with an “at your service Lord Elrond” and Thorin was grateful that they managed
to remember their manners long enough to do so while Elrond gave his own bow to the young royals.

Elrond looked over at Thorin again before he turned to Gandalf and began speaking in Sindarin.

Waiting patiently for Glóin to become offended and Gandalf countering with food, Thorin jumped when he was poked hard in the side and he looked down at Bilbo’s angry visage. “What? Just because you call him ‘Thain’ doesn’t mean he wouldn’t be considered a king in other cultures.”

“You didn’t have to say anything,” Bilbo growled.

“Not to introduce a fellow royal, or even a lord of another realm would be considered a grave insult. Not only to the royal or lord himself but to the hosting lord as well,” Thorin stated, looking over at where the boys were leaning forward listening in on his explanation. “Same reason I introduced the boys. Not to introduce them would be considered rude.” Which was why he didn’t do so the first time he’d been there.

Bilbo mulled over that as Elrond and Gandalf turned back. Surprisingly, it was Elrond who spoke.

“Please, stay as long as you need,” the elf proclaimed, this time looking over the entire Company. “And I insist that you join us for dinner.”

“Thank you,” Thorin bowed again, more to gather his thoughts than out of respect.

Glancing at Glóin, he was surprised to see Óin holding his brother back, whispering furiously. Glóin did not seem happy but he wasn’t saying anything about it. ‘What’s gotten into those two?’

“Perhaps there is somewhere where we may freshen up before hand?” he hedged turning back to Elrond. “The orcs were not the only trouble we found on the road here.”

“Oh?” Elrond stared down at him curiously.

“Yes, I regret to inform you that there are three very repugnant troll statues just outside your borders.”

Elrond looked surprised and interested by this information and he glanced at Gandalf as the rest of the elves began murmuring amongst themselves. “Perhaps you could regale the story to us while we dine?”

“I would be delighted to,” Thorin agreed.

Elrond nodded and turned to Lindir, presumably asking him to see to their guests.

“If you would follow me please,” Lindir gestured towards the staircase. “We have a set of rooms prepared that I believe you shall enjoy.”

“Does it include a bath?” Bilbo couldn’t help but ask eagerly.

Lindir simply smiled. “Of course.”

“Good to know,” Thorin said as he waved off Gandalf when the wizard gestured him over to where he and Elrond were standing. He had been polite enough for the moment and didn’t believe it necessary to join the two and remain silently bored stiff as they chatter on in a language he couldn’t even understand. “I would hate for us to have to use your fountain.”

Lindir clearly didn’t know how to respond to that, so he said nothing as he continued guiding them
through the hallways to the rooms Thorin remembered being in previously.

Walking through the hallways, Thorin fell silent as he thought about how the meeting with the elves differed from the first time. He would have to say that while not perfect, it had been better than the fridge façades they had presented each other before.

He snickered as he remembered Elrond’s face as he was presented with a polite Thorin rather than the surly, confrontational dwarf he was clearly prepared for. There was something satisfying about being able to shake others perceived expectations of him.

With the introductions having gone so well, Thorin couldn’t help but wonder curiously how different dinner would go this time around.

‘Hopefully we will be able to have a somewhat cordial meal. And one without Bofur dancing on the table.’
Diplomacy and Dancing

In the end Bilbo was unable to take his bath, much to his frustration.

Another elf had appeared just as they were dropping off their packs to announce dinner was ready and Lindir was leading them all once more through the maze of hallways to where dinner had apparently been set.

Thorin supposed there were some drawbacks to Gandalf forewarning the elves of their arrival, for there was no time to freshen up. Not that any of the dwarrows would have taken advantage of it. Many of them still far to leery to use any of the Elvin facilities.

Bilbo had been the only one truly distressed about his appearance and less than pleasant fragrance. Bofur gleefully informed him that he needn’t have worry because they all smelled rather ripe so even if he were clean, no one would even notice. Bilbo hadn’t been amused.

At least he wasn’t covered in dry troll mucus this go around.

Thorin wondered briefly what Bilbo had been thinking the last time they stopped at Rivendell and immediately realized it probably was far worse than the simple worrying he was doing now. Thorin wasn’t exactly a friend then and far harder to approach about such things so Bilbo had never voiced his concerns; at least not to him.

Wondering just how much Bilbo had held back the last time, Thorin didn’t notice when Balin fell into step with him a second time.

“Laddie, I’m beginning to worry about your health,” Balin told Thorin flatly as they followed the tall elf down one flight of stairs only to go up another.

Glancing at their guide, Thorin slowed his steps so he and Balin would fall back further from sharp hearing. He waved the others to continue on ahead and turned his attention to his old adviser.

“I think I’ve held onto my anger at the elves long enough, don’t you?” he asked quietly before Balin could voice his complaint. “I do not wish to continue with my father’s and grandfather’s hostility to the detriment of our kingdom. Not when we are so in need of any assistance we can find.”

Balin raised an eyebrow. “What are ye saying lad? Help with the dragon?”

“Mahal no, the elves made their stance on that front quite clear.” Thorin shook his head. “I’m speaking of afterwards. We are going to need provisions to feed a whole kingdom.”

“Provisions?”

“As much as we wish it were so, we can not eat diamonds in winter,” Thorin chuckled. “And any food we left is far beyond rotted. Even with the support of Dáin and the Iron Hills, they can only help us so much before they feel the strain. Also we do not know how hard the winter will be this year and roads may prove to be to difficult to travel.”

“And you think we can get it from Mirkwood?”

“Who said anything about Thranduil? If there is to be a truce made by any of them it would be
easier obtained from Elrond than any of the others. He, at least, has a firm grasp of reality. Which is more than most of them can say."

Balin considered this. “He does seem more amenable that King Thranduil,” he admitted slowly. “But surely we can get what we need from the humans? No?”

Thorin was already shaking his head. “We do not know how the remnants of Dale are doing if they’re even still there. They may not have the fields to spare as they once did. We didn’t exactly write ahead to tell them we were coming.”

“Aye, but the Iron Hills are still closer than here,” Balin pointed out.

“True but hopefully the elves can supply what Dáin can not and between them we will fair until the spring planting season,” Thorin shrugged. “We should at least be open to the possibilities. Worse comes to worse, Elrond will tell us no and that will be that.”

“While I am please you are preparing for the days ahead,” Balin drawled. “Perhaps we should oust the dragon before making long term plans.”

“I just thought we should look into the possibilities while we were here. Get a line of communication open at the very least.”

“Hence your rather over exuberant niceties.”

Thorin winced. “Was I that obvious?”

“Only to those who know you,” Balin chuckled. “And the wizard. And the elves,” he added as an afterthought.

Thorin shot him a glare but refrained from saying anything as they finally reached the veranda.

Elrond was not there yet but Lindir had stopped to wait at the door for Thorin to catch up. “Your Majesty, if you and your kin along with Prince Bilbo would come this way,” Lindir gestured towards further onto the veranda.

“What’s this then?” Bilbo asked from Thorin’s left. How long had he been there?

“My Lord Elrond would be most please if you would join him and his sons at the head table,” Lindir explained excitedly.

‘Sons?’ Thorin wondered as he looked towards the head table.

Sure enough, the table was larger than Thorin remembered, with eight chairs surrounding it rather than three.

‘This is rather new,’ he thought surprised. He truly hadn’t believed that anything would go differently as far as dinner was concerned, but clearly having introduced his heirs had prompted Elrond to respond in kind if he was bringing his own sons to dinner.

Bilbo was poking him in the side again. “Now see what you’ve done,” he hissed angrily. “I didn’t get a chance to freshen up properly and now I’m seated at the lords table!”

“You’ll be fine,” Thorin whispered back as he stepped next to where Fíli was already seated at the corner of one of the long tables. “You smell no worse than the rest of us.”

Fíli looked up at Thorin curiously as his uncle tapped his shoulder. “Yes uncle?”
“Up you two,” he said crooking a finger at Kili at the other table.

“What?” Fili asked as he followed Thorin and Bilbo and Kili jogged over. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong, we’re to be seated with Lord Elrond tonight.”

“What?” Kili gasped in dismay as he and Fili stopped in their tracks.

“Oh in Durin’s name, can you not act like the princes you are for one night?” Thorin grumbled as he grabbed their arms and hauled them forward. “Remember, do not speak of our reasoning for traveling through their lands. I shall handle that. And for Mahal’s sake, don’t do anything embarrassing,” he added in a whisper as he pushed them forward. “Or your mother will be informed of your need for additional tutoring and that Balin will be far too busy to school you two to do it. Leaving her no choice but to do it herself.”

Properly cowed by the threat of having to endure lessons from their own mother the two found their seats rather hurriedly, taking the two on Thorin’s left. Lindir took his place against the wall just behind Elrond’s seat on Thorin’s right.

Bilbo gave Thorin a rather approving nod when he caught Thorin’s eye from his own spot on the other side of Kili. Thorin gave a small nod of agreement back and took his own seat as they waited for the others.

It didn’t take long for soon Elrond arrived with Gandalf and two previously unmet elves behind him.

Thorin suddenly felt an unexpected sympathy for the elf lord as he assumed the two trailing behind him were his aforementioned sons. Both were completely identical to one another. ‘If they were ever like Kili and Fili as children, no wonder Elrond could withstand my earlier hostilities. He’s had plenty of practice.’

Rising from their seats as the small group approached Thorin and Bilbo each prodded the young dwarf prince next to them, prompting the two to scramble to their own feet. He gave the hobbit a grateful look and received another smile as the four approached.

“King Thorin of Durin’s Folk,” Elrond spoke as they reached the table. “May I introduce my own sons and heirs Elladan,” the unknown elf on the left bowed, “and Elrohir.” The second one bowed as well. “My daughter Arwen is currently away fostering at Lothlórien.”

Thorin bowed back and once again introduced Bilbo and his own nephews to the newly arrived and made his apologies for his sister who had been left in charge at Ered Luin.

One of the twins took the empty seat next to Bilbo and Thorin chuckled slightly to himself at Bilbo’s sudden look of panic. He had probably expected Gandalf to be seated on his left but the wizard would be on Elrond’s right as an honored guest and old friend.

Thorin tried to drop his smile when Bilbo glanced to him but his own relaxed state seemed to calm Bilbo. The boys were still tense though, focusing intently on their plates as the attendants began setting down platters of food rather than at the table’s other occupants.

Thorin looked down at his own plate utterly stunned. “What’s this?” he blurted out before he could stop himself.

“Venison it seems,” Fili offered as he prodded his own with his fork. “Bit overcooked for my taste.”
Thorin glanced at the other two tables as he pinched Fíli’s arm for the social gaff the boy made about the cookery. Sure enough, there was a wide assortment of meats at each table that his Company was tearing into gladly.

“Is something wrong?” Elrond asked curiously.

Thorin picked up his own fork and turned back to his own dinner. “Simply reassessing a few preconceived notions,” he stated. “I’m sorry that I was under the impression that Elves were… what is that word… Not herbivores…”

“Vegetarians,” Bilbo offered helpfully.

“Yes, thank you. That,” he turned back to Elrond.

“While we do prefer vegetables, we enjoy a well rounded diet as well,” Elrond acknowledged. “Did you ever dine in Greenwood before?”

Thorin instantly sobered. “I was still too young to join the high table before we were forced to leave Erebor.”

“That’s too bad. They have a vast array of game there.” Elrond gestured to the plates. “This buck was taken down by Elrohir earlier today.”

The young elf in question sat up straighter from his place next to Bilbo.

‘Well at least I can tell which was which now,’ Thorin mused.

The appearance of meat made slightly more sense to him now. For a moment there, he had worried that it was in response to his earlier respectful manner but Elrond showing off his son’s hunting skills with the display was far more likely. Fatherly pride and a bit of boasting he could grant the elf.

“The boar was felled by Elladan,” Elrond continued and Thorin turned to where, sure enough, there was a whole roasted pig in the corner being carved by some of the attendants. How had he missed that?

“I saw that many of the orcs and wargs that had been chasing you were felled by arrows,” Elrohir spoke up rather excitedly. “May I ask who your archer is?”

Elrond let out a sigh and reached for his wine goblet. Clearly his son’s eager interest was nothing new to him.

“That would be Kíli here,” Thorin gestured to the boy who was now slightly flushed pink. “While archery was never a customary practice in our family, Kíli has shown a great aptitude with the bow.”

The pink turned to red as everyone at the table turned to look at poor flustered Kíli.

“I spotted one some distance away that had been struck in its eye,” Elladan proclaimed. “It was a very fine shot.”

“Thank you,” Kíli managed to stammer out, his face going even redder.

Thorin shook his own head at the boy’s bashfulness. It had probably stemmed from the time when he was a child and some other children had declared him not a dwarf at all but rather a short ugly
elf trying to pass off as one.

Instead of being insulted, as Fíli had and proceeded to engage in a rather one-sided brawl with them, Kíli had taken the idea and all but ran with it.

Having hardly any facial hair and being of lean stature, Thorin could understand where the child’s mind had gone with the jest. Kíli was always very conscientious of his non-dwarven looks.

It finally took Dís sitting him down for a long talk that stopped Kíli from looking for a long lost elf family that had misplaced him.

Kíli’s insecurity was a surprise as Dís and Thorin had always worried that Fíli would be the one to feel out of place in a family full of dark haired dwarves. Fíli was thankfully very assure with himself however and had been a large factor in boosting Kíli’s own self-esteem.

Now Fíli was staring down at his plate with his lips pressed into a straight line, clearly upset at the attention his brother was receiving from the elves the younger brother had always privately admired but never before met.

Even without turning around, Kíli could clearly felt his brother’s distress and he set a hand on his brother’s arm while he explained to Elladan that the arrow had been of hobbit make and the two elves started asking Bilbo questions about his mother and where she had learned to shoot.

As Thorin watched, Fíli slowly relaxed and went back to eating everything but the vegetables on his plate.

“But you said the Orcs were not the only trouble you encountered coming here?” Elrond broke in when Bilbo had finished. “Trolls you said?”

Thorin nodded. “Three to be precise. In the Trollshaws just near the border. They had taken a few of our ponies for their supper. Which reminds me, all of our ponies had bolted at the sound of the Wargs howling. I hate to have to ask you this, but-”

“Should we come across them, they will be well cared for until you can retrieve them,” Elrond reassured him.

Thorin wondered how he could ask Elrond to send them to his sister without mentioning the fact that he wasn’t going to be traveling back near Rivendell any time soon. “I would be much obliged if you could.”

“They can always be sent to the Shire if needed,” Bilbo suggested to Thorin’s relief. “We can send them back to the Blue Mountains from there.”

“Thank you,” Thorin smiled. “Gyth had been a fine pony. I would hate for anything to happen to him.”

“I thought his name was Bungo,” Kíli frowned.

“What?” Thorin looked at the boys but they were now looking at Bilbo curiously.

“You said Myrtle didn’t have a name and when I asked the others what they had named theirs to get some idea, I found out none had bothered with it.” Bilbo blushed.

“Bilbo named all the ponies,” Fíli announced. “I rode Pansy. Kíli had Cinnamon.”
Bilbo flushed under the gazes he was getting. “I named most of them after family members or herbs and such. There were sixteen of them.”

“Who was Bungo?” Thorin asked curiously.

“My father,” Bilbo said quietly as he looked down at his lap.

Thorin felt a bit stunned. “I’m honored that you granted my mount such a fine name.”

Bilbo peeked back up at him and he smiled reassuringly.

“So the trolls had stolen your ponies then?” Elrohir asked, bringing them back on topic smoothly. “How did they manage that?”

“Perhaps my nephews would like to start the story,” Thorin looked to the boys who were now a flushing bright red and Thorin had to stifle a groan. He now knew how the boys had lost the ponies. “Never mind, perhaps Bilbo could tell it from his perspective. He was there when they realized the ponies had gone and from what I understand, he is an exceptional writer and storyteller.”

“Well, not quite as well known as that. I’ve written a few books here and there. For family and friends, mind you.”

“We would love to hear it,” Elrond insisted and for the next few minutes Bilbo regaled the troll fight.

Thankfully, Bilbo had enough sense to downplay how Fíli had tricked him into sneaking into the camp and he completely skipped over being used as a handkerchief though he admitted to being caught. He exaggerated everyone’s fighting skills in the following battle and how despite their best efforts, Bilbo had been unfortunately caught again and what followed was a toss into the foul smelling sacks for some and tied to a roasting spit for others.

As Thorin listened to the tale, he realized that he couldn’t hear any music anymore and worried that Bofur had decided dancing was called for, glanced over at the other tables. Surprised, he found that everyone was listening to Bilbo relate how he and Thorin had bide for time until Gandalf could arrive in rapt attention, including the attendants and musicians.

Clearly, Bilbo understated his talents for he was gifted at the art of storytelling if he had everyone captivated by the tale. Though Thorin didn’t remember having been so involved as Bilbo was making him out to be when he was tied in the sack.

“Sounds like a rather alarming situation to find yourselves in,” Elrond said after Bilbo finished and the musicians started playing again. “You are very luck to have come out of it as well as you did.”

“Yes, I suppose we were lucky to leave with our lives,” Thorin admitted before he grinned. “The swords we found hidden in their cave were also a fine addition and came in most handy in the ensuing flight from the wargs. I believe you know of them. Gandalf said they were forged in Gondolin.”

Elrond set his cutlery aside to accept Orcrist. “The Goblin-cleaver. It is a famous blade forged by the High Elves of the West, my kin,” Elrond stated before he handed it back to Thorin. “May it serve you well.”

Thorin gave another nod as he accepted it. “Thank you for allowing us to keep them,” he thanked. “We were unsure if you would like to reclaim for yourselves as they were made for your people
and such famous blades.”

“They were lost many years ago,” Elrond stated as Gandalf passed him Glamdring. “It is good that they find their way to someone who might have need of them.”

The elf shot Gandalf a knowing look and Thorin realized that they weren’t fooling anyone with their true purpose for traveling through Middle-Earth. It was understandable since Thorin was never exactly quiet about his desire to reclaim Erebor over the years. It had to have been plain for anyone with such a sharp mind such as Elrond to see. As long as no one said so outright however, Elrond refrained from making any such accusations.

“This is Glamdring the Foehammer. Sword of the King of Gondolin.” He handed the sword back. “These were made for the Goblin Wars of the First Age.”

“Master Baggins?”

Thorin glanced over to find Elrohir looking down at Bilbo curiously.

“Oh, it’s nothing… really,” Bilbo insisted slightly flustered and he quickly brought his hands back out from under the table rather obviously. Thorin hadn’t even realized Bilbo had brought Sting with him.

“There was a third sword in the cave,” Gandalf said slowly. “Bilbo?”

With a slight flush, Bilbo undid his own scabbard and passed the small sword to Kíli and down the line until Thorin could turn it over for inspection.

“I rather doubt that it’s seen any battle,” Bilbo continued. “It is small compared to the others.”

“True that it was never named,” Elrond nodded before showing the table at large the blank hilt. “See it is missing the inscription but I believe that this was the dagger made for King Turgon’s nephew, lost in the Fall of Gondolin along with the other blades. It has indeed seen battle.”

“Oh.” Bilbo looked fascinated at this news and gratefully accepted the sword’s return from Elrohir as Sting made it’s way back around the table. “What are the inscriptions on the other blades?”

Elrond smiled. “Orcrist simply stated that it is ‘The Long-Tooth of the serpent’.”

‘There’s an omen if I’ve ever heard one,’ Thorin thought amused.

“Glamdring a bit longer due to it being the king’s sword,” Elrond admitted. “It reads ‘Turgon, King of Gondolin, wields, has, and holds the sword Glamdring, Foe of Morgoth’s realm, Hammer of the Orcs’.”

“Definitely a king’s sword,” Thorin agreed before turning to Bilbo. “Perhaps Lord Elrond would be willing to have your sword inscribed when you have given it a name.”

“I would be delighted to,” Elrond nodded before turning to Gandalf. “So tell me, what were you doing on the Great East Road?”

“Oh well…”

“Exploring options,” Thorin declared, drawing Elrond’s attention again. “As you know, with the loss of Erebor, my people have not fared as well as we would have liked. Nogrod has given us shelter but not much else. For those reasons we’ve been looking to expand into trading and
possibilities of other outposts."

“Nogrod?” Elrond and even Lindir looked stunned at this announcement while Elladan and Elrohir looked disturbed. “Nogrod is a desolate place. Nothing stands there anymore and the mountain is full of poisonous gas. Do not say you have been living there?”

“I wouldn’t exactly call it living,” Fíli muttered, Kíli nodded in agreement.

“Indeed,” Thorin admitted grudgingly. “With the second loss of Moria and the subsequent deaths of my grandfather and father, I was a bit desperate to find somewhere for my people to settle fairly quickly. Nogrod was the only place we found we could reside after traveling practically all of Middle-earth so long.”

“The only other possible option that is large enough to accommodate all who fled Erebor would have been Belegost,” he continued. “However Lord Hábar had declared he had been thinking of rebuilding the city himself. Whenever he decided he could get around to it.”

Thorin had muttered the last sentence into his goblet as he drained the last of his watered down wine but he must have been heard since the twins were looking at their father in clear distress.

Lindir finally moved away from his spot next to the wall and was instantly at Elrond’s side, his face full of carefully suppressed horror as he stared down at Thorin. “Surely there was somewhere else more appropriate?”

“Nowhere we were allowed to stay,” Thorin snarled before he composed himself. “No one would grant us settling rights, not without placing exorbitant taxes on the land. Beggars can not afford to be finicky, Master Lindir and we were rather desperate in those days.”

“So you are tasked with finding someplace more suited to establish a permanent home for the betterment of your people,” Elrond said slowly and he shot Gandalf an indecipherable look.

“Wherever that may be,” Thorin agreed. “We are re-exploring possibilities that we have exclude in the past as well as keeping an eye out for newer prospects.”

“I’m sure you are.”

Elrond was now practically glaring at Gandalf who looked rather contrite. Clearly there was something being said in those looks there that Thorin was completely missing.

It was then that a timely interruption saved Gandalf in the form of Bofur getting up on the table. Thorin groaned and quickly drained his third cup of wine as the toy maker belted out into song.

Fíli and Kíli instantly perked up but Mahal bless him, Bilbo latched onto Kíli’s arm while Thorin placed his own hand on Fíli’s wrist and squeezed. Both of them looked disappointed but thankfully remained seated.

Elladan and Elrohir were fascinated by the merriment but Elrond and Lindir turned again to stare at Thorin critically.

He sighed. “Again, we have been traveling on the road for quite some time,” he began. “And while I’m sure you find your music to be quite pleasant and soothing, I’m afraid that it is a bit…” he paused as a piece of meat went flying by, barely striking the still standing Lindir, “even keeled for our tastes.”

“In layman’s terms, it’s duller than dishwater.”
“Kíli!” both Thorin and Bilbo burst out.

“What?”

“He will be censured for that,” Thorin reassured Elrond who had lost his stern appearance and had gone back to vaguely interested. Lindir still looked distressed however. Considering he was still standing and a larger target, it was all too understandable.

“I don’t see how, we’re already grounded,” Fíli murmured, unknowing that the elves could still clearly hear him over the din.

“Really? What were you grounded for?” Elrohir asked curiously as Elladan attempted to catch a dinner roll soaring in his direction.

“They lost the ponies,” Thorin drawled and both boys went crimson again.

“And your own minstrel?” Elrond asked pointing to Bofur still dancing on the table.

“Will find later on that his hat apparently suffered a rather unfortunate encounter with the fireplace and himself with a fine for the cleaning of your veranda.”

“Pity.” Elrond calmly shifted to the left out of the way of a flying potato. “It is a rather unique apparel.”

“A fine?” Elladan asked, tossing the roll back at Bofur with unerring accuracy before turning to rejoin the conversation before the singing dwarf could see who had hit him.

“Yes, I believe that by the time we leave your fine establishment, Bofur will find himself a far poorer dwarf than when he entered it.”
After the impromptu entertainment, dinner was most decisively over. Everyone stood from their places to stretch while the musicians started to put their instruments away and the attendants removed the dishes.

Elrond asked if there was anything further he could assist them with, as any polite host would, and Gandalf instantly jumped on the opportunity. Asking if Elrond could help with a slight translation snafu they had stumbled across. Elrond agreed and suggested they retire to his study.

Thorin dismissed Fíli and Kíli, to their delight, and called Balin over while Gandalf spoke to Bilbo, asking him to join them. Elladan and Elrohir managed to catch the boys before they could find refuge with the other dwarrows and offered to give them a tour of the city.

Kíli looked as if he would have enjoyed taking them up on their offer but after seeing Fíli's downturn expression, made their excuses citing exhaustion. Balin gave Kíli his approval as they passed and the young dwarf sighed in relief that he had done at least something correct.

Putting his nephews out of his mind, Thorin followed Elrond and Gandalf as they made their way deeper into the city and to the large building standing above a small waterfall.

Once the door was shut, Gandalf turned to Thorin. "Now, the map if you please."

Thorin enjoyed his look of shock as he simply passed it to him. Balin sighed beside him but Thorin had no compunctions about turning the parchment over. They needed the map translated.

"Allegedly," Thorin remember. But he couldn't very well miraculously be able to read Moon Runes. Balin knew he never learned them and unless they were part of his lessons as a dwarfling, Thorin never went out of his way to study anything new.

"Please be careful as it is one of the last things my father left to me," Thorin said as Gandalf handed it to Elrond.

Curious, Elrond opened the map before he jerked his head up to look at Thorin sharply. "Erebor."

Thorin remained silent as Elrond went on to inquire as to their interest in such a map.

"It's mainly academic," Gandalf explained before Thorin could say anything. "As you know this sort of artifact sometimes contains hidden text."

Thorin simply nodded. "You can imagine that there are very few relics to have survived Erebor's loss and I would like to know if my father might have left me a message before he died."

Elrond gazed at Thorin searchingly before he walked slightly away from them.

"You still read ancient Dwarvish, do you not?" Gandalf prompted.

Saying nothing, Elrond began to look the map over critically. Balin looked apprehensive but Thorin simply waited patiently as Elrond said something in Sindarin that Gandalf repeated in Westerton.
"Moon Runes? Of course. An easy thing to miss," he added at Bilbo's questioning glance.

'Liar,' Thorin thought. He didn't believe for one moment that Gandalf didn't know exactly what they were if not what they said.

"Well, in this case, that is true," Elrond agreed and Thorin heaved a sigh. "Moon runes can only be read by the light of a moon of the same shape and season as the day on which they were written."

Thorin raised an eyebrow at Elrond's announcement. "And that day would be…?"

Elrond's lips twitched into what Thorin would have called a smirk had it been on anyone other than an elf. "You are in luck, for not only can I read them but I can read them immediately. If you would follow me."

Balin huffed as Elrond exited through a side door and began leading them down yet another long and twisting path towards the terrace in the cliff's face behind the waterfall. "Thorin, what are you doing?" the older dwarf demanded to know. "To just hand the map over like that-

"Getting answers," Thorin said curtly. "We need the runes translated, do we not?"

"There had to have been other ways," Balin muttered as he studied the path they were walking.

"Not many read moon runes. You told me yourself that it was an old art that had fallen out of favor."

"Why's that?" Bilbo asked from behind them and Thorin turned so he was walking slightly sideways to answer him.

"Moon Runes, while having originated in dwarven culture, fell out of use alongside the old archaic version of Khuzdul, our primary language. It's just simply obsolete."

"Oh." Bilbo thought that over for a moment. "I wonder if Bifur can read them."

Both Balin and Thorin came to a sudden halt as they stared at one another in disbelief.

"Did you ever show anyone else in the Company the map?" Balin asked in a strained voice.

"Why would I?" Thorin retorted hotly, feeling the heat of embarrassment on his cheeks. "Out of anyone, it would have been either yourself or Gandalf who could have read them. Bifur never crossed my mind."

"We'll have to ask him when we get back to the rooms," Bilbo stated and found himself under the two incredulous gazes. "What?"

"You can speak with him?" Balin asked surprised.

Bilbo frowned at them. "Generally speaking."

Thorin thought about that. "In Iglishmêk?"

"I have continued showing him what I can remember of my own sign language and he's shown me his," Bilbo shrugged. "But I can understand a few words he says. He can only repeat the words 'food', 'ponies' and 'sleep' so many times before I can get the general gist of what he trying to say. After that it was a matter of simply listening."

Balin just stared at Bilbo before he suddenly turned and gave Thorin a fierce scowl of disapproval.
"I can't stop Bilbo from listening, now can I?" Thorin insisted. "Besides, Bifur is not teaching him Khuzdul. Not directly. So the law hasn't been breached."

"Is there something amiss?"

Thorin turned to find Gandalf and Elrond had double backed to see what had caused the small group to stop.

"No, not as much," Thorin assured them. "I apologize. Please lead on."

Elrond immediately turned to do just that but Gandalf looked at them in askance.

"You don't suppose Bifur knows Moon Runes, do you?" Thorin asked as he fell into step beside the wizard.

Gandalf startled. "I don't know. I never thought to ask. He does know more Ancient Dwarvish than any other I've met."

"Myself included," Balin agreed. "Does anyone know where he learned it? Or why?"

"We will have to ask him," Thorin said as they reached the door to the terrace and descended the steps.

Elrond held up the map again as they stepped out into the moonlight. "These runes were written on a Midsummer's Eve by the light of a crescent moon nearly two hundred years ago." He placed the map on the large crystal. "It would seem you were meant to come to Rivendell. Fate is with you Thorin Oakenshield. The same moon shines upon us tonight."

Thorin glanced at the cloud-covered moon in consideration. ‘Fate indeed.’

It was Mahal who had forged the Two Lamps of the Valar, the Sun and the Moon. One of the reasons Moon Runes were created. However what were the odds that on the year Thorin was to go questing for Erebor's return and on the day he finally reached someone who could read them, Bifur still an unknown factor at this point, that there would be an exact moon upon which they were written in the sky? Thorin doubted it was large.

'Were you helping us all along and I was to blind to see it?' Thorin wondered as he stared up at the shining light above them.

It might also explain the week of rain. Had it been clear, it was most likely that they would have dawdled as they went, causing them to only reach Rivendell after the solstice. The unrelenting rain had ensured that they continued traveling straight through the week and Thorin had to admit they had made the trek in record time.

'Could you not have found a drier way to do that?' he lamented quietly to himself and the clouds parted as if to answer him. 'Thought not.'

Stepping next to Elrond, he watched as the runes began appearing on the parchment near the bottom right corner in wonder. It was no less amazing the second time.

"Stand by the gray stone…” Elrond began and Thorin listened with only half an ear at the instructions.

Bilbo inquired about Durin's Day and Gandalf explained that it was the last moon of autumn and the first sun of winter appearing together.
"That means just shy of four months," Thorin elaborated.

“Now there’s still time;” Balin informed him and Thorin resisted rolling his eyes. There went that secret.

"Time? For what?" Bilbo asked.

"To find the entrance," Balin told him. "We have to be standing in exactly the right spot at exactly the right time. Then, and only then, can the door be opened."

"Well it shouldn't be too difficult then," Thorin drawled. "We just have to time it right to give us the days we need to find the right spot."

"And find a thrush," Bilbo added.

"Simple," Thorin agreed before shaking his head in exasperation. “This is going to be a problem.”

"So this is your purpose," Elrond interrupted, "to enter the mountain."

"I did say we were exploring old options," Thorin all but snapped. "We have no choice if my people are going to survive. We cannot stay at Nogrod any longer and as I said, our options are limited. We must see if Erebor can be reclaimed."

"There are some who would not deem it wise," Elrond drawled as he gave Thorin the map back.

"What do you mean?" Gandalf asked alarmed.

"You are not the only guardian to watched over Middle-earth," Elrond stated pointedly.

"Well if those guardians you speak of have another solution for my people's predicament then please, let me know," Thorin declared and Elrond turned back from exiting the terrace in surprise. "You said yourself that we cannot remain at Nogrod any longer but we have very limited options available to us. As it stands, none of our brethren are willing to take us into their own mountains and we've already tried to repossess Moria ourselves from the Orc hoard that now dwells there and failed, miserably. Erebor is the only place left now that we can possibly reclaim, as, while a dragon is intimidating, he is our only foe there." He shot Elrond a sharp stare. "Unless you are willing to assist us with a second attempt at Moria?"

Elrond's silence stretched.

"As I thought," Thorin stated grimly.

"Perhaps there is another option that we might be able to uncover," Elrond admitted slowly. "We will have to discuss it."

"Well do it fast," Thorin told him. "As you said, we have to be at Erebor by Durin's day or we shall have to wait a whole nother year. If we have not found an acceptable solution soon then we must be on our way."

“Must you?” Elrond demanded. “Surly it is not desperate as all that?”

“It will be,” Thorin ground out. “That’s the problem. We have only barely managed to survive there as it is. Nogrod is fine for a reprieve and to gain our bearings but to establish a permanent settlement? Never mind the fact that the mines are unusable and we have no way to support ourselves, there are absolutely no defenses there. Nothing to keep our enemy’s at bay and nowhere
to keep our children safe. We have to move on to someplace that is better protected.”


“You fought an Orc pack just this morning,” Thorin drawled. “Do you truly believe there are only a few of them scattered about? I’m sorry to inform you but there are not.” He glared up at the elf. “I’ve seen them Elrond. Not just here or there, but everywhere. I’ve traveled the lands. I know that there are more out there, spread out further than just on your borders!”

Here he jabbed a finger at Bilbo. “I only just learned how they had attacked the Shire some years back. One of the supposed safest places in the whole of Middle-Earth! Do you really think they wouldn’t attack Rivendell if they could? If your magic failed or Mahal forbid, you were killed? How long do you think your city would remain before they start testing your borders? To see how far they can press into your lands?”

Thorin shook his head. “And the Orcs are just the beginning. As they spread, their presence allows for other dark creatures to emerge from their own imposed territory, trolls being one such example. How long do you think it will be before the Goblins start encroaching out further from their underground town? The Orcs are changing the balance of the lands Elrond. The Greenwood is already succumbing to darker forces, it’s only a matter of time before that sickness spreads.”

He looked at Elrond critically. “Or has Thranduil not divulged that information just yet?”

Elrond looked at Gandalf agitated and just slightly horrified. “What is he speaking of? What sickness?”

Gandalf winced. “Radagast found me to pass on a message. The Greenwood does seem to be under some sort of illness.”

Elrond pursed his lips together as he thought about it. “We will discuss this later,” he told the Wizard and Gandalf nodded his assent before Elrond returned his attention to the fuming Thorin. “Be that as it may, three trolls are hardly the showings of our peaceful lands being invaded by outside forces. There cannot be anything so pressing currently to cause you to awaken a dragon.”

Thorin’s whole body went taut before he finally allowed it all the anger to just flow out of him and he released a sigh. Clearly he was not going to be convincing Elrond of any dangers, let alone an oncoming war, anytime soon.

“Believe what you will,” he finally stated quietly. “And allow me to think as I will. I believe there is a danger out there that will harm my people. Can you, as a lord of your own people, deny me the chance to do what ever I believe I must to see them truly safe once more?”

“I cannot fault you for wanting to keep your people safe but to possibly endanger not only your people but all of Middle-earth by awakening a dragon? Smaug will terrorize the lands, all the lands. It will not be you alone subject to his fury.”

“The dragon is just a small part of the danger,” Thorin announced grimly. “If the Orcs are encroaching into the outer lands, what will it matter when the dragon awakens? There will be nothing left for him to destroy, the Orcs will have already done so.”

“Any and all possible outcomes of your mission must be weighted and judged accordingly,” Elrond declared and he finally turned to leave.

“Smaug will not sleep forever,” Thorin called after him, his voice echoing on the terrace. “This year, in ten years, in a hundred. He will get hungry and he will wake up. What will you do then?
Elrond’s spine stiffened slightly before he strode out the door leaving Thorin and the others alone on the terrace.

"I think that was your ‘no’, laddie," Balin told him quietly.

"I believe it is," Thorin agreed as he turned to Gandalf. “Now what? You know he’s going to try and keep us here.”

“He is,” Gandalf agreed, giving Thorin a searching gaze. “But he can not watch you all the time.”

“You’re suggesting we sneak out?” Bilbo asked surprised.

He turned to look at the dwarrows incredulously and Thorin realized that since Bilbo had left his house with them this time around, he didn’t know just how quiet the dwarrows could be when they put their minds to it.

“It will be fine,” Thorin insisted. Bilbo didn’t look convinced but he allowed the matter to drop.

“I will see what I can do about distracting Lord Elrond,” Gandalf assured him. “When you see your chance to leave, I suggest you take it. I will meet up with you later in the Misty Mountains after escaping Lord Elrond’s clutches myself.”

Thorin smirked at that and with the plan in place they too the glowing stone behind them and re-entered the cliff face and into Rivendell proper.

"Is it truly that bad where you live now?" Bilbo asked hesitantly as they made their way back down the opposite staircase to the garden walkways outside.

Thorin nodded grimly. "We are just barely living as we are."

"Why did you never come to the Shire to speak for trade?"

Thorin winced and Blain took it upon himself to justify their reasoning.

"We are a prideful people and do not ask for help lightly," Balin admitted. "As well as the fact that Hobbits are known to have little to do with the rest of the world."

Bilbo flushed at that reminded but forged ahead determined. "I will write to my grandfather again," he proclaimed. "As well as speak with him directly when I return home. While it's not much, we might be able to send you some aid. Perhaps some seedlings if nothing else could survive the journey. There's always plenty to spare in the Farthings."

Thorin turned to Bilbo with such feeling of both admiration and gratitude that he'd never felt before that it nearly bowled him over. "You are very kind, Bilbo Baggins," he said sincerely. "But perhaps you ought to speak to your King before making such promises."

"Not a king," Bilbo contradicted automatically.

"Of course not," Thorin chuckled and Bilbo couldn't help but smile.

"I'll write to my grandfather when we return to our rooms," he said. "Hopefully the elves can pass the message on to a ranger to deliver."

"I'm sure they can," Gandalf assured him as they approached the rooms they were assigned.
"Then I'd best write my sister as well," Thorin groaned. "Do you suppose your grandfather would mind passing the letter on?"

"Not at all. Balin, would it be too much trouble to ask for a bit of parchment from your collection and ink?"

Balin hesitated but Thorin took the decision from him when he said he would ask about acquiring some with the supplies he was hoping to obtain.

"I think that stone has been cut Thorin," Balin frowned.

"It can not hurt to ask. If anything, it would give the elves an excuse to make us linger if they make a grand show of impeding us with them."

"I doubt they would be so sneaky as to do that," Bilbo disputed.

"Lord Elrond just might," Gandalf sighed as they reached the main door. "I shall think over everything said tonight and see what can be done about leaving undetected. For now, we must bide our time and let Lord Elrond think we wish to remain for a spell."

"He won't be easily fooled," Thorin said. "But I have a feeling you will be able to distract him soon enough."

Gandalf seemed curious but didn't comment. "Then I bid you all a good night then."

"Good night," the others echoed before entering the suit of room.

Many of the dwarrows were still awake and lounging around the main room of the suite they were granted, all still too alert to find their beds just yet.

Dwalin was sharpening his axes again while Bofur and Bifur were methodically taking apart an end table. Glóin and Óin were talking about something with Dori and Nori was showing Fíli, Kíli and Ori some sort of dice game. Bombur was seen dozing in the corner.

Thorin groaned as he looked at the destroyed table and quickly made his way over to the two on the floor.

"What exactly is wrong with the fireplace?" he asked as he waved a hand pointedly at the structure in question.

"Oh," Bofur looked up surprised. "Hello there, Thorin. Nothing's wrong with it but there's not much wood for it you see."

"Of course not. It's summer."

"Still need to have a fire for cooking," Bofur reasoned. "Dinner was all well and good but not nearly enough. Light eaters those pointy ears."

That was a bald face lie and everyone in the room knew it. Since none of the dwarrows had touched the assorted vegetable side dishes, it was no wonder they were all still hungry.

"Then ask for more wood," Thorin growled through gritted teeth. "Or better yet, use your hat."

Bofur gasped as his hand flew up and pulled his had down tighter on his head.

"And now we have to pay for the damages. Correction," Thorin’s glare made Bofur shrink back
even further, "you have to pay for the damages."

"What?" Bofur yelped horrified. They had now gained everyone's attention so Thorin looked at the room at large.

"You now all have the funds to cover your own expenses thanks to the trolls," he reaffirmed. "Therefore we are implementing the age old practice of 'you broke it, you bought it.'" He looked over the decimated furniture pointedly. "Unless you can repair it."

Everyone turned to look at the destroyed end table. Most of it was snapped into halves while the rest was in splinters.

Thorin had a sudden thought and turned to where Dwalin was cleaning Grasper. "You didn't…"

Dwalin shifted uneasily and Thorin had his answer. With a sigh he looked over at the one remaining table. "Glóin, since you were the one here and not I, I'll leave you to calculate the share of payment from each dwarf that was involved."

Glóin, while couldn't care less about the destruction of elf property, looked rather excited to work the figure and pulled out his abacus, leaving Dori and Óin to continue on their conversation themselves.

Nori was laughing along with a few of the others at the slouched form of Bofur but sobered significantly as Thorin turned his glare on him.

"Do not think you are getting out of this either," Thorin drawled and made his way towards Nori's pack.

"Oy!" Nori cried out in alarm as Thorin snatched the pack off the ground. "That's mine."

"The bag, yes," Thorin agreed. "However…"

Without asking, he promptly upended the pack and the contents cascaded with a clamor out onto the floor.

"Nori!" Dori snapped at the sight of the many items of cutlery, goblets and the like scattered about. Dwalin was just staring at his lover flabbergasted.


"I thought you were one of the best thieves in the business," Thorin said as he picked out a rather plain candelabra from the pile at his feet.

"I'm the best," Nori proclaimed furiously as he jumped to his feet and into a tense stance.

"Then please to explain how it was you chose which items to steal." Thorin shook the candelabra. "There's still the Misty Mountains to cross and you are the one who is going to have to carry all of these on your own back. Then you have to deal with selling them, no? May I ask just whom it was you thought you could deal with? There are not many people between here and Erebor and any of the humans who are there more than likely can not afford to pay for such luxury."

He glared at Nori who was scowling back just as fiercely. "And even if you do find someone to offload your haul there's the small detail that everything is clearly marked!" Thorin flipped the candelabra over to show the "Made in Rivendell" stamped on the bottom.
Nori stared at the marking in surprise. Obviously he hadn't even realized it had been there. Thorin tossed the object at him and Nori caught it easily enough.

"I'm not telling you how to ply your trade," Thorin said evenly, "but for Mahal's sake Nori, we're probably the only guest to have visited Rivendell in years! It won't take them very long to realize who the culprits are and I can assure you, if asked I will not hesitate to turn you over to them!"

Nori looked livid but Thorin stood firm. "If you're going to steal Nori, then take the small items!"

There was a gasp of dismay from Dori from the background but no one paid any attention to him.

Nori’s anger just drained from him and was replaced with utter confusion as Thorin continued. "A brush here, a knife there, a small jeweled box perhaps. Items that wouldn't readily be missed and if they are, it's assumed they were simply misplaced not stolen and not as easily traced back to us."

"Thorin!" Balin was frowning at him but Nori was now grinning wide at him shamelessly because however indirect, Thorin's had just given Nori his approval of stealing from the elves.

Thorin honestly couldn't be bothered either way. As long as Nori didn't have such identifiable objects if the Goblins got a hold of their gear was all he could be worried about. Anything else was Dwalin's problem and from the look the two were shooting each other across the room, Thorin wished his friend the best of luck and left him to it.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm really hoping I got Elrond's stance on awaking Smaug across clearly. ^^a um... yeah... /goes to hide/

Also I want to say thank you to everyone who has been helping me with the details and fun that is J. R. R. Tolkien's universe and letting me know all the neat facts! Thanks so much everyone
No one could really say what the second day in Rivendell was like since every single one of them save Gandalf slept right through it, even Thorin. Unsurprising considering they had not had any sleep for over two days straight. Added the lack of a full night’s rest over the course of traveling and real actual beds, no one had awoken to answer the polite knock around breakfast time… or lunch… or dinner for that matter.

The third day in Rivendell dawned bright and clear and Thorin watched every moment of it crest the horizon as he paced the main room of the guest suits restlessly. No one else had awoken yet so he had the whole length of the room to try and work out his muddled thoughts.

He had dreamed again of the gray creature muttering to itself about his precious and then again of Elrond and the human knight arguing in the gloom of the old cavern about the ring. Once again the human left and once more Thorin awoke drenched in sweat as if he had been lingering in the forge for too long.

What was the purpose of showing him these images now? Was there something that Elrond was supposed to do? Was Thorin supposed to warn him about it? Would Elrond even listen to him?

And what about the creature from his previous dreams? Did it have the ring now? If so, how did the knight get it?

"I'm so confused," Thorin sighed as he flopped into a large chair.

He glared at the tall table, wishing it were just slightly lower so he could drop his head against it in aggravation.

"Hello?"

Thorin startled as Bilbo stepped out from behind one of the doors. "Oh, I didn't know anyone else was awake."

"Neither did I," Bilbo admitted as he came fully into the room. "I just finished my letter to my grandfather and I thought I would see if there was someone who could tell me what to do with it. When people are conscious that is."

"I would think there have to be some elves already up and about," Thorin said. "They seem the type to be awake at the most uncivilized hours."

"What does that say about us?" Bilbo asked as he took the seat next to Thorin.

"That we're uncivilized I suppose."

"Thorin!" Bilbo leaned over and slapped Thorin's shoulder good-naturedly.

Thorin grinned unabashed and the two fell into a companionable silence as they basked in the quiet. Closing his eyes, Thorin tried to will his body to relax.

"Why are you awake?" Bilbo suddenly asked before he could think better of it.
Thorin opened one eye to take in Bilbo's wringing hands and taunt frame, announcing the hobbit’s nervousness. Closing his eye again, he shrugged.

"Did you want to talk about it?"

"Talk about what?" Thorin asked impassively.

"Well..." Bilbo waved a hand in a small circle. "Anything you feel you need to talk about. I’m a very good listener. My father always said I had that trait in my favor."

Thorin remained stubbornly mute.

“We can talk about how it was you people came to live at Nogrod if you like,” Bilbo offered. “I must admit, I would like to know under what circumstances you found yourself to be there.”

Thorin jerked in his chair and turned towards Bilbo. "No," he said flatly.

Bilbo froze for a moment before he capitulated. “Very well. Then how about what drove you to pacing a dark room in the middle of the night cursing to yourself.”

“It’s none of your concern,” Thorin snapped.

"Thorin," Bilbo sighed in irritation. "It's understandable for people to be anxious, even you-"

"I am not anxious," Thorin growled as he got back on his feet and began pacing again.

What could Bilbo possibly know about what he was feeling?

Between what challenges he knew were coming down the road and the tentative truce with the elves to his dreams. Thorin had absolutely no idea as to what it was he was suppose to even be doing or if what he was doing was the right choice and it was giving him headaches.

"All right. Not anxious," Bilbo relented slowly as he watched Thorin pace. “Restless then.”

Thorin shot him a withering stare.

“I can understand that it’s a bit daunting for you,” Bilbo tried again. “I mean, facing a dragon is no small thing and you’ve already seen how much destruction he can do first hand so I would be worried too if I knew I had to face him again.”

Thorin whirled around. “The dragon? That’s what you’re talking about?”

“Yes,” Bilbo answered taken aback. “Aren’t you?”

Thorin sighed as he ran a hand through his hair in frustration. “There is much on my mind these days,” he admitted. “The dragon is one, this,” he waved an arm to the room in general, “Elrond planning to try and stop us. Then there’s still the Misty Mountains to cross.”

‘And Goblins and Pale Orcs to evade,’ he added silently to himself.

“I hadn’t considered that,” Bilbo admitted softly and Thorin dropped back into his chair. “I suppose there are still many dangers to contend with between here and your Lonely Mountain.”

Thorin gazed at Bilbo curiously as the hobbit crossed his arms tight against his chest. “Just what did you hear back in the forest?”
“I’m sorry?” Bilbo’s head snapped up.

“When Gandalf stepped away to speak with Radagast,” Thorin elaborated. “I could only hear bits and pieces of their conversation and I was actually trying to listen in.” Without conscious though, his gaze quickly flickered to Bilbo’s ears.

Bilbo instantly raised a hand to cover one and he turned away embarrassed. “I don’t think I should say.”

Thorin called his name gently to regain his attention. “Bilbo, I know you do not wish to infringe on Gandalf’s privacy.” ‘Not that Gandalf ever bothered to give others the same consideration.’ “But as the leader of this Company, I have to know what it is I’m leading my people into. If there is anything dangerous we may encounter, don’t you think I should know of it so we can prepare as best we can?”

Bilbo remained tense for a moment before he finally nodded in agreement. “I suppose it would not do to be caught unawares.”

“Indeed,” Thorin encouraged.

There was a long silence as Bilbo shifted nervously and Thorin waited for him to find his beginning. “How much were you able to hear?” Bilbo finally asked slowly.

“Why don’t you just tell me everything that you were able to hear,” Thorin suggested. “Since I may not have caught all of what was being said.”

Bilbo nodded and took a deep breath to steady himself. “Right.” He glanced up again. “Right. The first thing I heard I think you already know about. Radagast was telling Gandalf about how the Greenwood was sick. As you’ve said before, it’s being called Mirkwood now by the people who live there.”

“Did Radagast say why it was ill?” Thorin asked eagerly.

Bilbo frowned at the interruption. “I’m getting there if I may be allowed to continue?”

“Right. Sorry. Please proceed.” Thorin made a show of placing his hands in his lap and giving Bilbo his full attention.

Bilbo looked upward for a moment in exasperation before he turned his chair so they were face to face directly. “He was saying how nothing grows there anymore, which is perplexing because it’s only in extreme cases that any soil can not sustain the plants on it let alone a whole forest. There’s always some sort of green growing in any season in forests so it made me wonder if there’s something leaching into the soil.”

“Leaching?” Thorin asked, forgetting his silent promise not to interrupt.

Bilbo didn’t censure him however as he elaborated. “Sometimes when there’s something like toxins in the water, the first warning signs are of plants dying.”

Thorin sighed as he remembered Bombur falling into the stream and instantly succumbing to sleep. “Indeed? What else did Radagast mention?”

“Giant spiders,” Bilbo stated with a small shake of his head. “Which is silly because how big can a spider get? I mean really...” He caught Thorin’s somber face and his dismissive air became one of distress. “Really? How big?”
“From what I heard, big. Almost the size of a man if rumors are to be believed.”

Bilbo stared agog. “That explains the plants dying. The webs must be suffocating them.”

“You can suffocate a plant?” Thorin asked surprised.

There was a slight pause before Bilbo asked, “you truly don’t know anything about growing things, do you?”

“Never needed to learn,” Thorin admitted. “Dealing with court and public grievances were a higher priority when I was a child.”

“Sound’s thrilling,” Bilbo muttered.

Thorin made a small sound of agreement before he leaned forward in his seat, bracing his elbows on his knees and brought his clasped hands up in front of him. “But it wasn’t the spiders that alarmed you.”

Bilbo’s face went white and he started to chew on his bottom lip anxiously. “It wasn’t so much them as where Radagast said they came from.”

Thorin thought back to what he had been able to overhear of the Wizard’s conversation. “There was something about a fortress?”

Bilbo shuddered and Thorin became concerned. “Bilbo?”

Bilbo remained quiet for a while, gathering his thoughts before he finally told Thorin what he had heard Radagast say.

“There’s a Necromancer there.”

Thorin thought he must have heard wrong. “A Necromancer?” he asked just to be sure he wasn’t hearing things.

“Something that can call the spirits of the dead,” Bilbo said grimly. “Radagast thinks he’s who made the spiders. They’re probably meant to keep people from venturing near the fortress.”

“A Necromancer,” Thorin repeated dazed, his thoughts whirling with the implications.

‘A person who can summon someone back from the dead,’ he thought stunned. ‘Like me.’

He quickly pulled himself from away from that line of thinking, realizing it couldn’t possibly be true.

If it was a necromancer that had brought him back, he wouldn’t have woken up in his old bed at Nogrod and it certainly wouldn’t be a year already gone by he was living.

‘And that wouldn’t explain the dreams,’ he rationalized. ‘Which means it has to do with something else. Something significant… such as a war.’

That had to be the answer. It was the only possible explanation between the Necromancer and his dreams of the battles. The Necromancer must have had something to do with it.

‘A person who could summon the dead can certainly start a war against any and all of Middle-Earth,’ Thorin realized. ‘It would also explain how it came about that Elves, Dwarves and Men could set aside their differences to fight such an enemy.’
He wondered briefly how it was the Necromancer got the Orcs to obey him enough to turn them into a formidable army. From his dreams of the battles with Gimli, Thorin knew there were thousands of them.

‘Then again, if he can summon the dead, they wouldn’t dare challenge his rule over them.’

Thorin leaned forward again and dropped his head into his palms. What did this mean for him and his attempts to change the year he had? He thought he was doing a fairly decent job so far just by trying to set a tentative truce with the elves, or at least some of them.

After all, what else could he do?

They had never even crossed paths with a Necromancer during their travels to Erebor the last time. The spiders were about the closest they had come to having anything to do with such a person. Thorin wasn’t about to go tearing off to fight a Necromancer. He didn’t even know where to begin with that idea.

But perhaps he didn’t have to do anything about it? Gandalf already knew of the Necromancer, and he had to have done something about it before while Thorin was so intently focused on smiting the dragon.

So did that mean Thorin didn’t have to worry about it?

But if he was supposed to change things then he couldn’t leave it alone. Not really. But what was he suppose to do that was different? What could he change?

‘And if my dreams are trying to tell me what I have to do, then what does the Necromancer have to do with Elrond?’ he wondered as he remembered his dream from earlier. ‘And that horrid, foul creature? Is it another of the Necromancers creations like the spiders?’

A possible and gruesome thought stuck him. ‘Please tell me that creature is not the knight reborn!’

“The dragon suddenly doesn’t seem all that intimidating.”

Bilbo let out a sudden burst of laughter at Thorin’s groaning. “No, it doesn’t. I would prefer facing a dragon over the dead any day.”

“Agreed.”

The two fell silent again as they each became absorbed in their own thoughts.

"Did you write your sister?"

Thorin let out a small laugh. "Subtle."

"You're not giving me a lot of options for conversation," Bilbo drawled. "So? Did you?"

"Yes, I have." Thorin took out his own sheet of parchment from his inner pocket. He had finished it hours ago when he had first woke, hoping to take his mind of his inner turmoil that now seemed like mild annoyances in comparison to what he had just learned.

"I suppose she won't be pleased her sons were nearly eaten by trolls."

"She wouldn't be if I had mentioned it. Which I didn't."

"A wise decision."
"Knowing my sister, yes."

They were still chuckling as Óin entered the room looking refreshed and ready to face a new day.

"What's all this then?" The old healer asked, raising his trumpet to hear the answer. "Did something happen?"

"Nothing. Just talking. Is anyone else up?" Thorin pitched his voice higher so his question could be heard.

"Aye, Ori is I believe. Bombur should be up soon as well, though I don't think there's any need as he doesn't have to make breakfast."

"It's better if he is," Thorin said. "I was hoping to speak to the elves about re-stocking our supplies. I'll ask after some medicinal plants if you would like."

"Missed aunts? No, she's been dead for years."

Thorin sighed but didn't try to ask again as Óin looked over the remainders of impromptu fire pit from the other night.

"Don't suppose there's any of those sausages left are there?"

The bedroom door opened again and Ori stepped out as Thorin was shrugging. "Good morning!"

"Good morning Ori. Bombur," Bilbo greeted as the larger dwarf stepped out immediately after Ori.

"Bombur, good. You're up," Thorin rose from his chair. "I was just telling Óin, or rather Bilbo that I was looking to speak to the elves about replenishing our supplies. I would like for you to lend your expertise if you could."

"Oh, certainly," Bombur agreed instantly. "When do you plan on asking?"

"Now if it's not to inconvenient," Thorin offered.

"May I join you?" Bilbo asked eagerly. "After I inquire about my letter that is."

"We'll get it seen to while we're at it," Thorin nodded. "Did anyone else-?" Thorin broke off as he found Óin had at some point left the room and Ori was already shaking his head.

"I'm going to see about catching up with my documenting," Ori told them holding up his journal.

"If anyone asks after us could you let them know where we've gone?" Thorin requested.

Ori made a sound of agreement, already pulling out his inkpots and looking his quill over to see if it needed sharpening.

"Thank you. Lets go see if we can find an elf to point us in the direction of the kitchens," Thorin said to Bilbo and Bombur as he opened the door.

Years of honed battle instincts allowed him to duck out of the way of the descending fist that nearly came down on his head.

"Oh Eru, I'm so sorry," Lindir gasped as he stepped back from the crowded doorway. "I was just going to knock when you opened the door unexpectedly."
"Lindir, just the elf we were going to see," Thorin declared and the tall elf stepped back in surprise and just a bit of panic.

"Pardon?"

"We were going to ask if we could see about possibly taking advantage of your pantry for provisions to see us over the mountains."

"Oh?" Lindir blinked. "Well, I suppose it couldn't hurt to see what we can spare."

"Much obliged," Thorin said. "We also have a few letters to post to the Shire if it's not inconvenient."

"Not at all," Lindir assured them. "We can see it taken as far as Bree."

"That would be wonderful. A Hobbit Bounder can take it the rest of the way," Bilbo grinned.

Thorin stepped aside to allow the others to exit the rooms and Lindir glanced at Ori still seated at the table writing furiously.

"Breakfast is available in the main hall whenever you are hungry," he called out to the boy.

It took Ori a moment to realize that someone was speaking to him and he turned to the door surprised. "Thank you."

"Ori is our scrivener," Thorin introduced.

"At your service," Ori half bowed from his seated position.

"Lindir at yours." The elf bowed before turning to Thorin. "Shall we?"

Chapter End Notes

1) **Rivendell Timeline** -

In all honesty, even watching the movie you knew they completely zonked on that first full day in Rivendell. After being up for probably longer than 48 hours from traveling to the farm, to camping with trolls, to the cave, to Radagast, to the warg run, to dinner with elves to the rune translation... yeah, Thorin was sleeping! I would be sleeping for at least a full day.

So in short: I am of the opinion that, while perhaps not as long as the book had them in Rivendell, (I think the book had them there for a week or two {or three?}) *they were there for at least a few days.*

*In the theater, it did look like it was here one second, gone the next but in the extended... Lindir complaining to Elrond, whining about the dwarves and asking when they were leaving... yeah, they were there a while. :)*
Dwalin was up ridiculously early.

He was determined to make up for the lost time he spent sleeping in that first day. Dwalin never slept in let alone for an entire day before, no matter how soft and comfortable the bed provided for him was. That he had left his king and princes unguarded was shameful enough but he had done it whilst they were all in enemy territory! For that was exactly what he felt they were in no matter what Gandalf claimed to the contrary.

He had thought Thorin felt that too.

When Dwalin had announced that he wanted to continue on with the nightly watches that first night, Thorin had overruled. Claiming that it was going to be rare enough for any of them to see actual beds anytime soon and sending everyone to find theirs before finding his own.

Dwalin was in agreement that they needed the respite after the flight from the orcs and wargs. Half the Company were not warriors and half of those who were fighters were untested and untrained. It would be the height of foolish to take an inexperienced squad out into a situation where they could be ambushed yet again.

Out of the motley crew Thorin had comprised his Company of, only he, Dwalin, Balin, Bifur and Glóin had trained in an army unit and knew any sort of battle tactics. Óin had been to battle as well, but he was always in charge of the healing tents.

‘But did help have to come in the form of elves?’ Dwalin snarled to himself as he clamped on his knuckledusters.

Thorin’s attitude did not make sense in the matter either. He had despised the elves most of all in the years they had traveled Middle-earth looking for a home, and never before had Thorin even given them a quarter of an inch in that hatred. His loathing had seeped and simmered like one of Dori’s teas and it had only been a matter of time before it would finally boil over.

How that anger had become, not just tepid but ice cold neither he nor Balin could fathom.

Watching his king and oldest friend playing nice with the elves did not sit well with Dwalin. After everything they had endured at the hands of elves, for his friend to almost kowtow to them was ridiculous.

Getting free food, that Dwalin could understand. Using Lord Elrond to translate the Map, Dwalin could understand. Trying to create a trading line with the elves, for Balin had told him of that strange discussion he had with Thorin, that Dwalin could not for the life of him understand.

But then again, that was why Dwalin was not King.

Fretting about how to get his people through a winter in a ruined keep, whether it be Erebor or Nogrod, had to be a daunting task. Dwalin couldn’t even begin to imagine how much pressure it was putting on his friend’s shoulders.

They had barely survived the previous few winters and after traveling practically across the whole
world, provisions would be small for the civilian caravans that would follow. How they would muddle through it, Dwalin didn’t even know and he was not the one all looked to for answers.

He could never fully comprehend what Thorin might be going through but he would be damned if he couldn’t support him.

‘Though I still wouldn’t mind putting a fist in one of those pristine hairless, smug faces.’ He paused slightly as he thumped on his boots. ‘Though, if Thorin is right, I’ll get the chance soon enough. Whatever that means.’

Finally exiting the large room he shared with a few of the others, Dwalin was surprised to find he was not the first one awake.

Ori was seated at the table scribbling furiously in his book while Óin was going through his pack of medicinal creams opposite.

Óin must have felt his cousin’s stare for he glanced up and gave a slight nod. “Good morning.”

“Morning,” Dwalin replied gruffly even as Óin went back to pulling out a mortar and pestle. Ori did not even raise his head at the greeting, so engrossed in his writing as he was.

Dwalin stood there awkwardly for a bit; unsure of what he should do when he spotted a strange shadow out on the balcony.

Not even bothering to excuse himself since no one would hear him anyway, Dwalin marched straight outside where he was greeted with a familiar sight at the very end of the balcony just out of view from anyone in the room.

“You just could not help yourself, could you?” he bit out.

Nori, who was still in the process of climbing back over the balcony, yelped in surprise and dropped his small bag back over the side.

Dwalin watched in disbelief as the idiot thief startled again and actually went after the sack, snatching it before it could fall too far and almost going over the rail himself in the process.

Snapping a hand forward, Dwalin snagged a handful of Nori’s tunic and hauled him back onto solid ground.

“Thanks,” Nori grinned cheekily before he opened the ties to the bag and began to pursue his stolen goods.

“Could you not leave off stealing for one day?” Dwalin grumbled, snatching the sack from Nori’s hands and dangling it over the auburn head as he glanced at the items collected. Mostly it comprised of small odds and ends just as Thorin had ordered. Hairpins, a few ornate boxes and combs and what looked like a full silver inkwell.

Dwalin huffed. “Make sure you put it somewhere no one may stumble upon.”

Nori, who had been tense with anticipation, went wide-eyed in surprise. “You’re letting me keep them?”

“Why not,” Dwalin shrugged handing the bag back. “They’re the elves things, not ours.”

Nori accepted the pouch with a frown. “Almost takes the fun out of it,” he mumbled. “Trying not to
get caught is just as exciting as snitching things right from under someone’s nose. If you don’t care either way…”

“Did ye want me to get mad?” Dwalin asked.

Nori shifted on his feet as he tucked the bag away. “Perhaps,” he began, a teasing lilt to his voice. “It wouldn’t be the first time my thieving aggravated you to the point of distraction.”

Hooking a finger in Nori’s collar, Dwalin slowly pulled the thief towards him and Nori went very willingly, his head already tilted upward and a smirk on his lips.

Dwalin very happily covered that smirk with his own before pulling back and wrapping his arms around Nori’s shoulders, dragging him closer to his own body. “I still can not believe you stole from the table yesterday,” he growled more amazed than angry. “I never even noticed.”

Nori let out a quiet laugh, well aware of the others on the opposite side of the wall. “The *elves* never even noticed and they were right there!”

“How in the world did *Thorin* notice then?” Dwalin mused aloud as he rubbed one of his thumbs in small circles at the nape of Nori’s neck.

“Thorin *always* notices whenever I steal things. I thought you knew,” Nori snickered. “He never censured me when I made off with your pipe.”

“That was you!” Dwalin growled, dropping one arm down to wrap around the slighter dwarf’s waist and hauling him upward until his feet dangled just inches from the ground. “I knew I was not as absent minded as *that*!”

Nori just grinned unabashed as he circled his own arms around Dwalin’s shoulders and held on. “I *did* give it back to you – Eventually.”

“Only after I had nearly lost my mind searching for it,” Dwalin emphasized, shaking the figure in his arms slightly.

“Now you know where to look the next time it disappears.”

“Oh I always know where to look,” Dwalin drawled before dropping his head again. Mouths met and clashed against one another, each trying to gain dominance over the other.

Nori’s legs came up easily and wrapped around Dwalin’s waist, pressing his hardened length against the softness of Dwalin’s abdomen.

Letting out a snarl, Dwalin’s hand came up to grasp a fistful of the thief’s hair and tilted his head back.

Nori’s mouth opened in a gasp and Dwalin took full advantage, sweeping his tongue in as if he personally needed to investigate every nook and cranny of the moist cavern for any other hidden treasures.

Nori was not about to allow that to happen however and brought up his own tongue to interfere with Dwalin’s search, twining it around the invading appendage and tugging it where he wanted it to go.

The battle was called with no winners as the two broke for some much needed air.
Even gasping for breath, the two never stopped exploring each other with hands as well as mouths. Dwalin pulled Nori’s head back further as he clamped his mouth on the exposed throat and sucked while his hand slid from Nori’s waist to the curve of his rear and squeezed.

Groaning at the sensation, Nori’s own arms slid tighter around Dwalin’s neck. One hand going up to drag his nails over the top of Dwalin’s bald head while his other hand slid under the opposite shoulder guard to find the skin beneath.

Dwalin hissed at the feeling of nails scraping over skin at both places and he released Nori’s throat from his ministrations. Nori’s unique beard style would hide the purple bruise there nicely.

Loosening his grip on the hair slightly, mouths met again for a second bout that Nori won, catching Dwalin’s bottom lip in between his teeth. Dwalin retaliated with a hard pinch on the other dwarf’s rear causing Nori to release a small whine of delight.

Neither of them could be called tender lovers but gentle wasn’t what either of them wanted.

The slight pain only heightened the sensation and added that extra element to their relationship that had been lacking in so many before. They knew exactly what it was the other needed and each could provide the stimulus in not only lovemaking but also life itself.

They knew. Just as they knew the sky was blue and grass green.

Apart they were incomplete, but together they were One.

Dwalin could not contain himself any longer and whirled about. Propping Nori on the edge of the balcony rail so his hands were free to travel to the front of Nori’s pants, he frantically tried to loosen the ties that held them closed.

Nori let out a hiss and encircled Dwalin’s wrists, halting the movement long enough for him to pull off the knuckledusters that scrapped his own soft belly through his tunic. There was pain and then pain.

Once the metal clanked to the floor, Dwalin practically attacked Nori’s clothing, almost urgently. He pushed Nori’s tunic up to his armpits and dusky nipples went pebble hard in response the cool morning air. He tweaking one as his hands slid back down to tug at the trousers.

Nori grasped Dwalin’s shoulders to brace himself as he lifted his hips enough for Dwalin to tug them down, dropping his legs so he could pull one free from the fabric and letting the rest pool at his opposite ankle.

He moved to Dwalin’s belt then while Dwalin searched his pockets for the small jar one of them always had on them. The large strap of leather slid to the floor with the knuckledusters and Nori went to unknot the front ties, his nimble fingers working far faster than Dwalin’s had and soon he was shoving the pants down to free the stiff member.

Dwalin was proportionate all over and being rather tall for a dwarf, his cock was certainly intimidating enough but Nori could only look at the pulsing length and think ‘mine’.

Dwalin had gotten the jar open while Nori was busy and encircled an already greased palm around Nori’s own neglected erection, pumping it to full hardness once again as he caught Nori’s mouth with his own for another brutal kiss.

Groaning, Nori sought out some grease for his own hand to slid against Dwalin’s cock as he loosened his jaw and allowed Dwalin his exploration.
They thrust into each other’s hands for a while, basking in the feel of hot mouths and slick palms against each other before Dwalin pulled away and took a slight step back.

Losing Dwalin’s hand, Nori brought his own down and wrapped it around his own cock, continuing with the rhythm Dwalin had set.

Catching the bare ankle, Dwalin tugged Nori slightly forward until he just sat upon the very edge of the rail and brought his other hand down and under the firm round globes of Nori’s ass.

“Really?” Nori sighed, wiggling impatiently until one thick, grease covered finger entered him unerringly. He groaned then and had to bring up his clean hand to clamp teeth upon lest the few who were awake hear them.

“The last think I ever want is to hurt you,” Dwalin murmured.

“Don’t care,” Nori replied before biting back a yelp as a second then third finger entered him and spread to stretch him.

“I care.”

Nori snorted but didn’t contend a second time as Dwalin started pressing his fingers into him earnestly, finding the one place that made lights flash before Nori’s eyes and his mind to go completely blank with thoughts of nothing but the pleasure he was feeling.

“Hurry you lout,” Nori snarled as he tugged Dwalin back down for another open-mouthed kiss. “Before the rest are up and about!”

“Plenty of time,” Dwalin argued but he removed his fingers from Nori’s body as requested and quickly lined himself up.

Nori groaned as Dwalin pressed into him inch by inch slowly until he was completely seated within Nori’s taunt body.

“If you do not move by all that is just in this world— Ah!”

Dwalin grinned and snapped his hips back and forward again sharply, rocking Nori’s body almost over the rail.

Nori allowed it, trusting Dwalin to keep him from going over the edge as he had before. He could not get any leverage to echo Dwalin’s thrusting hips so he moved his upper body instead, leaning and bowing his back to press his hips upward into the frantic pounding of his partner.

Dwalin immediately slid one hand up from Nori’s hips to steady the body in front of him, his rhythm slightly stuttering as his palm moved over the multitude of scars that crisscrossed the thief’s back.

Nori never divulged where he had gotten them but Dwalin didn’t need any explanation for the obvious lash marks. He hadn’t been surprised when he had first seen the scars a whip had caused years ago but they had saddened him. Nori called him a fool, for if he had caught Nori stealing himself in those early days, it would have been Dwalin that would have created them and not some nameless guardsman.

Dwalin still wanted the name so as to hunt the dwarf down and strangle him for daring to mark such a perfect body. One of the reasons Nori never gave it to him.
A hand tugged at his beard, bringing him back to the present and Dwalin swooped down claim Nori’s mouth below him and quickened his pace, plunging his member in and out of the hot, tight cavern offered to him.

It was only a few moments more before Dwalin lost any composer he had and was thrusting up and into Nori frantically.

Biting back a cry, Nori brought his hand back up to stifle any noises as he clamped his legs around Dwalin’s waist once more and rode out the storm until the larger dwarf found his end and spilled inside him.

Groaning, Dwalin slowed his movement, wanting to hold on to the overwhelming pleasure he found just a bit longer.

Nori finally brought his hand down and encircled it around his own pulsing length again, seeking his own release and Dwalin came back to himself long enough to wrap his hand around Nori’s.

Dropping his head against the fur on Dwalin’s shoulder, Nori groaned and shuddered as the tightness in his belly finally overwhelmed him and his own wet seed spilled over both their hands.

Dwalin snickered as he pressed a kiss next to one of Nori’s eyebrow braids and pulled the dwarf tight against him as they tried to catch their breath.

“Ye all right?” Dwalin asked, his voice still thick with pleasure.

Nori remained silent but Dwalin could feel him nod against his shoulder.

“You’re going to have a deep line in your arse from the rail.” He rubbed his palm over the indentation that spanned across both cheeks soothingly.

A hand came up and smacked the back of his head. “Whose fault is that?”

“Yours,” Dwalin informed him.

“You—!”

Dwalin claimed his mouth again and Nori let out a growl of anger before participating in the kiss fully.

“Nori, was my comb packed with your belongings when we were fleeing from the wargs? I could have sworn I packed it with my—”

Dori came out onto the balcony proper and froze at the sight of the two. He slowly took in Dwalin pressing Nori against the rail and Nori’s naked lower half with Dwalin’s hand clamped firmly on his buttocks.

“YOU BASTARD!”

“Oh fuck,” Dwalin muttered leaping away from Nori but it was too late. Dori leapt forward and pandemonium followed.

The kitchens were actually quite large for a city as small as Rivendell and very busy with the morning cookery.
Bilbo and Bombur both lit up at the sight of so many variations of food being prepared and it took Lindir a while to pull the two away and introduce them to the head chef, explaining why it was they were there.

The chef was not exactly pleased with the interruption but gestured to one of the pantries impatiently.

Thorin and Lindir had to scramble out of the way as the two Company cooks attacked the pantry like rabid squirrels, chitterling over what would keep on the road and what they could do with immediately as they sorted through dried meats, spices and vegetables in Bilbo’s case.

One of the pastry chefs took a moment to introduce them to Lembas bread, the supposed ever-filling bread that most elves preferred when traveling.

Neither Lindir nor Thorin could bring themselves to tell the pastier that while they had been sorting through the food, Bombur and Bilbo had eaten well over a dozen already between them for their breakfast. Thorin himself had eaten two.

“You are taking this journey very seriously,” Lindir began in an attempt to start a conversation.

“We have to. Erebor may be our last hope.”

Lindir considered that for a moment. “Has it truly become that desperate for your people that you would be willing to face the Great Calamity for a second time?”

“Is that your lord asking?”

“No, just me,” Lindir replied quietly.

Thorin deliberated how much to divulge to the elf. “It is a hard living but no, it hasn’t come to that just yet.”

“But you believe it will?”

“I know it will,” Thorin said dourly.

Lindir thought over that cryptic statement for a long while. “Surely there are those who would help?”

“Our only aid in all these years has been from Gandalf who in turn led us to Bilbo.”

The hobbit in question raised his head at the sound of his name but seeing the two in deep conversation returned to separating the different vegetables they could use on the road.

“No one else would aid you?”

“They never have before,” Thorin declared hotly. Lindir shifted uneasily and Thorin tried to restrain his temper. They past a few moments in silence as Thorin mulled over what to say next when he decided that something did indeed have to be said if anyone was to learn anything about Mirkwood.

“To be frank, I was not expecting such generosity from the elves here in Rivendell. It was why I had argued with Gandalf in the beginning. I was fully prepared to us to be tossed either out on our arses or in your dungeons the moment we crossed into your territory.”

“Dungeons? We have no Dungeons here,” Lindir proclaimed in an affronted voice. “And we
certainly wouldn’t throw you in them! You haven’t done anything to deserve such treatment.”

“I have known other elves who would without hesitation for less reasons,” Thorin said tentatively.

Lindir frowned. “That is the second time you have said such things about King Thranduil.”

“So you did hear us before.” It was a statement rather than a question but Lindir slowly nodded.

“I’m sorry but I still can not believe what you are insinuating. King Thranduil is firm but he is not cruel.”

“I am sorry to contradict your belief of him, but he is. At least he was when I saw him last.”

“When was that?”

“When we were fleeing the dragon,” Thorin admitted, surprising Lindir. “I had spotted he and his army on the high ridge but they did not assist us.”

“He probably weighed the risks as too great to chance,” Lindir defended.

“Against Smaug I can understand. But that dose not explain why he would not lend us aid in our flight.”

Lindir looked puzzled at the statement. “I don’t understand what you mean.”

“When we were running from the dragon, he did not give offer us any sort of support either in way of supplies or even in granting us temporary shelter to see to our wounded in the forest of Mirkwood—”

“Mirkwood?” Lindir interrupted.

“Then Greenwood,” Thorin clarified. “Now it is called Mirkwood by the human woodsman. I do not know if Thranduil’s people call it such but it’s not the peaceful forest you might remember it as. The brown wizard Radagast was explaining it to Gandalf. Perhaps he could explain it better.”

“I shall have to ask him then,” Lindir nodded. “What have you heard of the situation?”

“As far as I know, the woods are apparently now inhabited by giant spiders and its trees and plants are not fairing as well as they once were. Bilbo suggested that there might be problems with their river for whole forest to become dormant but he does not know for sure without seeing it for himself. If we had the time, we might investigate but with our new deadline of Durin’s Day, it would not be prudent.”

“No, and I suppose it would not be your problem even if you could do something about it.”

“It’s our problem all right,” Thorin scoffed. “We have to travel through those woods eventually. Then, if we are successful at Erebor, our civilians following will have to cross through them. It will be twice as difficult leading them if we have to watch out for the spiders as well as Thranduil’s patrols.”

“You honestly believe he will attack you,” Lindir said disbelievingly.

“And arrest us for any perceived slight if not attack us outright,” Thorin growled. “There were children with those who ran, Lindir. Infants still at their mother’s breast who suffered from the fire and smoke, and Thranduil just turned away.”
Lindir shook his head in a daze but Bombur had stood and declared them finished with the sorting and packing of supplies.

The tall elf nodded when he finally took stock of the pantry proper and stared at the barren shelves. Bilbo patted his arm sympathetically while Bombur started hauling the sacks off the floor.

“Take this”

Thorin was promptly laden down with four sacks. He wasn’t the only one. Bombur had four of his own while Lindir had one in each hand and Bilbo one large sack in his arms.

“Um… right. Back to the rooms then,” Thorin surmised.

Bilbo made a sound of agreement and Lindir took that as his cue to lead the way.

“I would like to ask about inquiring a few more items after we drop this off,” Thorin informed Lindir as they walked. “Medicine as well as ink and parchment for Ori and Balin if it could be spared.”

“There is always spare parchment around,” Lindir told them. “I shall see what I can retrieve for you.”

Lindir seemed to be learning if he was willing to fetch the required items rather than allow the dwarrows free reign.

“It would be much obliged. And if it’s not too much trouble to speak to Lord Elrond about the medicine it would be – what in Durin’s name is all the noise?”

The small group slowed as they came nearer to the rooms the dwarrows had been assigned and the sound of raised voices shouting over one another reached them.

Trying to figure out what could have possibly set his company off this time, Thorin dropped his bags and marched to the door, flinging it open wide as Lindir, Bilbo and Bombur all crowded behind him looking in with interest.

Thorin just stared.

In the middle of it, Bifur, Bofur, Glóin and Óin were holding a red faced, screaming Dori back. Or rather trying to as Dori was practically dragging all four dwarrows along with him in an attempt to reach the other side of the room. Ori had darted in front of him either to hold him off or heard him in a different direction Thorin didn’t know.

Turning his gaze opposite, Thorin felt his mouth drop open as he watched Dwalin hopping about on one foot, trying to untangle Dori’s Bola’s from his other leg while keeping out of Dori’s reach. Nori was following him frantically, trying to help with the ropes but with Dori pulling away from the others, Dwalin’s hopping increased. Fíli and Kíli were attempting to head him off but so far couldn’t stop laughing to accomplish much.

Only Balin, sitting in the corner smoking his pipe and watching the proceedings, remained out of chaos.

With that single look, Thorin knew exactly what happened.

“Dwalin!” he shouted aghast.
The room froze as most everyone turned to stare at the group in the doorway that was staring right back.

Thorin just glared at his best friend. “How could you?” he demanded angrily. Dwalin and Nori shared a bewildered look before he elaborated. “I thought I told you to wait until I could be there when you told Dori the happy news!”

The room stilled as Dori finally tore his gaze away from Dwalin to stare at Thorin furiously. “You knew!”

“Uh oh,” Thorin muttered as Dori pivoted on his toes, shaking loose his captors and bolted right for him.

Without even turning, Thorin spoke. “Sorry elf, but every dwarf for himself!”

Before Lindir could even say a word, Thorin grabbed his forearm tightly and pulled.

Not expecting it, Lindir was unable to keep his balance and proceeded to trip over his own feet. The added weight from the sacks swinging forward with him propelled him even faster until he landed right on top of the charging Dori as well as his keepers who were right behind him.

Bombur had already moved aside out of harms way when Dori moved so it was only Bilbo in arms reach when Thorin spun around.

Grabbing the hobbit’s hand, Thorin pulled him back out the doorway and ran down the path they had just traveled like their very lives depended on it, leaving bellows of curses in Westerton, Khuzdul and Sindarin floating out of the room behind.

Chapter End Notes

**Edit 5/9:** I HAVE GIFT ART! xD /sugeeeeeeel

All Tied Up by Akahime4
Since neither Thorin nor Bilbo was eager to go back to the rooms, Thorin suggested they used the opportunity to investigate Rivendell on their own.

“I can point out all the flaws in their building designs,” Thorin grinned. Bilbo rolled his eyes as he shoved at Thorin jovially.

The dwarf snickered and the two began to explore.

Thorin honestly couldn’t see the appeal of Rivendell. It all looked exactly the same everywhere they went. A building here, a walkway there, trees and bushes practically all over the place.

‘Which could exactly be why Bilbo enjoys it,’ Thorin realized as he watched Bilbo take a deep breath of fresh air, a blissful expression on his face. Hobbits were creatures of nature more than even the elves. ‘The city must seem a paradise to him.’

Thorin sulked at the thought.

Bilbo’s eyes slowly opened and he glanced at Thorin only to jolt in surprise to find Thorin watching him intently. “Um,” Bilbo blushed embarrassed. “Sorry.”

“It’s no matter,” Thorin shrugged as they continued around a terrace. “You seem to enjoy this place.”

“It’s peaceful,” Bilbo admitted softly. “Calming.”

“Dull,” Thorin muttered.

Bilbo’s cough sounded suspiciously like a chuckle. “I’m sure for someone as… active as you are, it would seem so.”

“We are a rowdy group,” Thorin admitted.

“What was that all about?” Bilbo asked curiously. “I’ve never seen Dori so angry before, and at Dwalin too. What could he have possibly done?”

“I do believe that Dori has finally found out about Dwalin’s relationship with Nori and did not take it well,” Thorin snickered. “I doubt he gave them a chance to explain before his temper got the better of him.”


Thorin nodded and Bilbo went red up to the roots of his hair.

“I did not think they were even friends with one another, so it’s a bit surprising to find out that they’re lovers,” he finally stammered.

“They’re good for each other,” Thorin smiled. “Nori keeps Dwalin on his toes.”
Bilbo thought over that for a moment. “Is that why Nori was stealing Dwalin’s pipe all the time? He was flirting with him?”

“Nori’s preferred method of gaining attention is slightly counterproductive, but it works for them,” Thorin chuckled.

Bilbo mulled over the new information for a moment. “I’m glad for them then, but why was Dori taking offense?”

“Neither Dwalin or Nori thought to mention their new relationship to either of their older brothers.”

Bilbo nodded in understanding. “Ah.”

The two continued to wander around as they spoke, peeking into a building off and on or investigating them outright. They didn’t even encounter anyone as they wandered, which Thorin found disconcerting.

“When they do nothing here?” Thorin huffed as they entered a small building. “It’s amazing they don’t pull their hair out from all the monotony.”

Bilbo choked back another laugh. “Some people enjoy peaceful quiet.”

“You included?” Thorin asked quietly as they stepped out onto a balcony.

Bilbo ducked his head slightly as he rested his arms on the rail. “Hobbits do enjoy their tranquility,” he admitted.

Thorin looked Bilbo over critically, doubt starting to prickle at his mind. “Having second thoughts about stepping out your door?”

Bilbo’s head jerked up in surprise. “No!” he almost shouted his denial. “I was sincere when I said I would join you.”

“You don’t have to force yourself,” Thorin said becoming serious as he turned to face Bilbo. “If you feel as if you can not continue this journey you just have to say so.”

“The contract-” Bilbo began hesitantly.

“Said nothing about being hunted by an Orc pack,” Thorin countered. “You let me worry about Balin and the contract. If you wish to return home…”

He waited. Now that he had said the words, he found that he needed to hear Bilbo’s answer. If Bilbo truly wanted to remain in Rivendell, to return to his home in the Shire, Thorin was not going to force him to remain. Dreams or no dreams, Thorin could not in good conscious deny Bilbo the ability to make his own decisions.

Bilbo was quiet for a moment before he shook his head and Thorin’s shoulders dropped in relief. He hadn’t even realized he was holding his breath in apprehension.

“You asked for my help and I promised I would give it to you,” Bilbo declared firmly. “I can not turn back now just because of a few dreadful incidents.”

“You call Orcs and Wargs a ‘few dreadful incidents’?” Thorin asked genuinely surprised. His curiosity piqued. “What about the trolls?”

Bilbo wrinkled his nose. “Disgusting annoyances,” he proclaimed. “But the same could be said for
the Sackville-Baggins.”

Thorin threw back his head and let out a roars laugh and the tension that had resulted from the previous conversation melted away.

“I’m glad I never met your relatives if you compare them to trolls,” Thorin chuckled as they left the balcony and proceeded on through the building and up some stairs.

“They’re not all bad. My Took relatives are almost as lively as yourself and the others. My father’s family never approved but father himself endured it for mother’s sake. You can imagine it at summer festival time.”

“I can,” Thorin snickered.

Bilbo nodded before he looked up at the mural just above them at the top of the stairs they were climbing before moving on.

“I think there’s a sword on that statue there,” Bilbo said with some surprise as they reached the landing. Standing slightly up on his toes, he glanced over the broken piece as Thorin came up beside him. “What do you suppose happened to it?”

“I’m not sure,” Thorin began frowning slightly as he reached the statue and examined the weapon. He stared down at the sword astonished. “This is dwarf made

“Really?” Bilbo looked back at the sword inquisitively.

“You can see the maker’s mark just there,” Thorin pointed to the hilt where a dwarf rune could barely be seen.

“What do you suppose it’s doing here in Rivendell?”

Thorin frowned as he stared down at the broken sword. There was something niggling at the back of his mind but he couldn’t quite put his finger on what it was. And how on Middle-earth did Elrond get a dwarf sword?

‘Perhaps he found it in a troll hoard,’ Thorin thought sardonically.

“Do you suppose it has anything to do with this?”

Turning around he found Bilbo staring intently at another mural on the wall opposite from the statue.

 Barely glancing at the battle scene, Thorin looked back at the sword before he suddenly froze, the image finally registering in his mind. Turning back around, he stared at the mural. Or rather the figure depicted within it.

It was him!

The dark warrior that had frightened even Thorin and that had only been in a dream. And it had only been the one time.

Thorin had been grateful that he hadn’t dreamed of the evil knight again.

“Thorin?” Bilbo asked as Thorin approached, staring at the mural in shock as he took in the finer details.
The evil knight was standing over another knight, looking three times as big as the cowering human that had his sword raised to ward off the oncoming blow. Thorin recognized it as the broken sword behind them.

The fighter in black was shown with his arm upraised, ready to bring down his own sword in one massive blow. Thorin glanced at the sword to see if he could tell which race had forged it when his breath hitched.

There it was. Painted in a single stroke of gold sitting innocently on the middle finger of the hand the dark knight had wrapped around his sword hilt.

It was the ring of power he continually saw in his visions, first with the gray creature and then again with Elrond and the human fighter.

Wide eyed, Thorin whipped around to stare at the sword again flabbergasted.

He recognized it now.

“Narsil,” he breathed in shock.

“What?” Bilbo pulled his own gaze away from staring at the gold band on the dark knight, the Dark Lord’s finger to look at Thorin worriedly as he took in his pale appearance. “Thorin? Are you all right? Thorin!”

Thorin was already pounding down the stairs, leaving both Bilbo and the broken sword behind him. He didn’t know where he was going, just that he needed to get away. Create some distance and try and bring his swirling thoughts into some semblance of order.

There was one story of a broken sword and a ring of power that encompassed throughout all three realms of Dwarf, Elf and Man, a story about a human brandishing a dwarven sword in a battle alongside elves against a powerful enemy.

He stopped seeing the path he was running and instead he saw Elrond again. In battered and bloodstained armor, standing there in the gloom of the cave, of the volcano, watching the human knight, the human king, closed his fist over the ring and turn away from the elf, heading back the way they had come.

“Isildur!” Elrond bellowed at the retreating figure.

“The ring, the ring, the ring!” Thorin realized as he finally stopped running and practically collapsed against a column as he desperately tried to fill his lungs with air.

Isildur’s bane; it had to be. The ring shaped by the Dark Lord Sauron. The One Ring. The most powerful ring of them all forged in pure malice by a dark evil.

Turning around, Thorin leaned back against the column as he stared up at the sky in disbelief. “Why me?”

Vision going white, Thorin suddenly could see it. Could see the scene from the mural of Sauron standing over Isildur raising his sword to bring it down on the terrified human come to life.

Isildur reached desperately for the sword and Sauron stomped down on the weapon, causing it to shatter when Isildur pulled at it.

Sauron leaned down, reaching for the human and Isildur swung wildly in a desperate bid to stay
alive. It was pure chance that the sword connected and sliced through Sauron’s fingers, subsequently separated Sauron from his single band of gold.

‘I don’t understand.’ Thorin was confused as to why he was being shown the end to what was considered by all on Middle-earth as the greatest battle of all time when the scene shifted.

Another battlefield, but this time it wasn’t human and elves against the Orcs but Dwarrows.

Thorin recognized it. It was Moria. It was the battle of Azanulbizar.

Turning slightly in shock, Thorin watched himself using an oak branch as his shield while reaching for a sword desperately as Azog stood above him, ready to bring down the finale blow when Thorin lashed out, blindly and desperately and Azog let out a scream as his arm was severed from his body.

The scene faded from his vision and the waterfalls and open architecture of Rivendell came back into focus.

"Don't tell me I'm Isildur reborn,” Thorin muttered, half in jest half in building dread as he rubbed his hand over his face. It was very unlikely however. It was just coincidence that he repeated Isildur’s wild swing from centuries before.

He glanced back up at the sky again. “Wasn’t it?”

There was no answer.

Thorin pushed himself away from the column and began wandering down a random path in a daze. Was that what everything was about? The One Ring?

What in Durin’s name was Thorin suppose to do with that knowledge?

‘Is that what’s at Erebor in grandfather’s treasury? Did Grandfather find The One Ring? I thought it was lost in a river…’

Thorin stopped again as a thought suddenly occurred to him. ‘There’s a dragon sitting on The One Ring?’

“I need a drink,” he muttered into his palm as he dropped his head again. “Badly.”

It made sense however. Why no one had ever found the ring before and how re-taking Erebor might set in motion everything that could bring about the war he had seen in his dreams.

Why Thorin would be sent back to live his last year of life all over again.

Thorin quite possibly had the fate of the entire world in his hands.

‘At least now I know what the Necromancer is doing in the old fortress,’ Thorin thought with a rather hysterical note. It had to be the reason why everything was happening in this year. Why he had been sent back to the year he decided to retake Erebor back from the dragon.

The Necromancer was trying to find The One Ring to resurrect Sauron.

“A lot of drinks,” he almost giggled.

Thorin felt dizzy as the implications overwhelmed him and he stopped again in the middle of the
path to lean over, bracing him hands on his knees as he took a few deep breaths to settle his nerves.

‘Damn Isildur,’ Thorin thought suddenly angry. ‘Why couldn’t he just throw the blasted thing in the fire like Elrond told him to?’

A blurred figure abruptly came thundering around the corner ahead and Thorin instantly jerked back to get out of the way without thought but it was too late. The small figure barreled directly into him and both of them tumbled to the ground in a heap.

“What in Durin’s name?” Thorin yelped as he stared down at the small body and gangly limbs suddenly in his lap. He instantly looked at the ears, not really knowing why considering that he was in an elf city but he was surprised to find the round shell rather than the pointed elf ear he had been expecting.

It was a human child in his lap. What was a human child doing running about? Was he there with another visiting party? Why didn’t Elrond say so?

The dark head finally looked up and bright blue eyes stared at Thorin with surprise and just a bit of fear in them.

The eyes.

Thorin knew those eyes.

Once again, he was looking down at the fight on the wall of the human fortress at the lone man dressed in Ranger’s garb fighting off Orcs between an older Gimli and the elf.

Then the scene shifted once more and he was looking at the human again, fighting through a swarm of Orcs with a repaired Narsil in his hands.

‘Aragorn.’

The name pushed to the forefront of his mind as he looked down at the child and knew. Knew exactly whom it was sprawled out on top of him. Knew instantly that this human boy to be Isildur’s descendent and the future king of Gondor thought to be long lost.

‘What is he doing at Rivendell?’ Thorin thought dazedly as the child suddenly started babbling to him in rapid Sindarin.

“What?” Thorin stared down before he pulled himself back to the present. “Are you all right?”

The child in his lap, Aragorn, switched to Westerton easily enough and began apologizing profusely. “I am so sorry sir. I didn’t mean it. I was playing hide and seek and wasn’t watching where I was going. Are you hurt sir? Papa will be furious if I hurt one of his guests.”

“No, I am quite all right,” Thorin reassured him, halting the torrent of words. “Are you all right?”

Aragorn nodded as Thorin helped him back to his feet, dusting the boy off.

One of the boy’s statements struck him as odd. “Your father’s guests”? Does your father live here in Rivendell as well?”

Aragorn nodded again, a wide and proud grin on his face. “He’s lord here.”

Thorin stared. “Elrond?”
“That’s him.”

Thorin couldn’t help but look at the boy’s ears again and Aragorn snickered. “He’s not my real papa.”

“Oh well that’s a relief,” Thorin muttered to himself. He looked the young boy over curiously. ‘Narsil and Isildur’s heir both in Rivendell; exactly what is Elrond up too?’

“Mama and Papa died,” Aragorn told him quietly.

Thorin’s thought faltered and he felt for the future king. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

Aragorn nodded, shuffling his feet slightly when a voice suddenly bellowed from the other side of the foliage. One word was repeated continually in the long string of Sindarin.

“What does ‘Estel’ mean?” Thorin asked curiously.

Aragorn giggled. “It’s my name.”

“What? But I thought-”

A tall elf suddenly rounded the corner and Thorin tensed at the sight of him.

This elf was a seasoned warrior.

This elf was fearless.

This elf had seen battle and trudged through the worst of conditions but had managed to come out whole on the other side.

It was in his stance and in his bearing. The weight on his shoulders, while no longer pressing, still sat heavy on him.

It wasn’t his aura that clued Thorin in that he was a warrior however. No, he could tell all of this in just once glance of his sword. The scabbard and hilt were worn but clearly cared for as one would a treasured friend or lover.

The newcomer was also the first gold haired elf Thorin had seen in Rivendell and he instantly placed a hand on Aragorn’s shoulder, ready to haul the boy behind him should this elf prove hostile. Was he from Mirkwood?

The adult elf came to a halt when he spotted Thorin with the small human child and tensed as he looked at the two.

“What is going on here?” the elf asked slowly in Westerton, his hand twitching as if he wanted to go for his sword friend as he eyed Thorin’s hand still on the boy’s shoulder.

Aragorn looked down at the ground and started shuffling his toe against the dirt in embarrassment.

“Estel,” the elf pressed though his gaze never strayed from Thorin’s own figure.

Aragorn shrank into himself a bit and Thorin gave the shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “I accidentally ran into one of papa’s guest and knocked him over,” he admitted in a soft voice. “I’m sorry.”

“It was my fault,” Thorin added quickly and Aragorn also called Estel looked up at him in surprise.
Thorin smiled back down at him. “I’m afraid I was lost in my thoughts and not paying attention.”

The elf looked from Thorin to Aragorn and back again before he allowed his hand to drop back to hang loosely at his side, away from his sword hilt. Giving Thorin a small bow the elf said something in Sindarin before translating it. “I apologize your majesty. My charge can be quite… enthusiastic.”

Aragorn stared up at him in shock. “You’re a King?”

Thorin couldn’t help it. He didn’t know if it was the pure awe in the child’s voice or the fact that Aragorn was destined to be an even greater king than Thorin could ever hope to aspire to. He laughed.

“King Thorin?” the elf looked at him in concern.

“It is quite all right,” Thorin reassured them both. “I have two very energetic nephews of my own.”

“You do?” Aragorn asked surprised and just a bit excited.

He nodded. “They’re grown now but they’re still quite a handful.”

Aragorn giggled and Thorin turned back to the elf that was looking at Thorin warily.

“Your charge? You must be very skilled warrior to look after Lord Elrond’s youngest,” Thorin credited.

The elf shot Aragorn a reproving look and the child hid slightly behind Thorin.

“I do not know about that,” the elf began. “But he is in my care. My name is Glorfindel, at your service.”

“The Balrog Slayer?” Thorin blurted out in shock, amazement and just a touch of awe.

Despite it being a story of an elf warrior, the tale of the Balrog Slayer had always been a favorite bedtime story for Frerin when they had been children. Even Thorin had enjoyed the telling.

Glorfindel winced ever so slightly. “No one has called me that in a long time.”

“No wonder Elrond trusts you to watch Ar- ah, Estel. You’re probably the only one who has the stamina to keep up with him.”

Glorfindel slowly lost the tension in his body and he gave Thorin a small, wicked smile. “The twins tend to give the little terror back within the hour.”

“Hey!” Aragorn sent Glorfindel a childish glare and the two adults shared long suffering looks.

Looking back over at the pouting child as he said something to Glorfindel in Sindarin that made the elf laugh Thorin made a silent promise.

He would do what he could to stop the cataclysmic war he saw in his dreams from happening, even if that only meant ensuring Fíli and Kíli were prepared to fight it in his stead. With Gimli present in his dreams, Erebor had to have been pulled into the war at some point. Fíli and Kíli would have to be ready for when it was.

Thorin would also tolerate Elrond and the other elves of Rivendell for Aragorn’s sake if nothing else. Well, perhaps also so Thorin could investigate what the elf lord was up too in regards to
Gondor.

He still wasn’t sure about the Mirkwood elves.

He didn’t know if anything he did from here on out would change things in the future, but he knew he had to do something and he could only pray that whatever he did was the correct course of action in order to help those he cared about survive the dark might of Mordor.

‘Now if only I knew what that something is.’

Chapter End Notes

1) Remember, you and I know who the necromancer is but Thorin does not. He's still trying to piece everything together.

2) Yay! Aragorn!

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I would like to take this moment to give a huge shout out to Selina Novella for her frighteningly accurate conjectures on this fic! Here’s Glorfindel for you darling! I hope I was able to do him justice! (and now you know why he wasn't at the dinner. xD)

May I also say, thank you Demifish for making me laugh a whole 2 minutes straight. Pod person!Thorin! xD

Also gnome_goddess_cat, eh-hehe. squashed that bug for ya. :( Yeah, me no spell so good
Bifur watched as Dori finally climbed off the floor in a huff, brushing off imaginary dirt from his clothing as he glared at those still in the main room.

In the end, it had taken Bifur and Glóin holding Dori down long enough for Bombur to actually sit on him to get the enraged dwarf to stop. With Dori thus captured Bofur and the boys had been able to hustle Dwalin and Nori out the door, Ori helping a rather disheveled Lindir after them.

“If we are all done acting like children,” Óin suddenly drawled, “perhaps now would be a good time for us to finally speak plainly.”

“About what?” Glóin asked as he sat down on a low bench to catch his breath.

“And why is now a good time?” Bombur asked very curiously, remembering to pitch his voice slightly so the older dwarf could hear.

Óin snorted. “After that display, I highly doubt that Thorin will be returning anytime soon-”

“He better not,” Dori growled as he sat in a free chair with a thump. He scowled over at Balin who glared right back.

“The younger one’s being occupied is also rather fortuitous,” Óin continued, either ignoring the hostility going on by pretending not to hear them or honestly just not having heard them.

Óin then turned his own stern gaze on Balin. “Why was it we were never told?”

“Not this again,” Balin groaned, dropping his head into his hand.

“Told? Told about what?” Bombur asked, sitting up a bit straighter in his seat. “What are we speaking of?”

Óin continued to stare at Balin as he answered the other dwarf. “Why it was that we were never told Thorin Oakenshield, our Leader and King, is an Oracle!”

Bifur felt both his eyebrows shoot straight up at that.

“A Oracle?” Bombur echoed amazed. “Do you really think so?”

Balin groaned and sunk a little further in his chair.

Dori finally turned away from glaring at Balin to frown at Óin incredulously. “What in Mahal’s forge are you nattering on about?”

“Thorin Oakenshield is an Oracle,” Óin repeated as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

Dori stared for a moment before he looked over at Glóin. “Is he serious?”

“My brother rarely jests,” Glóin stated.

Dori stared at Glóin this time before turning to Bombur. “Did they eat some funny elf
mushrooms?"

“Not that I know of.”

“Thorin Oakenshield is an Oracle,” Óin thumped his fist down hard on the table startling them. “And I would very much like to know why it was kept hidden from us. Both as citizens living at Nogrode and more importantly, as members of this Company!”

“Because he’s not!” Balin finally burst out in frustration, glaring at his cousin. "That's what I have been telling you this whole time!

“If Óin says he’s an Oracle, he most likely is,” Glóin growled threateningly before turning back to Óin. “Does he read Portents as you do or did you see some around Thorin?”

“Indeed. How did you come to that conclusion?” Bombur asked, genially interested.

“It is one thing to be able to read portents, it is quite another to suddenly have knowledge of things he should not!” Óin proclaimed. “Thorin knows things. He knows us.”

“We have been traveling together for well over a month now,” Balin reminded him. “We have gotten to know everyone better simply by being in close proximity.”

“Rain,” Óin countered flatly.

“Must we talk about that again?” Dori protested.

Óin nodded. “He knew.”

“Knew what?” Balin asked exasperated. “It’s a long journey. Surely we would encounter rain at some point.”

“But such a torrential down pour?” Óin asked sardonically. “He knew even before we left Bilbo’s village. Remember when he gave his nephews their oilskins? How did he put it…?”

Glóin continued for him. “‘You never know when it might rain for a seven day straight,’ he said. And wouldn’t you know it?” Glóin now turned to Balin with his own scowl. “It did!”

“Coincidence,” Balin opposed.

“Then explain the nightmares,” Óin challenged him.

“We are going to face a dragon,” Dori pointed out.

“Then why is he so bloody cheerful during the day?” Glóin argued. “If what he’s dreaming about is so horrible…”

“Perhaps he doesn’t remember his dreams,” Bombur offered tentatively. “I can’t remember mine most of the time.”

“It is possible. Some seers are known to be unaware of their powers,” Óin explained to the larger dwarf. “They do not remember what they say and if you confront them, they deny ever having spoken.”

“That would explain the little things Thorin absently says when distracted,” Glóin mused. “It’s like he doesn’t even realize what he’s saying.”
“Indeed.” Óin agreed enthusiastically.

“Perhaps he’s just a very good guesser,” Balin drawled sardonically.

Óin continued conversing with Bombur as if Balin had not spoken. “Sometimes rather than visions, it could be a vague feeling that they get,” he explained. “Or a pressing need to do something. Thorin himself might not know why it is he does some things, only that he knows he has to. Case in point, the trolls. He was anxious before Nori told even told us about them.”

“He did seem rather insistent not to let me head down to the water pump,” Bombur spoke up. “Do you suppose it’s because he knew it wasn’t safe?”

“He knew something was wrong,” Glóin agreed. “Else why would he send Nori to check on the boys?”

“Because the boys continually need checking up on,” Balin argued. “They’re always into something or other.”

“But how did he come up with such a plan on such short notice?” Glóin wondered aloud.

Bifur wondered the same thing.

“Aye, especially since all Nori said was ‘trolls’. He didn’t even see the camp to tell Thorin the layout,” Óin nodded.

“So he knew something was going to happen involving trolls, just not what, is that what you’re saying?” Dori asked, finally getting into the conversation. The dwarf frowned. “That doesn’t make much sense.”

“It does when you add in the dreams,” Óin argued.

“I thought you said he wasn’t having visions,” Balin disputed.

“Not consciously,” Óin stated. “Not remembering his dreams doesn’t mean he didn’t see it.”

“So like the feeling of things happening before when in truth, they didn’t,” Bombur began tentatively. “Such as the time I was in the kitchen and Bofur asked me for some flint rock and I could have sworn he’d asked me the same question the day before in that exact situation.”

Óin smiled broadly. “Exactly.”

“Let us say I believe this… proposal,” Dori spoke slowly. “Knowing about the trolls is just one factor-”

“Rain,” Óin, Glóin and Bombur said together.

“All right, two,” Dori relented. “That hardly proves he’s an Oracle.”

“Thank you,” Balin sighed.

“What about after we were caught?” Bombur asked, looking to Balin. “Remember he knew we wouldn’t be eaten. That we would get out of there.”

“Thorin was merely being optimistic,” Balin argued.

“Or it could be something else,” Óin pressed. “Its like he knows what he had to do to keep us all
safe.”

“You have to admit, having Bilbo stall them until Gandalf got back did work,” Bombur told Balin. “How did he know Gandalf was even coming back let alone that he would be back in time to break the boulder and let the sunlight in?”

“Gandalf had to come back eventually,” Balin said, but with less certainty than before.

“Then how did he know to take money from the troll hoard for the damages,” Glóin asked, looking pointedly at the destroyed end table.

Bifur shrunk back slightly embarrassed. He still could not believe Thorin had fined them.

“We’re not exactly the gentlest of groups,” Balin shrugged.

“I beg your pardon,” Dori scowled. Balin looked pointedly at the rest of the destroyed room. Dori went back to scowling.

“All right, then how did he know where to find the so called ‘secret pass’ here?” Óin finally shouted in exasperation. “Even Gandalf didn’t remember where it was. Thorin had to show him!”

Balin suddenly slumped into his seat, all anger flooding out of him. “For that I don’t have an explanation.”

“There. You see?” Óin grinned triumphantly.

A small silence descended on the group for a moment as they all lost themselves in their own thoughts.

“If Thorin’s an Oracle, that mean he’s always been one correct?” Dori frowned. “He would have been able to predict things before.”

“You’re speaking of Smaug,” Glóin stated.

“Who knows why he wouldn’t have said anything about the dragon,” Glóin continued speaking to Dori. “Mayhap he didn’t think it would actually happen.”

“Or maybe his talents bloomed late,” Bombur suggested.

Óin was staring at Balin who had a look of stunned disbelief about him. “What do you know?” he suddenly demanded, bringing the other’s attention to the rather silent Blain.

Balin shook himself out of his stupor. “Nothing.”

“Yes you do. You thought of something. Something about Thorin. What is it?”

“Did Thorin make predictions before?” Bombur asked eagerly.

“You must have noticed,” Óin accused Balin. “You’ve known the lad since he was naught but a babe.”

Balin remained stubbornly silent.

“Oh for Mahal’s sake,” Dori threw up his hands in aggravation and spun in his seat to face Balin. “Just tell us! What happened before? What did he do?”
Balin frowned at the other dwarf but spoke all the same. “When Smaug attacked…”

“Yes?” Glóin prompted when he fell silent. “Go on.”

“He knew it was a dragon,” Balin finally blurted out.

Dori let out huff and sat back in his seat. “We all knew it was a dragon-”

“No, before we even saw him,” Balin interrupted. “Thorin knew a dragon was coming.”

“He knew it was a dragon attack?” Bombur asked surprised.

Balin nodded almost reluctantly. “When I first heard the wind and such, I had gone out onto the battlements to investigate when Thorin ran out and told me to sound the alarm. I asked him why and that’s when he stated that it was a dragon and proceeded to shout it down to main hall below. I hadn’t even seen Smaug then, but he knew.”

Stunned silence descended over the small group before Dori finally spoke up. “Right then,” he said quietly. “He’s an Oracle.”

“Apparently,” Balin ultimately relented.

“Finally,” Óin grumbled.

Bifur pushed himself off the wall he was leaning against and headed for the door to the second room, his thought whirling with the arguments the others had made as well as his own thoughts and conclusions on the strangeness of their Company Leader.

“So, now that we’re all in agreement about his prophetic abilities, can we now discuss Thorin’s interest in courting the hobbit?” Óin demanded.

Bifur shut the door on Balin’s strangled scream.

Chapter End Notes

1) Bombur was speaking about the feeling of Déjà vu.

Let's face it; as a citizen in medieval England (or Middle-earth), your first reaction to Thorin's sudden startling knowledge about things that will happen is not going to be, "Oh! He came Back from the Future!", it's going to be "holy shit! He's psychic!" Or Oracle/Prophet as the case may be. Thus, the dwarves are reacting accordingly. xD

**Edit:** seriously, where would Thorin have hidden the DeLorean? (snicker, that rhymed xD)
“Ow,” a voice yelped as Bifur entered the second room.

“Sorry,” Ori apologized profusely as he dabbed at the blood trickling from the elf’s nose with his handkerchief.

“I think it’s broken,” Fíli announced where he was standing directly behind Ori’s shoulder, staring at Lindir’s nose critically.

“What?” Lindir yelped aghast.

Fíli nodded. “Dwalin, what do you think?”

Dwalin stopped his pacing on the opposite side of the room when his name was called and joined the small group. He gave Lindir’s nose a glance. “Definitely broken,” he proclaimed prompting Lindir to groan again. “Easily fixed.”

“Oh! No, thank you,” Lindir reared back in his seat slightly as Dwalin reached out. “I shall have one of our healers look at it.”

Dwalin glared at him. “Do not insult me. I’ve straightened many a nose on the battlefield. It’s a small fix.”

“No. No, I’m very sure you have but I do not wish to impede on your hospitality any longer,” Lindir said as tried to stand in order to leave. A very hard thing to do considering Ori was standing directly in front of him with Fíli and Dwalin flanking both sides, practically boxing the poor elf in.

“Sit down and let us fix it,” Dwalin growled, setting a hand on his chest and pushing Lindir back into his seat.

“Oh, well…” Lindir leaned back when Dwalin reached for him again.

Ori was the one to actually push Dwalin’s arm aside. “Leave off, will you? It’s your fault his nose is broken in the first place.”

Lindir gave the dwarfling a grateful smile.

“Technically, it’s Thorin’s,” Nori grumped from his seat next to Bofur. “He threw the elf into the middle of the fight.”

“That you started,” Ori burst out. “The whole fiasco started because Dori walked in on you because you two,” and here he actually glared at Dwalin, “couldn’t contain yourselves. I mean, really. The balcony?”

Lindir face went quite red, as did Fíli’s.

“It’s not what you think,” Nori grumbled.

Bofur smiled before he leaned over to prod Nori in the side. “Let me guess. You were simply enjoying the view.”

“Shove off,” Nori growled, slapping Bofur’s hand away. “There was no one there.”
“That’s not the point!” Ori looked to Dwalin. “You had better declare your intent and soon before Dori decides to take matters into his own hands and calls for a challenge.”

“You think I would hurt your eldest brother?” Dwalin asked affronted.

“No, I’m worried Dori would bash your bald head in,” Ori contradicted.

Dwalin stared before he looked at Nori questioningly.

“He is rather strong despite his delicate looks,” Nori shrugged.

Bifur could attest to that as Dori had shoved him over a time or two when he tried to get close. Bifur was not small and for Dori to simply shove and send him head over heels proved his hidden strength.

“Challenge?” Lindir asked curiously.

“To ensure Dwalin isn’t taking advantage of his position and coercing Nori,” Ori elaborated. “That his suit is sincere.”

“Since when do I let anyone push me around?” Nori demanded angrily.

“We all know you never do anything you don’t want to do,” Dwalin drawled.

“But Dori is large on tradition,” Ori raised his voice to speak over Dwalin. “Dwalin still has to make his intentions for Nori known.”

“Intentions?” Lindir repeated.

“We’re going to have a wedding!” Kíli announced gleefully.

This time it was Dwalin and Nori who blushed and Fíli snickered at his fighting instructor.

“So then congratulations are in order?” Lindir offered a tentative smile. Dwalin’s glare intensified and his arm snapped out to make a grab for his nose again.

Kíli watched interested from his seat on one of the low tables, swinging his legs restlessly.

“Speaking of weddings, I think I’m going to like having a hobbit for an uncle,” he suddenly proclaimed.

“That’s a bold assumption. They haven’t said anything on the matter, have they?” Dwalin stated as he reached for Lindir’s nose again.

“So they are courting?” Lindir asked as he dodged once more.

“Rather obvious, isn’t it?” Bofur snickered before he prodded Nori again. “Unlike these two.”

Nori actually took a swing at the chuckling dwarf and Bifur tensed slightly at his cousin in possible danger but Bofur simply slipped out of the chair and moved to the other side of the room.

“I still don’t think they are,” Fíli frowned. “I mean, Uncle Thorin’s never shown interest in anyone before.”

“Come on Fí,” Kíli groaned. “Thorin dotes over Bilbo even more than he does us!”

“Let’s not forget the hand holding,” Bofur agreed.
“That’s just…” Fíli trailed off as he tried to come up with a reasonable explanation.

“Over a dozen times,” Ori snorted as he folded his handkerchief to a clean spot and dabbed at Lindir’s nose again. “I’ve double checked my journal just to be sure and it’s almost fourteen times that I’ve seen him hold Bilbo’s hand. Fifteen if you include when he yanked Bilbo back out the door earlier.”

Fíli winced. “When you put it that way.”

“You see,” Kíli grinned triumphantly. “Uncle Thorin is courting Bilbo.”

“Thorin is doing what?”

Everyone froze as they turned to the door that led out into the garden.

There, standing in the doorway shocked, was Bilbo.

“Um.” Kíli looked to Fíli desperately. “What I said was – err…”

“Ye can’t say you didn’t notice lad,” Bofur stood up and headed over to the smallest of their Company, throwing an arm around Bilbo’s shoulders and leading him further into the room before helping him down into a free chair. “We’re never one’s to instantly take a likening to outsiders but Thorin took a shine to you right off. We thought you knew and reciprocated.”

“I thought he was just being polite,” Bilbo protested, clearly upset. “He can not be – be courting me!”

“He is,” Dwalin announced flatly. “He never opens up about his past to anyone and he’s told you things without the slightest hesitation that none of us would dare speak of around him. Or did you honestly think Thorin is that way with every one?”

“How should I know? Perhaps he’s always like that with people from other lands when they’re helping him. Or perhaps it’s because he wants my grandfather’s assistance later on and does not wish for me to tell grandfather not to bother.”

“Much as it would explain things, I rather doubt it is due to your station your highness,” Nori smirked.

Bilbo glared at him before turning back to Bofur. “Nothing he has done has even remotely indicated that he’s interested in me in that way.”

“Perhaps your methods of courting are different from the dwarves?” Lindir spoke up.

“Most races do have their own way of doing things,” Bofur nodded in agreement before turning back to Bilbo and giving him an apprising look. “We tend to present gemstones, fine weapons and armor or other such goods when we court, but perhaps because you are a hobbit Thorin has had to adjust.”

“Like the swimming lessons,” Kíli piped up.

“He’s having us teach Ori as well,” Fíli put in. “Unless he’s courting both of them.”

Ori took his free hand and smacked the other dwarrow on his side.

“But there’s courting and then there are the obvious love struck fools,” Bofur continued. “Thorin can barely leave you be. And when you are off doing other things, he checks on you almost as
quickly as he checks on the boys.”

Bilbo stared down at his lap in shock before he raised his head to stare at them with wide eyes. “He’s courting me?” he squeaked out.

“Yes,” nearly everyone in the room answered.

“Why?” Bilbo burst out.

“Why not you?” Bofur frowned as he shared a worried look with the others. “You’re very likeable.”

Bilbo blushed and looked down at his lap again.

“Is this a bad thing?” Bofur asked gently. “Do ye not like Thorin?”

“It’s – it’s not that,” Bilbo insisted and the red flush on his cheeks gave answer enough. “It’s just… why me?”

“Ahh. As to that,” Bofur looked to the others desperately.

“He knew it was going to be you,” Dwalin stated with a shrug.

Fíli stared at Dwalin. “You think he is too?”

“Óin certainly believes so. It also explains his manner when he reached the hobbit’s house,” Dwalin gestured to Bilbo who looked up curiously.

“What explains it?” Bilbo looked at the dwarrows beseechingly.

“Is this about your concepts of Halves and Ones?” Lindir asked curiously and startled slightly as all the dwarrows in the room instantly went silent. “Um. I apologize if I overstepped my bounds.”

“Halves and Ones?” Bilbo asked uncertainly.

“I think that’s going to be something you ask Thorin about if it gets that far,” Bofur told him gently.

“And we’re not speaking about that anyway,” Ori reassured the elf. “It’s just no one has said anything about Thorin’s ability out loud so…”

“We could have told you he was a seer,” Kíli said flatly.

“Kíli!” Every Dwarrow in the room bellowed at him and Kíli shrank into himself slightly.

“What? It’s true! After how many times he knew Fíli and I did something or knew we were going to do something. It was almost frightening sometimes.”

“A seer? Thorin Oakenshield is an Oracle?” Lindir gasped in amazement.

“There have been suspicions,” Fíli admitted grudgingly as he turned away from glaring at Kíli.

“That’s…” Bilbo began haltingly before he frowned in thought. “He can’t be… Can he?”

“Sure he can.” Nori shrugged. “We figured it out as soon as it started raining for a whole seven days. He predicted it almost a fortnight earlier, remember?”
“Hush you,” Dwalin growled before turning to glare at Lindir. “You will not tell anyone what you’ve heard here.”

Lindir straightened in his seat. “If this matter requires secrecy, then you have my vow that I will not say anything. Even to Lord Elrond.”

“Thank you,” Ori smiled at him and Lindir grinned back.

Dwalin gave him another hard glare before finally stepping back with a huff. The damage had been done either way and there was no trying to take it back now.

“Is it a state secret that no one’s ever heard of his ability before?” Lindir asked the room in general.

“This seems to be a recent development,” Dwalin muttered.

“I wonder if he knew he was going to meet Bilbo on this journey,” Kíli continued excitedly. “He was really eager when we were leaving Nogrod.”

“But an Oracle?” Bilbo seemed stunned.

“He knew I was going to wipe my boots on your mother’s Glory Box,” Kíli nodded. “He even warned me not to do it.”

“And then you did it anyway,” Bilbo glared at him.

Kíli shrugged embarrassed. “I forgot.”

“We haven’t forgotten again,” Fíli proclaimed firmly but Bilbo wasn’t listening to him.

“He did know what it the box was called, even when I hadn’t told him of it,” Bilbo said slowly. “So he knew about the Glory Box even before you left your home?” Kíli nodded enthusiastically.

“He knew you three would go after the trolls too,” Nori spoke up. “Why he sent me to check up on you I’ll bet. And he also knew how many there were. I only mentioned that I saw the one troll and heard a second voice. There could have been just two but Thorin knew it was three.”

“Oh! My coat!” Bilbo exclaimed.

Bifur looked at the hobbit puzzled along with Bofur, Dwalin and Lindir but Nori and Ori shared a look of comprehension, as did the boys.

“‘The mud and snot should wash right off’! He knew you were going to get caught by one of the trolls and… uh…” Kíli trailed off with a small chuckle.

“Get sneezed on?” Bilbo groaned. “I wish he had warned me.”

“Well, in a round about manner, he did,” Nori snickered.

“And he knew the ponies were going to bolt,” Fíli added after the laughter had died down some. “Why he told us to keep all our personal belongings with our own gear and only put the nonessentials on the pack ponies.”

“He was rather impatient to leave after Radagast arrived,” Dwalin added after a moment. “Once the wargs appeared, he wasn’t surprised.”

“He even knew how to get here to Rivendell through the secret tunnel,” Bofur nodded, startling
Lindir.

“Thorin is an Oracle?” Bilbo repeated stunned in the ensuing silence.

All the dwarrows nodded.

“And he’s courting me?”

They all nodded again as Kíli grinned at him excitedly.

Bilbo smiled back tentatively even as he blushed again. He frowned however after a moment. “I wonder then…”

“Wonder what?” Bofur asked curiously.

“Earlier, when we were exploring Rivendell there was something odd,” Bilbo began.

The outer doors suddenly burst open, bouncing off the wall with a bang and startling everyone.

Bifur reached for his small knife while Dwalin went for his axes to fend off the intrusion, Fíli scrambling to pull out his own weapons while Kíli jumped down from the table.

It was uncalled for however as Elladan and Elrohir tumbled in.

“Is everyone all right?” One of them asked anxiously, looking at everyone in the room with wide eyes. “The guards said they heard a commotion and what sounded like things breaking.”

“Is that blood?” The second one gaped at Lindir.

With Lindir’s attention diverted, Dwalin’s arm shot out and he firmly grabbed the elf’s nose and tugged.

There was a sickening “crunch” and Lindir let out a piercing scream, his hands flying up to cover his nose as Dwalin released him.

“See,” Dwalin smirked at the agog expressions of everyone in the room. “Easily fixed.”
“Truly, I am well,” Lindir asserted for what had to be the tenth time in the past hour alone to his companions.

“Are you sure?” Elrohir asked as he crowded Lindir’s left. “It didn’t look good when we first saw it.”

“And it sounded even worse when the dwarf ‘fixed it’,” Elladan stated from Lindir’s right.

“If something was amiss, Lord Elrond would have mentioned it,” Lindir stated calmly.

There was a noise of agreement from behind them where Elrond himself was following the three at a leisurely pace.

“The swelling is gone and everything is fine again,” Lindir reassured them.

“How did your nose get broken in the first place?” Elrohir repeated his question, the same one he’d been asking since he and his brother whisked Lindir out of the Dwarves rooms and hauled him into Elrond’s study for healing.

“I am curious as well,” Elrond closed the distance to hear Lindir’s answer, clearly not going to allow the other Elf to simply wave the explanation away again.

“It was a simple skirmish and I foolishly got in the way,” Lindir answered vaguely. “You know how dwarves are. Quarreling over the smallest of things.”

“If you’re sure,” Elladan said slowly.

“I’m fine,” Lindir patted the younger elf’s arm.

“What was the quarrel about?”

Lindir startled and looked over his shoulder at Elrond. “Pardon?”

“The fight. You said they were arguing over something. What was it?”

“Oh um…” Lindir could feel a small flush rise to his cheeks. “Apparently there were some relationship dynamics that were… startling to the others shall we say?”

Elrond raised an eyebrow curiously as both his sons went bright red. “Did it involve the Halfling Gandalf brought?”

“Bilbo?” Lindir asked genuinely surprised. “No, actually. I suppose you noticed that as well?”

“Noticed what?” Elladan asked curiously.

“Very hard not to, wouldn’t you agree?” Elrond asked back.

“Very hard not to what?” Elrohir demanded, frowning at the other two. “What are you talking about?”
“Never you mind,” Elrond frowned at the two before turning back to Lindir. “While you were there, did they say anything?”

Lindir blinked before he turned back aground and began back down the path, forcing himself to keep a sedate pace. “Say anything?”

“Regarding their intention to travel to Erebor,” Elrond pressed and Lindir couldn’t help but allow his shoulders to lose some of their tension. Speaking about Erebor was relatively safe, Thorin’s odd behavior not so much.

“I think if it’s what they want to do, who are we to stop them,” he said truthfully after collecting his thoughts.

The twins slowed their steps, falling behind the elders of the four so it allowed Elrond to move to Lindir’s left so he could see his face. Lindir tried not to look away guiltily.

“You think it is the right thing to do?” Elrond frowned at him.

“I’m saying we have no cause to stop them. It is not our kingdom nor our business,” Lindir said bluntly.

“The safety of Middle-earth–”

“Does not mean we have the right to regulate its people – of any race,” Lindir interrupted and his disrespect startled Elrond enough that the Elf Lord’s mouth hung open for half a heartbeat before it snapped shut.

Lindir continued before he could open it again. “King Thorin is right. Erebor is their city, their responsibility and their problem. We do not have the authority to dictate what a king chooses to do. Especially a foreign king and certainly not about his own kingdom!”

The silence was pressing after Lindir finished. He could practically feel the tension in the two younger elves behind them but Elrond did not take his gaze from Lindir’s.

“The dragon is a threat,” Elrond finally settled on.

“Since when are dragons not a threat?” Lindir retorted hotly. “They’re dragons. If not Smaug, then some other dragon a hundred years or so down the road will wake up and come south hunting for food, gold or simply fun.”

He paused as he took in Elrond’s closed off expression. “Unless the dragon is not our only problem?” Lindir said slowly. “Is there something else we should be concerned about?”

Elrond shook his head ever so slightly, though if it was in answer to Lindir’s question or simply shaking himself out of his thoughts Lindir couldn’t say, and stepped back. “The dragon is everyone’s problem,” he announced and started down the path once more.

Lindir glanced back at the younger two seeing their own confusion at their father’s behavior before hurrying after his lord and friend. He fell into step with Elrond as he dropped his voice to an almost whisper. “It wouldn’t have to do with Greenwood, would it?”

Elrond glanced sharply at him at that. “The Dwarves have said something to you about that as well?”

Lindir shrugged. “I think that if anything that is happening on the other side of the Misty
Mountains, that should be our main concern rather than the dragon in Erebor.”

“If there was a problem in Greenwood, Thranduil would have consulted myself or Lady Galadriel.”

“Are you sure about that?” Lindir pressed and Elrond shot him another questioningly glance.

Elladan and Elrohir finally worked the courage to re-join them.

“What is this about Greenwood?” Elladan demanded.

“And what problems are you speaking about?” Elrohir continued. “If there was something amiss in Greenwood, Legolas would have certainly mentioned it in one of his letters—”

“And if they had gone to Lórien for help, Arwen would have said something in hers,” Elladan finished.

“It is unconfirmed at this time,” Elrond informed them. “Gandalf spoke to me of the rumors—”

“Hardly rumor when he was told them by another wizard,” Lindir interrupted again before he could stop himself.

Elrond gave him another searching stare. “You seem to be very well informed.”

Lindir hesitated again before speaking carefully. “The Dwarves are very secretive by nature but ask a direct question and I’ve found that they are honest with you.”

“And naked,” Elrohir gasped as they rounded a corner.

Lindir’s head snapped up and he could finally recognize what he had been faintly hearing for the past few minutes.

There the Dwarves were, frolicking in one of the larger serenity fountains, laughing and joking about with each other. And were indeed very, very naked.

If Lindir needed anymore proof to convince him of the Dwarves claim of Thorin’s strange abilities, this clearly was it. ‘What is the appeal of swimming in fountains?’ he wondered vaguely. It seemed as if the Dwarves were having great fun, but Lindir couldn’t see how going in continuous circles could be perceived as fun.

Bilbo was also present, still fully clothed thankfully, and was dashing about just outside the fountain holding up a stack of towels imploringly. He seemed to be trying to get the Dwarves to exit the water and cover themselves all the while without looking directly at them. Very hard considering they clearly had no ounce of modesty between them all. Even Ori was there without a stitch on.

Lindir quickly averted his gaze, a small flush on his cheeks. He instead turned his gaze to where the twins were staring openly at the merriment before them in both shock and surprise. “Wish we’d thought of that,” Elrohir muttered after a moment.

Elrond sent his sons a sharp reproaching glare and Lindir felt the bubble of a hysterical laugh threatening to rise up in his throat. He sobered immensely when Elrond turned his sharp look on him. They all turned to leave the immediate area in a dignified but no less swift manner when there was a shout from the opposite path leading to the three-tier fountain.

Lindir spun around in surprise as he recognized the voice along with the name being bellowed,
since it was not a rare occurrence throughout the city to hear it shouted quite often nearly
everyday.

Sure enough, there was the common sight of Estel, running as fast as his small legs could carry
him, and Glorfindel pounding after him. What was new however was the sight of Thorin himself,
chasing after the elf. A feat much harder due to his smaller stride and the fact that he seemed to be
laughing as he followed the other two.


Estel, in true child form, disregarded his keeper and made a direct line for the fountain.

The Dwarves, having frozen at the first bellow of Estel’s name, watched amazed as the young boy
clambered up the fountains edge and propelled himself into the water just as Glorfindel was about
to snag his tunic.

With a sigh, Elrond began heading towards the commotion with a resigned look.

Hesitation for a moment, Lindir quickly hurried after him along with the twins as he watched
Thorin reach Glorfindel and say something to him.

The Elf warrior glanced down at the dwarf king and the two shared a long-suffering look before
Glorfindel suddenly removed his cloak and shoved it at Thorin. Then to the astonishment of the
watching elves, handed the king his own sword! Glorfindel never allowed anyone to even touch
Dinanga in all the time Lindir had known him!

‘Now how did that come about?’ Lindir couldn’t help but wonder.

“You do know that you’re going to have to go in after him if you wish him out of the water,”
Thorin chuckled as Aragorn swam away from Glorfindel’s reach. “I’m afraid no one in my
Company will be of any help.”

Glorfindel glanced at him and heaved a sigh before reaching up and undoing the clasp to his over-
cape. “Hold this,” he shoved it at Thorin as he undid his belt and scabbard and shoved them in
Thorin’s open hand. “And this.”

The rest of the dwarrows meanwhile seemed to pull themselves out of their surprise at the child
suddenly in their midst. Kíli was the first to reach him and scooped the boy out of the water. “Look
Fíli! There’s some sort of frog in here!”

Estel shrieked with laughter as Kíli held him over his head.

“Bless me!” Bofur laughed. “What an ugly frog it is too!”

“I’m not a frog, I’m a child!” Aragorn yelped and began struggling.

“Are ye sure?” Bofur teased. “You certainly looked like a leap frog jumping into the water.”

Aragorn finally managed to wiggle himself out of Kíli’s grasp and plunk back into the water
behind him. Fíli made to catch the boy next but not very hard and allowed the human to slip past
him.

Thorin watched then fondly for a moment before turning to Glorfindel who was laying his boots
on the cloak draped over the Dwarf’s arms. “You do realize that I am a king, not a coat rack,”
Thorin drawled as Glorfindel added his silver circlet to the pile just as Lord Elrond and the others reached them.

One of the twins snickered at this but Glorfindel just muttered something under his breath as he stepped over the fountain edge into what was for him thigh high water and began trudging towards the swimming child. Bifur managed to pluck Aragorn up before he could reach him however and tossed him to Glóin.

A game suddenly erupted with a few of the Dwarrows scooping Aragorn up before tossing him, gently, to each other in a strange game of keep away from the tall elf. Aragorn loved it.

Thorin sighed and looked up at where it was surprising Lindir who was staring down at him in some sort of shock. It took Thorin a moment to remember his prior comment to the Elf and he winced. “Yes, I do believe I forgot to speak to the others about the fountains being off limits, didn’t I?”

“Indeed,” Lindir said after a moment.

“I would think you would have better control over your companions King Thorin,” Elrond chide.

“How could he do that when he wasn’t even there?” Bilbo was the one who unexpectedly contested as he joined them, looking at the ground for a relatively dry spot to set down his burden of towels as he continued. “I couldn’t even stop them.”

“And he did try,” Ori spoke as he came over to the edge, a small flush on his cheeks as he glanced at the Elves before turning back to Thorin with a determined look. “I’m afraid that Fíli, Kíli and Bofur wouldn’t listen to him.”

“They do know there was a bathing chamber in the rooms we were given, don’t they?” Thorin asked as there was a yelp and a rather large splash. He looked over just in time to see Glorfindel surface from the water. The Elf shoved his sleeves up past his elbows and stared right back at Nori’s challenging gaze.

Bilbo huffed as he finally decided to just hold the towels under his arm and he looked over at Thorin. A small flush started to creep up the Hobbit’s neck to his face but Thorin assumed it was due to his embarrassment regarding the Dwarrows state of undress.

“I had mentioned it to them,” Bilbo said to the group at large, “but they insisted and once Fíli mentioned seeing the fountain out here well…” He made a small wave with his hand as his sentence died off.

Thorin gave Bilbo a sympathetic look. He knew his Company was very hard to stop once they got an idea in their heads about something.

Observing the group in the water, Thorin was amused to see Dwalin was keeping a far distance from where Dori was lounging in one of the middle tiers with Óin. Balin lounged in the basin opposite and he and Dori would shoot glares at each other every now and again but on the whole, remained civil. Balin wouldn’t even look at Óin and Thorin wondered if they were still quarreling.

Glorfindel was now making his way back to them, completely soaked all the way up to his pointed ears and a pair of small boots dangling from his fingertips. Glancing back at the group, Thorin could see Aragorn trying to stand on Bombur’s shoulders, his bare toes clenching into the dwarf’s skin before he leapt off and back into the water.

“I see you’re still missing your charge,” Thorin snickered.
Glorfindel dropped the soaked boots on the other side of the basin and reached back to squeeze some of the moisture from his hair. “He’s already wet, what’s the harm in letting him play longer?”

“Indeed,” Elrond spoke, alerting Glorfindel to his presence. “And should he catch cold?”

“In the middle of summer?” Glorfindel huffed back incredulously. “Then he’ll have to suffer your wonderful tonics for a while, won’t he? And I’ll be able to relax in my room.”

Thorin thought he should have been surprised at how flippant Glorfindel was being to his liege lord but considering who he was, Thorin supposed if anyone could talk back to Elrond and get away with it, it would be the Balrog Slayer.

The two had spoken for a long time as they had trailed the playing Aragorn through Rivendell’s gardens. Thorin really didn’t have a choice in the matter. Glorfindel just wouldn’t leave.

When Thorin first made to leave them, Glorfindel offered to walk Thorin back to the rooms the dwarrows had been given but Thorin had politely declined. Glorfindel had immediately countered with a tour of Rivendell, which Thorin also declined. Undeterred, the tall Elf insisted on at least showing Thorin the small training grounds that Rivendell had.

“Admittedly it is mostly for archery. The sword arena is dismally small,” Glorfindel had confessed.

Thorin finally relented after Glorfindel had continued to lament about the tiny sword arena for ten minutes just to get the Elf to stop.

They chatted as Aragorn lead the way, mostly about battle tactics and the differences in sword forging elfin versus dwarrow. He had been astonished to learn that Glorfindel was surprisingly blunt in voicing his opinions and possessed a rather wicked sense of humor.

It was before they had come across his bathing company, allowing Aragorn so far ahead of them that they could not catch him once he bolted that Glorfindel had asked the question he had been so clearly wanting to ask.

“When you first saw me,” Glorfindel had begun after ensuring Aragorn was out of ear shot, “you almost pulled Estel behind yourself and gone for your sword. As if I were the outsider here in Rivendell and possible threat–”

“And you were curious as to the reason,” Thorin finished before he could ask, taking no offense at the elf’s words about being an outsider.

“I did wonder.”

Thorin considered his words for a moment before he finally shrugged, settling for the complete truth. “I apologize but when I saw your lighter hair, I had worried that you were one of the elves from Thranduil’s court.”

“And that is cause for such alarm?” Glorfindel was surprised.

“The Greenwood is not as it once was,” he answered vaguely. “I could not be sure of your intentions.”

“Simply having the possibility of hailing from Greenwood is just cause for you to look upon myself as a potential enemy?”
“When it comes to me and my people, I’m sorry to say that it does,” Thorin frankly said.

Glorfindel had seemed shocked with his answer when Aragorn had let out a shout of excitement and dashed away from them before Glorfindel could question further.

Currently the Elf simply climbed out of the fountain, taking his boots back from Thorin with a nod though he made no move to put them on. “Thank you,” he said as Thorin handed him his sword. “And this is?”

Thorin followed his gaze to where Bilbo was now standing slightly behind Thorin as if trying to hide from the newcomer. “Oh. Bilbo Baggins of the Shire, allow me to introduce Glorfindel. Glo-”

“Glorfindel?” A surprise gasp came from the fountain. Thorin looked over just in time to see Nori making a rather strategic retreat to the opposite side of the fountain leaving Dwalin watching him go, befuddled at his sudden departure.

Nori must have known the stories too with how fast he moving away from the gold haired Elf. Apparently he realized just how much he erred in challenging this particular one. Ori, for his part was just staring at Glorfindel wide-eyed as he ducked down slightly behind the lip of the fountain.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Bilbo said diplomatically, giving Glorfindel a small bow and a towel.

The Elf smiled gently as he accepted the cloth. “Likewise.”

“Well,” a new voice spoke up and the small group at the edge of the fountain turned to see Gandalf coming up the path Elrond and the others had used, a large smile on his face. “Here is something you don’t see every day.” He glanced at the damp Glorfindel briefly before turning to Thorin. “Making new friends?”

“More like commiserating,” Thorin chuckled, gesturing to where Fíli and Kíli had a hold of Aragorn’s wrists and ankles respectively and were swinging the child back and forth before tossing him yet again.

Unfortunately, the had tossed him in the direction of where the watching group was standing and the resulting splash went up over the edge, landing directly on Glorfindel, Thorin, Bilbo and Lindir who was unfortunate enough to be standing with them. Elrond and the twins had taken a step back before Aragorn had even been let go.

“Right,” Thorin huffed and reached down to yank off his own boots and shoved both them and Orcrist at the Elf still sitting on the fountain rim. “Hold these,” he commanded as he clambered over the edge and chased after his fleeing nephews and Aragorn. Each one of them the future kings of their own people.

Thorin briefly wondered, as he caught Fíli and shoved his head underwater before darting after the fleeing Kíli, if he should be worried about unleashing his nephews on his poor unsuspecting citizens more then anything else.

Chapter End Notes

1) Din Anga = Silent/Quiet Iron. *(I think)*

Did you really believe I wouldn't include the fountain scene after seeing it in the
extended? Who could say no to Naked Dwarf Time?
The sound of laughter drifted up the stairs to the small building at the top of the hill from the rooms the elves had assigned the Company.

Thorin had sought this private spot the last time in order to plot how to escape from the elves watchful eyes and plan how to go about crossing the Misty Mountains. This time he stood there in the shadows looking out at the sleepy city of Rivendell trying to determine what exactly the Valar wanted him to do about the thrice-damned ring.

‘At least now I know why we were attacked by the Orcs so violently at Erebor,’ he thought sourly. ‘They were most likely trying to get to it before we could dig it out. What a mess.’

Just finding the blasted thing in the treasury alone was going to take possible years to achieve, considering all the gold his grandfather had managed to accumulate before Smaug’s arrival; longer, if they had to continually fend off Orc attacks. And when they found it, then what? The ring was nearly indestructible. Only a volcano could truly destroy the ring.

‘But that’s not the only way,’ Thorin realized with a start. It was known by all the dwarf kingdoms that three of their own rings of power had been actually eaten.

‘Am I suppose to feed it to Smaug?’ he thought incredulously. “Wouldn’t that just make everything worse?”

Groaning, Thorin thumped his head back against the stone behind him. ‘One thing at a time here,’ he chastised himself. ‘The first thing that I have to do is find the ring. Which means if it’s in the treasure room, nothing can be done until we reach Erebor.’

‘But that can’t be the only thing I’m suppose to do, is it?’ he asked himself. ‘There’s still the Necromancer.’

The Necromancer was the one piece of the puzzle Thorin had absolutely no idea what to do about and with almost no information to go off of. The first time he embark on this journey, Thorin had not even heard of a Necromancer that apparently Gandalf knew all about.

“It certainly answers where Gandalf kept disappearing off to the last time,” he muttered aloud. “But did Gandalf manage to deal with him before?”

It was a legitimate concern. Thorin had been so consumed with the reclaiming of Erebor to truly pay any attention to what Gandalf had been up to. At the time, Thorin had considered it an annoyance that Gandalf continually vanished only to return whenever he felt like it.

Now with this new knowledge, Thorin knew it was not the case. Gandalf and Radagast had to have been confronting the Necromancer, or at least interfering with whatever his plans had been.

‘Am I suppose to help them deal with the Necromancer?’ Thorin speculated. ‘Should I postpone reclaiming Erebor and help deal with him first?’

It was a possibility. The Necromancer seemed to be a larger threat than Smaug ever was, especially if he was trying to resurrect Sauron.
‘But if everything hinges on the finding of the Ring, then should I continue with my original plans of reaching Erebor?’

Groaning he rubbed a hand over his face. ‘Should I tell Gandalf?’ he suddenly questioned. ‘Tell him everything that has happened to me, that is going to happen if I can’t figure out what the Valar want me to do?’

The image of Aragorn fighting off Orcs alongside an older Gimli came to mind again.

‘Should I tell Elrond?’ He contemplated briefly. ‘He’s the one with both Aragorn and Narsil. Not to mention he was there in the beginning with Isildur.’

He quickly shook his head. It wouldn’t matter if he told one the other or both of them. Elrond would most likely insert himself in the middle of whatever Gandalf decided to do under the guise of being the voice of reason.

‘Uppity Elf always has to be involved in everything, even when it’s none of his business,’ Thorin thought to himself irritably.

With a sigh, Thorin leaned against the wall of the structure as he listened with half an ear to the sound of furniture breaking about downstairs and Nori’s question of who exactly was supposed to pay for a damaged sideboard, Bombur who had been sitting on it, or Bofur who had apparently tossed him a sausage which seemed to be the downfall of said broken table.

Shaking his head, he tuned out the sound of the laughter below and leaned back against the wall, glancing back down at the view in general just in time to see Bilbo reaching the small landing between the stairs cases.

Bilbo couldn’t see Thorin hidden in the shadows on the side of the building, out of sight but it didn’t matter since Bilbo didn’t turn in his direction, instead looking out over the scenery once again.

Gandalf’s voice soon echoed out from a walkway down below them and Thorin groaned slightly to himself. He had almost forgotten about this particular conversation.

“I think you can trust that I know what I am doing,” Gandalf was insisting to Lord Elrond next to him as they walked down the path below the terrace Bilbo and Thorin were on.

“Do you?” Elrond demanded. “That dragon has slept for 60 years. What will happen if your plan should fail, if you wake that beast?”

“What if we succeed?” Gandalf countered and Thorin couldn’t help but snort. They had almost failed miserably and- what was Gandalf talking about now?

‘Defenses?’ Thorin stood straighter as he focused his attention to the two below, stepping out of the shadows and moving closer to the rail to hear better. He did not remember this part of the conversation. Defenses against what exactly? Did Gandalf know about what the Necromancer was planning? Did he know of the war that was to come?

“Oh, come, the throne of Erebor is Thorin’s birthright. What is it you fear?” Gandalf pressed gently.

It was at this moment that Bilbo glanced behind him and Thorin met his gaze, just for a moment before they both turned back to the conversation below.
“Have you forgotten?” Elrond practically growled. “A strain of madness runs deep in that family. His grandfather lost his mind. His father succumbed to the same sickness. Can you swear Thorin Oakenshield will not also fall?”

Oh yes, the madness of the Line of Durin. It was typical of an elf to bring up that sensitive subject.

The voices below faded slightly as the two began climbing the stairs to the gazebo on the hill opposite them.

Bilbo watched them for a long while, shifting from foot to foot uneasily before glancing at Thorin who was still standing behind him rather than storming away to brood as before.

Clearing his throat, Bilbo turned back around and placed his hands on the wall before him, leaning on it slightly. “So…” he began uneasily.

“It’s true you know,” Thorin spoke into the following silence.

Bilbo startled and turned to face him, his blue eyes meeting Thorin’s for a moment before they widened ever so slightly and his gaze went back to the stones beneath their feet. “Uh- What is?” he finally asked, his voice cracking just slightly with apparent nervousness.

“My family,” Thorin elaborated. “My grandfather did indeed go quite mad.”

Bilbo stared in surprise. “O-oh?”

Thorin nodded. “The family was suspicious long before Smaug even appeared at our mountain. Grandfather had started withdrawing from all of us, spending less and less time with my father and our family and instead spent every moment he could secluded in the treasure room.”

Bilbo gave Thorin a sympathetic look before he started shuffling again restlessly. “And your father?”

Thorin nodded. “The loss of Erebor hit him almost as hard as Grandfather and Moria…” he sighed and rubbed his forehead with his fingers to try and abate some of the ache he felt there. “It seemed to have been the last straw.”

Bilbo made a sympathetic noise and after a moment, Thorin felt a hand coming to rest on his shoulder.

“I am sorry for your loss,” Bilbo said sincerely when Thorin met his gaze.

Thorin nodded in thanks before he straightened again. “I hope this means you won’t think too badly of me in the future, especially if Elrond’s fears prove well founded?”

For his credit, Bilbo actually looked surprise. “You don’t truly believe that,” he waved off before he glanced up at Thorin apprehensively. “Do you?”

Thorin repressed a shudder, remembering things he would much rather be able to forget. Holding his sword against Bilbo, dangling Bilbo off the mountain…

“Let us just say that I would rather you be prepared for the worst,” he said tiredly. He patted Bilbo’s shoulder reassuringly as the Hobbit’s worry began to show in his expression. “It is true that madness does run in my family. I can only hope that while they try their best to follow in my footsteps, Fíli and Kíli take after their father’s family more so than our own.”
Bilbo took a small step back and looked at Thorin critically, as if he could possibly spot exactly what it was that would drive Thorin to madness on his person. “You don’t seem crazy to me…” Bilbo admitted finally. He gave Thorin a teasing grin. “A bit too stubborn and far too irritable in my opinion, but far from crazy.”

“Things can change long before you even realize what is happening,” Thorin told him firmly, watching as the smile disappeared from Bilbo’s face and the worry returned.

“Are you?” Bilbo suddenly demanded. “Are you going to… succumbed to the same sickness as your father and grandfather?”

Looking at the determination and resolve on Bilbo’s face, Thorin could only answer him honestly. “In time, yes.”

Bilbo’s eyes flew wide in surprise and just a hint of grief.

“Which is why you must promise that should I start to act unlike myself, you will take steps to correct the matter should it seem as if I am about to do something I would later regret, deeply.”

Confusion replaced the sadness. “What steps? What can I possibly do?”

Thorin shrugged. “I honestly don’t know. Lock me in a closet, have the others hold me down until it seems as if reason comes to me once more, throw me in another sack if need be! Do anything and everything you must to keep me from hurting you- or anyone else,” he added quickly. “We must be ready for anything that might happen once we reach Erebor, including my loss of all sanity and sense.”

He tried to think of any and all scenarios that could have stopped him that fateful day in the mountain while Bilbo watched him concerned. “The others would be hesitant to go against me if I start issuing actual orders and decrees. I am King, after all and they’ve all grown up with the belief that anything the King says is law. They wouldn’t dare contradict me, not even Balin. That’s why you have to do something,” he explained. “If someone outside were to look at your position objectively, they would conclude that you are, in essence, simply an employee under contract with the kingdom of Erebor, not a citizen yourself. You are not subjected to our laws and have no obligation to obey me.”

“And just how am I to wrestle you into a closet and keep you there?” Bilbo inquired before a slight flush rose on his cheeks. “Don’t answer that.”

Thorin contemplated the puzzle. “Best have Nori help you then. He doesn’t follow the law as it is. I’m sure between the two of you, you will come up with a way to make me see reason.”

“Thorin,” Bilbo grabbed his arm again, his gaze searching Thorin’s face for something only he could see. He must have found it for the hand gave a slight squeeze and his expression turned sorrowful. “I’ll speak to Nori whenever we have a moment alone,” he agreed. “If we start to suspect… something- Well, we’ll deal with it when the time comes.”

Thorin couldn’t help but feel relief at Bilbo’s acceptance. He brought up his opposite hand and covered Bilbo’s own on his arm in gratitude. “You can never allow me to harm you, Bilbo,” he said sincerely. “Promise if you can’t subdue me, you will flee.”

The surprise was back. “Thorin–”

“Promise me,” he pressed.
Bilbo swallowed thickly as the silence stretched between them. “I promise.”

The tension flowed out of Thorin’s body and he dropped his head until he was almost pressing his forehead against Bilbo’s own, stopping mere inches from following through with the motion. “Thank you.”

Bilbo gave him a wan smile. “You’re welcome.”

The moment ended and Thorin pulled back, allowing Bilbo to drop his arm. The two stood there awkwardly for a moment.

“Dare I ask how much money we are leaving for the elves to compensate the loss of furniture?” Thorin tried to change the subject.

Bilbo smiled. “Bofur may very well be leaving his entire purse with the way things have been going.”

Thorin chuckled. “Pity that. There won’t be another town for quite sometime and nowhere for them to peddle their toys to compensate.”

“If there won’t be a town, then it won’t mater if they have coin or not as there won’t be anyplace to spend it,” Bilbo countered.

“Very true,” Thorin agreed with a smile.

Bilbo smiled back before his face became serious once more. He glanced at the stairs for a moment before turning back to the now curious Thorin. “What happened earlier today?” Bilbo finally asked.

“Earlier?” Thorin asked genuinely puzzled. A lot had transpired that day, so it was a number of instances that Bilbo could be referring to.

“At the painting,” Bilbo elaborated. “With the sword. Narsil I think you called it?”

Thorin’s entire body stiffened. “Ah, that.” He cleared his throat to buy himself some time. He should have known there would be consequences for abandoning Bilbo as he did. “I am sorry for leaving you alone. It was merely a… surprise to find such a famous relic here in Rivendell.”

“Famous? I don’t believe I’ve ever heard of the blade Narsil. What battle is it from?”

Thorin’s expression turned serious. “The only one that mattered.”

“To who?” Bilbo asked.

“Everyone,” Thorin told him flatly. “I believe that mural was a depiction of the battle against Sauron.”

“The Last Alliance,” Bilbo spoke in surprise. “In Mordor.”

“Aye, The Great War,” Thorin nodded. “I understand that Elrond is a veteran of that fateful battle.”

Bilbo eyed Thorin critically. “Is that what surprised you?” he asked. “That Lord Elrond has the sword from such a significant battle?”

“What does it matter to me what Elrond does with a broken sword?” he dismissed lightly.
Bilbo’s gaze was unwavering. “Then what upset you so?”

“Nothing,” Thorin told him stubbornly.

“You’re lying,” Bilbo countered firmly. “You were afraid. You know something. What is it? Thorin—” He grabbed Thorin’s arm again and spun him around so they were facing each other once more. “What’s going to happen?”

Thorin froze, his gaze locked with Bilbo’s in a test of strength and will. Unfortunately his resolved wavered long before the Hobbit’s. He couldn’t keep it to himself any longer. He couldn’t tell Gandalf or Mahal forbid Elrond, even if they asked. But this, this was someone he could tell and Bilbo had asked.

“War,” he finally managed, forcing himself to say the word, his fear, aloud. “If the Necromancer Radagast spoke of manages what I suspect he’s trying to do, then war will encompass all the lands, just as it did during the Last Alliance. Only this time, there is no alliance to speak of. Not with all the races divided so vastly.”

Bilbo gasped, a tremor just starting to show on his figure. “War,” he croaked. “A great war? Another one?”

“If what I know is the truth, then yes. And it will spread further and wider than the first. Possibly even to your Shire with the increasing number of Orcs pressing out of Mordor.”

“We – we have to tell someone! Thorin, we have to warn them!”

“I think some already know,” Thorin admitted, gripping Bilbo’s shoulder reassuringly and gesturing to where they had overheard Gandalf and Elrond speaking with his other hand.

“If the dwarves take back the mountain our defenses in the east will be strengthened’,” Bilbo quoted Gandalf’s earlier words, realization in his eyes.

“As far as I know, we are doing something,” Thorin reassured him. “Though if it is the right thing has yet to be seen.”

“Is this the reason you’ve been polite to Elrond and the other elves? You’re trying to re-establish the alliances that were lost?”

“Part of it, yes,” Thorin answered; pleased that Bilbo was able to comprehend everything that Thorin had told him so quickly. “You must not say anything to the others,” he suddenly announced, startling Bilbo. “I don’t want them knowing. Not yet. Especially Balin. This will place far too much pressure on them and the journey is perilous as it is.”

“The Orcs,” Bilbo realized. “They’re trying to stop us from reclaiming Erebor. To keep the eastern borders vulnerable.”

Thorin ignored the small part of him that was pleased that Bilbo used the phrase “us” rather than “you”, including himself so readily in this matter.

“Among other things, yes.”

“But I don’t understand. How is it that Erebor is such a pivotal piece if it’s just one mountain?”

“War costs money,” Thorin explained. “And we can provide aid to the Ironhills who would most likely be one of the main weapon’s smiths to arm all the troops. The revenue our mines would
produce alone would sustain everyone. And if Fíli and the others can gain aid from the other dwarrows after we free Erebor, after we prove that it can be done, they may also be able to reclaim Moria, which means Mithril. Do you not see? Every decision we make now can impact decisions to be made later on.”

“Fíli?” Bilbo repeated slightly dazed. “Why would Fíli have to make such a plea?”

“Because he’ll be king,” Thorin replied, as if it were obvious. “Along with Kíli of course.”

Bilbo seemed thrown by that information. “So you do not think the war will be for quite some time yet then?”

Thorin shook his head, watching the hope in Bilbo’s eyes fade. “It could happen at any moment. Even by the end of the year. I do not know exactly when, but it will be sooner than we will be ready for.”

“The end of the year…?” Bilbo was confused again. “But what about—”

Thorin jolted back at the sudden screaming.

Stumbling slightly over his own feet as he stepped away from Bilbo, Thorin tried to regain his bearings as the voices continued to shriek in his head. Bilbo was saying something to him but he couldn’t hear the hobbit over the roaring in his ears. Something was definitely wrong but what? Bilbo was next to him, the others were all downstairs laughing and Gandalf—

With a start, he whirled about and stared in shock at the gazebo across the way where Gandalf and Elrond had disappeared, the voices all ringing over one another as they shouted at him.

He could see it. The strange tower surrounded by the burning forest as Orcs scurried about building weapons and enormous catapults. Above it all standing on the top of the tower looking down upon them was a figure in white.

“He’s here!”

“The Betrayer!”

“The Demolisher!”

“He’s here!”

“Don’t let him see you!”

“Don’t let him find you!”

“He’s here!”

“Run!”

“Run!”

“Run!”

“RUN!”

Thorin ran.
“Thorin! Thorin slow down!” Bilbo called out after him as he thundered down the steps. “This is becoming rather commonplace!”

Thorin didn’t pay attention to Bilbo’s frustration as he swept into the main room of their suit and moved right for his pack. He didn’t bother noticing how everyone went quiet and still at his sudden appearance as he started mentally going over his list of things he still needed to do.

‘We’ve only been here three days. How is it that all our stuff gets everywhere in such a short time?’ Thorin thought to himself as he hunted down one of his vambraces and threw them into his pack, the soft sound of Bilbo’s voice speaking to the others barely registering in his mind.

Finding his overcoat draped over one of the larger chairs he immediately put it on as his gaze looked over at the sacks of food that had been acquired. “Bombur, are all the provisions secured?” he called out absently.

He barely listened for the affirmative before already sweeping into the bedroom he had shared with his nephews and some of the others, finding what few items that had been strewn about. Retrieving his belt from under one of the beds where it had been kicked, he barely noticed the others had begun darting hurriedly about the room as well.

“Glóin, see that the money is left somewhere Lindir can find it easily,” he ordered as he reentered the main room.

Glóin’s voice muttered something that Thorin took to be an acknowledgement.

His sword was secured to his waist along with his axe and knives and Thorin felt instantly improved now that he was appropriately armed and went about finding his oilskin.

It took perhaps ten minutes to collect all of his belongings before the urgency finally abated and Thorin was able to think again without the voices pressing him to hurry, hurry, hurry!

Shaking himself out of his daze, Thorin turned to issue the order for everyone to pack their own gear when he found his entire company already standing at the door, fully clothed once more with packs already slung on shoulders.

“Oh!” he blinked at them. “Well done then. We have to hurry. Gandalf will be stuck with the council but the longer the meeting goes on, the further ahead of them we will be. Dwalin, douse the fire. Fíli, Kíli, get the candles.”

The three quickly moved to their assigned tasks as Thorin started ushering the others out the door.

“What is going on laddie?” Balin prodded him as he approached, gesturing to where Bilbo watched him concerned. “Bilbo said something startled you mightily.”

“It seems we are not the only ones to visit Rivendell this night,” Thorin told him and in turn the group at large. “I believe someone in more of a position to stop us then Elrond has arrived and we must leave before he finds us here.”

“There are not many who frighten ye lad,” Balin lowered his voice to say. “Least not to this extent.”

Thorin’s eyes met Bilbo’s and he could see his own fear and panic reflected back at him.

“This is one of them,” he admitted.
Dwalin and the boys returned as everyone waited on the small patio for instructions. “We’ll make for the small trail above us,” he pointed to where he remembered the small mountain path they had used last time. It was earlier than when they had left before; back then dawn had only just begun to glow over the horizon. This time, they were leaving under the cover of full night.

“Bofur, Nori and Dwalin will lead the way. Glóin, you and Bifur watch our rear flank. If it seems as if anyone makes to follow us, let me know immediately.”

“Gandalf will likely wonder why we have gone so quickly,” Balin continued as the others scrambled to get into their assigned positions.

“He will not be surprised,” Thorin told him. “Besides, they have their own problems to worry about. We must use it to our advantage and leave while they are else occupied.”

“What could possibly have the elves attention so completely?” Óin asked incredulously.

Thorin met Bilbo’s gaze again and both of them turned as one to give Óin a look of apprehension. “Something that I pray never happens at all,” Thorin began firmly and resolutely. “Something that I am determined to stop.”

He turned and began following the others through what passed as alleyways in Rivendell before finishing his pledge to himself.

“At any cost.”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter 32 now has art from the wonderful Akahime4 so go check it out!

And quadrad has started a time travel fic of their own staring Fíli and Kíli called Double Trouble Again


Verdicts and Vegetation

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Breakfast was a dismal affair. Even when traveling on the road with the bare minimum of supplies, Dáin had eaten far better breakfasts than what he was presented that morning. This was not what he was expecting, what any of them had been expecting.

He would admit that whenever he received a letter from his cousins Thorin and Dís pertaining to their living circumstances and asking for any assistance that he or any of the others could give them, Dáin always believed that they were over exaggerating.

As he now stared down at the meager bowl of mashed gruel and a tiny, rock hard piece of bread he was served in what constituted as the great hall of the people of Nogrod formerly of Erebor, Dáin could only think that they had horribly understated their plight.

Young Lord Bilgin and he shared a horrified look as Dís’ people served the others at the great table. A simple glance around showed that they were given larger portions than the resident noble dwarrows as per custom. Dáin had never resented custom more than in that moment.

Even their own guards looked reluctant to touch their meager servings. As if eating their breakfast was literally taking food from these people’s mouths. Ovip looked close to tears yet again as she slowly nibbled on her bread roll.

Dáin wasn’t feeling any better as he looked back down at his bowl. He couldn’t help but wince at the thought of the wagon he had made Ovip leave behind with the extra food in it. Food that was most likely gone now, eaten by wild animals or just rotted from being in the sun.

The past few weeks in Norgrod had been rather hard on everyone in their group. Who would have ever, ever believed that the strong, hardy people of Erebor – the most prosperous and sturdiest of kingdoms in the dwarf realms – would have been brought so low? Even human beggars in the streets of their cities had more than these people had.

The houses were not even houses! Mostly they consisted of three poorly constructed wood walls leaning against the mountain face with a forth slab precariously balanced on the top to act as a roof. Children ran barefoot through the slick mud that Dáin supposed were roadways of some sort and everyone; child, adult and the elderly were wearing clothes that were so worn down no one could tell what their original color was anymore.

It was as if someone had come along and faded out a tapestry, removing everything that had made it so vibrant and beautiful. Instead everything was just… gray; shadows of their once colorful vibrancy.

The only building that was a building at all was the main hall. Dáin guessed it was the first and only building anyone had spent any time constructing. It was also where his guards and the Rangers were staying, sleeping on little cots that had been scrounged up.

Dáin and his son, along with Ovip and Bilgin were staying with Dís in her own home, which wasn’t any better condition than the great hall. It was more like a small cottage then what one imagined the home of the royal family to be.

Dáin and Thorin were using Fíli and Kíli’s beds and Bilgin was staying in the older Thorin’s room.
while Ovip bunked down with Dís. They were all practically living on top of one another in the five tiny rooms the building consisted of. For Mahal’s sake, Dáin could have fit the whole house in his personal bathing chamber alone!

It was insane! Dwarrows living outside a mountain! But on that second day since their arrival, Dís had some of the head miners show them what consisted of the former city of Nogrod; one giant pile of rock and a very large, deep hole with seemingly no bottom. The tunnels and corridors were all caved in and the ones that were still clear showed signs of collapsing themselves any minute.

Indeed, the once mighty people of Erebor were in dire straights.

Dís was currently seated at the head of the table, not even looking at the small spoonfuls of slop in her bowl as she spoke to her head guard Simim or Simkon or whatever, making their plans to follow after Thorin.

The whole kingdom was already getting packed up and ready to move back to Erebor per Thorin’s orders back at Belegost but Dís was getting a small group to head on ahead to find out just what kind of damage her brother had left in his wake, starting with the hobbits and this Bilbo burglar or whatever Thorin made off with.

The guard who’s name Dáin couldn’t remember finally left and Dís turned back to the table. “Will you be needing extra guards for your return trip or will you be able to handle yourselves?” she asked without preamble.

Young Thorin jerked upright. “Our return trip?” he repeated confused.

“Back home,” Dís returned sharply before turning to Bilgin. “I can only assume you’re done with your inquiry into our claims. As you can see,” she waved her hand indicating the hall, “we weren’t embellishing our living situation. You yourselves were attacked by Orcs on the road and I believe you even interviewed the Rangers.”

Bilgin and Dgol shared a look while the Rangers looked anywhere but at the other occupants at the table. Dáin knew they had already agreed to travel back to the lower lands with Dís and her people, as they knew the hobbit that had written her.

“Look,” Dís sighed as she straightened in her chair. “I am very sorry, but we just can not handle visitors right now. Thank you for at least giving Thorin the benefit of the doubt and coming all this way to investigate our claims but this changes nothing. Thorin has already left for Erebor along with my own sons. Any aid you decided to finally grant us is useless to them now. Meanwhile, Nogrod will be empty at the end of next month to follow after my brother while I myself would like to leave tomorrow morning and go to this… what is it called?”

“Shire,” Ranger Wyn supplied. She nodded in thanks.

“Thank you for your concern Princess Dís,” Bilgin began diplomatically. “But I do not believe we will need any further assistance from you. My guards and I shall be able to find our own way home and I shall report to my father everything I have found here.”

“Don’t trouble yourselves,” Dís scoffed. “You never have before.”

Bilgin glared at her but didn’t respond.

“And you cousin? Lady Ovip? I don’t mean to rush you but will you be able to leave tomorrow as well?” Dís asked turning to Dáin and Ovip.
Dáin frowned and pushed his bowl away towards his son before turning to the Princess. “Actually, I had wondered if we might leave with you and your party tomorrow? Considering we’re all going in the exact same direction, I thought you might like the company,” he suggested.

Dís lowered her spoon and stared at him suspiciously. “You wish to join us?” she asked slowly. “Why? We’ll be traveling slower than normal as we’re going to be tracing Thorin’s steps and seeing exactly what that wizard has gotten him into.” She scooped up more of her gruel. “It was that wizard that got us all in this mess in the first place,” she muttered under her breath. Wyn and Adan raised eyebrows but refrained from saying anything.

“Nevertheless,” Dáin persisted. “As the roads are becoming more dangerous, perhaps it would be best to travel together.” He gave her what he hoped was a disarming smile. “Safety in numbers and all.”

“You just want to poke your nose in our business as usual, you gossip,” Dís shook her head.

Dáin’s smile widened. “You do know me so well.”

“Don’t sass me,” Dís glared at him. “I get enough of that from my sons, I don’t need more from you too.”

Dáin’s smile dropped while his son hid one of his own behind his hand.

Ovip glanced at Ketola before turning back to Dís. “Perhaps… if you wouldn’t mind we would like to also tag along. At-at least to the Shire. I’m very curious about these hobbits in their little hill homes. I’ve never even heard of these creatures before!”

Dís sighed as she scrapped the bottom of her bowl. “You’re lords and ladies in your own rights, I can’t tell you where to go or not to go. If you wish to travel to the Shire that’s your business.” Shaking her head, Dís set her bowl aside. “I’m not so sure this Hobbit would be amenable to more dwarrows invading his home however.”

“Actually, Hobbits are very hospitable creatures. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind visitors,” Adan offered helpfully. He received a dark glare from Dís for his trouble and young Thorin had to hide his smile his again. It was so much more fun when it wasn’t him getting the angry mom glare.

For what it was worth, Thorin was very curious about these Hobbits as well, especially after reading the other Thorin’s letter about Bilbo.

He couldn’t wait to meet them.

Hobbits were infuriating creatures.

Thorin stared at the small pink flower being held out to him for a moment before following the arm that held it back up to Bilbo’s smiling face, still as baffled at the gift as ever.

This was not the first time Bilbo had given him one and it was just as perplexing now as it had been then. After the fourth one, Thorin had tried to hand back the gift but Bilbo had been strangely determined for him to take them. After that, he had started looking around to see if he could hand the thing off to someone else only to find the whole Company, every single last one of them, grinning at him and refusing to even let Thorin hold out the whatever-color-of-the-day flower he had been gifted for them to take.

If Bilbo struck up a conversation about the flowers, Thorin would assume the hobbit was trying to
correct his lack of plant knowledge. But every morning, he was simply handed a flower of unknown origin and nothing more was said.

With a sigh, Thorin decided to just let Bilbo have his little quirk and accepted the fragile thing. Because honestly, what else could he do?

“Thank you,” Thorin said and Bilbo’s smile grew wider, if that was possible, before he headed off to assist Bombur with breakfast as it had now become a rather long process with such a smaller pot. Thank goodness the large dwarf had accepted the strange folding cooking pot from Bilbo or it would have been nothing but cold rations as the first time around since Bombur had lost his larger pot with the ponies.

Balin approached him with two bowls of warm oatmeal as Thorin shoved the stem of today’s latest flower in one of his coat clasps. He’d dispose of it that night when the hobbit wasn’t looking.

“Are we going to keep going or are we finally waiting for Gandalf?” Balin asked curiously even as he glanced at the latest flower adorning Thorin’s apparel and Thorin suppressed another sigh.

“We shall continue onward,” he answered his friend as he finally got the delicate stalk to sit straight and accepted his breakfast. “We can’t allow ourselves to delay our travels and Gandalf is more than capable of catching up to us.”

‘Along with figuring out how to get us there,’ he thought sourly as he shoveled his food mechanically into his mouth.

While Thorin had been pressing them ahead ever since Rivendell, he had been slow about it while he tried to figure out the best way to deal with the upcoming issues he knew were further over the mountain range. He had finally come to the conclusion that morning to drag out their traveling so as to arrive at the small cliff trail after the storm and the following Thunder-battle. If Gandalf wanted them to take back Erebor so badly, he could figure out how to get there without having to encounter the foul Goblins.

So why was it that he was getting that sour feeling in the pit of his stomach since coming to that conclusion? There was nothing gained by falling down into the Goblin’s town save perhaps a shortcut through the last of the Misty Mountains. Surly being a day behind wasn’t that crucial? They could make up the difference later. ‘Perhaps it had to do with the Eagles?’

Thorin continued to ponder over the foreboding feeling he was getting throughout the rest of breakfast and as they all packed up the last of their camp.

He was just picking up his pack and shouldering it when the sound reached them.

Everyone froze in mid-motion, wondering if they truly had heard what they thought they heard.

It didn’t take long for a second, wailing howl to answer the first and Thorin blinked in surprise before scrambling for his gear along with everyone else. ‘Blast it all! All the delay allowed for them to catch up to us faster!’

There were more warg howling but strangely enough, it didn’t sound as if it was getting any closer. In fact, it sounded as if it was just echoing off the mountain walls around them.

“How far behind do you think they are?” he asked Dwalin and Glóin.

“Not far but not close either,” Glóin answered. “It would take them some hours yet to reach us if we were to remain here.”
“Not that we’re going to. Hurry up!” Dwalin snapped at Ori who was frantically trying to put away his writing items as fast as possible. Most of it ended up on the ground rather then in his pack and Bifur was scooping up a few escaping items and helping the panicked scribe.

“If they’ve caught our trail, they’ll be upon us soon enough,” Nori declared as he handed Dwalin his pack. “Once they’ve caught a scent, they don’t stop until they’ve run it down.”

“Either way, it’s clear we’re being tracked,” Balin agreed. “Best to put as much distance as we can. It’s as you said, Gandalf will have to catch up at a later time.”

“It will be harder for them to find us in the cliffs,” Nori continued. “Some of those trails are narrow enough that no four footed creature can possibly traverse them.”

Thorin meanwhile was thinking frantically. ‘There’s still a few days before the rain is upon us again. Surly we can delay at some point. And if we wait until after the rain, we won’t have to seek shelter in any of the caves that might hold more Goblin traps.’

He pursed his lips together in frustration as they were forced to leave earlier than he had intended for them to. Honestly, what was the point of coming back to re-live this year if everything just played out as it had before?

‘No. I shouldn’t think like that,’ he chastised himself as Balin consulted his map and compass and pointed in a vague like direction, a direction that would lead them to the thrice damned stone giants and the goblin town.

‘Besides, what are the odds we’ll end up in the middle of the thrice damn thunder-battle again?’

Chapter End Notes

... yeah... I actually had chapter 38 for MONTHS but something in me just wouldn't let me post it and before I knew ITF just fell by the wayside. Slowly sliding back into the Hobbit fandom, I took a look at what I had written and realized that it was a good thing I hadn't posted because it just did not fit the story... at all... so I scrapped the whole thing and had to start all over again. After weeks of juggling my chapter outline and writing and re-writing and re-writing again, this is what came out. I hope you all enjoyed it!

EDIT: Do I still need the name chart for Dáin and Dís' group? And wow! We haven't seen them since chapter 25
‘We’re going to end up in that thrice damned thunder-battle,’ Thorin thought irritably as he found his bedroll for the night.

It had been six days since they first heard the Warg’s baying and they’d pressed forward nearly every day thereafter with the sound following their every footstep. Each day they traveled took them closer to the trail that led them into the midst of the stone giants and each night that passed they could feel the atmosphere become heavy with moisture.

Tomorrow evening the rain would fall and the Stone-Giants would begin their battling.

And tomorrow, Thorin’s company would start down the trail that would take them right into the middle of it.

Thorin couldn’t think of a way to delay any longer. There was no sign of Gandalf anywhere and the trail was the only way left for them to go.

‘What am I doing wrong?’ He thought miserably as he watched the firelight. ‘If I was brought here to change things, why is it that I feel as if nothing has?’

He sighed as he rolled over away from the light and tried to get comfortable on the hard ground.

‘What is it that I’m supposed to do? What is it that I’m supposed to change? Or am I not going to be able to change anything until we arrive at Erebor and start to search for the cursed ring?’

With a sigh, he fingered the small white flower Bilbo had given him that morning. Aside from his improved relationship with Bilbo and perhaps an elf or two, Thorin couldn’t figure out what, if anything, he was doing to help the Valar.

If it didn’t have anything to do with the journey and only Erebor, why was it he was sent so far back to the start of the journey? What was it they wanted from him? Why couldn’t they just tell him?

Setting the soft flower aside, he closed his eyes in a vain attempt to sleep.

‘We may be being forced into a faster pace, but there’s no way in Mahal’s forge that we’re going to Goblin-town,’ he decided firmly. ‘The singing is absolutely appalling.’

There was an unconscious Goblin in front of him.

Thank goodness he was dreaming or he would never have heard the end of the teasing he would have gotten for the scream he had let out.

‘Why am I always screaming in these?’ Thorin wondered curiously. Then the twisted little gray creature appeared from a dark hole. ‘Oh, that’s why.’

He sighed and looked around, trying to get his bearings. ‘We must be near the Goblin-town if one of them is here,’ he reckoned as he looked up at the small sliver of light above them. ‘Under it, perhaps.’

He turned back to watch as the creature circled the groaning Goblin before it started hauling the foul thing away. The Goblin suddenly sitting up startled Thorin as much as it did the gray creature
but the smaller being recovered and reached for a rock, bashing it against the snarling Goblin’s head.

Thorin couldn’t figure out why he was watching such a scene. So the gray creature had dwelled close to the Goblins, what did that have to do with anything? It didn’t explain how the ring it came to be at Erebor under a dragon, unless it was the creature Irmo wanted him to focus on. But what did the creature have to do with anything?

Then he saw the ring fly out of the creature’s loincloth while it struggled against the Goblin and bounce against the stone floor before coming to rest at Thorin’s feet. Despite the fact that the ring wasn’t actually there, he couldn’t help but recoil from the small band of gold.

This was it.

The ring of legends.

The ring of darkness.

The ring to rule them all.

The One Ring.

He could now understand why it was everyone was so leery of the ring, even with its master dead and dust. Even in a dream, the power of the ring practically soaked into Thorin’s skin with its dark taint.

The Durin ring had been lost with his father but Thorin could remember it from his childhood. It had practically radiated with its own light and had always felt warm when he held his father’s hand.

This was ice cold and seemed to drain the light that surrounded it, plunging the area further into darkness.

He stared at it for a moment while the creature and the Goblin disappeared around the rock wall, still as baffled as before as to what he was watching and more importantly when this had all taken place.

‘Is this when the ring was brought to Erebor?’ Thorin thought, puzzled as he stared down at the cool band of gold. ‘Who would have found it in such a place though? What dwarf would have ever even bothered traveling these tunnels?’

There was a sound behind him but before he could turn to see, the scene shifted and the creature was before him again, cooing in delight and staring straight at him.

Thorin jerked back in surprise and stifled another scream.

“Oh, we love games, doesn’t we, precious?” the creature announced with utter glee. “Does it like games? Does it, does it? Does it like to play?”

‘The thing is mad,’ Thorin realized as he watched it giggle in sheer delight.

“Maybe,” a voice stated behind him and Thorin whirled around. He knew that voice!

Bilbo Baggins, Sting held straight out in a tight, two handed grip that was frankly appalling, stood before him in all his glory - dirt, scratches and all.

“What are you-?” Thorin voice choked off mid-word as his hand went through the hobbit and he remembered that he was in a dream. Utterly bewildered, he took in Bilbo’s appearance.
This wasn’t the Hobbit that had said good night to him just a few scant hours before. Burgundy velvet coat, stained green vest and brown, tattered trousers adorned the hobbit rather than the sturdier traveling pants and leather down-coat covered in pockets that he wore now.

This was the Bilbo from before. The year before, the year Thorin had already lived. The year he was living again now.

He glanced between the two, trying to figure out what exactly was going on. Bilbo knew the creature? Had met him the last time they traveled? Why hadn’t he ever said anything to Thorin? To anyone about this?

He listened with half an ear as the two began to speak in riddles, literally.

‘Bilbo is the one who met the creature? But… but the ring…’

His eyes widened as he remembered the sound he had heard behind him when he was gazing down at the forgotten ring.

‘No! It couldn’t be! He didn’t!’

Shocked and a bit in denial, he watched as Bilbo looked around frantically for the gray creature as it’s voice echoed around them. “All things it devours; Birds, beasts, trees, flowers. Gnaws iron, bites steel. Grinds hard stones to meal. … Answer us.”

“Give me a moment, please. I gave you a good long while,” Bilbo called, clearly frustrated and began going over the riddle. “I don’t know this one,” he announced and Thorin felt his heart still. Didn’t the creature say if Bilbo lost he would eat him? But no, something had to happen. Bilbo met up with them outside the mountain the last time, didn’t he?

“It’s stuck. Bagginses is stuck.”

It suddenly dawned on Thorin. ‘He met up with us… he wasn’t with us during the fight in Goblin-town. It was only after Gandalf was so angry with us that any of us even realized he was missing. So… where was he during all that time?’

Thorin looked between them, an uneasy feeling of dread beginning to form in the pit of his stomach as the creature grinned back at Bilbo. “Time’s up.”


The creature growled and Thorin couldn’t help a triumphant smirk. He knew Bilbo would get it.

“Last question,” the creature rumbled. “Last chance.”

He glanced back at Bilbo worryedly. Thorin could never understand riddles. He had enough trouble trying to ascertain what the Valar wanted him to do without having to puzzle out actual riddles.

“What have I got in my pocket?”

Thorin’s eyes went so wide it almost hurt and a sharp, cold chill shot down his spine. “You did!” he couldn’t help but speak aloud. “You picked it up! You have the ring. All this time and it was you who…”

Thorin ignored the two still arguing about the riddle as his mind whirled with the implications. If Bilbo had the ring, if it was Bilbo who found it and took it from the Misty Mountains and back into
the world proper while a Necromancer searched for it…

‘Never mind the Necromancer,’ he thought wildly. ‘How was Bilbo even able to carry the one ring without going insane. If he had it when facing Smaug… how was it no one knew he had it? How did Gandalf not know he had it?’

The creature’s wail pulled him out of his thoughts and he watched in horror as comprehension dawned on the creature’s face.

“What has it got in its nasty little pocketses?”

Bilbo did the only sensible thing as the creature hurled a rock at him. He turned and fled leaving Thorin no choice but to follow.

It was a maze of tunnels that had no distinct pattern to them. Mahal himself must have created these passageways since nothing looked to have been touched by chisel or pickax. Thorin was starting to get a bad feeling about this again.

Bilbo was able to lose the scuttling creature as they ran but it knew these tunnels better than the Hobbit did and soon enough, he and Thorin were halted by a dead end.

There was a small crack in the wall to the left and Bilbo instantly took advantage of it. Or rather tried to.

Thorin groaned as the Hobbit became stuck and the creature caught up to them. Between one blink and the next, Thorin found himself on the other side of the crack Bilbo was trying to get through. He watched as with a final heave, accompanied with the tinkling sound of metal hitting the rocks on the other side of the fissure, Bilbo finally managed to shove himself through the hole and land on his back.

The Ring flew out of his hand and Bilbo reach for it desperately.

Unexpectedly – unbelievably – the ring fell down in such a way that it slipped easily and unerringly onto Bilbo’s middle finger.

And right before Thorin’s eyes, Bilbo Baggins disappeared.

Startling awake, Thorin managed to bite down on the cry of surprise.

He didn’t move as he tried to get his bearings, separating what was from the dream and what was real around him. Dawn was only just cresting the horizon as he tried to understand what it was he had seen, listening with half an ear as the early risers went about getting ready for the day.

Bilbo had the One Ring. Or rather, he would have it. He didn’t have it now, there was no possible way he had it now.

Thorin recalled Bilbo’s surprise back at his hobbit hole when Thorin had mentioned being invisible and his immediate denial. “Ridiculous,” the hobbit had told him. “We’re simply quieter than most. We don’t go invisible.”

‘Hobbits aren’t invisible, the ring is what makes him disappear.’

Which meant it had to be true. Bilbo must have come across the ring during their travel from his home in the Shire to the Lonely Mountain. Which meant, if the dream was correct (and Irmo had
yet to make a mistake in them though Thorin didn’t always understand them) Bilbo had come across the One Ring in the cave under the Goblin-town.

_That_ was how he was able to free them from the dungeons in Mirkwood. _That_ was how he was able to evade Smaug in Erebor.

Bilbo Baggins possessed the Ring of Power.

Groaning, Thorin moved to get up. While it might have made him feel a bit better to simply toss his blanket off in a bit of pique, Thorin made sure to carefully push it off and slowly climbed to his feet. The _last_ thing he wanted to do was distress anyone.

“Good morning,” Bombur greeted him cheerfully from where he was setting up the small cook pot.

Thorin waved at him and Óin, who was also up and about, as he past. The two dwarrows shared a look, but Thorin didn’t have time to ponder about it as he made his way away from the camp, hoping the others were assuming he was just off to make water in bushes and wouldn’t follow him.

He continued on past what trees and small hills there were and around one of the larger boulders strewed about until he was positively sure that no one could see him. Only then did he shed off his coat and, after wadding it up into a ball, pressed to his face and screamed his aggravation into the fabric.

Things were more complex than he had originally assumed.

How did this latest piece of the puzzle fit into everything he had already learned and what did this mean for his task the Valar had given him?

Wait… _What_ was the task the Valar had given him?

Thorin had thought he knew, but did he?

Everything Thorin thought he had managed to finally grasp from the dreams was now irrevocably changed and as he stared down at the crumpled overcoat in his hands he came to one startling, alarming, _stunning_ conclusion.

It wasn’t Erebor he had to save.

It was Bilbo.
Thorin was quietly scaring the hell out of everyone.

Thorin scaring people was not necessarily a new concern, but usually he was doing it on purpose. Currently, Thorin wasn’t trying to do anything and that was what was so horrifying.

When Thorin had finally gotten up from his bedroll after laying there for an hour or so, clearly having been awaken from another dream, he had accepted his breakfast without a word. In fact, he hadn’t spoke to anyone the entire morning. They might have well not even been there for all the attention Thorin granted them, which was to say none at all. He just sat there, going through his morning motions with a perplexed if not resolute look on his face.

Kíli had never been so terrified in all his life.

The only time Thorin’s expression changed was when Bilbo had given him that morning’s flower, a bright yellow one this time.

Thorin looked as if he were about to cry.

That, in Kíli’s opinion, was so much worse then the thoughtful staring he had been doing just moments before.

Now however, with everyone packed up and ready to continue on their journey, Thorin stood at the end of the pathway leading down and around the mountain face and just scowled at it. As if it had done something to personally offend him.

Kíli wasn’t sure if he wanted to travel down the path any longer. He had been excited the night before but if Thorin was hesitating…

Fíli gave him a small poke and Kíli’s held breath left him in a whoosh.

“What?”

“He’s muttering,” Fíli told him and glancing back at Thorin. Kíli realized his brother was right, Thorin was muttering under his breath. Thorin never muttered. Their mother did on occasion, as did Balin but Thorin didn’t. He would just say outright whatever was on his mind.

The two shared another alarmed look before turning to Dwalin beseechingly.

The larger warrior let out a snort but made his way to Thorin’s side, Kíli and Fíli trailing behind him until they were close enough to hear their uncle.

“Perhaps if we go in groups of threes. No, there’s still a possibility of being separated on the knee.
We could hurry but the rain will slow us down either way so there’s no telling if we’ll be in front or behind, so it’s more then likely we’ll still be separated… Maybe if there was rope. DWALIN! Do we have rope?”

Kíli couldn’t help the jump he made as Thorin spun around only to find the dwarf he was looking for standing right behind him. “There you are,” Thorin blinked. “Do we have rope?”

“No since we lost the ponies,” Dwalin told him flatly.

“Well there goes that idea,” Thorin huffed as he turned back to the pathway.

“Do we need rope?” Kíli asked and honestly didn’t want answered.

“Hmm? No, not really. But maybe… no, that’s silly. The eagles might get offended.”

‘Eagles?’ Kíli frowned at that. Fíli and Dwalin looked just as puzzled.

Bilbo suddenly appeared at Fíli and Kíli’s side, shooting a worried look at Thorin before turning to them. “Is there something wrong with the path?”

“We honestly couldn’t tell you,” Fíli answered and they all turned back to Thorin.

Not to be deterred, Bilbo raised his voice and repeated his question at Thorin.

“What?” Thorin turned and seemed surprised to find them behind him staring. In fact, as Kíli glanced around, he realized that everyone was staring at Thorin and the path in equal parts alarm and anxiety.

“Oh. No, nothing is wrong with the path,” he reassured them and shoulders dropped with relief all around camp.

Kíli didn’t think he was suppose to hear the “yet” Thorin tacked on under his breath at the end and Fíli gripped his arm tightly in agitation.

“Then is there something else that’s troubling ye?” Dwalin inquired.

Thorin seemed to think about it for a moment. “We’re not sure the condition the path is in,” he finally told them. “And with rain possible later today, it could become treacherous. Someone could fall off the edge.”

Kíli returned Fíli’s tight grip. Who was going to fall? Could they catch them if they did?

“What do you propose to do about it then?” Dori asked, now looking at the path with his own distaste.

“We’re going to have to take it carefully. Bofur, you and your family know mountain trails, don’t you?”

“Aye,” Bofur nodded. “Traveled many of them from time to time. Most are safe but there are paths that become worse as time wears them down.”

“Do you think you could lead then?”

Bofur startled. “Lead?”

Kíli returned his brother’s wide-eyed stare. This couldn’t be good.
Thorin had scrapped every single preconception he had made and re-evaluated everything since he had re-awoke in Nogrod.

If it was Bilbo he had to save, then he should have waited to reclaim Erebor. There were clearly much larger problems to be had. But he had already given the order for Dís to follow them with their people. They could be even now on the road headed east.

What a mess.

And with the revelation the night before, Thorin had also had one foul realization. They would have to be captured in Goblin-town. The ring was the key and Thorin couldn’t do anything until Bilbo had the ring. They had to get the ring.

Which meant a trip through the stone giant’s playground and down the goblin trap.

But he’d be damned if he had such a fright as he had last time when he thought the stone giant had killed Fíli and the others that had been trapped on its knee. So a bit of rearranging had to be done.

Bofur and Bombur were leading, immediately followed by Fíli and Kíli, neither of them were ending up going for a ride on a giant while he could help it, hence they were at the front of the line. Bilbo was next and Thorin placed himself afterwards before having Ori on his other side followed by Dori.

Then Balin and Óin who were being followed by what Thorin admitted were the most resilient of their group, Glóin, Bifur, Nori, and Dwalin.

‘I hope it’s enough to get us through this,’ Thorin thought with a scowl as the rain poured down.

This was not something he wanted to do. Out of everything that had occurred during their travels, from the trolls to orcs to elves to the dragon, the only time Thorin had truly thought he had lost one of their own had been here on this ledge amongst giants of stone.

But they had to proceed. In order for Thorin to change anything, the ring had to fall into Bilbo’s hands.

If the ring remained in the creature’s possession, the Necromancer might, just might, be unable to find it. But if he did, then it would not be a game of riddles the two would engage in. The Necromancer would just take the creature’s head and be done with it.

No, the ring would be safer in their possession.

‘But will we be safer with it among us?’ Thorin had fretted. They had seemed fine in the second half of their journey. They had made it to Erebor in relative safety, elves and wine barrels aside. It hadn’t seemed as if anyone had been affected.

‘Except me!’

Thorin had nearly brought up his breakfast with that sudden thought. ‘My gold sickness! I had never succumb to it before even when I still yet lived in Erebor and Grandfather was amassing his treasure…’

He mulled over that as they continued down the winding path.

‘Could that have been it? The reason I failed? The reason I betrayed not only Bilbo and my
company, but even myself?’ Thorin snarled, startling Kili in front of him. ‘If I ever see Elrond again I am going to hit him where it really hurts. Why couldn’t he have just knocked Isildur unconscious and just taken the thrice blasted ring and tossed it in the fire himself?’

He began wondering at how they could best contain the ring’s dark power, or at least muffle it. ‘Perhaps a Mithril box.’

‘Thorin!’

‘What?’

Bofur allowed his brother and the boys to pass him at a small place where the path had widened out. ‘This rain is making it difficult for even someone like me to cross. We need to find shelter soon.’

“We can’t find shelter unless we press on,” Thorin countered.

“But yer having us going to fast for such conditions,” Bofur argued. “Do we really need to practically run the whole way?”

Thorin glanced around at the deep valley they were in. “Yes,” he said gravely. “In fact we should hurry even more. This is not a good place to be.”

“Why?” Bilbo asked over the rain, practically huddled against both Bofur and Thorin for shelter. With the rain coming right at them from the open side of the mountain however, it was a hopeless endeavor. Thorin gave him a consoling pat on the shoulder.

“LOOK OUT!” Dwalin’s voice echoed out from behind and Thorin instantly whirled around and looked upwards for the falling rock he knew was coming.

That was why the spear was a complete surprise.

He stared at it sticking out of his shoulder in stunned disbelief. “Where did that come from?” he muttered in shock before instinct kicked in and he shoved Bilbo into the small hollowed space behind Bofur and whirled back around to behind them.

Dwarrows! There were other dwarrows locked in combat with Bifur and Dwalin. Glóin was trying to assist but couldn’t get to them on the narrow path.

Rope appeared in front of them and three more dwarrows appeared in front of Bombur. One went for the large cook but the other two were only focused on one thing: Thorin’s nephews.

The ledge made sword work difficult but Kili could still shoot and he managed to get one in the chest, unfortunately it wasn’t a killing blow but it gave Fili enough time to pull out his daggers and bring one across the dwarf’s throat.

The second dwarf reached them the same time Thorin did and Orcrist made short work of that one as well.

He turned to the third one Bombur was bashing over the head with his cooking spoon when two more appeared down the rope.

“Kili!” Thorin shouted, still keeping half an eye on the dark sky above even as he parried a forward thrust attack. “Watch the ropes! Shoot anyone else who tries to come down.”
Bombur had fallen back and Bofur and Dori pressed forward as Thorin pulled Fíli behind him. Bofur’s mattock took slammed into the side of one’s head while Thorin managed to slice another’s hand clear off.

The screaming rang out over the storm and Kíli was shooting at yet another pair of dwarrows trying to climb down the rope. He needn’t have bothered though. The rock hit one dwarf dead on. Emphasis on dead.

The body plunged down with the falling rock shards and everyone, attacking dwarrows included, flattened themselves against the cliff wall.

“This is no thunderstorm!” Balin shouted out alarmed. “It’s a thunder-battle! Look!”

“Now they show up,” Thorin snarled as he dodged a wild swing from his unknown opponent. “Gawk later!” he snapped at Bofur and hauled the miner back from a wild swing of an axe of the latest dwarf that made it down the rope.

“The legends are true,” Bofur garbled back, shock all over his face. “Giants! Stone-Giants!”

“Be in awe of the giants when they’re not trying to kill each other and subsequently us!” Thorin bit out before finally thrusting Orcrist home and taking out the deranged, one-handed dwarf. “We have to move!” he shouted back.

He thought he heard Dwalin call back “Aye!” but who could tell over the sound of the rain and both battles going on?

Then the ground shift below him and he cursed under his breath. Hopefully they had moved far enough ahead. “Brace yourselves!” he shouted.

And the rock underneath them moved.

After that, it was just chaos. Thorin took a brief moment to look behind but couldn’t see between the rain and the bodies who had been left behind on the second knee of the giant. He didn’t have any more time then that to ponder as he pressed forward against the last two dwarrows in front of them. They had one chance to get off the knee and it was coming up fast.

“MOVE!” he bellowed as the knee slammed into actual rock of the mountain. He reached back and managed to snag Bilbo’s hood who in turn grabbed onto Ori and Thorin hauled the both of them over one of the attackers and onto stable ground. Oddly enough, Nori was the last one behind him after Balin.

Unfortunately, one of their attackers also made it. Kíli and Fíli were right on him along with Dori and Thorin took the moment to look back at those left behind.

Dwalin, Glóin, Óin and Bifur were still fighting what looked like four more opponents while they tried in vain to hang on to the wet rock. Less then last time but still frightening as this time there was the unknown factor of the attacking dwarrows.

Thorin held his breath as the knee slammed into the mountain.

There was screaming!

Watching the giant fall down the crevice, Thorin could see at least one dwarf-size body go tumbling down with it.
Scrambling, Thorin pressed ahead, shouting for the four they were missing the whole time.

‘Please let them have made it,’ he prayed. ‘You couldn’t have sent me back only to watch them die!’

They had indeed made it, all sprawled out on the rocks along with another dwarf.

Thorin instantly held Orcrist at the unknown’s throat. “Who are you?” He bellowed while the others scrambled to find their feet. “Why did you attack us?”

The dwarf simply sneered, showing off broken and missing teeth and Thorin pressed the blade closer. Blood welled at it’s tip at the dwarf’s jugular. “Answer me,” he snarled.

“THORIN!”

The push was unexpected and the sword went right into the other dwarf’s throat before there were shouts of stunned alarm from his entire company.

Whirling around, Thorin had just enough time to see yet another dwarf go tumbling over the edge, his hand clenched firmly on Bilbo’s coat pulling the hobbit with him.

“NO!” Thorin screamed and lunged.

By all the fates, Bilbo managed to snag a ledge just below them even as the weight of the dwarf clinging to him pulled him down.

Thorin reached frantically but as before, he was just out of reach. Thorin didn’t even think, he swung down just as an arrow flew down from above and struck the dwarf clinging to Bilbo.

As the dwarf fell, Thorin could see the glint of a sword and he realized that the dwarf had been going to attack either Bilbo or himself despite the precarious position they were all in.

Grabbing Bilbo’s down coat was easier than the old velvet dinner jacket he had worn before and Thorin practically hurled his hobbit onto safer ground.

Thorin was ready to catch himself as he had slipped the last time but realized that it would not happen this time as not only was Dwalin holding onto him, but Dori as well.

Thorin wasn’t so sure about this. Neither had gone near the other since Rivendell and the balcony kurfuffle.

Before anything could be said however, the two of them they systematically hauled his sodding arse back up onto the ledge with relative ease.

Thorin scrambled back towards the safety of the wall and found himself seated next to a pale Bilbo who was gasping for air. So was everyone actually, as they all stared at Thorin who in turned eyed the ledge where the dwarf had gone over.

“Well…” Thorin finally managed to gasp out as he gave Bilbo what he hoped was a reassuring smile, “that was different.”

The Company’s groaning was carried away with the wind.

Chapter End Notes
Dwarf Assassins! I went there!
Recuperation and Reactions

Chapter Notes

Yes, yes. I am a horrible, horrible, horrible person. I am sorry. :( I know this is SO late and to tell you the truth, I'm just as surprised as you are that there's a new chapter to this fic. Of course with a new transformers movie, you would think I would be working on that story but no... Thorin is a very persistent dwarf. *sigh*

Thank you all so very much for the reviews! I am so sorry I have not replied to any of them, just life in general has been very busy. There's been a wedding and a new baby in the family all within the last year (neither were mine just FYI). No time for the fan world. But I do thank you all for your encouragement.

(... Horrible person...)

*edit: changed the chapter title. it was bugging me a bit. :P

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Thorin stood under the rain, dripping both water and blood, and just glared at the dark gloom within the cave.

He did not want to go inside. He really, really didn’t. Going inside meant going to Goblin-town and Thorin detested Goblin-town.

Unlike the last time however, there were actual serious injuries instead of just bumps and bruises, with Thorin being the worse of the lot.

At some point during the fight, he had snapped off the end of the spear somehow and the metal tip had been pushed even further into his shoulder. Óin was even now prodding him to go into the cave so he could take a look at the wound out of the rain. Still, Thorin dug his heels in and refused to move.

It took Bilbo trying in vain to stop a sneeze that finally roused Thorin into moving. “Come on,” he said and hauled both Bilbo and a shaking Kíli with him.

“Thorin!” Dwalin yelped and scrambled after him before the three could disappear into the darkness. “We need to search it.”

“Then search it,” Thorin waved his friend forward even as he pulled Kíli and Bilbo further into the cave. “I’m frankly too tired at the moment.”

There was a pause while Dwalin borrowed a lamp from Bofur before the taller dwarf went to check the very back of the cave to see if there were any connecting tunnels that could be used against them. Thorin left him to it. The danger was under their very feet after all, but Dwalin wouldn’t find anything under the black sand. Which, now that Thorin thought about it, should have been their first clue that something was amiss.

Finding a somewhat flat area, he pushed Kíli down upon it and looked towards Fíli to come look after his brother. His eldest nephew practically flew to Kíli’s side, his own face pale as milk as he
sat down and gathered his lover to his chest. This was going to be hard on both of them. They had fought other creatures before and had killed when hunting but neither of them had ever killed one of their own. Never before had another dwarf ever attacked them. Thorin and Dís had always kept the two far away from anything that could possible turn into such a situation. There would be nightmares tonight.

As much as Thorin wished he could give them the time to come to grips with what they had done, he could not just yet. With the goblins ahead of them and the wargs immediately after, they had to be strong. Thorin had to be strong for them.

He waved Óin aside, much to the healer’s dismay, and moved beside his kin again, placing a hand on each shoulder to gain their attention. “I’m proud of you both,” he told them firmly. It was the truth after all.

Fíli managed a wan smile but Kíli just swallowed heavily and pressed his face against his brother’s shoulder and shook.

“Who were those ill-bred swine?” Dori asked the group in general as they peeled off wet clothes to get to their own scratches and wounds. Even Bilbo had one from his reckless plan of tackling the dwarf that had gone to stab Thorin in the back while on such a narrow ledge.

“There was nothing on the body we could get to,” Dwalin confirmed as he returned from his scout to stand undaunted next to Dori. “No identifying marks at all.”

Thorin had gotten the story from Bofur about their sudden tolerance for one another while Dwalin and Nori had gone over the only body that hadn’t gone down the ravine.

Apparently when the Stone-Giant they stood on had begun to move, Dwalin had hurled his lover to the other side and safety without even attempting to follow him. Dori was grudgingly impressed with the display. Nori was utterly furious over it, and he and Dwalin had argued for quite some time in hushed tones. Though Thorin couldn’t help but notice neither was moving from the other’s side and there were small reassuring touches every now and again. They were so smitten.

“Too bad we couldn’t interrogate at least one of them,” Balin said irritably as he peeled off his own coat from his claimed corner of the cave.

“The yellow-backed cowards got what they deserved,” Glóin snarled as he dropped a pile of wood on the ground for a fire. The last time Thorin had spoken against it, this time he hoped some of the burning pieces landed on a goblin’s head. Though it wouldn’t be pleasant if they were to land on it after the long fall.

He eyed the wood critically as Óin started pealing off Thorin’s overcoat to get to his wound. The grain of the wood was too smooth, too well-rounded. And there was what looked like an antler in there but clearly wasn’t bone at all. It took Thorin a moment to recognize it as a piece from a chair he had once sat on discussing Mirkwood and discourteous Wizards with Bilbo. “Are those pieces of furniture from Rivendell?”

“We paid for it,” Glóin countered and Thorin let it go.

“Why would they attack us?” Ori picked up the conversation again. “We posed no threat to them.”

“Aye, especially at such a precarious place and in the rain to boot,” Óin agreed as he yanked out the spearhead. Thorin grunted at the movement.

“Following us. Had to be,” Balin agreed. "There was no other reason for them to be here in this
exact location at this exact time that we would be passing through."

“Do you suppose they were why we kept hearing the Wargs?” Fíli asked anxiously. Kíli just
burrowed into his side and solemnly watched Óin work on Thorin’s shoulder as the healer pulled
Thorin’s shirt collar aside to see the torn skin underneath and thoroughly clean it with the water
from his canteen.

“They had nothing to gain from such an attack. If it was to steal it was a poor way to go about it,”
Bombur added. “We practically have nothing to steal.”

“They weren’t thieves,” Nori proclaimed earnestly. “Not with those hands. Too calloused and thick
for light-fingered work.”

“They were looking for blood,” Bofur translated Bifur’s rapid Khuzdul and stared at his cousin.
“You think they came to kills us?”

“Not you specifically. I believe I was the target.” And his nephews, but Thorin wasn’t going to say
that aloud.

Óin started to pull out a bottle of something and Thorin grabbed his arm, stopping him. “That
won’t put me to sleep will it?”

Óin looked at him critically as everyone in the cave stilled and held their breath. They had been
doing a lot of that since Rivendell.

“Ye need rest, laddie,” Óin told him gently. “Else the body will be too tired to fight infection.”

Thorin shook his head. “Nothing that will take away my wits this night.”

“I’m sure we’ll be able to handle anything that might come up,” Dwalin insisted, gesturing around
the cave at everyone. “We’re not helpless.”

Thorin said nothing to his friend. He and Óin just continued to stare at one another before Óin
finally conceded, switching out the bottle for a small jar that he pressed into Thorin’s hand before
moving on to assist Bifur with a large cut on his arm.

The jar was gently removed from his palm before he could even wiggle the cork out of the top and
Thorin glanced up at Bilbo’s rather tense frame. Seeing the determination in Bilbo’s eye, he
promptly conceded the jar and turned so Bilbo could have easier access to his wound.

“How?” Bilbo asked quietly as he set to work rubbing the paste over the opening in Thorin’s
shoulder. “Why would anyone wish you dead? Especially now? It makes no sense.”

“It makes perfect sense lad,” Balin disagreed. “They don’t wish us to complete our task. They
perhaps wish to take Erebor for themselves.”

‘If only it were that simple,’ Thorin thought with a sigh as everyone agreed with Balin’s conclusion
and began discussing their own theories.

Thorin ignored them as he pondered over what this could mean in his own mind. The appearance
of the dwarrow cutthroats was a completely new factor. One that Thorin couldn’t put his finger on.
What had he changed? What would force someone to send those murders after him? Who would
send them after him?

The obvious answer was Lord Gruak. Or perhaps Lord Hábar? Perhaps both? They were the only
ones who despised Thorin enough to actually go through with the deed of seeing him killed. Also, there was the fact that he had stood his ground in Belegost. Before, when Thorin had first left that meeting dejected and full of bitter hate, the two had been smug and confident. This time Thorin left them angry and belittled. Dwarrows knew how to hold grudges.

But Thorin knew those dwarrows. Had known them almost all of his life, though granted in small doses whenever he traveled with his grandfather and father in his early years. There was no possible way that they would take it upon themselves to actually send assassins. Plot and dream about it perhaps but to go through with it? ‘An outside factor. There must be, but what? Who?’

Shaking his head, he realized he really didn’t have time to puzzle out the newest problem. Perhaps on the way to Beorn’s but not now; not with the Goblins and Azog still to come that night.

“I will take first watch, everyone get some sleep,” Thorin told his exhausted company as he retrieved Orcrist and lay it across his lap at the ready. “We’ll be leaving sooner than we wish.”

There were flinches all around at that but Balin was frowning. “We were to wait in the mountains until Gandalf joined us. That was the plan.”

“With wargs and assassins after us? Who knows if he’s been delayed or even on the same trail as us? The path is gone with the Stone-Giant. He’ll have to find another route. Either way, the plan has changed. We can only work with the here and now and right now we are being hunted by more than one enemy.”

Everyone looked uncertain but most started to stake out a place for the bed-rolls. Unsurprisingly, Kili and Fili bedded down together as did Nori and Dwalin. Dori didn’t even so much as huff in their direction, instead staking out a spot on Bifur’s wounded and therefore vulnerable side. Soft conversation flowed from the different corners of the cavern.

‘Truly, how much had I missed about my own company with my constant obsession of Erebor and the dragon the first time?’ Thorin wondered sadly.

Bilbo suddenly capped the jar, bringing Thorin out of his musing, and handed it back to Óin before accepting the small roll of bandages. At the sight of them, Thorin removed his tunic fully to allow the hobbit to wind them around his chest and shoulder.

There was no movement behind him and after a while Thorin finally glanced back at Bilbo to find the hobbit staring at his now bared chest and back. It took Thorin a moment to realize what it was that must have startled him. “The scars are from Azanulbizar,” he explained.

“What? Oh, sorry.” A flush rose to Bilbo’s cheeks, and he pointedly went about wrapping the strips of cloth around Thorin’s cheeks, and he pointedly went about wrapping the strips of cloth around Thorin’s cheeks, and he pointedly went about wrapping the strips of cloth around Thorin’s cheeks, and he pointedly went about wrapping the strips of cloth around Thorin’s cheeks, and he pointedly went about wrapping the strips of cloth around Thorin’s cheeks.

“No need to be embarrassed. I got them honorably and wear them proudly. Even the one you are tending to will be worn with honor.”

There was a snort from Bofur’s direction but Bombur shushed him.

Bilbo’s flush had spread down his neck and up to his ears but he gamely continued winding the long strip of cloth up and around Thorin’s chest. The two sat in silence for a while as he worked.

“You need rest yourself you know,” Bilbo told him softly.

“No,” Thorin proclaimed sharply and Bilbo’s hands paused in winding the wrap before they started up again. Thorin took a deep breath to calm himself. “Apologies. My thoughts are simply too numerous to try and find sleep.”
Kíli shifted behind him and Thorin instantly strained his hearing towards them for sounds of distress but Fíli murmured something, and they settled down once more.

“Surely we are safe until morning,” Bilbo tried to sound reassuring but there was a slight hitch in his voice, almost questioning.

Thorin remained silent.

“Thorin…” Bilbo’s began, anxiously. “We are safe here, aren’t we?”

Before he could stop himself, Thorin reached out and placed a hand over Bilbo’s on his shoulder, stilling the hobbit’s movements. “We need to be strong for just a little while longer,” he finally said.

Bilbo’s wide, green eyes stared down into Thorin’s blue. “How much longer?”

“Too long,” Thorin admitted tiredly. “You’ll need all your Baggins wits about you tonight Bilbo. Took courage will only get you so far with what is to come.”

Bilbo’s jaw dropped open, and he just gaped at Thorin for so long that Thorin began to shift uncomfortably. Had he said too much?

With a click of teeth, Bilbo returned to wrapping Thorin’s wound with a single-minded focus and tying it off just a firmly.

There was noise in the direction of his nephews and he turned surprised to see that they were getting back up, Kíli’s bow in his hand while Fíli rolled up their sleeping pallet. He wasn’t the only one. Dwalin was now sitting up sharpening his axes and Ori was scribbling in his books as fast as possible. Even Balin had sat up and was now lighting his pipe.

“I thought I said to get some rest,” Thorin frowned at them.

“Oh aye, ye did lad,” Balin puffed on his pipe. “But it seems as if we all have things keeping us up for the moment.”

Thorin frowned at them all as he pulled his clothing back on. Even Bilbo hadn’t bothered to pull out his blanket, instead setting his pack on his lap and pulling out a small book that he had been reading for nearly the entire journey.

“You’ll only have yourselves to blame tomorrow when you’re exhausted on your feet and too tired to run,” Thorin stated.

There was a strangled sound from Dori but Thorin couldn’t figure out what was wrong with the dwarf to cause such a sound.

“I’m sure we’ll manage somehow,” Glóin stated as he threw another piece of elf furniture on the fire and stirred it back to life.

All argument left Thorin and he leaned his good shoulder back against the wall. “Suit yourselves.”

It felt as if he had just closed his eyes for a second when Kíli spoke up for the first time since entering the cave.

“Bilbo, what’s that next to you?”

Thorin shot up. “Damn it! They’re early!”
Bilbo stared up at Thorin before scrambling for Sting, yanking the shining blue sword out of its scabbard.

“UP! Everyone up!” Thorin bellowed but everyone was already scrambling to their feet, weapons at the ready. Thorin was actually impressed by their speed.

It was Ori who cried out a warning as the sand by his feet suddenly sank below the floor and disappear.

Thorin could only give his Company a regretful wince. “Brace yourselves and keep tight grip on your things. It’s a long way down.”

“What?” Bilbo gasped but could ask no more as the floor finally gave way beneath them and they plummeted into the darkness below.

Chapter End Notes

1) Look at the wood in that scene and you just know it came from Rivendell. Either that or the prop department got really lazy.
2) Alternate title for this chapter: How to Completely Freak Out Your Company: 101
3) Finally, I know Thorin is driving some people crazy with his obliviousness to how the company is acting around him, but a) I love oblivious Thorin so I write him as I want and b) he has so many other things on his mind right now to notice the little things.

Again, horrible person here. I know this wasn't the exciting chapter you were waiting for but hopefully the blushing Bilbo made up for it. :) My next chapter shouldn't take me so long to crack out considering it's Goblin Town but no promises.

To all my Transformer fans, I'm going to try and belt a chapter to Cover Me as soon as I can, I swear!
Nori was more than a bit irate with the current situation.

This day just would not end!

From that very morning with Thorin’s misgivings at the start of the trail that warned them all that it was not going to be a Good Day, to the afternoon rain, to the dwarf assassins, to the Stone-giants!

‘And now Goblins,’ he groaned to himself as they were swarmed by the foul smelling things. Tugged and pushed and prodded and pulled, they were forced to their feet and herded down the wooden bridge. ‘Wonderful. Lets hope this is the last of our troubles for today.’

He jerked away from a Goblin whose hands went just a bit too low and punched the creature for it only to recoil as three more unwashed bodies surged against him and pushed him back.

Through the chaos, he could see Dori had a firm grip on the back of Ori knitted tunic, thank Mahal, and Bifur had placed himself directly next to the pair. For as long as he lived, Nori didn’t think he would ever understand what the old miner saw in fussy old Dori. He had to give the other dwarf his due however, he had managed to wear down his uptight brother’s resolve.

Nori could also see that Thorin was trying gamely to stay close to his nephews, but their leader was being shoved along away from his charges just as fast as he could reach them. Nori would have been more worried if not for the fact that Thorin had a rather resigned look on his face for such a serious situation. ‘Must not turn out too badly then.’

Thorin’s visions didn’t seem to come in the actual order of events since he had looked for the Stone-giants before the assassins but if he wasn’t worried then he had to know at least something of the coming trial. He was indeed allowing the Goblins to shove him down the path, but he continually looked backwards as if searching for something.

Nori jerked back around as another hand grab at him when he saw what it was Thorin was searching for. Or rather, didn’t see. Bilbo had vanished!

No, that wasn’t quite right. A second look showed Nori that Bilbo had instead simply ducked and wonder of wonders; the goblins were going right around the hobbit without seeming to realize he was there at all.

Perhaps there was some hope yet of getting out of this latest mess alive.

There was no more time to think about such things however as they were hauled through the tunnels and out into a enormous cavern full of rickety bridges and wobbling structures that should
have fallen down years ago.

“Goblins,” Nori huffed as he was shoved along.

The most horrific din echoed through the cavern and Nori had to wince at the clattering of pots and the beating of drums and horrific horns were huffed into. Didn’t these creatures know what real music was supposed to sound like?

‘Not much for lyrics either,’ he grimaced in distaste. ‘The only thing worse is the smell.’

Thorin seemed to be of the same opinion from his expression and when he ducked, so too did the rest of the Company. The Goblins were slightly slower and one was nearly clonked by their so-called king’s scepter.

“Canny, isn’t it?”

Nori rolled his eyes as the Goblin King nattered on and discreetly looked for a possible escape route until the clanging of metal had him turning back to see their weapons on the floor where the goblins had dumped them.

“Who would be so bold as to come armed into my kingdom?”

Nori rolled his eyes again. Honestly, there was less dramatics with the elves, and that was saying something.

Then another search began, and Nori did not like the sound of them searching every “crack and crevice”.

He spied his bag in one of the goblins’ hands and winced when it was upended but after a cursory glance at the rather large pile of small boxes, combs and other odds and ends the goblins moved on.

There was a tap on his shoulder and Nori had to look around his brother to see Thorin give him an approving nod. “Remind me to give you a bonus for your restraint.”

Nori stared. “What?”

“What’s this? Nori! How much did you knick at-”

Dori cut off with a whoomp as Thorin’s elbow jabbed into his side. Dori could take a hint, and he promptly shut up.

“Uncle, what exactly are we suppose to be doing?” Kíli hissed as their packs were searched.

“Stalling.”

Nori stared along with those closest to Thorin.

“Stalling for what exactly?” Dwalin asked, but Thorin just shook his head.

After most of their possessions were trampled and torn apart, the large goblin finally asked the question as to why they were there.

Thorin made to step forward when Óin pushed him back and took his place. What followed was a lot of shouting nonsense and Bofur.
Thorin was actually leaning against Dwalin trying not to laugh as the Goblin King became more and more frustrated with Bofur’s attempt at an explanation as how they were off to visit inbred relations on his mother’s side.

“SHUT UP!” the foul creature bellowed, and Bofur wisely shut his mouth.

“If we can not make them talk,” the foul-smelling Goblin continued, “we’ll make the squawk.”

Nori sighed. This could not end well.

Thorin truly had to speak to Fíli about making Bofur the court presenter. Truly, any meetings he had with his council would just fly by. Mostly because after the first few times, nobody would attend

‘How does he come up with such stories?’

When the goblin bellowed, “start with the youngest” he took a deep breathe to regain his composer and stepped forward shouting for them to wait.

He had absolutely no idea what to do. He didn’t even remember what he had said the last time he stood there since Thorin had tried his best to suppress all memories of Goblin-town.

The goblin smirked rather triumphantly, meaning he more then likely knew exactly who they were before his subjects hauled them into his “court”.

“Well, well, well. Look who it is.”

Thorin let out a huff as the goblin made a grand show of listing off Thorin’s titles and as he did so, an idea sprung to mind.

“…which makes you… …nobody, really,” the Goblin smirked.

“I must be somebody if you’re hoping to claim the price on my head,” Thorin retorted.

That caused the Goblin to pause. “How is it that you managed to know of this?” he demanded.

Thorin gave a small shrug. “You are not the first to try tonight if we are being honest.” Though he doubted that it was Azog’s bounty the dwarrow assassins were hoping to collect with his death.

“Is that so?”

“Surely you heard it earlier this night?” Thorin asked. “We are deep in the mountain but the fight of the Stone-giants should have rumbled down to even here in your ‘town’.”

“Yes, they were rather active tonight, weren’t they?” the Goblin King grinned. "Tell me, did you loose any of your companions?”

Thorin hummed slightly. “Some dwarves were lost in the ensuing chaos,” he admitted to the surprise of the Goblins. “Went right over the edge.”

“Wonderful!” the King crowed. “How delightful! Did they suffer?”

“One or two.”

The Goblin King let out a roaring laugh and the others quickly followed suit.
“So you know whom it is that has set such a race for your crownless head?” he smirked. “Just a head. Nothing attached.” The Goblin stood to his full height and leered. “An old enemy of yours—”

“The so called Azog the Defiler is a bitter fool who resents the fact that I had bested him in battle when sorely outnumbered and was the reason for the loss of his arm.” Thorin brushed some dirt off his own arm for emphasis. “He has since become obsessed with the notion of seeing my entire line dead to the detriment of all else.”

He gave another shrug even as he ignored the sudden, frantic whispering of his Company. “Surely whatever price he gave you, it couldn’t possibly be enough.”

“And yet I would have gladly done it for free.” Standing, the large king turned to one small goblin seated on a strange pulley seat. “Send word to the pale Orc. Tell him I have found his prize.”

Thorin watched the small, hideous thing zip away down the rope and sighed, even as his company started making protests.

“Pity that,” Thorin had to raise his voice to be heard over the shouting. “Especially when there are others who would pay a far higher price for my crownless head.”

The large goblin eyed him critically. “And what do you think you could gain by telling me that?”

“Nothing really as I’m apparently losing my head either way. Seems a shame you’re getting the lower end of the deal. You know how we dwarves do love to bargain for the best prices for everything.”

“Really? And who else would be willing to pay for your death?”

Thorin knew he had the Goblin King’s interest. “Other dwarves actually. Ones who still have possession of their mountains,” he smirked, “and their mines.”

The large, smelly creature seemed to ponder over this new information. “Why would other dwarves wish to see you dead?”

“Other then my wonderful personality?” Thorin asked with a smile.

“Perhaps you were a guest of theirs at one point,” the King considered as he stared at Thorin suspiciously. “You are a very chatty dwarf.”

Thorin waved the comment off. “If I’m about to lose my head, I’d best say everything that I possibly can now.”

“That still does not explain why another dwarf would pay me to give him your head.”

“Haven’t you heard?” Thorin tried for the false innocence that Kili was practically a master of. “I’m on a quest. And those on quests usually have those who wish them to fail at said quests.”

“Hump. The dragon,” the Goblin King huffed as he sat back on his “throne” all suspicion gone. “Did you really think you could take such a creature on? Surly you can’t believe you would succeed?”

“And yet there are those who are afraid of just that. Of the return of Erebor’s might. We were a strong place of power once, we can be so again. Those who gained what small power they have after our fall would do anything to keep it.”
“Power is a very good reason to see anyone dead,” the Goblin agreed. “But silly to think they couldn’t simply wait for the dragon to eat you.”

The two stared at each other, each one looking for the slightest crack in the others cool visage.

“Well, it makes no difference,” the odious Goblin finally smirked. “Dead is dead after all.”

Thorin groaned in disappointment. So much for stalling. Hopefully Bilbo was fairing well with the creature and the riddles. And where in all of creation was Gandalf?

A piercing shriek startled everyone, Thorin included.

It was then he realized that more time had to have passed then he thought as a goblin tossed Orcrist aside right in front of the King.

All the goblins shrieked at the sight of it.

“I know that sword!”

Thorin thought desperately as they were once more swarmed by Goblins. The whipping was worse then he remembered as it caught his still wounded shoulder and Thorin dropped to his knees sooner than he would have liked.

He was up again only to be pulled down once more and held there.

‘Gandalf, where the hell is that light of yours?’ Thorin thought desperately as he stared up at goblin above him as it raised a stone dagger for the killing blow.

The arrow came from nowhere and struck the goblin dead in the throat. Thorin knew instantly it wasn't Kili's.

‘More assassins?’ The horrifying thought was instantly laid though as he stared at the arrow. ‘No. Wait… I know that type of fletching.’

That’s when the bright light finally encompassed all who were there, and a wind of such force knocked everyone down to the ground. Thorin spitefully hopped some goblins fell off the bridge.

When he finally managed to blink the spots from his eyes, he wasn’t sure what it was he was seeing. There wasn’t just the shadow of the gray wizard walking out of the smoke of the doused torches. It seemed as if there were three, no four… five! figures approaching as Gandalf called for them to pick up their arms and fight back.

All of the figures were amazingly familiar, especially the one with golden hair.

“Glorfindel? What are you doing here?” Thorin called out incredulously.

“Saving your sorry hide!” Glorfindel snapped, as he immediately cut down the goblin closest to him. Elladan was quick to follow his example while Elrohir notched another arrow.

“Then what is Lindir doing here?”

“ Asking himself the same question!” Lindir shouted back in a panic.

Thorin smirked as he reached for Orcrist that Nori had swept up and held out to him, turning immediately to block the downward strike of the Goblin King. “Fair enough!”
As if I would leave Lindir safe and sound back in Rivendell! HAH! Poor Lindir. He is so fun to torture! :D

So yes, this is the first MAJOR change and things will really start changing with movie 2: TDoS. The end of Movie 1 is near so here's hoping I'll get the next few chapters out soon.
The Goblin King was screaming about Gandalf wielding Glamdring behind them as everyone scrambled for their weapons. Bofur was tossing them backwards to Bombur who tossed what looked like Kíli’s sword back down the line. The one who took the longest was unsurprisingly Fíli. While it was good practice to have a weapon for any situation, it sure took the boy a long time to search for them when they were strewed about.

At one point Dwalin bashed a goblin’s head in with Óin’s battle staff and Thorin hoped he hadn’t damaged it. They would never hear the end from their healer.

The ensuing fight, once everyone was situated, was something to behold. They were sorely outnumbered, even with the addition of the elf warriors, along with Lindir, and Thorin wasn’t sure how exactly it was they had been able to survive it the first time they had done this.

Amazingly enough, Bombur and Ori were the ones doing the most damage. Strength clearly ran in the family of ‘Ri with how Ori was swinging that hammer around while Bombur just pushed goblins aside.

Thorin didn’t have any more time to watch the others however, as the Goblin King finally found his footing and headed right for him. He quickly reached for Orcrist as Nori held it out to him and blocked the downward strike of the large pike just a fast, causing the larger creature to stumble back and finally tumble off the platform.

Rather then watching to ensure the goblin king actually fell down far enough so as not to come right back at him from behind, Thorin quickly headed back for his axe and sword Deathless. He knew it wouldn’t be until they were near the bottom again before they saw the foul creature and he was not about to leave either of his long time companions behind this time.

He hoped they wouldn’t go tumbling down the crevice on the three-level bridge again. ‘*Or have a giant corpse land on us,*’ he remembered with a distasteful grimace. However, what Thorin wanted and what was actually happening had yet to coincide with each other as of yet. Thorin wasn’t about to rule anything out any more.

Orcrist was just a magnificent blade as it had been before, slicing through goblin thick hide as if it were creamed butter. It seemed as if Gandalf was having the same ease as Thorin was if the bouncing goblin head was anything to go by. ‘*Must be the way the elves forge their metal,*’ Thorin realized when he saw Glorfindel going through goblins with the same smoothness. Elrohir had put away his bow in favor of his own sword and the two were making quite the headway through goblins towards the Company.
Poor Lindir, however, was practically clinging to Gandalf’s side. It was clear that the minstrel had received some training with his sword but it was also extremely apparent that the elf had fallen very out of practice. He spent most times just parrying with the goblins then actually doing any damage, though he was trying.

Glorifindel made it to Thorin’s side just as he stabbed another two foes clean through.

“How in the world did you all end up here?” Glorifindel asked as they pressed back-to-back.

“An unfortunate combination of assassins, stone-giants and trap doors,” Thorin told him bluntly.

“What?”

“It’s been a terrible day all around really,” Thorin grunted as he swung left and then parried right. “What are all of you doing here with the wizard?”

Glorifindel huffed as he went low for the next swing. “You were the one who said there was something wrong with the Greenwood when we met,” the elf explained. “Everyone was ready to pass it off as wild rumors, but when Elrond and the others were in their council it seems that some of your statements were partially confirmed. Elrond really didn’t have a choice in sending someone to investigate the claims. Elrohir volunteered and of course Elladan couldn’t be left out. Seeing as the boys are good friends of Legolas, Lindir was sent to be an impartial witness.”

“That explains them,” Thorin grunted as he sliced through an arm and back up across a goblin’s chest. “Then why are you here?”

“The things you said about Thranduil made me curious so I tagged along,” he shrugged as much as he could while pushing back another rush attempt.

Thorin gave the elf a pointed look in the few seconds between attacks. “Bullshit.”

Glorifindel gave a boisterous laugh. “Very well. The truth is, it’s rather boring in Rivendell,” he proclaimed as he struck down another opponent, “and you’re the most interesting thing to come along in the last one hundred years or so.”

“Glad I could be of service to stave off your boredom,” Thorin grinned.

“Would you two shut up and focus on the thrice damned fight in front of you!” Glóin bellowed. “This is not a time for a social visit!”

“There’s always time for a social visit,” Thorin retorted even as he ran another Goblin through. “Dori! You wouldn’t happen to have any tea on you, perchance?”

“Shut your kingly trap and go kill some more goblins!” Dori snapped as he braced against the hard swing of a goblin blade.

Everyone around them grunted in agreement just as Gandalf called for everyone to follow him and quickly.

‘Does he know the way out?’ Thorin wondered briefly as they followed the gray figure. ‘Or is he just running at random?’

Not that any of them had a choice. Running was their only option and the only reason they were doing so well was due to the fact that the platforms upon which they were fighting could only hold so many. Most goblins were getting shoved off the edge by their own fellow goblins in a bid to get
the dwarrows, wizard and now elves.

Needless to say, since he knew which direction they were going to run in, Thorin was right in front leading the way down to the swaying bridge. He couldn’t say who was behind him aside from Glorfindel and that was only because when a goblin appeared above him, the taller elf’s longer arm had an easier reach.

Thorin ignored the screaming goblin in order to ensure the path in front was clear. The last time it had been Dwalin and Nori up ahead. Thorin grudgingly wished he had allowed his old warrior-brother to go first. Dwalin’s dual axes would make shorter work of this mess.

Then Thorin looked up and saw the mass hoard running right towards them.

“Dwalin!”

“Here!” and the next thing he knew, the dwarf himself was pushing past the tall elf none too gentle. He took one look at the coming goblins and instantly spun around. “Post!”

He, Thorin and Nori, who had followed Dwalin, Fili and Bifur instantly cut the ropes holding together the railing while Glorfindel just looked on bemused.

“Charge!”

Swinging the giant post back and forth actually was more fun then Thorin expected. Especially since Glorfindel and Lindir who was between Fili and Bifur, couldn’t figure out which way to go and simply ended up leaping over it every time it swung their way.

“I should be up front more often,” Thorin chuckled. “You have a lot more fun.”

“This is not the time to be making jokes!” Lindir yelped, sounding completely distraught. Fili just let out a burst of hysterical laughter and Thorin couldn’t help but join him.

The fighting continued in its chaos and Thorin had lost count of how many he had struck down. He was hoping to have a higher number then last time but Glorifindel was unfortunately much lighter on his feet and kept beating Thorin to the kill.

Coming up to a three-way split at the end of the bridge simply meant that goblins were now charging at them from three different directions. Balin was handling his own quite nicely while Óin was having a hay-day swinging his battle staff around, knocking any goblin near him down and out. ‘Old warrior my arse,’

Thorin was actually impressed with how much he remembered about this fight as he sliced three more goblins down to size. Especially considering he had done all he could to try and forget the whole experience.

He glanced to the left just in time to see the one batch of goblins going for ropes in order to swing down at them from the side. “Cut the ropes!” he ordered and didn’t bother to watch the falling scaffolding tangle the swining goblins this time, no matter how amusing it had been.

He’d have to remember to mention to Kíli how fortunate his quick thinking with the ladder had been as he and the others who had gotten separated scrambled over it.

It was another mad dash to the broken off bridge that most likely had been damaged when the large goblin had fallen on it. Thorin paused at the one end to ensure everyone got on, a feat he had to accomplish by pushing one of Elrond’s sons up before Kíli cut the rope holding it in place.
Being on a large, rickety bridge swinging freely was apparently more than Lindir could take and he was the first one off when it swung close enough to the other side of the crevice.

Everyone scrambled off when it swung back the second time and Fíli cut the last rope suspending the thing.

Thorin felt a swell of pride in his chest at his nephews clear thinking during battle. He had been worried when they had bunked down in that smaller cave that the attack of the dwarrow assassins would have hindered this battle but evidently being thrust into life-or-death situations meant they had no time to dwell over such things. He would be sure to have a long, sit-down talk with them on the morrow after they got down from that blasted large rock that Beorn’s ancestors had carved.

It was just chaos of flashing swords and snarling goblins as they continued on their mad dash to what everyone else thought was safety and what Thorin knew was just going to be more fighting.

Bombur’s sudden appearance behind them surprised Thorin for a moment and he wondered how everyone kept getting separated.

“This whole place is just one giant maze!” he snarled as he took out another goblin. “Gandalf! Are you sure you know where you’re going? Or are we lost? Again?”

There was a laugh from one of Elrond’s sons, truly Thorin couldn’t tell which was which and frankly didn’t care either way, as Gandalf shot him an unamused look before turning the corner and knocking some more goblins aside.

A tap of the wizard’s staff and a boulder dropped down in front of them that Dwalin and Fíli instantly took advantage of, Bofur lunging to help shove it down the path ahead of them.

Thorin couldn’t help but snicker as goblins were practically mowed down by the thing, complete with squishing sounds. The cry of the one that went over the cliff with the boulder was especially entertaining.

“You’re enjoying this far too much,” Glorfindel rebuked.

“Oh don’t try to tell me you’re not,” Thorin smirked back as he spun around and took another goblins head.

In truth, the blond elf did look like he was having far too much fun himself as he sliced through the chest of another opponent. “Maybe.”

“You must admit this far outweighs the monotony of Rivendell,” Thorin pressed as he chopped off one goblin’s arm and then ran him through.

“You seem rather enthusiastic about all of this,” Glorfindel chose to say instead of replying to that statement.

“As I said, It’s been one hell of a day,” Thorin told him. “Unfortunately it’s not over yet.”

“Don’t say that!” both Glóin and Lindir shouted back at him.

Thorin was amused, albeit a bit puzzled over their sudden panic, but didn’t have much time to ponder it when their conversation was suddenly cut off by the surprise appearance of the Goblin King springing up through the bridge ahead of them.

Everyone crashed into one another as they skidded to a stop while the goblins chasing them
blocked off the way they had come.

“You thought you could escape me,” the Goblin King crowed before taking a swing at Gandalf. Glorfindel left Thorin’s side and pressed through the others in order to reach the wizard’s side as Gandalf fell back onto Ori and Nori who helped the old Maiar up.

“What are you going to do now, Wizard?” the giant creature sneered.

Gandalf jabbed his staff in the foul thing’s eye the same time an elf arrow got the other one and Gandalf sliced through his belly while Glorfindel got the throat this time.

Pity. The Goblin King’s last words of “that’ll do it” the last time had been quite amusing.

“Brace yourselves!” Thorin shouted the same time the sound of the bridge supports cracking reached them.

There was the moment that seemed to just still as the structure wobbled before with a crunch, the whole thing fell out from under their feet.

The slid downward was just as fast and as heart-pounding as before. The side Thorin was closest to scrapped along the the stone wall and they bounced over large rock formations that stuck out from it.

Everyone was screaming, the elves included!

Lindir, unsurprisingly was the loudest of them all. Or it could have been the fact that he sounded the loudest since he was right next to Thorin, gripping his shoulder so tight that Thorin was sure that he unintentionally opened up his spear wound all over again.

Not that he could get the elf to let go. Tapered fingernails were practically digging into his overcoat.

The fall seemed to go on for forever. It was amazing how no one so much as fell off in the rapid decent the bridge did.

Many heartbeats later, they finally went over the edge and fell down the narrowing portion of the crevice before slowing down enough and coming to rest at the bottom and collapsed in on itself.

Thorin was already moving before they had come to a full and complete stop, leaping off the bridge and to the actual ground, hauling Lindir out of the rubble since they elf still hadn’t let go.

He managed to go back around and begin hauling Kíli out just as Bofur announced how it could have been worse.

Thorin quickly just heaved his nephew out of the pile of broken wood and leapt backwards, pulling Kíli and Lindir with him just as the body landed on top of the others with a solid thud. All three of them landed on their backsides since Thorin was still pulling mighty when Kíli had popped free.

His nephew simply blinked up at him before looking back at everyone groaning under the weight of the goblin. “Thanks.”

Thorin patted his nephew’s shoulder. “Don’t mention it,” he said but Kíli was already screaming for Gandalf as he had noticed the approaching goblin hoard when he looked back up the way they had come.
Dwalin was holding Nori upright when he looked to Thorin. “There’s too many. We can’t fight them.”

“The sun!” Lindir shouted back.

“Yes, only daylight can save us now!” Gandalf informed them. “Quickly!”

It was another mad scramble to find their footing and help others out of the broken splinters of wood. Elrond’s sons were helping Glóin and Dori out of the rubble while Kíli grabbed Ori. Thorin checked to ensure Fíli was alright before he pushed them forward down the path Gandalf was running. He made sure everyone was clear, even the elves before following.

Then Thorin had that damn feeling again, as they dashed for the sliver of daylight still ahead of them. Something tingled at the edge of his awareness and he slowed down.

Hadn’t there been a crack in the wall just a moment ago?

Skidding to a sudden halt, Thorin whirled around and headed back the way they came. Bilbo! How in the world could he have forgotten? Bilbo had to have come out the same way they had in order for them to meet up so quickly! That meant that they had used the same tunnel out onto the mountainside proper!

“Thorin?” Bombur gasped out as they passed each other.

“Keep going, I’ll catch up,” he shouted back over his shoulder as he skidded to a stop at the hole.

Peering into the gloom, something made him look down just in time to see a huge head with wide, mad eyes leap up in front of him with long, boney fingers stretched out to claw at his face.

Thorin just reacted and Orcris sliced through the gray creature’s neck easily.

“Yuck. It’s more hideous in person,” he muttered as he stared down at the corpse.

“Thorin?”

Bilbo was scrambling towards him and Thorin saw him shoving something in his pocket as he did so.

Thorin’s breath left him in a whoosh before he could help himself. Bilbo got it! He had found and claimed the One Ring! Thorin didn’t know whether to be happy about this or absolutely terrified. He’d go with apathy for the moment. There was absolutely no time to dwell on such thing until later.

Holding out a hand for Bilbo to take, he lifted the Hobbit right off his furry feet and over the corpse of the foul creature Thorin had first seen in a dream at Bag End.

“A ring,” Thorin grunted as started running again, pulling Bilbo behind him.

“What?” Bilbo gasped out as they headed for the open gap before them.

“The answer to your riddle,” he elaborated as they burst out into the sunlight. “A ring. One that we’re going to have to have a long discussion about later. For now, keep running.”

Bilbo’s hand tightened around his own and they raced away from gloom of the Misty Mountains and all the horrors it contained.
So this was the problem: I had NO idea what the frick to do with Gollum/Smeagol! I did not want to deal with him. I SO did not want to deal with him but I could NOT figure out if I would need him later in the story line for plot reasons or something but again I >SO< did not want to deal with him so... yeah. Not sure how I feel about this chapter... No matter what I did with it however, it seems to get worse before it got better so here you go.

To my Cover Me Readers: I know I need to get cracking on that sucker and I can not tell you how many times I sat down to get some writing done and nothing... Maybe the new Bumblebee movie will get the creative juices flowing on that sucker.

End Notes

*stares at all the bookmarks, comments, kudos and whatnot* Seriously? O.O *Looks at fic* **looks back at massive numbers* again, really? Okay... I guess the masses have spoken... don't really know why but whatever.

10/13: Just a few quick notes: I've been told that I have some characters in this fic that a) have not been born yet or b) have already passed away prior to the Hobbit's timeline... Let's just slap a giant "AU" on the sucker and call it a day. A lot of characters I picked to have in this fic was because they sounded interesting more than anything else. And another thing, I never said Thorin WASN'T A seer... >:D

Works inspired by this one: Double Trouble Again by quadrad, Politesse by MiladyMorningstar (PrincessPestilence)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!